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Nigeria Small and Medium Enterprise Sustainability Strategies

Elizabeth Olufunmilayo Ajibola
Walden University

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Walden University

College of Management and Technology

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Elizabeth Olufunmilayo Ajibola

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Dr. Jill Murray, Committee Member, Doctor of Business Administration Faculty

Dr. Alexandre Lazo, University Reviewer, Doctor of Business Administration Faculty

Chief Academic Officer and Provost
Sue Subocz, Ph.D.

Walden University
2020

Abstract

Nigeria Small and Medium Enterprise Sustainability Strategies

by

Elizabeth Olufunmilayo Ajibola

MS, University of Liverpool, 2016

BS, National Open University of Nigeria, 2014

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Business Administration

Walden University

November 2020

Abstract

Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) contribute to economic development and create 80% of the jobs in Nigeria. However, 80% of SMEs are not sustained beyond 5 years. Grounded in stakeholder theory, the purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies SME owners used to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years. Three SME owners who have sustained their businesses over 5 years in the Southwest region of Nigeria were purposefully selected to participate in this study. Data were collected through semistructured interviews and other business documents. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data using comparison method, and 7 themes were generated: leadership and entrepreneurial skills, financial management practices, positive work environment, fostering customer satisfaction and loyalty, a business community in line with sustainable development goals, maintaining long term relationships with stakeholders, and innovation management that gives social, economic, and environmental values to stakeholders. Key recommendations include having SME owners identify their internal and external stakeholders and getting involved in operations sustainability strategies that give economic, social, and environmental values to all the stakeholders. Positive social change based on the study's findings include providing social, economic, and environmental values to stakeholders of an SME could enhance their sustainability over 5 years in Nigeria.

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Dedication

I dedicate my doctoral study to my parents for their efforts in my education. To all the citizens of Ijara-Isin, this accomplishment will have a great social impact on our community. To my sons, Aaron, and Lawrence Ajibola, thank you for being there for me. I dedicate this study to my husband, Kabiyesi, Olusin of Ijara-Isin, Oba Ademola Julius Ajibola, for your care, love, understand, and the support you gave me during my study, may your reign be long. Above all, I dedicate my study to God Almighty, the author and the finisher of my faith.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study

Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) contribute to the economic development of developing and developed countries (Ifekwem & Adedamola, 2016). Because these businesses are the pillar of economic development, SMEs are imperative to the growth of any nation (Masama & Bruwer, 2018; Miranda & Miranda, 2018). However, sustainability and productivity are the main challenges confronting SMEs, and SME owners find it difficult to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years (Ugoani, 2016). In Nigeria, SME owners have established businesses with minimal personal or outside funding, because skilled and unskilled owners do not have the same access to many of the opportunities that are available to large organizations (Quarter, Turkson, Abor, & Iddrisu, 2017). Some of the opportunities the large organizations enjoy over SMEs are funding, accessibility to information, knowledge acquisition, and standardization. Lack of these opportunities makes the sustainability of SMEs in Nigeria difficult (Quarter et al., 2017).

Background of the Problem

Many SME owners lack the knowledge of sustainability strategies to enhance their businesses (Meflinda, Mahyarni, Indrayani, & Wulandari, 2018). Small and medium enterprise owners also do not realize and consider the different organizational stakeholders and how they affect an organization's sustainability (Mile, 2017). Further, some of the reasons that jeopardize the growth and sustainability of SMEs in Nigeria are high employee turnover, low employee engagement, low employee motivation to improve the success of the business, lack of customer loyalty and continuous patronage, and low community support (Reina, Roger, Peterson, Byron, & Hom, 2018).

Various researchers have conducted studies on the sustainability of SMEs with a focus on external factors such as lack of funding, but less focus has been on internal factors (Wang, 2016; Quarter, Turkson, Abor, & Iddrisu, 2017). In this study, I explored how SME owners in Nigeria could deploy sustainability strategies comprised of internal and external organizational factors to sustain their SMEs. Such knowledge could provide awareness to help SME owners sustain their business beyond 5 years.

