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Strategies for the Growth and Survival of Small- and Medium-Sized Businesses

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Abstract

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by

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MBA, University of Cape Town, 2004

MS, Leeds University, 1991

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Abstract

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are the cornerstone of economic growth and job creation in developed and developing economies, but most fail within the first 5 years of existence. Sustainability is important to SME leaders in the information communication technology (ICT) industry as an indicator of economic growth and job creation. Grounded in dynamic capabilities theory, the purpose of this qualitative, multiple case study was to explore strategies SME leaders use to sustain their business performance beyond 5 years. The participants comprised 3 SME leaders in South Africa in the ICT industry who sustained businesses beyond 5 years. Data were collected from semistructured interviews and a review of company documents. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data. The results yielded three themes: innovation, organizational learning, and technology integration. A key recommendation is that SME leaders focus on business model innovation and the institutionalization of a culture of learning to continually review and align business processes to the value proposition to ensure their businesses' long-term sustainability. The study has implications for positive social change: current and future SME owners could use these strategies to improve business agility to satisfy existing customers and attract new customers for their businesses' growth and survival. A focus on SME growth and sustainability could improve the local economy by creating more jobs and alleviating poverty.

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Dedication

I dedicate this doctoral study to my family. To my dear wife, thank you for your unwavering support throughout the entire journey. Without your love and support, I would not be able to complete this degree. To my children, thank you for your support. One of the reasons why I enrolled for this course was to show you that there is no limit to what you can achieve if you put your mind to it. I would also like to dedicate this doctoral study to my business partners. Thanks to my business partners for all the support you have given me in the last four years.

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my committee chair, Dr. Theresa Neal, for her guidance, constructive feedback, and support. I learned a lot from her leadership and academic experience. I extend my gratitude to Dr. Hall, and Dr. Johnson, for their insights and guidance.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study

Small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are the engine of economic development because they employ more than 80% of all employees globally (Campbell & Park, 2017). SMEs are also a significant contributor to the gross domestic product, both in developing and developed economies (Ramukumba, 2014). However, despite support from government and nongovernmental agencies, SMEs experience a high failure rate because some leaders of SMEs lack the essential strategies and skills for ensuring growth and survival.

Background of the Problem

SMEs are essential for developing competitive markets and reducing poverty, particularly in developing countries (Ramukumba, 2014). They alleviate poverty by contributing significantly to job creation (Campbell & Park, 2017). Approximately 2 million registered SMEs employ about eight million people in South Africa (Bureau of Economic Research, 2016). Although SMEs form the largest sector of the economy, the growth of this sector and its contribution to the economy remain disproportional despite support from the government and the banking industry in South Africa (Bureau of Economic Research, 2016). SMEs in South Africa face challenges in attracting customers, maintaining profitability, securing finance, and dealing with uncertainty over economic conditions (Ramukumba, 2014).

The information communication technology (ICT) industry in South Africa contributes approximately 3% of the country's GDP (Statistics South Africa, 2017). However, the trade deficit in ICT increased from US$4.2 billion in 2014 to

US$9.7 billion in 2016 (Statistics South Africa, 2017). South Africa, therefore, imports far more ICT products and services than it exports. My research on strategies and capabilities that would help improve the growth of this sector. A dynamic SME sector would likely lead to an increase in local procurement of ICT products and services, and thus reduce the trade deficit, create more local jobs, and help grow the local economy (van Scheers, 2016). The purpose of this research study was to explore the factors required for SME businesses to survive and grow for more than 5 years in the ICT industry in South Africa. The findings might help support SMEs and provide learning opportunities to leaders and managers of SMEs both in South Africa and globally.

Problem Statement

The high failure rate of SMEs is a significant constraint on global economic growth and job creation (Campbell & Park, 2017). About 50% of SMEs fail within the first 5 years of operation (Gray & Saunders, 2016). The general business problem was that some SMEs exhibit a high failure rate. The specific business problem was that some SME leaders in the ICT industry lack awareness of the strategies needed to ensure the growth and sustainability of their businesses beyond the first 5 years.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative, multicase study was to explore the strategies that leaders of SMEs in the ICT industry employ to ensure the growth and sustainability of their businesses for more than 5 years. The target population consisted of leaders of three ICT SMEs who implemented successful strategies to ensure growth and sustainability for more than 5 years in South Africa. The implications for positive social change include (a)

equipping SME leaders with information on value-added strategies that might provide new ways to reconfigure processes and assets, thereby enhancing operational efficiency, and (b) enabling enterprise growth and permitting the organization to contribute to local economic development, including job creation.

Nature of the Study

The three main research methods are qualitative, quantitative, and mixed (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2015). In this study, I used the qualitative method. Qualitative researchers use open-ended questions to gain a more in-depth understanding of phenomena (Saunders et al., 2015). In contrast, quantitative researchers use closed questions to test hypotheses about the relationships between variables and the differences between groups; mixed method researchers combine both quantitative and qualitative techniques to address more complicated research questions and develop a deeper theoretical understanding (Hyett, Kenny, & Dickson-Swift, 2014). In this study, I employed a qualitative research approach to gain insights into the strategies that leaders of ICT SMEs use to grow and sustain their businesses beyond the first 5 years of operation.

I considered three qualitative designs: phenomenological, ethnographical, and case study designs. Researchers use the phenomenological design to understand the meanings of participants' experiences and they use ethnography to observe and analyze lifeways or patterns of a culture or subculture (Pearson, Albon, & Hubball, 2015). Using the case study design, researchers can gain a deeper understanding of a phenomenon in its natural context and is therefore good for strategy research (Yin, 2018). I, therefore,

used the case study design to explore the strategies that leaders of ICT SMEs in South Africa use to grow and sustain their businesses for periods longer than 5 years.

The multicase study design allowed for an in-depth analysis of how some SMEs have achieved growth and survived for more than 5 years. It allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of each SME and to identify the common critical growth and survival strategies that have helped them survive for more than 5 years (see Yin, 2018). Using the multicase study design, as opposed to a single case study design, improved the rigor of the study and, therefore, a basis for increasing the validity and generalizability of the findings.

Research Question

The question this study addressed was: What strategies do leaders of ICT SMEs use to grow and sustain their businesses for more than 5 years?

Interview Questions

1. What strategies have you implemented for your business to grow and survive for more than 5 years?

2. What key barriers did you experience in implementing your strategies in the first 5 years of your business?

3. How did you address these key barriers to implementing your organization's strategies for sustainability?

4. What internal and external organizational capabilities helped you to develop and implement your strategies successfully?

5. How does your organization assess the effectiveness of its strategies for sustainability?

6. What other information, if any, would you like to share regarding the strategies you used to grow and sustain your ICT SME for more than 5 years?

Conceptual Framework

I chose the dynamic capabilities (DCs) as the basis of the study's conceptual framework to explore the unique capabilities of the SMEs that have developed a competitive advantage and the resilience needed to survive for more than 5 years. This framework came from Teece, Pisano, and Shuen's (1997) observation that the firms that survive are those that can continuously develop new capabilities in fast-changing environments.

The DCs framework is grounded in the resource-based view of the firm, which includes resources that are valuable, rare, inimitable, and nonsubstitutable (VRIN; Nason & Wiklund, 2018). According to Teece (2014), using DCs to configure and reconfigure these VRIN resources influences the speed with which a firm can continually develop a competitive advantage to improve profits in fast-changing economic environments. The strategies that leaders of successful SMEs might involve accessing or developing and then aligning these resources and capabilities to gain a competitive advantage. The possession of valuable resources increases the potential for success among SMEs. Leaders use DCs to combine resources in new and unique ways to identify and satisfy the new markets as well as the changing needs of existing markets (Radulovich, Javalgi, & Scherer, 2018). The DCs framework, therefore, was the most appropriate framework for

exploring the unique capabilities and strategies of SMEs that grow and survive for more than 5 years.

Operational Definitions

Business survival: Business survival is the maintenance of business in the marketplace with economic and financial progress over an extended period (Shin, Park, Choi, & Choy, 2017).). In this study, business survival is the proven ability of an enterprise to sustain activities and performance beyond 5 years.

Firm resources: Firm resources are assets, capabilities, processes, firm attributes, information, and knowledge under the firm's ownership and control, and which can enable the firm to develop and implement strategies to enhance performance (Barney, 1991).

Small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs): An SME is any business employing up to 100 workers, with annual revenue below $25 million (Bureau of Economic Research, 2016).

VRIN resources: VRIN resources are unique resources that are valuable, rare, inimitable, and nonsubstitutable, and which can help a firm achieve sustainable competitive advantage over rivals (Kay, 2018).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

Assumptions, limitations, and delimitations affect any research (Okimoto, 2014). Identifying and demonstrating an understanding of them is necessary to address reliability and validity. Below is a list of assumptions, limitations, and delimitations related to this study.

Assumptions

To interpret findings appropriately, researchers need to acknowledge underlying assumptions of what is important, how things are related, and what qualifies as evidence (Flannery, 2016) and the limitations imposed by the approach (Kirkwood & Price, 2013). Assumptions include facts, ideas, or beliefs that cannot be verified as factual but are treated as such even with little or no substantial evidence (Okimoto, 2014). Assumptions are based on the researcher's viewpoint, they are often necessary to conduct research (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Of the study's three assumptions, the first was that the participants would provide accurate, complete, and honest responses during the interviews. The second assumption was that the sample population would be a fair representation of small businesses in South Africa. The third assumption was that the leaders or managers selected would have knowledge and understanding of the business strategies they claim to have implemented and that their experiences and successful business strategies could be generalized.

Limitations

Due to the existence of some external and internal uncontrolled conditions, the case study design makes it difficult to generalize findings (Baporikar, Nambira, & Gomxos, 2016). The act of acknowledging weaknesses related to external and internal uncontrolled conditions and explaining their boundaries supports the validity and transferability of the findings (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). And the degree of validity of the findings allows readers to determine the extent to which the findings are generalizable (Kirkwood & Price, 2013). Three limitations were evident in this study. First, I collected

data from individuals, groups, or organizations whose characteristics and behaviors might have been shaped by restrictions beyond my control. Second, there were limited data on the rates of success or failure of small businesses in South Africa. Previous researchers in South Africa focused mainly on the causes of the high failure rate of SMEs with minimal emphasis on strategies for their growth and survival (Fatoki, 2018). There was also minimal data on SMEs in the ICT sector. Third, participants' knowledge of business analysis and strategic management might have affected their ability to interpret the interview questions and fully explain themselves.

Delimitations

Delimitations provide self-imposed boundaries the scope and design of the study (Snelson, 2016) and enable the researcher to maintain control. Choosing which case to study and its boundaries are critical to the case study research design (Saunders et al., 2015). The main delimitations of this study were the sample size, population, and geographical location. Due to anticipated resource constraints (time and budget), I preferred a multicase study and interviewing only small business leaders and executive managers who had successfully run their businesses for more than 5 years in the Gauteng province.

<div align="center">Significance of the Study</div>

The study was significant because SMEs have the potential to contribute significantly to economic growth and job creation (Campbell & Park, 2017). SMEs represent more than 90% of enterprises in all economies and constitute most of the employment in virtually all countries (Ramukumba, 2014). The high failure rate of SMEs

results in substantial financial losses for entrepreneurs and financial institutions that support business startups as well as hardships for employees, suppliers, and customers. Reducing their high failure rate, including those in the ICT sector, might help grow many economies and consequently reduce global unemployment rates.

Contribution to Business Practice

SMEs face many challenges and therefore require visionary and skilled leaders who can craft the best strategies to grow their businesses by attracting and retaining customers. The findings from this study may lead to strategies that enhance the growth and sustainability of ICT SMEs in South Africa. Governmental and any other support provided to SMEs may yield better returns because these strategies improve general business management. The insights from this study may benefit SME leaders by equipping them with strategies to deal with the challenges they face in growing their businesses and increasing their resilience.

Implications for Social Change

The findings of this study may lead to positive social change by equipping SME leaders with strategies that may improve the survival rate of SMEs. Since SMEs typically grow, produce, and sell products in one location, they thereby generate economic contributions to local communities. Thus, these SMEs may contribute to economic growth and job creation, especially in disadvantaged areas. The opportunities to effect social change available to SME leaders and entrepreneurs, in general, derive from gaining improved knowledge of strategies for growth and survival of their businesses.

ICT SMEs also provide communication tools, such as the internet, to other businesses and government organizations. Internet cafés offer services to communities and can enable people in these communities to find and apply for jobs, conduct research, and enroll in online learning programs. Improving the development and implementation of strategies for growth and survival of ICT SMEs may, therefore, improve the quality of services that SMEs can provide to citizens, which may, in turn, improve the quality of people's lives.

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

The purpose of this qualitative, multicase study was to explore strategies that some SME managers have used to ensure the survival and growth of their organizations. The overarching research question for this study was: What strategies do leaders of SMEs use to ensure the survival of their companies beyond 5 years? To answer this question, I interviewed SME leaders from three different SMEs.

The literature review—a conversation between the researcher and other researchers—(a) provided a firm basis for identifying knowledge gaps as well as the justification of research objectives, (b) demonstrated the researcher's knowledge about the topic, and (c) refined the research question (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Through the review, I provided the context and conceptual framework for the research on the development and implementation of strategies for growth and survival by SMEs beyond 5 years. The literature review provided a deep understanding of the dynamic capabilities and how these affect SME growth and survival.

Introduction

SMEs are critical for economic growth and innovation. Economic development heavily relies on the success or failure of SMEs, and many countries, especially the developing economies are developing policies related to how they can stimulate economic growth through SME development (Sheikh Khairudin & Amin, 2019). Even though SMEs contribute to the development of a countries economy, they still have challenges, and as a result, most of them fail within the first 5 years of establishment (Hyder & Lussier, 2016). SMEs struggle to, among other things, access finance and to recruit and retain qualified employees (Madrid-Guijarro, García-Pérez-de-Lema, & Howard, 2016). SMEs that survive beyond 5 years are those that can overcome these challenges and access resources to develop capabilities for growth and survival. For their survival and growth, SMEs not only have to perform well, but they also need to be able to adapt to fast-changing markets.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative multicase study was to explore the strategies that leaders of SMEs in the ICT industry employ to ensure the growth and sustainability of their businesses for more than 5 years. This literature review was about exploring strategies that SME leaders use to ensure the survival and growth of their businesses. The findings of this study might benefit SME leaders with information on value-added strategies that may provide new ways to reconfigure processes and assets, to ensure the survival and growth of their businesses

Small business owners may benefit from this study by recognizing strategies that some SME leaders use to ensure the growth and survival of their businesses beyond 5 years. By affording insight into such strategies, the study may increase the knowledge of other SME leaders who are struggling to keep their businesses operational. Developing capabilities for adapting to environmental changes is critical to the survival of SMEs (Pisano, 2017). SME leaders gain from business survival benefits that include financial stability and social benefits of contributing to economic development. While there are numerous studies analyzing business success versus failure, there is a need to study both SMEs that fail and those that are successful in being able to predict and avoid failure (Hyder & Lussier, 2016). This comparison may help in understanding what strategies a superior. Also, while there were research studies related to business success and numerous factors, there was not much research on the strategic use of resources, such as strategic planning, among business owners (Guerrero, Revuelto-Taboada, & Virginia, 2012). The goal of this qualitative research study was to explore strategies that ICT SME leaders use to ensure the growth and survival of their businesses beyond 5 years.