Problem Statement

Small and medium enterprises contribute to economic development and job creation in Nigeria, but SME owners find it challenging to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years (Ifekwem & Adedamola, 2016). The Small Medium Enterprise Development Agency of Nigeria (SMEDAN) reports failure rates for SMEs as 80% within the first 5 years of inception (Agwu, 2014). The general problem is that some SME owners face the challenge of sustaining their businesses beyond 5 years, which has led to a high rate of business failure. The specific problem is that some Nigerian SME owners lack strategies to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore what strategies SME owners used to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years. The targeted population comprised of three owners of SMEs in the southwest region of Nigeria who had successfully managed their businesses for over 5 years. This research may have implications for positive social change by creating awareness for SME owners on how to sustain their businesses, which can ultimately affect the economy of Nigeria. An effect of

such awareness might lead to increase in government revenue through tax generation.

The creation of jobs to reduce the unemployment rate, reduction of the poverty level, and improvement of the standard of living in the Western region of Nigeria are other potential positive social changes that may emerge from awareness of business sustainability.

Nature of the Study

There are three types of research methods: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2015). In this study, I used a qualitative research method to explore sustainability strategies that SME owners have used in sustaining their businesses beyond 5 years. The qualitative method involves interpreting the subjective data and giving meaning to a given situation (Mohajan, 2018). By using a qualitative method, I gained understanding of the reason behind participants' behaviors. The quantitative method is used to examine the relationship between dependent and independent variables; the analysis involves the use of a statistical structure to support the validity of the data and interpret the findings (Esfandiari et al., 2018). A quantitative method was not suitable for this study because I sought to find an in-depth understanding of why and how the participants act in their various ways to sustain their businesses. The mixed method combines both quantitative and qualitative data collection to examine data and typically involves a test of hypotheses about variables' relationships (Saunders et al., 2015), but there was no need to examine the relationship among variables through testing of hypotheses in this study.

Qualitative designs include ethnography, phenomenological, and case study (Gelling, 2015). The ethnographic research design provides data about the understanding

of ordinary life in each culture, subculture, or group of people living in special conditions (Gergen & Gergen, 2018). Researchers use the ethnographical design to study a cultural group's belief and cultural interactions (Gelling, 2015). It was not suitable for this study because of its emphasis on the culture of the phenomenon. Researchers also use phenomenological design to study the meaning of participants' lived experiences with a common phenomenon (Alfakhri, Harness, Nicholson, & Harness, 2018).

Phenomenological design was not suitable for this study because the meanings of participants' lived experiences with a phenomenon were not the focus of this study.

Using a case study design allows a researcher to probe through open-ended questions and gather data that would give a holistic view of the phenomenon (Marshall & Rossman, 2015). A case study design was suitable for this study to explore the sustainable strategies SME owners in the southwest region of Nigeria use in sustaining their businesses beyond 5 years because the design enables a researcher to gather in-depth data from the participants' experiences with open-ended questions and organizational records. A case study design could be a single case or a multiple case study, and for this proposed study, a multiple case study was appropriate to help produce robust data that would provide independent analytical conclusions across cases.

Research Question

What strategies do SME owners use in sustaining their businesses beyond 5 years?

Interview Questions

1. How would you describe your sustainability strategies?
2. How did you implement your sustainability strategies?

3. Based upon your experiences, what sustainability strategies have impacted your business most?
4. What were the key challenges you faced to implement your sustainability strategies?
5. How did you address the key challenges to sustain your business?
6. What additional information would you like to share about your strategies in sustaining your business beyond 5 years?

Conceptual Framework

Stakeholder theory provided the conceptual framework for this research study. Freeman (1984) postulated stakeholder theory, arguing that the shareholders are not the only stakeholders in an organization. Anyone who has a stake or interest in the organization is a stakeholder; these include managers, employees, customers, suppliers, government, and community, among others (Miles, 2017). The relationship between internal and external stakeholders impacts the building of an organization's corporate image (Slabbert, 2016). Managers should manage the affairs of the organization in the interest of all the key stakeholders to achieve the organizational goals (Freeman, 1984). I used stakeholder theory as a lens to explore the strategies of meeting the needs of stakeholders in adopting a sustainability strategy for the success of a business organization.

Managers are responsible for the interest of all stakeholders in and out of the organization and concluded that corporate social responsibility (CSR) to the community and care for the environment influence the profitability of the organization (Dinsmore,

2014; Gibbon, 2015; Miller, 2016). Empowering employees and creating teamwork motivates employees to add more value to the organization (Humphrey, 2017). Such empowerment can build good relationships with customers to earn their loyalty, which positively impacts the profitability of the organization. Employee training and effective communication among stakeholders also enhance customer loyalty (Makani, 2017). Employee engagement can also reduce job insecurity and employee turnover rates in an organization (Abolade, 2018).

Operational Definitions

Corporate social responsibility (CSR): CSR is the organization's responsibility as part of its business activities to take up social and environmental issues that positively impact the people and their environment (Coppola, & Lanuario, 2017).

Entrepreneur: An entrepreneur is someone at the center of business entity creation and its growth (Byungku, 2019).

Entrepreneurship: Entrepreneurship is the vehicle to economic development and societal transformation (Dhahri, & Omri, 2018; Lee & Hu, 2018).

Small and medium enterprise (SME): A SME is an enterprise of between 10 and 199 employees (SMEDAN, 2013).

Small and medium enterprise owner: A SME owner is an entrepreneur with employee capacity between 10 and 199 employees, who is involved in day to day business transactions with the aim of profit (Abdul, 2019).

Stakeholders: Stakeholders are a group of people who affects or are affected by the outcome of the operations of an organization (Rajhans, 2018; Souza Neto, & Borges, 2019). They include employees, customers, suppliers, community, and government.

Sustainability: Sustainability is the concept that explains the capacity of an organization to exist over a long period and be resistant to factors that can affect its growth, performance, and strategies (Meflinda, Mahyarni, Indrayani, & Wulandari, 2018).

Sustainability strategies: Sustainability strategies are the strategies imbibe by an organization that focuses on the economic, social, and environmental development in society (Garg, 2017).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

Assumptions

The researcher's assumptions form the basis of the study (Lips-Wiersma & Mills, 2013). Researchers perceive the assumptions of the study are true yet otherwise lack authentic evidence (Ellis & Levy, 2009). In this study, I assumed that a qualitative research method and case study research design were appropriate to explore the sustainability strategies used by Nigeria SME owners to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years. Based on the selection criteria, I assumed that the participants would not be biased and would be honest in answering the interview questions. I also assumed that the selected participants knew about the topic under investigation. I assumed that the participants represented the population of SME owners in southwest Nigeria. Last, I

assumed that the interview questions were related to the study and were enough for data saturation.

Limitations

Limitations of a study are factors or variables that the researcher does not have power over. To ensure credibility and accuracy, a researcher needs to identify such limitations (Yin, 2018). A limitation focuses commonly on the internal and external validity of a study; it helps the researcher to identify its strengths and weaknesses and how to apply the findings (Connelly, 2013). One of the limitations of the study is its restriction to southwest Nigeria; therefore, it cannot be generalized for the entire country. Another limitation is each respondent's emotional status during the interview, which could have affected the data collection and the integrity of the result. The participants may have also not wanted to disclose some of their success or failure factors.

Delimitations

Delimitations define the scope and boundaries of the study (Ellis & Levy, 2009). They enable the reader and the researcher to understand its scope and implications. I delimited the participants of this study to SME owners who have sustained their businesses beyond 5 years in Nigeria. I delimited the interview questions to six for data collection. I also delimited the study to accommodate participants from the southwest region of Nigeria.

Significance of the Study

In this study, I explored sustainability strategies that SME owners employ for the sustainability of their businesses beyond 5 years. The Small Medium Enterprise

Development Agency of Nigeria reported the failure rate for SMEs was 80% within the first 5 years of their establishment (Agwu, 2014; Akinso, 2018). The value gathered from this study could be a significant contribution to create awareness for SME owners on other means to increase the profitability of a business, reduce the cost of hiring and firing, and eventually enhance SME sustainability. The study's findings could also be significant in enabling organizations to positively affect the lives of the stakeholders and their communities.