Organization of Literature Review

The literature consists of peer-reviewed articles and authoritative books on the DCs conceptual framework, SME survival and growth, ICT SME survival and growth in South Africa and other countries. The research methodologies researchers used in the articles I selected included both quantitative and qualitative research methods. The primary databases I used were ProQuest, ABI/INFORM Global, *Business Source Complete, Eric, Sage,* and *Science Direct*. Key search terms for searching the literature

included *dynamic capabilities, small businesses, small- and medium-sized enterprises, information and communication*, *information technology industry* in *South Africa, SME survival strategies, SME growth,* and *business survival strategies.*

In this literature review, I analyzed the central concepts of the DCs framework in detail while addressing their relevance to this study. These fundamental concepts included dynamic capabilities, operational capabilities, the relationship between DCs and innovation, and the relationship between DCs and entrepreneurship. Innovation and entrepreneurship are key drivers of growth and survival (Teece, Peteraf, & Leih, 2016). The purpose of this study was to identify what strategies SME leaders use to identify, access, and develop the necessary capabilities for building resilience and agility in their organization for these organizations to survive for more than 5 years. I started the review by analyzing the resource-based view (RBV) and the general systems theory (GST). These conceptual frameworks were potentially helpful, but I did not choose to use them for this study. I then analyzed the dynamic capabilities theory (DCT). I ended the literature review by discussing why the DCT framework was appropriate to investigate strategies that ICT SME leaders use to ensure the growth and survival and growth of their organizations.

I reviewed articles and books published between 2015 and 2020. In my literature review, 87% of the sources included research from 2015 and 2020 (see Table 1). These sources were relatively new. They were relevant as they covered the most recent thinking.

Table 1

Details of Publications in the Literature Review

Sources of publication	Older	Recently Published	Totals
Books	2	4	6
Peer-reviewed articles	10	75	85
Web pages	0	1	1
Total	12	80	92
By period of publication (%)	13	87	100

Choosing a Conceptual Framework

Most of the studies on the survival and growth of SMEs I reviewed in search of the conceptual framework used the GST and the RBV conceptual frameworks to analyze SME survival and growth. As shown in Table 2, both these frameworks fall short of explaining the conscious role that organizational leadership plays in configuring and reconfiguring capabilities to develop and sustain competitive advantage that makes their organizations outperform and outlast others. The major test of the conceptual framework should be its relevance to the study. This study was about the growth and survival strategies of SMEs beyond 5 years. According to Cirjevskis (2019), DCs should underpin the growth strategies that some business leaders implement, including collaborative and consolidative strategies. The collaborative strategies include alliance, networks, and joint ventures, and consolidative strategies include mergers and acquisitions (Cirjevskis, 2019). These growth strategies require business model innovation (BMI), which includes DCs of sensing, seizing, and reconfiguration (Teece et al., 2016). BMI innovation is triggered by

an entrepreneurial idea, the identification of new customer needs, and creative ways of

creating and delivering consumer value to the target market (Bereznoi, 2014). I used the

DCT conceptual framework as using this framework could help me explain how SMEs

achieve growth and survival over extended periods, as well as BMI, which is the critical

mechanism for creating and sustaining competitive advantage.

The DCs conceptual framework is relevant to the growth and survival of SMEs

for more than 5 years. In the ICT industry, knowledge from other companies and outside

the country drives innovation for both large and small companies (Fransman, 2014).

SMEs must have the capacity to access and integrate that knowledge into their company

strategies and operations (Pisano, 2017). The categories of sensing, seizing, and

reconfiguring DCs are, therefore, relevant to ICT SME growth and survival (Teece,

2014). Also, because of technological advances in the ICT industry, the company may be

exposed to new resources that can drive innovation. Such resources might include

crowdsourcing platforms. Crowdsourcing as an organizational innovation strategy

involves outsourcing a function that is typically performed by employees to an undefined,

generally extensive network of people by inviting ideas and contributions, mostly from

volunteers over the Internet (Renard & Davis, 2019). Crowdsourcing may reduce the cost

of innovation and (Wilson, Bhakoo, & Samson, 2018). Crowdsourcing and may also

increase the value to customers due to process and product innovation (Wilson et al.,

2018). The company will need to possess the DCs of sensing what customers' needs are,

identifying and seizing the relevant crowdsourcing platforms, and reconfiguring as well

as transforming the internal competencies to ensure management of the crowdsourcing

platform (Teece et al., 2016). The integration of the knowledge from the crowdsourcing

is critical in achieving the intended results of crowdsourcing.

Table 2

Taxonomy of Organizational Theories

Name of theory	Author	Date	Key tenets	Comment
DCs theory	Teece, et al.	1997	Firm survival and growth are a result of its ability to integrate, build and reconfigure internal and external competences (Teece et al., 19997) A hierarchy of specific and general DCs drive firm growth and survival (Kay, 2018).	The theory does not detail how these should integrate for competitive advantage (Teece et al., 2016). The success of a firm lies in its strategic agility and not just on VRIN resources.
Resource-based view	Barney Penrose	1991 1959	Firms gain competitive advantage because they possess VRIN resources External and internal resources influence firm growth	The theory does not explain why firms that the same resources differ in performance (Teece, 2016).
General systems theory	von Bertalanffy	1951	The organization is a social system made up of subunits that must interrelate harmoniously together and with the environment for survival (von Bertalanffy, 1951) The emphasis is on complementarities among elements, their integration, and outcomes resulting from their interactions (Teece et al., 2016)	The theory does not explain why some firms are agile and successful longer than others (Teece, et al., 2016). The theory does not address the fact that different systems can achieve identical outcomes The theory is not prescriptive about what practitioners should do to ensure growth and profitability (Teece et al., 2016).

In Table 2, I illustrate the main aspect of the DCT, which is a derivative of the

RBV framework and the GST. The GST is not prescriptive in the sense that it does not

detail how practitioners can improve profitability and growth. The DCT is prescriptive as

it is about how companies can adapt to environmental changes and what practitioners

need to do to take advantage of opportunities resulting from environmental changes such as market innovations. The DCT theory goes further than the other theories I discussed in this proposal, as this theory also leads to the identification of which dynamic and ordinary capabilities underpin various growth strategies adopted by multiple organizations (Cirjevskis, 2019). Using the DCT identified what capabilities the leaders of SMEs have developed and how they have implemented organizational strategies aimed at selecting, developing, and deploying capabilities. The findings of this study revealed what overall corporate strategies SME leaders implement to ensure the growth and survival of their businesses. The results also exposed the strategies SME leaders used to overcome challenges they came across in the implementation. I, therefore, selected the DCT to gain a deeper understanding of what strategies SME leaders whose companies have implemented to ensure the survival and growth of their companies. The emphasis was on what strategies and capabilities they have used to ensure the survival of their firms for more than 5 years. A more detailed description of the three conceptual frameworks follows.

GST Conceptual Framework

The GST assumes that systems have common characteristics irrespective of their intrinsic nature and the system is a collection of interrelated and interdependent subsystems (Caws, 2015; von Bertalanffy, 2008). The systems-interactive paradigm of organizational analysis features the continual stages of input, processing, and output, which demonstrate the concept of openness in systems (von Bertalanffy, 2008). The idea of an open system is central to GST and describes a system that can affect and be affected

by the environment. A system can accept input from the environment, which it can process and send out as an output to the environment. Open systems, therefore, interact with and are influenced by their environment, and closed systems have got boundaries that limit interactions with the environment (von Bertalanffy, 2008).

SMEs, as organizations, interact with their environment even as it impacts on them, and vice versa. Researchers, therefore, use systems theory as a basis for the analysis of the failure and sustainability of SMEs. For example, the failure rate of SMEs is much higher in developing countries than in developed countries due to environmental factors including inadequate infrastructure, limited access to funding, and companies not attracting people with the proper skills (Ifekwem & Ogundeinde Adedamola, 2016). Ifekwem and Ogundeinde Adedamola (2016) conducted a study in Nigeria which showed that barriers to SME growth and survival include lack of succession planning, lack of access to adequate business set up capital, shoddy bookkeeping, lack of political awareness, and being in the wrong line of business. The study also revealed that survival methods such as differentiation strategy, corporate strategy, and competitive strategy enabled these businesses to be sustainable (Ifekwem & Ogundeinde Adedamola, 2016). Gupta and Mirchandani (2018) conducted a study on women-owned SMEs in the UAE. Gupta and Mirchandani found that personal and environmental factors, as well as government support, were the primary factors responsible for SME survival. The personal attributes assessed in their study included business leaders' levels of education, motivation, commitment, and environmental factors, including access to markets and startup capital. Government support included access to government authorities and

assistance from NGOs. While Gupta and Mirchandani highlighted issues surrounding access to startup capital and government agencies, they did not specify which management tools or strategies managers use to access and deploy the resources and capabilities required for growth and survival, which is the focus of this study. Gupta and Mirchandani also did not explain the nature of support that SMEs receive from government and NGOs. Healy, O'Dwyer, and Ledwith (2018) used the case study methodology to explore the impact of product advantage on SME survival and found that the meaningfulness of products to customers is the most significant product advantage dimension, rather than product innovation or superiority. The meaningfulness of products relates to their utility and, therefore, their value to the customer (Healy et al., 2018). According to Healy et al., leaders of small businesses must prioritize customer engagement, especially in business to business (B2B) settings, as they must manufacture products that enable the customers to develop a competitive advantage. SMEs in manufacturing require the tools and capacity to engage with their customers and design products that meet the needs of these customers (Healy et al., 2018).

Leaders of successful SMEs should have the ability to develop and implement survival strategies to ensure the survival and growth of their companies (Ramukumba, 2014). Ramukumba (2014) found that SMEs need to focus on critical success factors to build competitive advantage. The list of critical SME success factors identified by Ramukumba in South Africa included the attraction of repeat customers and product performance. Indeed, product performance related to the meaningfulness of the product is a critical factor in business survival (Healy et al., 2018). Product innovation must,

therefore, be about ensuring the meaningfulness of products for SMEs to survive for more than 5 years through innovation.

Environmental factors such as technological advancements can affect the survival of small- and medium-sized businesses. Roy, Maxwell, and Carson (2014) conducted research using case study methodology into how SMEs use social media platforms to sustain their businesses and found that SMEs use these tools to engage both current and potential customers. Roy et al. found that the use of information technology relates to its ease of use and affordability, and the availability of implementation time or technical support. Social media influences the purchase decisions of consumers, and its use can, therefore, help SMEs survive (Roy et al., 2014). The technology strategy is, therefore, critical in survival consideration in understanding how SMEs survive for more than 5 years.

RBV Conceptual Framework

The RBV framework views the enterprise as a collection of resource capabilities and competencies that give it a competitive advantage by matching its internal capabilities to the external factors affecting the organization. Penrose introduced the RBV theory in 1959. Penrose (1959) asserted that the internal and external resources of a firm influence its growth. The central tenet of RBV includes resources that meet valuable, rare, inimitable, and nonsubstitutable (VRIN) criteria (Barney, 1991). According to Nason and Wiklund (2018), using VRIN resources make it possible for firms to differentiate themselves by developing and sustaining a competitive advantage. For example, the firm with highly skilled human resources may develop a better strategy to

survive and grow. Cassia and Minola (2012) suggested that companies achieve growth by utilizing available resources. According to the RBV conceptual framework, internal and external resources promote and constrain a company's growth and survival (Kay, 2018). The RBV framework, however, does not explain how SMEs develop and deploy resources to gain competitive advantage. In a qualitative study, Cassia and Minola applied the RBV conceptual framework to explain factors that empower SMEs to survive and grow in highly competitive markets. Cassia and Minola explored the relationship between enterprise orientation, resources, and the environment with the growth of SMEs. Cassia and Minola used the case study research methodology to study three small firms. The findings of their study revealed that the availability of redundant or slack resources could influence the growth of SMEs. In their analysis, Cassia and Minola found that SMEs operating in hostile and dynamic environments grow by utilizing slack resources and access to resources. The findings of Cassia and Minola's study revealed that RBV combines very well with the research construct of enterprise orientation in explaining the growth of SMEs in dynamic and hostile environments. Cassia and Minola, through their study, revealed a link between entrepreneurial orientation and growth.

The link between SME resources, capabilities, and SME survival and growth is critical in ensuring that the SME sector grows. The SME sector is extremely vulnerable, yet this sector contributes significantly to job creation and economic growth (Campbell & Park, 2017). High growth enterprises create the most jobs (Cassia & Minola, 2012). Sok, O'Cass, and Sok (2013) used RBV as a theoretical basis to study how SME internal resources enable SME performance. Sok et al. surveyed 171 SMEs that had, on average,

33 employees and had been operating for an average of 10.5 years in the manufacturing

sector in Cambodia. Sok et al.'s study revealed that innovation capability, marketing

capability, and learning capability all contribute significantly to SME performance.

Correlation analysis between precursors of financial performance and financial

performance confirmed the relationship in Cambodian SMEs. Wolff, Pett, and Ring

(2015) used the resource-based view theory in explaining the correlations between

entrepreneurial orientation, learning orientation, and SME performance. Wolff et al. used

the survey methodology to collect data from chief executive officers (CEOs) and leaders

of SMEs located throughout the United States. The findings of Wolff et al.'s quantitative

study confirmed the hypothesis that entrepreneurial orientation mediated the relationship

between learning orientation and growth in SMEs, which were studied. According to

Wolf et al., entrepreneurial orientation included innovativeness, risk-taking, and

proactiveness while learning orientation included open-mindedness and commitment to

learning. The learning culture or orientation (LO) in SMEs studied by Wolff et al.

translates to enterprise growth only if the company can access opportunities.

Entrepreneurial orientation and LO are features of the internal resources of the firm,

mainly its leadership and employees. Therefore, the use of the RBV conceptual

framework in this study was more than appropriate (Wolff et al., 2015).

The LO on its own is not enough to improve the performance of SMEs. In

addition to the learning culture, the company must take calculated risks, innovate, and be

proactive. The limitation of Wolff et al.'s (2015) study is the fact that it does not include

the external factors in the analysis. However, the only way small companies can ensure

survival is to grow (Wolff et al., 2015). Growth may result in attracting highly skilled and qualified personnel (Wolff et al., 2015). Ren, Eisingerich, and Tsai (2015) applied the resource-based view theory in explaining the relationships between R&D capability, internationalization, marketing capability, and innovation. Ren et al. focused on small-and medium-sized businesses listed on the Chinese stock exchange. The findings of the study by Ren et al. showed that marketing capability, R&D, and internationalization influence the innovation performance of SMEs in China. According to Ren et al., the most exciting finding from their research was the positive relationship between marketing capability and innovation. The innovation improves with an increase in marketing activities and a focus on customers (Ren et al., 2015). In Ren et al.'s quantitative study, the authors developed a model that links innovation to marketing capability, R&D capability, learning orientation, and internationalization. All these processes require significant financial and technical resources to materialize.

Lack of access to funding is a significant barrier to the development of DCs and, consequently, the survival and growth of microenterprises. Inan and Bititci (2015) conducted a study whose findings revealed that some SMEs fail because they lack dynamic networking capabilities, marketing, and sales dynamics as well as the formalized learning capabilities which are necessary for survival and growth. Bose (2016) applied the RBV conceptual framework in explaining factors that influence the internationalization of SMEs. The findings of Bose's study revealed that successful SME internationalization depended on timely and thoughtful decisions relating to the efficient evaluation of prospects for internationalization as well as the efficiency of analyzing the

prospects of internationalization. Bose emphasized the importance of knowledge; both implicit and explicit is critical in making the right decisions about the timing and the nature of internationalization. The findings of Bose's study confirmed the link between marketing, innovation, and internationalization identified by Ren et al. (2015). The results of Bose's study made a significant contribution to the development of a conceptual framework for internationalization, which is a form of enterprise growth.

Well-resourced companies may have better chances of survival than those that are not well resourced. Researchers use the RBV framework to investigate factors that influence SME survival and growth (Kazlauskaite, Autio, Gelbuda, & Sarapovas, 2015). According to Alonso, Bressan, and Sakellarios (2016), the RBV theory is applicable in the development of models for organizational improvement, growth, and survival through the development of effective strategies to develop and sustain competitive advantage. However, the DCs conceptual framework is more relevant in studying long term survival of SMEs as it is about how SME leaders configure and reconfigure their internal resources to explore and exploit changes in the business environment for survival and growth of their businesses beyond 5 years (Teece, 2014). Ferreira, Coelho, and Moutinho (2018) explored the relationship between DCs and competitive advantage and found that creativity, innovation capabilities, and entrepreneurial orientation had a positive impact on competitive advantage. Thus, for an SME to develop and maintain a competitive edge, it must adapt to environmental changes by using creativity and innovation, and it must have an entrepreneurial orientation as well as engage in continuous improvement (Hansen, & Moller, 2016). SMEs that are in the developmental stage may have the

flexibility to innovate and exploit opportunities in dynamic environments that more established entities have lost (Nedzinskas, Pundzienė, Buožiūtė-Rafanavičienė, & Pilkienė, 2013).

DCs Conceptual Framework

I used the DCs conceptual framework as the lens for this study. According to Teece et al. (1997), the DCs conceptual framework consists of two essential elements. These elements include the organization's capacity to renew and extend competencies to improve organizational performance in the short term, and the second is the ability to use these capabilities to position the organization for long-term competitive advantage (Pisano, 2017). According to Ambrosini and Bowman (2009), DCs are different from ordinary capabilities as they are mechanisms by which firms learn and accumulate new skills and resources. DCs processes include co-ordination and integration, learning, and reconfiguration (Ambrosini & Bowman, 2009). DCs are learned and stable patterns of collective activity through which the organizations systematically generate and modify its operating routines in pursuit of improved performance (Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000). According to Ambrosini and Bowman, DCs are not ad hoc problem-solving events; they are patterns and, therefore, repeatable processes. The position the firm occupies in the markets and the strategic path it has taken determine what DCs it has and what DCs it requires at any particular stage of its development (Zollo & Winter, 2002). Dynamic capabilities, unlike ordinary capabilities, are concerned with developing a new resource base to ensure the growth and survival of firms. The DCs framework came from Teece et al.'s (1997) observation that the firms that survive are those that can continuously

develop new capabilities to survive in the fast-changing environments. I chose DCT conceptual framework over GST and RBV frameworks because it emphasizes the role of organizational leaders in using resources to achieve adaptations as a mechanism of survival and growth in changing environmental conditions (Pisano, 2017).

DCT proponents address the growth and survival of organizations as products of the development and implementation of dynamic capabilities. DCs encompass activities such as new product development, business model innovation, collaboration with other organizations (Schoemaker, Heaton, & Teece, 2018). According to Schoemaker et al. (2018), strong DCs are essential for bringing about organizational agility necessary to address deep uncertainty that comes from innovation and competition. Companies that have strong DCs have better chances of winning against competitors.

Leaders of companies engage in activities to extend resources and develop new capabilities to improve organizational performance and to create competitive advantage. The DCs framework underpins the development and use of strong DCs to bring about organizational agility that is critical in addressing deep uncertainty, from market innovations, new technologies, and competition (Sasmoko, Mihardjo, Alamsjah, & Djap, 2019). The DCT offers a good explanation of how organizational leaders renew and transform their organizations to gain competitive advantage (Teece, 2014). Using the DCs conceptual framework in exploring the strategies for survival and growth of SME will enhance the understanding of how leaders of SMEs access and integrate internal and external resources to ensure the survival of SMEs beyond 5 years.

The DCs conceptual framework is a derivative of the resource-based view (RBV) of firms (Teece, 2016). Teece et al. (1997) introduced the concept of DCs to describe how firms developed, configured, and reconfigured internal and external competencies to gain and sustain competitive advantages in dynamic environments. The DCs are meta processes that focus on decisions about sensing opportunities, enabling organizations to seize resources and take advantage of opportunities, and creating sufficient conditions to change and transform in response to changing environments (Teece, 2014). Sensing is about sensing new clients' needs, introducing new business scope (Cirjevskis, 2019). Sensing ensures that the business continually increases the client base and that these new clients are satisfied with the products that the company offers. Sensing is about sensing changes in the competitive environment, including potential shifts in technology, competition, and regulation (Ambrosini & Bowman, 2009). Ambrosini and Bowman (2009) asserted that searching and identifying opportunities are not DCs but are managerial, organizational processes that support the implementation of DCs or microfoundations of dynamic capabilities. Seizing is about acting on opportunities in the market by reconfiguring tangible and intangible resources (Ambrosini & Bowman, 2009). Reconfiguring includes the reconfiguration of resources, new distribution channels, and further promotion methods (Cirjevskis, 2019). According to Birkinshaw, Zimmermann, and Raisch (2016), reconfiguring is a higher-order capability; it is not at the same level as the low order capabilities of sensing and seizing. The result of implementing DCs may be to deliver products and services that meet the needs of the customers at a lower cost or

better positioning of the brand to increase customer demand that brings about growth and survival.

DCs form the foundations of strategic decisions about ordinary capabilities required to develop and sustain superior performance in markets with high levels of innovation (D'Annunzio, Carattoli, & Dupleix, 2015). The rare and inimitable resources are, therefore, insufficient to gain a competitive advantage and achieve growth and survival. The ability to identify opportunities and exploit them enhances the possibility of developing effective strategies for growth and survival (Ferreira, Cardim, & Branco, 2018). Strategies for the survival of SMEs must be about identifying, accessing, configuring, and reconfiguring the rare and inimitable resources towards ensuring that organizations can identify and seize market opportunities. Developing the ability for organizations to transform and survive in dynamic market environments is, therefore, critical to the sustainability of SMEs. The DCT is about understanding the growth and survival of businesses in rapidly changing and highly innovative environments by analyzing how organizational leaders identify, nurture, and access operational capabilities for the survival and growth of their organizations (Ambrosini & Bowman, 2009). DCs reflect the capacity of an organization to reconfigure and extend competences to adapt to external environmental factors.

The DCs can be patterns, processes, and foundations of survival strategies. However, the capacity to adapt is not enough to ensure survival. Pisano (2017) argued that the capacity to adjust without the capacity to choose among future paths could not guarantee survival. Pisano's perspective brings in the ability of the managers to choose

among future paths as a critical component of successful strategy development. Managers

have an essential role in identifying and selecting the resources they have and those that

they need to access and integrate into the business (Inigo & Albareda, 2019). Managers

also need to ensure that they have the skills to integrate resources or to collaborate with

other entities that can help them access resources they do not have. The expertise of

managers is, therefore, critical in crafting and implementing dynamic capabilities-based

survival strategies for SMEs. According to Carraresi, Mamaqi, Albisu, and Banterle

(2016), combining the marketing, network, and information acquisition capabilities is

critical to achieving a sustained competitive advantage. Birkinshaw et al. (2016) asserted

that of the three categories of dynamic capabilities, which include exploring, seizing, and

reconfiguring, reconfiguring is a higher-order capability that involves the choosing of the

mode of adaptation. The formation of capabilities is the result of various kinds of

investments that include R&D projects, technology adoption, enhancements to physical

and human capital, formal and informal experimentation, operating process redesign, and

autonomous learning by doing (Pisano, 2017). All these types of investments require

managers who can make critical strategic choices and have relevant implementation

skills, motivation, and values (Asah, Fatoki, & Rungani, 2015). Teece et al. (2016)

asserted that managers deploy not only financial capital, but also technical expertise

while balancing stakeholder interests both within and beyond the organization in the

process of identifying and implementing relevant capabilities. Organizational leadership

is critical in the identification and deployment of capabilities for the survival and growth

of enterprises.

Managers and organizational leaders play a critical role in selecting and deploying capabilities for the survival and growth of enterprises. Teece et al. (2016) emphasized the pivotal role of entrepreneurial managers in the orchestration, giving direction, and coordinating among activities. Managers make decisions about which new paths the organization must follow to adapt to environmental changes and what capabilities to develop and deploy (Pisano, 2017). Organization adaptability and agility is the product of superior skills of managers in redeploying and reconfiguring resources to build and sustain competitive advantage.

The underpinning assumption of DCT is that DCs give organizations competitive advantage. Researchers have identified a positive relationship between dynamic capabilities, organizational performance, and competitive advantage. Ferreira, Cardim et al. (2018) conducted a quantitative study to establish the relationship between DCs for exploitation and exploration. They found that there is no significant direct correlation between DCs and performance. However, they found a significant relationship between DCs and marketing capability, as well as between DCs and innovation capability. Ferreira, Cardim et al. also found positive relationships between DCs and competitive advantage.

Dynamic capabilities, environmental, and social performance. DCs do not improve the financial performance of SMEs. The process of enhancing corporate social responsibility (CSR) performance and green performance requires not just the motivation but also the development capabilities that allow the SMEs to adjust to internal and external changes (Arend, 2014). According to Arend (2014), DCs based adaptability is

critical in the development of CSR and green competitive advantage. The findings of a study that Arend conducted targeting executives of SMEs in the United States revealed a strong relationship between DCs and financial, CSR, and green competitive advantage. The findings of a study that Park, Park, Hong, and Yang (2017) revealed that implemented CSR program has a positive impact on the long-term performance of SMEs. In the research that Park et al. conducted, the main driver of successful implementation of the CSR program was the CSR orientation of the chief executive officer (CEO) and the ability of the CEO to communicate the plan clearly and mobilize resources toward successful implementation of CSR program. The ability to identify an appropriate and implement CSR program gives the company competitive advantage, and the extension or reconfiguration of resources to develop the capabilities for CSR implementation as well as the engagement of stakeholders reside with CEO in SMEs (Park et al., 2017). The DCs and the CSR orientation of the CEO are the drivers of the successful implementation of the CSR programs (Arend, 2014).

DCs are associated with the economic, environmental, and social performance of companies. Eikelenboom and De Jong (2018) assessed the impact of external and internal integrative DCs on the sustainability performance of SMEs. They found that there is a positive relationship between external integrative dynamic capabilities, innovation, as well as the social and environmental performance of firms. Eikelenboon and De Jong found a weak correlation between integrative dynamic capability and sustainable performance. The findings of Eikelenboom and De Jong's research revealed that SMEs that can have a strong ability to access external resources and knowledge could be

sustainable. The external integrative DCs are also critical if a company is following a collaborative strategy to achieve growth and survival.

Collaboration with supply chain partners is another factor that is critical for SMEs to be sustainable. Sustainability is about ensuring growth and survival without harming the people and the environment (Kumar, Subramanian, & Arputham, 2018). Kumar et al. (2018) conducted a study on the impact of DCs on supply chain sustainability involving SMEs in India. The finding of Kumar et al.'s study revealed that DCs and not static resources are critical in improving the sustainability performance of companies.

DCs and innovation. DCs ensure that organizations survive through innovation. Companies that do not invest in accessing or developing DCs are unlikely to be able to create and maintain competitive advantage needed for growth and survival (Sugiono, Arifianti, Raharja, Maulina, & Hapsari, 2017). The key to the survival of SMEs is their ability to be innovative in terms of their products, systems, structures, and processes (Healy et al., 2018). The findings of a study conducted by Padilha and Gomes (2016) among textile manufacturing SMEs in Brazil, revealed that the innovation culture influenced process innovation more than product innovation. However, the presence of innovation culture did have a positive impact on the development of competitive advantage and survival of SMEs (Padilha & Gomes, 2016). In a study involving Turkish SMEs, Bayarcelik, Tasel, and Apak (2014) found that management skills to foster technological capability, access to finance, and organizational size are factors that drive innovation in SMEs. Management skills to develop a culture of innovation through organizational learning, collaboration, and risk-taking are critical for innovation

(Bayarcelik et al., 2014). Innovation can result in improved processes, products, and services that lead to efficient, flexible, and responsive businesses (Schiliro, 2015). According to Hervas-Oliver, Ripoll-Sempere, and Moll (2016), there are three types of innovation: (a) management innovation, (b) product innovation, and (c) process innovation. The findings of a study conducted by Hervas-Oliver et al. revealed that SMEs that focus on both technological and management innovations could outperform those only focused on technological innovation. According to Ferreira, Cardim et al. (2018), there is a significant positive relationship between DCs and innovation capability.