Contribution to Business Practice

Sustainability strategies reflect strategies that focus on businesses' economic, social, and environmental development (Garg, 2017). Developing and deploying these strategies enable organizations to create long-term value for key stakeholders who are employees, shareholders, customers, governments, and communities (Matzembache, & Meira, 2019). Small and medium enterprises also have stakeholders, and the knowledge of sustainable strategies could enhance the sustainability of SMEs beyond 5 years. As a stakeholder, an employee in an organization can make valuable contributions to the organization's success (Vorina, Simonič, & Vlasova, 2017).

Promoting an environmentally friendly operation shows the concern and recognition an organization gives to the community where an organization runs and gives benefits back to the organization (Yun & Lee, 2018). The knowledge of sustainable strategies could enable the organization to reduce employee turnover and enhance productivity, protect their environment, and promote customer loyalty toward increasing

profitability (Albrecht, Breidahl, & Marty, 2017; Hildebrand, Demotta, Sen, & Valenzuela, 2017; Yung & Lee, 2018).

Implications for Social Change

The findings of this study could provide awareness of the advantages of developing sustainability strategies for SMEs. The sustainability of SMEs could enable existing employees in the organization to retain their jobs and create more jobs, thereby reducing the rate of unemployment in Nigeria (Albrecht et al., 2017). The findings of the study could also build awareness about increasing the standard of living and boost the national economy. The implications for social change from the study may also contribute to an organization's ability to perform corporate social responsibility.

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

The purpose of this multiple case study was to explore the sustainability strategies SME owners in western Nigeria used to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years. A review of literature enabled me to review the work of other researchers related to SMEs, the stakeholder's theory, and the sustainability strategy. The literature review includes articles from different researchers that are peer-reviewed on different aspects of SMEs that relate to sustainability. The literature is relevant to what SMEs are and their impact on people, society, and the economy as well as the challenges of managing SMEs and SME failures and successes.

For this study, stakeholder theory was the conceptual framework that I used to explore sustainability strategies used by owners of SMEs to sustain their businesses in Nigeria. Stakeholder theory explains and presents the stakeholders of a business entity

and their impacts on the success of any business organization (Prasadh, 2018; Yung, & Lee, 2018). This literature review also provides information on how the stakeholder theory relates to SME stakeholders for the SME successes.

Methods of Reviewing the Literature

A thorough review of literature enables the researcher to review the works of other researchers in the field of study and to avoid repeating what other researchers had done. To review the literature, I searched for research on the sustainability or success of SMEs in Nigeria and other countries that cover their challenges, impacts, failure, success, and sustainability. The review of the literature involved researching articles to gain an in-depth knowledge of SMEs, the owners of SMEs, and the stakeholder theory that I used as the conceptual framework of the study.

The studies chosen are the work of researchers in Nigeria and other parts of the world. The literature review includes 130 peer-reviewed journals, four books, two government websites, and six dissertations. I reviewed a total number of 140 papers with 88% of the articles published in or after 2015. The databases that I used include the *Emerald Management Journal*, ABI-INFORM Complete ProQuest, ScienceDirect, *Directory of Open Access Journal*, Government databases SMEDAN and the National Bureau of Statistics in Nigeria, and Google Scholar. The database search included different combination of words such as *entrepreneurship, entrepreneur training, small and medium enterprises, SMEs and employment, employee engagement, customer satisfaction, corporate social responsibility, stakeholders and organization, SME in Nigeria, impact of SMEs, challenges of SMEs, SMEs and finance, stakeholder theory,*

SMEs owners, SMEs and the economy, leadership, small and medium enterprises in Nigeria, SMEDAN, and NBA.

Methods of Analyzing the Literature

I reviewed the literature related to the study and grouped the articles based on the research themes. First, I define the relevance and the ideology of stakeholder theory to the study, explaining how the theory is relevant to explore Nigeria's SME sustainability and the influence of stakeholders in the organization. Second, I review the relevance of SMEs and what it entails in the following themes: (a) SMEs; (b) SME owners; impact of SMEs on the people, in society, and on the economy; perceived challenges faced by SMEs; (c) perceived failure rate of SMEs; and the sustainable strategies that can be applied by SMEs.

Relevance of Theories and Frameworks

Freedman conceptualized stakeholder theory in 1984, which suggests that all those having a stake in a business entity are stakeholders of the organization including managers, employees, customers, suppliers, bankers, government, and the community. Stakeholder theory guides the manager to oversee the interest of all the stakeholders in the organization and not only the interest of the shareholder. Scholars have further developed stakeholder theory to consider the norms, morals, ethics, and standards of relating to the stakeholders (Jones, Harrison, & Felps, 2018; Wick & Freeman, 1998). However, integrating moral and economically sound decisions in the interest of all the stakeholders without affecting the bottom line of the organization has been challenging (Freeman, Harrison Wicks, Parmar, & de Colle, 2010).

In addition to Freedman, Jones (1995) created instrumental stakeholder theory to synthesize stakeholder theory, economic theory, behavioral science, and ethics. The integration of ethics into stakeholder theory was for the competitive advantage of an organization (Jones et al., 2018). Other scholars have also identified with the stakeholders and validated the importance of stakeholders in an organization and how they impact organizational success and sustainability (Prasadh, 2018; Yung, & Lee, 2018).

An organization can enhance its sustainability by harnessing the values of each stakeholder, which is significant to an organization (Smirnova, Rebiyazina, & Frösén, 2018). The sustainability strategy, with the focus on the stakeholders, identifies them in an organization and their impact on the success of the organization. Employees are valuable resources to an organization when engaged in innovation, planning, and decision-making (Schilpzand, Houston, & Cho, 2018). Employee motivation and a positive work environment provide comfort for the employees, which increases employee morale, resulting in increased employee productivity at work, increased financial performance, and enhanced sustainability of the organization (Ružić & Benazić, 2018).

Customers are other key stakeholders in the organization. Customer satisfaction and loyalty is a priority in an organization, leading to increased patronage of customers and marketing of the organization through referrals to their friends, acquaintances, and families (Hosseini & Ramezani, 2016). The business community is another key stakeholder. Organizations provide social and environmental support to the communities, which could be in the form of support to the government on social amenities such as good roads, ample water supply, provision of schools, and promotion of green energy. All

these amenities are beneficial to the citizens of the community and in the long run add economic value to the organization (Hoi, Wu, & Zhang, 2018). An organization that deploys strategies that add value to key stakeholders also benefits long-term relationships with stakeholders, enhancing the sustainability of the organization (Matzembacher & Meira, 2019). The various stakeholders of an organization affect the operations of an organization in different ways (Freeman, 1984; Rajhans, 2018). However, some stakeholders are key to the operations of a business organization than are others. Employees, customers, government, and community are the key stakeholders identified in this study.

Stakeholder theory was relevant to this study because it is used by researchers to identify the key stakeholders in an organization and the sustainability strategies deployed by the leaders of the organization, which encompasses economic, social, and environmental values in organizational strategy. When sustainability strategy is adopted by an organization, it can take into consideration the impact of the organization in giving economic, social, and environmental values to its stakeholders (Garg, 2017).

Relevance of Entrepreneurship and Small and Medium Enterprises

The relevance of entrepreneurship and SMEs explains the contribution of entrepreneurship and SMEs for economic, social, and environmental values in a society. In this study, I explain entrepreneurship, SMEs, SME owners, and the impact of SMEs in society. The relevance of entrepreneurship explains the relationship between entrepreneurship and SMEs. To understand such relevance in the market and society, it is essential to understand how they relate, what they are, and how they function in society.

Entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurship is the foundation of the prosperity of industrialized nations (Berti & Mulligan, 2016). It involves designing, launching, and running a new business to offer a product, process, or service (Yetisen et al., 2015). Both entrepreneurship and micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) are recognized globally as the backbone of all economic development (Okyere, 2017). Although the meanings of entrepreneurship and small business are related, the two concepts are different. Entrepreneurship is a complex activity involving a wide array of talents, abilities, and skills. It is characterized by different performance outcomes. As such, it has been the object of a variety of fields of research from economics to sociology, to history, management, psychology, anthropology, and even humanities (Nuvolari, Toninelli, & Vasta, 2018).