Innovation can develop into a dynamic capability that entails sensing and seizing opportunities as well as transforming other ordinary capabilities into DCs (Stronen, Hoholm, Kvaerner, & Stome, 2017). For the innovation capability to be dynamic, an entrepreneurial culture must prevail in the company (Stronen et al., 2017). Lyver and Lu (2018) conducted a study on the survival of 164 SMEs in Canada. They found that information technology capabilities have a positive relationship to product innovation performance and that strategic entrepreneurship partially mediates the relationship between IT capabilities and product innovation performance.

DCs and entrepreneurship. An entrepreneur is someone with a flair identifying and seizing businesses and creating value in the process (Nuvolari, Toninelli, & Vasta, 2018). Entrepreneurial actions are behaviors to exploit opportunities others have not identified or used. Entrepreneurship behavior includes the introduction of new businesses, opening new markets, developing new products and services, and the monopolization of new sources of raw materials (Dorin & Alexandru, 2014). According

to Nuvolari et al. (2018), entrepreneurs tend to introduce new ways of doing things and are, therefore, innovators.

Entrepreneurship behavior is associated with the growth and survival of SMEs. Schachtebeck, Groenewald, and Nieuwenhuizen (2019) argued that in the South African economy, SMEs have in the past illustrated uninspiring performance, low levels of job creation, and diminished levels of early-stage entrepreneurial activities. Undertaking entrepreneurial activities of identifying and exploiting opportunities can result in the growth of the SME sector resulting in economic growth and job creation. According to Teece et al. (2016), innovation and entrepreneurship are critical drivers of SME growth and survival.

SME leaders must entrench a culture of entrepreneurship or entrepreneurial orientation in their business ventures. The key driver of growth in SMEs is the entrepreneurial orientation (Cassia & Minola, 2012). Wolff et al. (2015) asserted that the entrepreneurial orientation included innovativeness, risk-taking, and proactiveness. Wolff et al., in a study involving three SMEs, found a direct relationship between entrepreneurial orientation, learning orientation, and growth in profoundly changing market conditions. Hashim, Raza, and Minai (2018) found that entrepreneurial competencies were the cause of SME success in a market environment. Entrepreneurship competencies are among the dynamic ingredients for raising the bar for progress in SMEs (Hashim et al., 2018). SMEs, therefore, need entrepreneurship to survive for extended periods.

The ability of managers to deploy entrepreneurial activities throughout their organizations is critical to its success. Entrepreneurship education is one of the strategies that governments and development organization to promote economic growth (Roundy & Fayard, 2018). Hossain and Al-Asheq (2019) revealed that entrepreneurial activities play an essential role in improving the business performance levels of business organizations. Leaders of SMEs must familiarize themselves with knowledge of how entrepreneurial activities can enhance organizational performance and implement these activities throughout their organizations to improve the performance and survival of their organizations.

Entrepreneurship and the development and deployment of DCs reinforce each other. The categories of DCs mirror the components of entrepreneurship of identifying and exploiting opportunities. Following the DCT framework forces companies to implement entrepreneurial competences. According to Teece (2017), DCs reflect the attributes of the entrepreneur who identifies and exploits opportunities. The challenge is for the entrepreneur to ensure that managers develop and operationalize DCs throughout the organization to achieve the growth and survival of the organization.

If each manager in the organization is an entrepreneur, the organization can adapt and grow much quicker than others. The concept of entrepreneurial management involves the identification and exploitation of opportunities using DCs (Teece, 2016). DCs reside in the entrepreneurs, and they are elements that ensure the viability of the enterprise (Farago, Denkewski, Lourenço, & Ferreira, 2019). For SMEs, it is, therefore, vital to look at the entrepreneur to understand the DCs that the company possesses. It is entrepreneurs

that identify gaps in the market, organize resources to exploit or seize the opportunity, and to transform the organizational assets for the enterprise to adapt and grow (Farago et al., 2019).

SMEs in the ICT Industry

There are a limited number of studies on factors responsible for the success of SMEs in the ICT industry. The shortage of academic articles presents a significant knowledge gap in the exploration of the strategies that SMEs use to grow and survive. ICT in South Africa is the key growth industry and has the potential to contribute to economic growth in general (BER, 2016). However, in South Africa, there are very few successful SMEs in the ICT sector (BER, 2016). I, therefore, explored the literature from other developing economies and the global ICT industry. The definition of SMEs differs from country to country. The general definition of SMEs includes companies that have employees that are less than 200 (Coetzee & Buys, 2017). Lack of access to funding, lack of skills, lack of motivation, and crime are the challenges that SMEs in sub-Saharan Africa (Doukoure & Mnkandla, 2018). These challenges are the reason many SMEs fail to survive beyond five years. Krejci, Strielkowski, and Cabelkova (2015) conducted a study of ICT SMEs in the Czech Republic, a developing country, and found that access to financial resources, research and development, and technology skills are determinants of SME success. These findings are in line with those of Healy et al. (2018), who established that the determinants of SME success include product innovation and superior service, as the

only way to achieve these is through R&D and technical or product development skills.

In the ICT industry and especially in software development, knowledge and technical skills are critical to the success of the enterprise. Shirokova, Vega, and Sokolova (2013) conducted a study in Russia and found that entrepreneurial orientation, exploration, and exploitation were factors that determined the success of small and medium enterprises. This study included SMEs in the hospitality, retail, and ICT industries. According to Shirokova et al., exploitation included investment in internal resources, organizational learning, knowledge resources, developmental changes, and transitional changes. The findings of this study are similar to those of Wolff et al. (2015), which found that entrepreneurial orientation (EO) alone is not enough for SMEs to succeed. Instead, EO has to combine with learning orientation and innovation for SMEs to be successful. In South Africa, SMEs in the ICT sector fail mainly due to shortages of ICT skills and because they lack the strategies to compete in an industry dominated by multinational companies (BER, 2016).

Access to funding can make it possible for companies to attract the skills to develop the capabilities required for survival and growth. Owoseni and Twinomurinzi (2018) assessed the potential of SMEs using information technology applications to enhance the absorptive, adaptive, and innovative DCs to develop and use opportunity sensing capabilities, opportunity shaping capability, and opportunity seizing capability. However, Arifin and Frmanzah (2015) observed that technology adoption happens more smoothly and yields better results in organizations with

entrepreneurial leadership and absorptive capacity, which are mostly lacking in

SMEs. Badin, Hajjar, and Kozak (2018) recommended that to understand better

factors that affect the survival of SMEs, and researchers must consider governance

issues, macroeconomic, institutional, policy and market conditions, as well as

internal issues including resources such as access to finance, organizational

capabilities, and clustering. To understand the factors that differentiate SMEs within

the same locality and same industry, emphasis should be placed on capabilities as all

businesses in the same location experience the same environmental factors. It is

imperative to understand not just what resources an organization has but what the

organization does with those resources. I, therefore, decided to focus on which

capabilities successful SMEs develop or access to survive or grow.

Collaboration with other companies can improve the chances of survival of

SMEs. Aslesen and Harirchi (2015) conducted a study of SMEs in India and found that

regional and global linkages enhance the innovation and survival of these companies. In

South Africa, most ICT companies are channel partners of global companies (BER,

2016). Few SMEs specialize in software development in the absence of partnerships with

global companies (BER, 2016). The findings of this study may confirm whether

companies with global partners are more successful than those without them.

There was no academic study focusing on the strategies that have a positive

impact on the growth and survival of ICT SMEs in South Africa. The various articles I

reviewed show that there are several strategies that SMEs can use to drive enterprise

growth and survival. Some studies deal with orientation or culture, such as

entrepreneurial or learning orientation, while others dig deeper to explore the actual

strategies used by organizations. Other studies focused on environmental factors such as

government regulations and support. Only a relatively small number have focused

holistically on environmental factors and the strategies which companies employ to

survive. There are also very few articles focusing on ICT SMEs, and that is why I

systematically investigated strategies that SME leaders implemented to ensure growth

and survival of their companies beyond 5 years.

Accessing and developing DCs is critical for companies, especially SMEs, that

are operating in the ICT industry, which is fast changing because of technology

innovation. To gain and sustain competitive advantage SMEs in the ICT sector must

adapt to fast-changing consumer needs. If the founders, leaders or managers of the SME

do not possess dynamic capabilities, the chances of survival of the SME are very slim

(Teece, 2017). Growth and survival strategies must include how the company will access

and develop DCs to configure and reconfigure resources in a manner that gives the

company the capacity to adapt to gain and sustain competitive advantage.

Using the DCs conceptual framework in exploring the growth and survival

strategies of SMEs will expose how the leadership can build the organization's agility to

match environmental changes. DCs underpin the growth and survival strategies of firms

(Cirjevskis, 2019). The DCT conceptual framework was the best framework to explain

how ICT SMEs adapt through innovation, entrepreneurship, and, most importantly, how

leaders of SMEs can ensure growth and survival beyond 5 years.

Transition and Summary

The objective of this qualitative, multicase study was to explore the experiences of leaders of three ICT SMEs and the strategies they employ to ensure survival and growth beyond 5 years in South Africa. In this study, I used semistructured interviews for data collection, either face-to-face or via video conferencing technology. I used the DCs framework as the lens to gain a deeper understanding of the capabilities that SME owners and leaders develop to ensure the survival of their businesses. I used the DCs framework because its main tenet is that SME leaders might be able to access and develop dynamic capabilities to maintain their business operations and achieve growth even in highly volatile market environments.

Section 1 included the background to the study, the problem statement, the purpose statement, the nature of the study, the conceptual framework, the research question, interview questions, assumptions, limitations, delimitations, and significance of the study. Section1 also included a review of the relevant professional and academic literature to position this research within the existing knowledge ecosystem. In Section 2, I address the methodological aspects of this research project. I include a discussion of my role as the researcher, the selection of participants, the research methods and design selection, population, and sampling. I also include ethical research considerations, data collection and analysis techniques, and data reliability and validity. In Section 3, I include the research findings, the application of the findings to the professional practices of business, and the implications for social change. Section 3 concludes with reflections and recommendations for action and further study.

Section 2: The Project

The objective of this qualitative multicase study was to explore the strategies that SME leaders in the ICT industry use to ensure business survival and growth beyond 5 years from their establishment. SME leaders must understand the strategies of business leaders who have operated beyond 5 years as most SMEs fail within the first 5 years. The main topics in this section were: (a) the purpose statement, (b) the role of the researcher, (c) the participants, (d) the research method, (e) the research design, (f) population and sampling, (g) ethical research, (h) data collection, (i) data analysis, and (j) reliability and validity.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multicase study was to explore the strategies that leaders of SMEs in the ICT industry employ to ensure the growth and sustainability of their businesses for more than 5 years. The target population consisted of leaders of three ICT SMEs who survived for more than 5 years in South Africa. The implications for positive social change include equipping SME leaders with information on value-added strategies that might be of use in configuring processes and assets, promoting operational efficiency, and as a result, enabling enterprise growth, and thereby allowing the organization to contribute to local economic development, including job creation.

Role of the Researcher

A qualitative case study researcher collects, organizes, analyzes, and interprets the data, and then presents the findings (McCusker & Gunaydin, 2015). According to Patton (2015), the researcher is the central figure and the primary data collection instrument. As

the researcher, I designed and carried out interviews, transcribed, and analyzed the collected data, and presented the findings in an organized and unbiased format. I designed the study and planned the technique and process of data collection. The data collection technique included interviewing the participants and analyzing company documents. I also developed and implemented the criteria for selecting the participants. I developed criteria for identifying and selecting the participants. I also negotiating access to the strategy documents with the participants. . . To ensure consistency in the interviews, I developed and used the interview protocol (see Appendix), conducted face-to-face and video interviews, and analyzed company documents. I ensured that I recorded the conversations, organized, and analyzed the data.

I have been a senior business executive for 18 years, and I have acquired extensive experience in supporting SMEs, while I have no personal relationships with SME business leaders. This experience helped me to identify SMEs that have survived for more than five years and to negotiate with the leaders of SMEs for them to participate in my study. the participants I used this experience, combined with my knowledge of previous studies on business strategies, to gather appropriate data from participants. I familiarized myself with the guidelines for qualitative research. I complied with these guidelines to improve the validity of the study because I am passionate about helping SMEs in my community and country to grow and survive over the long term.

One of the responsibilities of a qualitative case study researcher is to mitigate any bias emanating from the researcher's personal experience. I ensured that I remained nonjudgmental and impartial throughout the interviews. This approach of being non-

judgmental allows researchers to venture beyond sphere of knowledge into the unknown world of the participants to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon from the participants' worldview (Yin, 2018). During the research process, the researcher must remain open-minded and nonjudgmental (Saunders et al., 2015). The researcher needs to build trust by being open-minded and nonjudgmental toward research participants (Attia & Edge, 2017). Building trust and rapport with the participants allows the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomena (Yin, 2018). It is imperative to engage the respondents throughout the data collection and analysis process to avoid any personal bias that could influence the respondents' answers and to make sure through member checking that the interview summaries reflect their opinions (Fusch & Ness, 2015).

I mitigated researcher bias by using an interview protocol (Appendix) and allowed the participants to check my interview reports and findings. The process of member checking improves the accuracy of data and the validity of the study (Saunders et al., 2015). Researchers use the interview protocol to ensure that the interview follows a similar structure while at the same time, giving some flexibility to deviate from the structure (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). As a qualitative researcher, I adhered to the interview protocol (Appendix) to ensure that I did not deviate from the questions I prepared. An interview protocol provides researchers with a script to follow during the research investigation and provides a format for capturing the key aspects of the interview (Yin, 2018). By following the interview protocol (Appendix) and using member checking, I ensured consistency and reduced any researcher bias.

I followed the guidelines outlined in *The Belmont Report* published by the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research (1979). *The Belmont Report* provides three principles to guide ethical research: respect for persons, beneficence, and justice (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). *The Belmont Report* serves as the guiding ethical document to protect the rights of human subjects and participants involved in the research (Miracle, 2016). The consideration of the principles of ethical research and *The Belmont Report* are fundamental to achieving ethical research because they provide guidelines for the protection of human subjects by researchers.

Participants

In selecting the participants, I applied the following eligibility criteria for participants. The participants (a) were ICT SME leaders who successfully implemented strategies to sustain their business, (b) maintained their ICT business for more than 5 years, (c) older than 18 years, and (d) had their SME located in South Africa. Qualitative researchers rely on the business problem and related research questions to select a small number of knowledgeable participants of the phenomenon to gain relevant data collection (Yin, 2018). I picked the participants from companies listed in the Alternative Exchange (AltX), a division of the Johannesburg Stock Exchange (JSE). The AltX is for SMEs that are still in the process of developing the capacity to list on the main board (JSE, 2019).

I emailed letters of invitation to ICT SME leaders located within the Gauteng region of South Africa. I ensured that the participants who took part in the study received

a comprehensive consent form through subsequent email notification. In the consent form, I specified the research purpose and ethical considerations, including the process of agreeing to participate and the right to withdraw from the study at any time. Participants gave their consent by replying to the consent form email with the words *I consent*, indicating their willingness to participate in this study freely, with a clear understanding of its purpose, the rights of participants, and the absence of any intent to cause harm to participants or their business activities. After receiving responses to the informed consent letter, I contacted willing participants via a telephone call to schedule the interview at the convenience of each participant.

In conducting the interviews, I explained the purpose of the study, described the interview process, and provided clarity for each participant as a means of establishing a working relationship with them. Through the establishment and maintenance of excellent relationships with participants throughout the study, participants feel confident in sharing information with researchers (Saunders et al., 2015). Creating a better relationship between the researcher and participants enables the collection of insightful data when interviewing participants (Anyan, 2013). As suggested by Saunders et al. (2015), I organized interviews at the convenience of participants to further strengthen relationship building.

I selected this topic of exploring strategies for the survival and growth of SMEs to help initiate a discussion with the leaders of SMEs. Company leaders are responsible for the development and implementation of corporate strategies (Dyer, Godfrey, Jensen, & Bryce, 2015). Business leaders behave as the primary decision-makers and can provide

rich information to elucidate the research question (O'Donnell, 2014). The leaders that I selected were those that ensured that their businesses survived for more than 5 years.

I ensured that participants' privacy and confidentiality were respected both during and after the research procedure. As required in the IRB regulations, the destruction of all collected data will occur after storing them in a secure place for 5 years. The quality of interview research depends on the use of a well-designed interview guide as well as the creation of a free and nonthreatening interview environment (Kallio, Pietilä, Johnson, & Kangasniemi, 2016). I, therefore, ensured that I created a nonthreatening and safe environment for the interviewees to respond openly and honestly to my interview questions.

Research Method and Design

This subsection includes an explanation of the research method and case study research design and the rationale for using the qualitative method for this study. Reinhardt, Gutner, and Griffin (2018) asserted that a systematic review of the phenomenon under investigation and a multicase study design is critical in gaining a deeper understanding of phenomena, interdependencies, and contingencies. To obtain a deeper understanding of the strategies that ICT SMEs use to sustain and grow their businesses, I used multicase study research design in conducting this study.

Research Method

In this study, I used a qualitative research method. The three main research methods include qualitative, quantitative, and mixed (Saunders et al., 2015). Quantitative researchers use closed questions to test hypotheses about variables' relationships and

groups' differences (Saunders et al., 2015). Mixed methods researchers combine both quantitative and qualitative techniques to address more complicated research questions and develop a deeper theoretical understanding (Hyett et al., 2014). In contrast, qualitative researchers use open-ended questions to gain a more in-depth understanding of phenomena in their natural setting (Yin, 2018). In this study, I used qualitative research to gain insights into what strategies leaders of ICT SMEs used to grow and sustain their businesses for more than 5 years

In exploring effective strategies used by SMEs, I did not examine relations or test hypotheses; hence, the quantitative or mixed methods were not suitable for this study. As recommended by Yin (2018), I used semistructured questions to interview participants regarding strategies they used for sustainability, to gain insight into their experiences. The qualitative research method also includes data collection from artifacts such as internal and external documents (Yin, 2018). I integrated the data collection techniques for triangulation. I, therefore, analyzed financial reports, organizational strategy documents, strategic marketing plans, and artifacts such as posters and pictures in offices.

Research Design

I chose multicase study research to gain a deeper understanding of the strategies that leaders of ICT SMEs used to ensure the survival and growth of their businesses. I considered three types of qualitative research design: phenomenological, ethnographical, and case study for this research. In this subsection, I discuss the three qualitative research designs and offer reasons why I have chosen a multicase study design.

A researcher conducting phenomenological research seeks to understand peoples'
perceptions and perspectives and describes the experiences of individual participants
regarding a situation (Doody & Bailey, 2016). A phenomenological researcher seeks to
understand phenomena from the lived experiences of participants (Rodriguez & Smith,
2018). Phenomenological researchers focus on a more in-depth understanding of
phenomena embedded within the research participant's views and perspectives (Qutoshi,
2018). The phenomenological design approach was not suitable for this study because the
phenomenological design is better suited for exploring lived experiences and not the
strategies SME leaders use to sustain their business.

In this study, I explored strategies that SME leaders use to sustain their businesses
beyond 5 years. Researchers use the ethnographic research design to understand socio-
cultural phenomena by studying people's beliefs and behaviors (Hammersley, 2018).
Ethnography is suitable for studying and observing important events in cultures and
groups concerning facts or experiences from the past (Pearson et al., 2015). Ethnographic
researchers require enough time to understand people's beliefs through observation and
unstructured interviews. The ethnographic research design was not suitable for this study
as this study is about gaining a deeper understanding of strategies leaders of SMEs use
and not people's beliefs and behaviors.

I chose the multicase study research design to investigate strategies that leaders of
SMEs use to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years. Using the case study design,
researchers can gain a deeper understanding of a phenomenon in its natural context (Yin,
2018). I, therefore, chose the case study design. According to Pearson et al. (2015), the

case study is more about gaining insights, discovery, and interpretation than hypothesis testing. Merriam (1998) recommended the use of a case study when the researcher's interest lies in understanding social processes that occur in a specific context rather than in understanding relationships between variables. The multicase study design is particularly valuable when relationships between organizational structures, management processes, and outcomes are under investigation (Stewart, 2012). I, therefore, used the case study design to gain insights about the strategies that leaders of ICT SMEs in South Africa use to grow and sustain their businesses for more than 5 years.

The multicase study research design was most suited to investigate strategies that SME leaders use to ensure the survival of their businesses beyond 5 years. A case study is an in-depth inquiry into a phenomenon (Yin, 2018); researchers can use the case study design to identify what is happening and why, and perhaps to understand the effects of a situation and implications for action (Saunders et al., 2015). Also, the case study is appropriate when the goal is to investigate how and why questions about contemporary events and where there are many variables of interest and limited ability to exercise control in the setting (Stake, 2010).

According to Saunders et al. (2015), case study research is useful for exploratory or explanatory purposes. I used the interpretivist design that makes it possible to analyze data inductively, identifying themes and patterns, and locating the findings in theory (Saunders et al., 2015). To enhance the rigor of the case study, I opted to use a multicase study design. The use of the multicase study design process allowed for an in-depth analysis of how some SMEs have achieved growth and survival for more than 5 years.

Furthermore, following the multicase study design process made it possible for the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of each case and to identify the common critical growth and survival strategies that successful SME develop and implement to survive for more than 5 years (Yin, 2018). Using the multicase study design provides a means for improving rigor versus a single case study design and therefore provides a basis for increasing the findings' validity and generalizability (Reinhardt et al., 2018).

The multicase study design is particularly valuable when relationships between organizational structures, management processes, and outcomes are under investigation (Stewart, 2012). According to Stewart (2012), in a typical multiple-case study, several different instances of a particular problem (or phenomenon) are brought together, to investigate or identify critical factors that seem to have some bearing on an outcome of interest. The main focus of this study is onhow SME leaders ensured the survival and growth of SMEs. I chose the multicase study design to allow for replication to gain an understanding of the processes that SME leaders employ to ensure the survival and growth of their businesses (Yin, 2018).

Population and Sampling

Population

The research population is the collection of individuals and organizations that are the focus of the research (Saunders et al., 2015). The target population for this multicase study comprised of three small business leaders from three different ICT organizations in Gauteng, South Africa. Population refers to all the ICT SMEs that are publicly listed in the Johannesburg stock exchange. I was not able to interact with every member of the

research population because it will be too expensive and time-consuming. I, therefore, selected a sample population that is a subset of ICT SMEs. The findings of this research might benefit the population of small business leaders globally.

Sampling Method

There are two types of sampling plans: probability samples and nonprobability samples (Yin, 2018). Probability samples are when the selection of each participant is not known. Probability sampling includes random sampling, cluster sampling, and multi-stage sampling (Saunders et al., 2015). Non-probability samples are when the selection of the participants is known. These include quota sampling, dimensional sampling, convenience sampling, purposive sampling, and snowball sampling (Mohd Ishak & Abu Bakar, 2014).

The sampling approach I used was purposive sampling, which means that I selected participants for this research study with a purpose in mind. The purpose was to identify and select participants who may provide information-rich cases of using business strategies to operate their small businesses successfully. I made the selection of the participants based on my expectations that they can inform and lead me to an understanding of the research problem for this study. I, therefore, selected leaders of SMEs that have survived for more than 5 years.

Sample Size

The sample included three leaders from three small- and medium-sized ICT organizations in the Gauteng region of South Africa. Including three business leaders increased the possibility of direct replication and made my conclusions more acceptable

because the results came from multiple independent cases (Saunders et al., 2015).

Guetterman (2015) acknowledged that sampling in qualitative research is not a single

planning decision, but an iterative series of choices throughout the process of research.

The researcher must be reflexive throughout the research process, continually assessing

and exploring sampling issues, including theoretical saturation (Guetterman, 2015). I,

therefore, started with three companies and checked for data saturation. According to Yin

(2018), a sample size of two or three cases is sufficient to conduct a qualitative multicase

study.

Data Saturation

Data saturation occurs when there are no new categories or themes in data

collection and analysis (Malterud, Siersma, & Guassora, 2017). Qualitative researchers

can use saturation to determine the sample size (Nelson, 2017). Data saturation is a good

indicator of the adequacy of the sample and the validity of the study (Walker, 2012).

Sechelski and Onwuegbuzie (2019) recommended the use of multiple methods to

enhance saturation at the analysis stage of the research. According to Sechelski and

Onwuegbuzie, combining classical content analysis and theme analysis can increase

saturation. I used both content analysis and theme analysis continuously to test and

ensure data saturation.

I ensured data saturation by conducting interviews and analyzing the company

until no new information emerges. According to Fusch and Ness (2015), several

iterations of member checking helps to achieve data saturation. The process of member

checking includes sharing research transcripts with the research participant until both the

researcher and the participant are happy that all the information relating to the interview was captured adequately (Fusch, & Ness, 2015). I used member checking to ensure I achieved data saturation.

Criteria for Selecting Participants

The criteria for selection of participants included ensuring that the participants are business leaders that have operated their businesses for more than 5 years whose businesses are financially viable after the first 5 years. The business leaders who took part in the study were those that increased their revenues over the first 5 years of their existence. Eligible participants were older than 18 years and were ICT SME leaders who have listed their companies in the AltX stock exchange. Eligible participants were business leaders that were able to articulate the strategies they implemented to ensure the survival and growth of their businesses for more than 5 years. Furthermore, the location of the SME was in South Africa.

Interview Setting

The setting of the study was in South Africa. Marshall and Rossman (2016) asserted that the setting influences human actions and that one should, therefore, conduct the study in a real-life natural setting. I, therefore, arranged that the interviews take place at the offices of the participants or a location where they can comfortably participate in the interviews. In addition, I proposed to the participants that we conduct the interviews through Skype as there was a national lockdown because of the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. The semistructured face-to-face or video interviews took place for approximately 45 minutes at a time. The semistructured interview allows a flexible

medium of communicating freely about the phenomenon under consideration between participants and researchers (Anyan, 2013).

Ethical Research

In this study, I followed ethical guidelines to ensure that I protected the rights of participants. The starting point in protecting participants' rights in qualitative research is to ensure that they give informed consent to participate and that they participate voluntarily (Doody & Noonan, 2016). The process of seeking consent from potential participants included a telephone call followed by a letter of invitation and a consent form to business owners and CEOs who would participate in this study. I made sure that all the participants signed the consent form before I interviewed them.

In seeking consent to participate, I ensured that the participants were aware that they can also choose not to participate in the research and that they can choose to opt-out at any stage of the research process without consequences. I also informed participants that I was not going to incentivize them to participate in the research, and I assured them that all research data collected remained confidential I guaranteed the confidentiality of the interviews to ensure that they participated in the research freely and without fear (see Saunders et al., 2015).

Before submitting my research proposal, I completed the National Institute of Health's web-based training on extramural research to learn more about the protection of human participants in research. I also sought and obtained approval from the IRB. The IRB approval number I received was 03-27-20-072933. The purpose of the IRB is to verify that the researcher will follow the ethical standards of treatment of human participants

(Klizman, 2013). Ethical committees for research involving humans, such as the IRB focus primarily on minimizing harm, informed consent, privacy, and confidentiality (Kendall & Halliday, 2014). I started with my research only after I received IRB approval. As a means of ensuring the confidentiality of participants' personal and company data, I did not at any stage of the research reveal their identity. The IRB specifies that researchers take considerable measures to protect the research participants (Klizman, 2013). I protected the participants by ensuring that I did not use any information that made it possible for anyone to identify the participants and their companies. I protected the names and personal data of participants by using pseudonyms. I used alphanumeric coding (P1, P2, P3) to identify the participants. I locked the research documents, transcripts, and recordings in a safe. I will keep the safe locked for 5 years. I am the only person that has access to the safe.

Data Collection Instruments

The researcher is the primary data collection instrument in qualitative studies (Yin, 2018). In qualitative research, researchers collect primary data through semistructured interviews, observations, and review of documents (Saunders et al., 2015; Yin, 2018). I negotiated for the use of organizational documents such as the strategic marketing plans, annual reports, and financial statements from the organization's representative. As the companies are publicly listed, I was able to retrieve most of their information from their company websites. Semistructured interviewing is the most common source of primary data collection in qualitative studies (Kallio et al., 2016). Therefore, I collected primary data using semistructured interviews and through

reviewing company documents. Employing these data collection methods that

complement each other ensuring the data exhibit the values of descriptive adequacy,

reactivity transparency, and relevance, which is critical in ensuring the data address the

research question (Zahle, 2018).

The semistructured interviewing format involves using a predetermined set of

open-ended questions to elicit participants' responses with the opportunity for the

researcher to ask follow-up questions to clarify participants' responses (Saunders et al.,

2015). Conversely, the use of a semistructured interview format enhances the data

collection process because the participants are not limited to pre-determined responses

(Yin, 2018; Zahle, 2018). Developing and using the semistructured interview protocol

(see Appendix) improves the trustworthiness of qualitative research (Kallio et al., 2016).

I shared the interview questions with the participants before the interview. I also used an

interview protocol (Appendix) that I developed. Using the interview protocol also

ensured consistency throughout the data collection process (see Yin, 2018).