Economic researchers developed different definitions of entrepreneurship to show the differences in approaches throughout the years (Lahutta, 2018). Entrepreneurship is a phenomenon that appears in numerous scientific disciplines, which makes it complicated to reach a consensus that concerns both definition and nature (Szaban & Skrzek-Lubasinska, 2018). Entrepreneurship is also identified as a potential source of growth, personal development, and well-being. Unlike most traditional occupations, entrepreneurs enjoy a level of freedom and control that can enable them to derive fulfilment from their work. Entrepreneurs have innate talents and skills and engage in purposeful activities through self-directed tasks (Wiklund, Nikolaev, Shir, Foo, & Bradley, 2019).

The term *entrepreneur* ranges in definitions to also include creators of small businesses or even young college students attending an entrepreneurship class (Levine & Rubenstein, 2017). Some scholars are also entrepreneurs because they develop new ideas, are a person or a group of people who discover new ideas, have new needs or new methods, and take the risk of looking for necessary resources to create an entity to satisfy those needs to improve lives (Pontikes & Barnett, 2017). Some people want to run their own business after their university education, whereas some want to do business when studying at a university to combine learning with running a business (Amway Global Entrepreneurship Report, 2016). The entrepreneurial skills of SME owners that have impacts on business include (a) promoting their businesses internally and externally, (b) increasing their sales, (c) helping them in identifying opportunities within their economy, (d) gaining understanding of customer specification, and (e) contributing to the development of the location where the business organization resides (Abdul, 2019).

Entrepreneurship training. Entrepreneurs undergo training to improve themselves in some essential entrepreneurial skills that have a positive impact on SME performance, especially profits and revenues. Entrepreneurship training has positive impacts on SME performance, profits, revenues, and size; though training might be a costly activity, the benefits from training exceed the cost (Mayuran, 2016). Small and medium enterprise managers need to consider social supports and human resources, customer orientation, and staff training as the most important factors for the sustainable performance of SMEs (Hosseininia & Ramezani, 2016). Attitudes and perceptions are important in influencing an entrepreneur's level of propensity for sustainable

entrepreneurship (Koe, Omar & Sa'ari, 2015). Factors influencing the identification of sustainable opportunities by SMEs include entrepreneurial knowledge, which should be provided by business associations, governmental, and academic institutions (Choongo, Burg, Paas, & Masurel, 2016).

Entrepreneurship training generally helps entrepreneurs to improve their business practices and sustainability (Ismail, 2018). Three elements are essential to increase entrepreneurship activity in a community: entrepreneurial education, capital, and a dedicated political system (Dutta, 2016; Wang & Morrell, 2015). Entrepreneurship training improves business knowledge of entrepreneurs and has a large effect on identifying sustainable opportunities more than other factors that have been hypothesized like environmental and social issues (Patel, 2015). Entrepreneurship training requires constant follow up and re-training because entrepreneurs have the tendency of losing some of the things they have learned after a certain period. Evidence from an entrepreneurship training course revealed that self-employment declined in the long-term—that is, about 2 years after receiving training intervention (Martinez, Puentes, & Ruiz-Tagle, 2016). Other impact assessments of entrepreneurship training uncovered small improvements in sales, income, capital stock, and loan activity. The greatest impact of such training programs is most effective regarding boosting business knowledge and good business practices (Martinez et al., 2016).

The values and personality of entrepreneurs. Entrepreneurs who include sustainability strategies in their mission have some differences in their goals. Some entrepreneurs aim to improve sustainability, whereas others aim to create a new and a

more sustainable world (Jolink & Niesten, 2015). A conventional entrepreneur is characterized by an economic mission. A sustainable entrepreneur, on the other hand, has a dual mission. Besides an economic mission, they have a social or sustainable mission related to their values, goals, normative identity, and their desire to create social value (Stevens, Moray, & Bruneel, 2015).