To ensure the accuracy of the interview reports, I conducted member checking

(see Saunders et al., 2015). Member checking involves sharing the researcher's data

interpretation with the participants to ensure the researcher's interpretation is correct

(Saunders et al., 2015). Researchers use member checking to establish whether they have

accurately captured participants' responses as they write the interview transcripts. Birt,

Scott, Cavers, Campbell, and Walter (2016) distinguished between three approaches to

member checking. The approaches include sending an interview transcript to the

participants for them to check if the researcher has accurately captured their views;

member checking interviews arranging for a second interview to check that the interview transcripts are accurate, and focus group checking. The approach to member checking that ensures better validity of the study includes summarizing the responses on each interview question and giving it to the member to check for accuracy and to get additional information (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Going through several iterations of member checking can also help to achieve data saturation (Fusch, & Ness, 2015). I, therefore, shared my interview summaries with the participants to ensure the accuracy and the validity of the interview data. The use of member checking and verifying the data through document analysis helped to improve the validity and reliability of the study (Fusch & Ness, 2015).

Data Collection Technique

The critical question that guided this study was: What strategies do leaders of ICT SMEs use to grow and sustain their businesses for more than 5 years? To answer this question, I conducted a multicase study using semistructured interviews and analyzing SME company documents. Saunders et al. (2015) asserted that combining interviews with document analysis allows for triangulation. According to Zahle (2018), integrating multiple techniques of data collection improves the validity of the study.

The most popular approaches to data collection for qualitative research include observation, participant observation, in-depth interviewing, and analyzing audio-visual materials and documents (Saunders et al., 2015). The primary data collection sources for this research study were interviews and company documents. For this study, I

interviewed three ICT SME leaders who have operated their businesses for more than 5 years.

A well-structured interview protocol helps to optimize the time spent with the interviewee by ensuring that the interaction is both useful and ethical (Doody & Noonan, 2016). Using the protocol also helps to ensure consistency, especially if the researcher is interviewing more than one participant (Kallio et al., 2016). I used the interview protocol (Appendix) to guide the interview process. I used the five interview questions, and I read each question aloud to each interviewee. To capture the responses, I recorded the interviews using two audio recording devices that would not distract the participant or make them uncomfortable.

To start the interview, I used the initial probing or introductory questions to understand, among other things, the background and education of the SME owner (see Castillo-Montoya, 2016). The format of the interview included as recommended by Saunders et al. (2015) the probing questions, main questions, and wrap-up questions. Following the interview protocol will ensure consistency and will keep me focused throughout the interviews (see Cypress, 2017)**.**

I took field notes as the record of the interviews. Field notes included the responses of the interviewees and a detailed record of the researcher's observations about the interview environment and the behavior of the interviewees (see Zahle, 2018). Morse (2015) recommended that researchers must understand and interpret the participants correctly. Correct interpretation of data contributes to the trustworthiness of the research.

One of the ways of ensuring that the researcher interprets the data correctly is through member checking (Birt et al., 2016).

I requested each participant to verify interview summaries to ensure that they were accurate and continued interviews until the participant revealed no new information. According to Sechelski and Onwuegbuzie (2019), using member checking entails giving the transcript of the interview to the interviewee to review for accuracy, adequacy, and authenticity. Member checking should continue until the transcripts are accurate and the participant does not reveal any new information (Fusch & Ness, 2015).

I also analyzed annual reports, strategic marketing plans, minutes of meetings, company policies, company profiles, as well as audiovisual materials where possible. Using multiple data sources enhanced triangulation as I was able to verify and enrich the data. The use of company documents as a secondary source of data has both advantages and disadvantages. The use of the second source of data can allow researchers to use triangulation to improve the validity of the study (Fusch & Ness, 2015). The disadvantage of gaining access to a second source of data to validate the primary data can be an increase in the costs of conducting the study. According to Yin (2018), reviewing additional data such as archival records can be a time-consuming process. Also, there is a possibility that records that a researcher has access to may be outdated or incomplete (Yin, 2018). The time the researcher spends on documents might or might not result in a significant addition to the interview data. However, analyzing the phenomenon under study from multiple perspectives and several data sources enhances triangulation and data saturation (Zahle, 2018). It was, therefore, critical that researchers collect data from

multiple sources to the validity of their research (Walsh, Rutherford, & Kuzmak, 2010). I ensured that in addition to interviewing the participants I reviewed minutes of meetings and strategic planning documents.

Data Organization Technique

The iterative nature of case study research requires continuous access to data. Effective data organization enables researchers to retrieve the data for analysis and reporting purposes (Given & Olson, 2013). Researchers use data organization techniques to ensure that after the completion of the study they have an audit trail of all steps and findings. If the data is not well-organized, the researcher may miss some critical information, and this may compromise the reliability and the validity of the study (Yin, 2018)

I wanted to be able to access the data even after the completion of my research study as I might need to retrieve it if for the reconstruction of the research project, responding to an audit, and to use it in further research. It was essential to adhere to the research requirements of retaining the data in a locked container for 5 years. I will keep data transcripts, interview notes, research journals, tables, graphs, and worksheets in hard copy format for 5 years in a locked, fireproof storage cabinet. I also locked the two audio recording devices and USB flash drives of the raw data used in the data analysis in the fireproof storage cabinet. I am the only person who has access to this storage cabinet.

I kept a research journal, both before and after each interview. I used the journal to record my state of mind before and after the interviews. The journal entries provided me a medium to collect the ideas and insights I gained while conducting the interviews.

Keeping and using a reflective journal is one way of reflecting on possible biases in data collection and analysis (Hadi & Jose Closs, 2016). Using a reflective journal provides evidence from which researchers can assess the research process. Researchers use reflective journals to address and even guard against bias in research (Orange, 2016).

Data Analysis

The primary data collected was the interview data. The secondary data included company documents such as strategy documents, company profiles, and company websites. Data analysis in qualitative research involves searching for patterns in the data and interpreting those patterns and their meanings (Ziskin, 2019). Qualitative data analysis usually concerns the identification of themes using an interpretative thematic analysis in which the researcher spends time analyzing each interview and verifying and enriching the interview data with data from company documents as well as information from company websites (Morse, 2015). Thematic analysis is a process involves the identification of themes with relevance specific to the research focus, the research question, the research context, and the theoretical framework (Roberts, Dowell, & Nie, 2019).

The data that I collected, organized, and analyzed included, among other things, the interview data, company documents as well as journal entries. According to Morse (2015), the data analysis strategy must fit with the research question and the research design. Using my prepared semistructured interview questions consistently in conducting the interviews helped me in identifying the patterns and themes in the data. The literature review also helped in identifying and explaining these themes. Yin (2018) emphasized

the use of multiple sources of data in the case study and that developed theoretical

positions must guide data analysis. The conceptual framework was that of dynamic

capabilities. According to Rengkung (2018), DCs are abilities and enabling processes

that make it possible for companies to respond to environmental factors and customer

demands. These processes or abilities enable the firm to integrate, build, and reconfigure

competencies to address environmental changes (Teece, 2014). DCs aim to match

internal resources and competencies with changes in the external environment (Teece,

2014). Dynamic organizations use DCs to respond to all such environmental changes by

exploiting elements of sensing, learning, integrating, coordinating, and collaborating

(Cirjevskis, 2019; Rengkung, 2018). I, therefore, looked for themes that related to the

sensing, integrating, collaborating, coordinating, and learning as wells as innovative

culture, entrepreneurial culture, absorptive capacity in the data that I analyzed.

      The qualitative data analysis strategy includes collecting, coding, and analysis

(Clark & Veale, 2018). The collection phase included the organization of the raw data

into narrative descriptions with major themes (Elo et al., 2014). Clark and Veale (2018)

emphasized that the researcher is central to the implementation of the data analysis

strategy through interpretative inquiry. There is a need for a researcher to exercise

reflective thinking and interpretative thinking as well as coding and sorting of data in

qualitative data analysis (Clark & Veale, 2018; Yin (2018). Data coding is a process of

allocating themes to the data (Yin, 2018). Williams and Moser (2019) propagated a three-

level hierarchical coding model for categorization and interpretation of data. These

coding levels included open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Williams &

Moser, 2019). Williams and Moser asserted that coding was necessary even if researchers propose using software to analyze the data. I, therefore, developed the codes before entering the data into the software for analysis.

In the process of qualitative data analysis, in addition to researcher reflection, interpretive inquiry, and coding, I used data triangulation to test the validity of data. Researchers use triangulation to by comparing data from multiple data sources or through using different data collection methods (Abdalla, Oliveira, Azevedo, & Gonzalez, 2018). According to Fusch, Fusch, and Ness (2018), there are four types of triangulation: (a) data triangulation, (b) investigator triangulation, (c) theory triangulation, and (d) methodological triangulation. Due to time constraints, I limited my efforts in this multicase study to using data triangulation to confirm and test for convergence in data from multiple data sources such as interviews and company documents. I compared the data from interviews with minutes of meetings and strategic planning documents as well as data from websites. This approach helped in not only verifying data from multiple data sources but also in gaining a deeper understanding of the phenomenon (Moon, 2019). Using the triangulation of data collection techniques might help in discovering misleading dimensions of the phenomenon (Abdalla et al., 2018). Researchers need to be careful in implementing the triangulation strategy as it has the potential to limit the multiple perspectives that enrich and deepen the researcher's understanding of the phenomenon (Abdalla et al., 2018). As part of the analysis, I tested the accuracy of my analysis through member checking by sharing the interview summaries with each

participant. In the process of sharing summaries, I only shared each interview summary with the participant I interviewed to ensure confidentiality.

The process of qualitative data analysis includes five steps: (a) compiling, (b) disassembling, (c) reassembling, (d) interpreting, and (e) concluding (Yin, 2018). Compiling is about transcribing the data in such a way that the researcher can easily see the data (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). I transcribed the data per each case to get a clear view of strategies each of the companies used for survival and growth. Transcribing the data will enable me to see the similarities and differences in the strategies employed by each company. The second step included disassembling the data. In this step, I used coding to arrange the data into themes. Coding included identifying exciting features of the data systematically across the entire data set and occurs at multiple levels. As recommended by Castleberry and Nolen (2018), I assigned codes to different units of data, as informed by the literature review. The reassembling stage involves the aggregation of the data codes into broader themes that represent full thoughts (Yin, 2018).

I ensured that units that appear to be components of a theme form a meaningful category in line with the factors identified in the literature review. The fourth step was the interpreting stage. As a researcher, I interpreted the themes guided by the literature review and the DCs framework. Yin (2018) asserted that there are five requirements for the right interpretation. First, readers should be able to see the beginning and an end of how the researcher arrives at the interpretation. Secondly, there must be clear logic that allows other researchers to reach the same interpretation if they analyze the same data.

Thirdly, the interpretation must be accurate and representative of the raw data. Fourthly, the interpretation must have a link to the current literature, and lastly, the data methods and interpretation must be credible and free of bias. The last step included the analysis of emerging themes concerning the research questions and the purpose of the study. Also, I interpreted the emerging themes using the literature on SME survival strategies and the DCs framework as well as other conceptual frameworks. Following these steps ensured that the findings answer the research question and whether I have achieved the purpose of the study.

A growing number of researchers are using computer software to analyze qualitative data (Woods, Paulus, Atkins, & Macklin, 2013). Computer software helps researchers organize and interpret their data (Yin, 2018). I used NVivo software to conduct data analysis. The software also helped with organizing the data and in visualizing it (Woods et al., 2013). Organizing the data made it easy to interpret and code the data. For this study, I used NVivo software to conduct data analysis, including categorizing and visualizing the data using diagrams. Castleberry and Nolen (2018) asserted that NVivo is easy to use, and researchers can use it to categorize data and make diagrams.

Reliability and Validity

Reliability

Reliability in qualitative research concerns ensuring whether the researcher is credible and ensures that the interpretations of data are trustworthy (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Reliability in qualitative research is rooted in the idea of data adequacy,

which makes it possible to show consistent support for one's analysis across participants.
To ensure that I eliminate personal biases, I used member checking and triangulation
(Spiers, Morse, Olson, Mayan, & Barrett, 2018). I also used the interview protocol to
direct the interviews. The interview protocol (Appendix) kept me focused on the
questions throughout the research process.

There are three techniques that researchers use to improve reliability and
dependability: triangulation, external auditing, and member checking (Leung, 2015). To
improve dependability, I recorded all details related to this study to enable other
researchers to replicate it and reach similar conclusions. I also kept a paper trail of all the
decisions I made throughout this study. Secondly, I employed data triangulation to verify
the interview data and the documents of the SMEs. Thirdly, I shared my analysis with the
participants to obtain their feedback and ensure that I have accurately captured what each
participant wanted to say.

Validity

Validity relates to how accurately the data represent the participant's view of a
phenomenon (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Validity includes data appropriateness, which
makes it possible to provide an accurate account of the experiences of participants within
and beyond the immediate context (Spiers et al., 2018). Validity or trustworthiness
includes credibility, dependability, transferability, confirmability, and authenticity of the
research (Baillie, 2015). Strategies for ensuring validity and reliability of the doctoral
study included collecting data from multiple sources, informants' study review and
documentation of all steps in the data collection and analysis process, and keeping a case

study database (Yin, 2018). Researchers must document all the steps they have gone through to arrive at the results to make it possible for other researchers to be able to follow the analysis process and to understand the results better (Elo et al., 2014). In qualitative research, the researcher is the data collection instrument for this research study (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). I used an audio recorder to record the participants' answers. I also kept a written journal entry for each participant. I used data triangulation to validate the accuracy of the information. In data triangulation, the researcher collects data from different sources with the understanding that the information will converge to validate the data (Leedy & Ormrod, 2015).

   Credibility. According to Marshall and Rossman (2016**),** credibility in research means that the researcher conducts the research in a manner that would ensure the proper identification and description of the subject and that the research makes a valuable contribution to the knowledge on the subject. Keeping all the research data and including audit trails contributes towards research credibility (Cope, 2014). Snelson (2016) recommended that researchers conduct their research study with competence, goodwill, and trustworthiness. To demonstrate goodwill, a researcher should discuss the effort made and the time spent to get a sense of the subject (Kelley, 2016). To demonstrate trustworthiness, I ensured that I captured the perspective of the participants as much as possible through member checking. According to Moon (2019), triangulation establishes credibility in qualitative studies. I also used data triangulation of participant responses and company documents to ensure that the findings of the study are credible.

Transferability. Transferability refers to the usefulness of research findings to others in similar situations (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). There are six dimensions of applicability/transferability from their research: congruence, ease of implementation, adaptation, setting, effectiveness and study design and methods (Burchett, Mayhew, Lavis, & Dobrow, 2013). As a way of ensuring transferability in my report, I used the interview protocol (Appendix). I also provided enough details about my research design and methods, as well as the findings, to enable others to gain a deeper understanding of my study and make informed judgments about the validity and reliability of my findings and whether those findings can provide answers to their research questions.

Confirmability. Confirmability means that another researcher or study can confirm or support the results of the research study (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Cope (2014) recommended that a researcher describe how he/she formed their conclusions and provide examples of how themes emerged from the data. I documented my logical inferences and interpretations in detail so that my analysis will make sense to another researcher. This documentation of logical inferences, including the research design, data collection, and data analysis will make it possible for other researchers to confirm the results. According to Haven and Van Grootel (2019), the process of putting the entire research process on a public platform for other researchers to scrutinize the research, which they refer to as preregistering, enables other researchers to assess whether the researcher used the right data collection and analysis methods, as well as whether the interpretation based on the data is convincing. According to Morse (2015), there are three techniques that researchers can use to improve reliability: triangulation, external auditing,

and member checking. I used triangulation to establish the authenticity of the data that I

will collect. I also used member checking to check the accuracy of the interview

summaries and ensure that they reflect the interviews conducted with the participants and

to eliminate any personal biases or preconceived ideas I might have. I also detailed all the

steps I used in an interview journal to capture the interview settings and any feelings and

experiences that I encountered during the data collection process to enable other

researchers to understand the entire research process and the findings of my study.

Data saturation. Data saturation occurs when the researcher sees the same

patterns repeatedly and senses that there is nothing new emerging from further data

collection (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Sechelski and Onwuegbuzie (2019) defined

saturation as occurring when the researcher can assume that her/his emergent theory is

adequately developed to fit findings stemming from any future data analysis of the same

data. Data saturation occurs when the researcher senses that there is no new data, themes,

or codes, and that the research study is replicable (Fusch & Ness, 2015).

There is no specific number of interviews that will provide enough data for a

research study to attain data saturation (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Hennink, Kaiser, &

Marconi, 2017; Malterud et al., 2017). Despite this being the case, I conducted three

interviews, and I also collected data from company documents. As recommended by

Fusch and Ness (2015), I implemented the iterations of member checking with

participants until there is no new information from interviews. I also used a combination

of data analysis techniques such as constant analysis and qualitative comparative

analysis, as recommended by Sechelski and Onwuegbuzie (2019), to achieve data

saturation. If a researcher concludes data collection because of a predetermined number of interviews without reaching the point of data saturation, the findings will not be fully developed, therefore not be valid (Haven & Van Grootel, 2019).

Transition and Summary

In Section 2, I covered the details of the project, its purpose, the role of the researcher, the participants, the research method and design, the population and sampling, and a discussion about ethical research. I also provided details about data collection: the instrument, technique, data organization, and data analysis. I also detailed how I intend to ensure reliability and validity in my doctoral study.

In Section 3, I will detail the findings of the study. The presentation of the findings includes a discussion of the themes and how they link to the DCs conceptual framework. I will discuss the findings and their application to professional practice as well as their implications for social change. I will end section 3 by making recommendations for action and further study, and I will include my reflections on the entire research process and the findings.

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative multicase study was to explore strategies ICT SME

business leaders used to remain sustainable beyond 5 years. I conducted semistructured

interviews using six open-ended questions with three business leaders who were founders

and current CEOs of three ICT organizations in South Africa. During data analysis, I

discovered that the participants' responses and the findings of my review of company

records aligned with the strategies of Teece et al.'s (1997) DCT and my review of the

professional literature. Based on data triangulation and analysis, I identified three major

themes: (a) the innovation of products and processes is critical in gaining and retaining

customers, (b) the investment in people development is needed for business survival and

growth, and (c) understanding and integrating various technologies is needed to create

and deliver value to customers.

Presentation of the Findings

The overarching question I addressed in this qualitative multicase study was:

What are the strategies that leaders of SMEs use to grow and sustain their businesses for

longer than 5 years? I collected data via semistructured interviews and reviewing

company documents obtained from the websites of three ICT SMEs listed on the

Johannesburg Stock Exchange. I used NVivo 12 software for data analysis, which

included the identification of themes, subthemes, patterns, and trends.

As the first step in the investigation, I imported the three interview transcripts and

used NVivo to calculate the frequency of the words. From the words with the highest

frequency, I deduced several codes. I noted these codes and then compared them with the codes that emerged from the NVivo auto-coding process that I conducted after the content word-frequency analysis. Each code represents a theme or subtheme.

Table 3

Number of Codes Per Interview

Interview	Participant	Number of unique codes	Number of new codes
1	P2	6	6
2	P1	8	2
3	P3	8	0

The process of qualitative data analysis included the identification of themes from data and the assignment of a code to each issue in the first stages of analysis, grounding, and linking the data to the broader analytic context (Nelson, 2017). The coding process involved identifying themes in empirical data and giving them labels (Yin, 2018). Six main themes and subthemes emerged in the first interview, and eight themes and subthemes emerged in the second and third interviews. In the third interview, there were no new themes (see Table 3). The fact that there were no new themes confirmed data saturation (see Haven & Van Grootel, 2019). I aggregated these subthemes and the main themes that emerged were (a) innovation management, (b) investment in people, and (c) technology integration.

Theme 1: Innovation

All three participants identified business model innovation, product innovation, and process innovation as the main drivers of growth and survival. P1 and P3

emphasized that they used the process and product innovation to keep their customers satisfied. P1, P2, and P3 expressed that they used business model innovation to ensure that their businesses created and delivered value to all stakeholders. P3 said, "Innovation keeps the company relevant." P1 observed that companies survive because they "Reinvent" themselves. This finding aligns with the conclusions from Healy et al. (2018), who established that the determinants of SME success included product innovation and superior service. According to Uhlaner, Stel, Duplat, and Zhou (2013), product innovation does not have a strong positive impact on SME survival; in contrast, process innovation has a positive effect on the growth and survival of SMEs. Healy et al. used a case study methodology to explore the impact of product advantage on SME survival. Healy et al. found that the meaningfulness of products to customers is the most significant product advantage dimension. According to Healy et al., product development should involve customers because involving customers, especially in business to business trading, helps companies to understand and confirm the needs of customers. Customer engagement in product development allows customers to give SME leaders ideas about how they can improve their products and services to achieve customer satisfaction directly from customers.

Process innovation can bring about improved processes, products, and services, resulting in SMEs becoming efficient, flexible, and responsive businesses (Schiliro, 2015). To survive for more than 5 years, SMEs need to have a strong ability to manipulate internal processes to maintain relevance in dynamically

changing market environments (Kuuluvainen, 2012). It is, therefore, critical that SMEs develop or access capabilities to manage innovation to survive.

The three participants identified business model innovation as the most effective approach to ensuring flexibility and adaptability to environmental changes. This finding is in line with those of Makhmoor and Rajesh (2017), who revealed that business model innovation could increase profits four times more than a classic business model. A business model consists of three core components: value proposition, activity system, and resource portfolios (Yang, Wei, Shi, & Zhao, 2020). A business model represents the logic of how a company creates, delivers, and captures value around the focus on customer value proposition (Schaller & Vatananan-Thesenvitz, 2019). Rethinking and restructuring how a company designs and delivers value requires that companies review and align how their processes, policies, strategies, and culture support their value proposition. SME leaders and managers must continually align the value proposition, activity system, and resources to keep their companies relevant.

Companies engage in business model innovation to ensure that they continue to serve their customers and other stakeholders better. Business model innovation is about continually aligning the components of the company to adapt to environmental changes and capture opportunities (Schaller & Vatananan-Thesenvitz, 2019). According to Yang et al. (2020), business innovation requires a market orientation, and business model innovation involves resource and coordination flexibility as well as proactive and responsive market orientation. A company that focuses on business

model innovation must, therefore, demonstrate a culture of strategic management characterized by conducting strategic marketing plans to analyze the market as well as assess internal strengths and weaknesses to guide the strategic alignment to market trends (Kuuluvainen, 2012). It is this strategic alignment, which entails the configuration and reconfiguration of internal resources, to market changes, that makes it possible for SMEs to survive and grow beyond 5 years.

According to DCT, organizations need strategies, structures, and processes that enable agility and responsiveness to survive in dynamic market environments (Felin & Powell, 2016). The ability to improve organizational processes depends on the innovation capability of the organization. Ferreira, Cardim et al. (2018) conducted a study on the impact of DCs on the survival of SMEs. Ferreira, Cardim et al. found that there is a significant positive relationship between DCs and innovation capability. According to Stronen et al. (2017), innovation capability can become a dynamic capability that entails sensing and seizing market opportunities when combined with an entrepreneurial culture. Sok et al. (2013) conducted a study on SME survival that revealed that innovation capability, marketing capability, and learning capability all contribute significantly to SME performance. Continuous innovation allows companies to adapt to changing customer needs and market conditions.

All three participants stated that their companies conduct strategic marketing planning processes to ensure a fit with ever-changing market dynamics. All three participants emphasized that strategic marketing plans inform their resource

allocation process. P1 and P3 emphasized that strategic planning, which includes

deciding on the value proposition and SWOT analysis are what they use to

collectively scan the environment and develop strategies to capture opportunities in

the environment. P2 indicated that their approach to strategic planning begins with

understanding customer needs, competitor analysis, visioning, and the development

of strategies to create value for customers. All the participants confirmed that they

focus all the time on strategy development and implementation quarterly because the

ICT industry is highly volatile. P1 indicated that an organization has to be flexible to

adapt to environmental changes and that managers have to ensure that they have to

ensure that the teams they manage are part of the process and product innovation.

According to Bayarcelik et al. (2014), management skills and capabilities are critical

in developing and sustaining a culture of innovation in an organization. Managers are

responsible for selecting and strengthening of capabilities for innovation as they are

responsible for setting the tone and policies on what behaviors the organization

encourages and what the organization does not encourage. Managers, therefore, need

to understand innovation strategies and how best to implement these strategies.

Theme 2: Investment in People Development

The participants stated that the personal attributes of entrepreneurs, such as

resilience, education levels, passion, and commitment, are suitable for startups but are not

enough to sustain and grow a business beyond 5 years. All three participants were of the

view that for survival and growth, SME leaders must surround themselves with people

possessing knowledge of the industry and invest in programs for the development of

technical and soft skills for their managers and employees.

The theme of investing in the development of people aligns with the findings of Gupta and Mirchandani's (2018) study, which confirmed that entrepreneurs' attributes and skills contribute significantly to the success or failure of their businesses. According to P1and P3, investing in ensuring the better management of resources, including financial resources and teams, can lead to the development of organizational capabilities for the survival of SMEs. All three participants agreed that better management of resources and organizational learning contributed significantly to the survival of their SMEs. P1 used the phrases, "investment in people" and "surrounding yourself with experienced and well-trained people who understand business," to explain how to grow businesses from zero to a turnover of more than $100 million. P2 emphasized that it is the employee training on products and services that resulted in the growth and survival of their company. P1 and P3 used the strategic planning process to decide on the allocation of financial and human resources. The participants emphasized that accessing and management of financial resources requires careful planning as all organizational activities require money for implementation.

One commonality among all three businesses is that the business leaders managed to retain almost all the executives they recruited when they started their companies. P2 and P3 indicated that they struggle to keep new people because new people do not fit easily into the culture of their companies. The participants asserted that high-performance teams gel from working together over time, and it is difficult to introduce new people to these teams. P1 indicated that his entire executive team is people who were founders of

the company. P2 also emphasized building high-performance teams is critical to the survival of SMEs and that it is always a challenge to integrate new members into these teams. P2 expressed that managers must focus on building teams, and they must carefully incorporate new members to these teams for new ideas.

Skilled managers have more chances of success in ensuring the survival and growth of SMEs. Malim, Shahibi, and Halim (2012) asserted that managers need to be skilled in all areas of management to be able to ensure the survival and growth of SMEs. The skills that managers need to acquire and use include people management, strategic planning, and financial management (Odar, Kavcic, & Jerman, 2015). Banterle, Cavaliere, Carraresi, and Stranieri (2014) conducted a survey of 371 European SMEs in the food industry and found that marketing capability and the price-making ability of SMEs were the main drivers of their survival and growth. Managers must, therefore, understand marketing, people management, and financial management to sustain and grow their SMEs.

All three participants acknowledged that strategies for team management are critical for continuous performance in the fast-changing technological environment. P2 and P3 asserted that managers need to build effective teams through communication and the management of diversity. Team diversity, when managed well, can result in creativity and innovation (Morgan, Paucar-Caceres, & Wright, 2014). Morgan et al. (2014) confirmed a positive relationship between team performance viability and survival of SMEs. It is, therefore, critical that managers acquire people management skills in general but also skills for managing professionally and culturally diverse teams. Team

management, creativity management, and innovation management capabilities can give organizations a competitive advantage (Im, Montoya, & Workman, 2013).

Previous research on DCs revealed that learning by individuals, teams, and the organization is critical to the development of capabilities for the growth and survival of SMEs (Cirjevskis, 2019; Rengkung, 2018). Learning by individuals and teams forms the basis for the development of DCs (Sivusou, Sivusou, & Takala, 2018). Wolff et al. (2015) showed that entrepreneurial orientation, a dynamic capability, results in SME survival only if there is learning orientation. Organizational learning is the single most crucial that propels organizations to improve from current practice to new practice (Damschroder et al., 2009). Organizational learning allows organizations to access, develop, and integrate new knowledge that enables them to improve their performance and survival (Argote, 2013). Liu, Horng, Chou, Huang, and Chang (2018) revealed in their study that learning orientation is essential in ensuring that organizations can develop DCs to sense and seize opportunities in the constantly changing market environments and customer needs. It is through organizational learning that SMEs can sustain and improve their outcomes and remain relevant for extended periods (Mittal, 2019). Mittal (2019) revealed that the DCs of the task and environmental flexibility mediates the relationship between organizational learning and survival. Souza and Takahashi (2019) surveyed higher education institutions and found that organization learning initiatives that managers implement balance the DCs of exploration and exploitation. Liu et al. (2018) revealed that organizational learning is critical for improving the relationships between shared goals and DCs to achieve and sustain competitive advantage among SMEs. P1,

P2, and P3 all acknowledged the value of organizational learning in sensing the environment as well as in identifying, accessing, and developing capabilities that allow SMEs to survive and grow. P2 emphasized that the collective scanning of the environment and understanding the needs of the customer are critical for the development and implementation of strategies that make it possible for the company to survive and grow. P3 stated that to keep the customers and ensure customer loyalty, managers should select and deploy relevant capabilities that make it possible for managers to understand and address the needs of customers. P2 indicated that SMEs survive if they are flexible, and leaders ensure that each employee is empowered to provide services and products in a way that ensures that customers are happy. The learning at an individual, team, and organizational level allows SMEs to understand their customers better and to provide quality products and services.

Theme 3: Technology Integration

The participants highlighted the use of technology in ensuring that their companies adapted to environmental changes. P1and P3 indicated that they used technology to reduce costs and improve the quality of services provided to consumers. P3's company is in the process of automating all operations to ensure the consistency of quality of service throughout his organization. P2 develops solutions with partners that are abroad and uses technology to communicate with them. The three participants agreed that understanding and using various technologies to create and deliver value to customers is key to the survival and growth of these companies. P1, P2, and P3 asserted that they use technology to run all their processes, including the collection of consumer

data from social networks. P2 and P3 use social networks to interact with their customers and inform them about new products and services. All three participants acknowledged that they use technology to market their products and services and agreed that the use of technology enhanced their marketing capabilities as well as the capabilities for planning and executing their business strategies. The finding on technology integration leading to improved performance is in line with the results of Wang and Shi (2011), who conducted a study on SMEs in China to establish how the information systems enhanced dynamic capabilities. Wang and Shi found that a significant positive relationship exists between IT infrastructure, business IT knowledge alignment, and systems integration with the DCs of market responsiveness, organizational learning, coordination, and integration.

The correct integration of technology in SMEs can assist them in creating value, better performance, increased productivity, and quality. P1 and P3 explained how they digitized organizational processes to incorporate explicit and implicit organizational knowledge, resulting in improved processes, products, and services. Using technology to improve organizational processes, products, and services is in line with the findings of Sheikh Khairudin and Amin (2019), whose study involved 269 SMEs in Malaysia. Sheikh Khairudin and Amin reported that IT is a management tool to optimize the processing of information to produce goods and services, leading to profitability and sustainability. As most consumers use ICT, SMEs must develop the capability to use technology in a way that helps companies to gain and sustain a competitive advantage. The ability to use technology for customer engagement, information processing, and

product development can help SME to perform better, retain their customers, and get new customers.

The essence of DCT is that companies adapt to external changes through continuous development, alignment, and reconfiguration of firm-specific assets (Teece et al., 1997). Researchers have identified that the integration of key business processes through technology among the partners in a supply chain can add value for the customers (Vaaland & Heide, 2007). Technology integration can, therefore, map, automate, and improve the supply chain collaboration capability of SMEs. However, as Vaaland and Heide (2007) observed, some SMEs give less attention to organizational planning and the integration of technology to manage organizational processes and, therefore, struggle to gain competitive advantages and survive. Some SMEs fail because of not giving attention to planning and technology integration. Developing and using the capabilities for planning and technology integration can help SMEs to select and use the effective technologies that can help SME leaders to improve organizational performance.

Technology can support businesses by offering interconnectivity and access to capabilities anytime and anywhere (Sumaili, Dlodlo, & Osakwe, 2018). Accessing capabilities can help organizations to perform better, survive, and prosper. This relationship between technology and DCs for SME survival became evident in Lyver and Lu's (2018) study of 164 SMEs in Canada. Lyver and Lu found that IT capabilities have a positive relationship to product innovation capability and that strategic entrepreneurship partially mediates the relationship between IT capabilities and product innovation

performance. Leaders of SMEs can use technology to access and develop new

capabilities for product innovation to keep existing customers and attract new customers.

Applications to Professional Practice

The objective of this qualitative multicase study was to explore the strategies

some South African SME owners use to ensure business growth and sustainability

beyond 5 years of operation in the ICT sector. The study findings revealed three

themes: (a) innovation, (b) investment in people, and (c) technology integration

technology. Leaders of ICT SMEs can apply the findings of this study in establishing

strategies to ensure the survival and growth of their companies beyond 5 years.

The implementation of the emergent themes from this study can improve

professional practice because the findings indicate how SME leaders can improve the

survival and growth of ICT SMEs. The results revealed that without accessing or

developing the requisite capabilities for innovation, organizational learning, and

technology integration, SMEs in the ICT industry have no chance of growth and

survival. Without dynamic capabilities, SMEs have no way of exploring and

exploiting opportunities for creating and delivering value to customers (Teece, 2017).

DCs position the organization for long-term competitive advantages (Pisano, 2017).

According to the DCT, learning orientation is essential in ensuring that organizations

can sense and seize opportunities to adapt to changing market environments and

customer needs (Mittal, 2019). SME leaders, political economists, and academics can

refer to the findings of this study in developing strategies for SME survival and

growth as well as how to improve the regional, national, and global economies. The

results can also serve as a guide to struggling small business owners on how to improve their business practices and avoid failure. The findings of this study offer entrepreneurs the knowledge, insights, and strategies required for ensuring the growth and survival of SMEs in the ICT sector.

Implications for Social Change

The understanding and implementation of the strategies small business managers used to sustain their business in volatile ICT environments can assist SME leaders in gaining and maintaining competitive advantages, enabling SMEs to survive and grow for more than 5 years. The growth and survival of SMEs may impact local economic growth resulting in the alleviation of poverty and job creation (Campbell & Park, 2017). Empowering existing and potential entrepreneurs with knowledge, insights, and strategies for SME growth and survival may ensure the survival of more SME. Successful SMEs create value for investors, employees, and customers. There is a positive association between economic growth and the funding of social programs (Humphrey, Spratt, Thorpe, & Henson, 2014). SME growth may contribute significantly, not just to job creation but also to social programs that address the needs of the most vulnerable people. The investment in social programs results in SMEs gaining the credibility and long-term performance of SMEs (Arend, 2014; Park et al., 2017). SMEs can use these investments to extend their customer base and ensure their survival.

Recommendations for Action

This multicase study was an attempt to answer the research question: What strategies do SME leaders use to ensure the survival and growth of ICT SMEs in South Africa? The findings of this study may enlighten entrepreneurs about what strategies they need to implement to sustain their businesses and provide insights concerning how to diagnose and address the underlying causes of the high failure rate of SMEs in general.

In the process of this research, I identified the following three recommendations for SME leaders and managers to use to ensure the survival and growth of their SMEs: (a) focus on innovation to understand, create, and deliver customer needs and the value proposition; (b) invest in improving individual, team, and organizational learning; and (c) build capacity for technology integration. Focusing on these three pillars can help SME leaders sustain their organization in the highly volatile and disruptive ICT industry.

SME leaders must focus on investigating and implementing strategies for the innovation of their products, processes, and business models. SMEs develop and sustain their competitive advantages through the implementation of innovation strategies (Im et al., 2013). The data analysis for this study revealed that innovation is critical to the survival of ICT SMEs in South Africa. The findings also show that innovation activities must focus on developing and delivering value to customers if that innovation is to impact the growth and survival of SMEs positively.

The second recommendation for small business leaders and managers is to develop relevant capabilities through ensuring individual, team, and organizational learning. The findings of this study revealed that organizational learning could result in better products and services as well as more effective business models that can improve customer satisfaction and retention. The results of this study show that access to and management of resources are critical for the identifying and seizing of growth opportunities and long-term sustainability. The literature review revealed a definite link between organizational learning, innovation, marketing, and entrepreneurial orientation (Bereznoi, 2014; Sok et al., 2013; Uhlaner et al., 2013). SME leaders should consider training their managers not only on innovation but also in better management of all organizational assets.

The third recommendation for small business leaders and managers is to access and develop capabilities through integrating their processes through technology and to use technology to access relevant capabilities. Previous studies have shown that SME leaders and managers tend to give limited focus on using technology strategically to improve the survival and growth of their business (Vaaland & Heide, 2007). Technology, such as social media platforms, influences the purchase decisions of consumers; therefore, its use can help SMEs survive (Roy et al., 2014). Owoseni and Twinomurinzi (2018) found that technology enhances the absorptive, adaptive, and innovative, DCs to develop and use opportunity-sensing capabilities, opportunity-shaping capability, and opportunity-seizing capability. The

participants in this study confirmed t they use technology to improve products and services, cut costs, and engage customers.

The findings and recommendations from this study may help my research participants, other small business owners, as well as agencies that support SMEs to manage and support SME growth and survival better. I will provide participants with an email containing a summary of the findings and recommendations. Whenever possible, I will share the results with those attending conferences on SME growth and survival as well as economic growth. Finally, I will invite future researchers to perform a peer review of this study. I will also publish this study on ProQuest.

Recommendations for Further Research

The findings of this study add to the limited research available on the strategies used by some South African ICT SMEs to achieve business sustainability beyond 5 years. In this study, I used a multicase study design to explore the strategies that some SME leaders use to sustain and grow ICT SMEs. Like any other study, this study had assumptions, limitations, and delimitations.

I identified two limitations to this study. First, the primary mode of data collection was through participant interviews. While I have tried to limit participant bias, unintended participant bias could still be a limiting factor to the validity of the findings. The study also depended on the participants' abilities to accurately recall events from their experience. Furthermore, participants may have felt uncomfortable disclosing critical information about the failures or successes of their businesses. To ensure that participants were comfortable, I gave them a sense of what the questions

would entail a few days before the interview. As face-to-face meetings were not possible due to the COVID-19-related restrictions, I was not able to go to the SMEs' physical premises to collect evidence from some of the posters in the participants' offices. I am confident that the validity of this study remains intact even without the benefit of posters because the participants answered all the questions during the interviews.

The second limitation was a methodological one, as the leaders I interviewed operate in the ICT industry in Johannesburg. The culture of the participants could have influenced their responses. I recommend that future researchers conduct further research on the strategies used by SMEs in other industries in South Africa and other developing countries. There is a need to extend the research to include ICT SMEs from other regions. A similar study conducted in other regions will make it possible to determine if the results have applicability elsewhere.

Reflections

The Doctor of Business Administration program at Walden University has been full of challenges. Along the way, I worked with some wonderful faculty members and staff and classmates. There have been moments when I felt overwhelmed, frustrated, and doubted if I needed to continue; however, with support from my family, my business partners, classmates, lecturers, and my chair, I have reached these final stages of my study.

Data collection was challenging because of the COVID-19 lockdown. Some participants withdrew at the last moment, and as a result, I had to look for other

participants. I used Zoom to conduct the interviews. The use of the Zoom conferencing technology presented its challenges, as some participants were not familiar with it. However, despite these challenges, I was able to get three participants to interview. I am grateful to the participants who, at a challenging time, allowed me to interview them and to advance my studies.

The use of the DCs conceptual framework helped me to understand not only the strategies that SMEs use for growth and survival but also the processes that underpin the development and the implementation of these strategies. Using the DCs conceptual framework has helped me understand how some SME leaders and managers access, configure and reconfigure organizational resources to sustain and grow their businesses (Pisano, 2017). Using the DCT has helped me link strategies to processes that companies undertake to create and deliver value to their customers. I used the DCT framework to expose the business models of the SMEs and how some SME leaders develop and change their business models to adapt to environmental changes. Schoemaker et al. asserted that the DCT concerns how managers develop organizational agility by configuring and reconfiguring organizational resources. I intend to continue studying the DCT further. I found the DCT to be a compelling theory for organizational analysis. I also plan to continue researching the relationship between entrepreneurship and dynamic capabilities, as well as the relationship between DCs and innovation.

Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative multicase study was to explore the strategies some ICT leaders use to ensure the survival and growth of SMEs. The target population for the study was business leaders from three different SMEs. I used the DCs conceptual framework to undertake this study. I used triangulation and member checking to ensure data saturation. I reviewed and analyzed over 200 sources to develop the themes of this study, which included information from semistructured interviews with business leaders, existing peer-reviewed literature, and public information regarding the participant businesses on company websites. From the data analysis, three themes emerged that are useful in answering the research question and understanding factors that influence sustainability in this industry: (a) innovation strategies, (b) individual, team, and organizational learning strategies, and (c) technology integration.

The themes that emerged support the DCs conceptual framework. The DCs perspective assumes that DCs are processes (Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000) or patterns of organizational behavior (Ambrosini & Bowman, 2009) that firms use to gain, modify, and reconfigure the resources to adapt to environmental changes. According to Zahra, Sapienza, and Davidsson (2006), DCs are abilities for the manipulation of organizational assets towards achieving growth and survival. The organizational skills to carry out innovation and technology integration are dynamic capabilities. ICT SME leaders use DCs to ensure they reinvent their companies to explore and exploit opportunities in the

changing market environment. Learning orientation is required to make these capabilities dynamic (Stronen et al., 2017).

Learning orientation, on its own, is not a dynamic capability but a mechanism to enhance innovation and technology integration (Ambrosini & Bowman, 2009). The orientation and DCs can only be visible through analyzing the activities that SME leaders engage in to grow and sustain their businesses (Zahra et al., 2006). The findings of this study revealed that SME leaders who invest their resources in developing a culture of innovation and learning in their organizations could develop and sustain competitive advantage that ensures the growth and survival of SMEs for more than 5 years. SME leaders must ensure that they implement innovation strategies and, in particular, business model innovation. They must ensure that they recruit people who demonstrate entrepreneurial skills, train employees, foster collective organizational learning, and develop capabilities for technology integration if they want to grow and sustain their organizations beyond 5 years.

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Appendix: Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol	
What you will do	**What you will say—script**
• Watch for non-verbal cues • Paraphrase as needed Ask follow-up probing questions to get more in depth	I am a graduate student at Walden University. I am conducting this interview as part of a study in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of DBA. This interview will take around 45 minutes and will include 6 questions about your experience in developing and implementing strategies for the survival and growth of SMEs. I seek your permission to make an audio recording for this interview to be able to accurately document this discussion. Audio recording can be stopped at any time during the interview based on your request. Allow me to remind you of the following: We can stop the interview at any time. There are no consequences for choosing to do that. All your responses will remain confidential but will be used to develop a strategy for innovation implementation in SMEs. You have read and signed the consent form. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and we can stop or take a break at any time. Please let me know if you have any questions or if you are ready to give your permission to proceed with the interview.
• Watch for non-verbal cues • Paraphrase as needed • Ask follow-up probing questions to get more in depth • Wrap up interview by thanking the participant	1. What strategies have you implemented for your business to grow and survive for more than 5 years? 2. What key barriers did you experience in implementing your strategies in the first 5 years of your business? 3. How did you address the key barriers to implementing your organization's strategies for sustainability? 4. What internal and external organizational capabilities helped you to develop and implement strategies successfully?

	5. How does your organization assess the effectiveness of its strategies for sustainability? 6. What other information, if any, would you like to share regarding strategies you used to grow and sustain your ICT SME for more than 5 years?
Schedule follow-up member checking interview	Thank you for your participation. I will compile a write up of your responses and I will share the transcript with you to check I have correctly captured the interview or if there is any additional information you want to add.
	I humbly request that we meet again in three weeks for 30 minutes to review the summaries of interviews.