The personality of the entrepreneur is also a key factor in whether the SME is sustainable. Attitudinal and perceptual factors of the entrepreneur have been shown to be significant to sustainable entrepreneurship among SMEs in Malaysia (Koe et al., 2015). The personality of entrepreneur is based on either of two major phenomena: (a) The characteristics of an entrepreneur differ from the characteristics of a non-entrepreneur and (b) The characteristics of an entrepreneur influence the performance of a business venture (Chavez, 2016). Entrepreneurs tend to be more open to experience than the general population who are non-entrepreneurs (Antoncic, Kregar, Singh, & DeNoble, 2015). But risk-loving entrepreneurs who operate innovative firms are much less likely to have their firms survive over a 3-year follow-up period compared to similarly risk-loving entrepreneurs running less innovative operations (Hyytinen, Pajarinen & Rouvinen, 2015).

The perspective of entrepreneurs on their perception of success is equally important. This involves variation in meaning rather than in perceived criteria for measuring success, as portrayed in several existing literature on entrepreneurial success. Variation in how entrepreneurs understand success is likely to influence the extent entrepreneurs to prioritize different approaches for developing their firms. Most studies

adopting individual level criteria focus on a combination of monetary and non-monetary criteria to extend the discussion from a focus on monetary criteria alone (Angel, Jenkins, & Stephens, 2018; Sieger, Fueglistaller, & Zellweger 2016). Entrepreneurs frequently use personal wealth creation and income both for themselves and their businesses as their monetary criteria (Kirkwood, 2016). Conversely, the study of non-monetary achievements defines subjective entrepreneurial success as the individual understanding and assessment of the achievement of criteria that is personally important to the entrepreneurs (Wach, Stephan, & Gorgievski, 2016). Additionally, entrepreneurs who prioritized personal fulfillment are more likely to be satisfied with their lives, whereas entrepreneurs who prioritized firm performance are more likely to run firms with higher levels of turnover. However, both monetary and non-monetary factors are important to SME sustainability.

Defining small and medium enterprises. A SME is usually a business organization with between 10 and 199 employees (SMEDAN, 2013). These are business enterprises owned by an individual to create values, which include economic, social, and environmental values (James et al., 2018; Pinkovetskaia, Nikitina, & Gromova, 2018). These values enhance the economic growth of the nation, decrease poverty, and reduce unemployment (Fatoki, 2018). In most economies, SMEs spring up, and with their business activities, they improve the lives of the people and society (Jacinto & Du Preez, 2018).

Small and medium enterprises are the pillars of economic development and the empowerment of communities (Miranda & Miranda, 2018). Small and medium

enterprises create activities and engagement for institutions such as finance, marketing, and supply chain by way of their business transactions. Bello, Jubril, and Ahmed (2018) mentioned that SMEs are the ingredient for industrial development in a developing economy. Setting up small and medium manufacturing businesses could be through art, for instance, such as painting, bag making, shoemaking, and clothing with the use of locally sourced materials (Bello et al., 2018). Also, a SME could involve food manufacturing from local producers that could reduce dependence on imported foods and increase the consumption of locally made products to boost the national economy. Local food manufacturing generates revenue for organizations and government from taxes generated from these organizations. Such local businesses and a couple of others generated by SMEs boost the economy, create social values, and cause environmental development of a nation (Fatoki, 2018).

Small and medium enterprise owners. Small and medium enterprise owners are entrepreneurs who are sensitive to their environment to see opportunities or challenges turn them around to make a difference toward economic and social benefits (Miller & Le Breton-Miller, 2017; Rey-Martí, Ribeiro-Soriano, & Sánchez-García, 2016). The enterprises are born out of creativity and innovations of the owners (Guo, 2018). The owners' economic and social activities include sources of revenue for the government, reduction of unemployment, and improvement of the citizens' standard of living (Jang, 2018; Rusu & Roman, 2017). Small business owners are people with minimal capacity to obtain resources needed for their businesses. The lack of resources includes financial resources and having enough employees. The owners usually set up businesses with a

little capital from individual savings along with financial support from family, friends, and acquaintances (van Klyton & Rutabayiro-Ngoga, 2017).

Small businesses in Southwest Nigeria. Southwest Nigeria has six states: Ekiti, Lagos, Ogun, Ondo, Osun, and Oyo. It is mainly a Yoruba speaking area, although there are different dialects even within the same state. Lagos, one of the states, is the fastest growing city in all West Africa. Lagos has the fifth largest economy in Africa, generating about 90% of Nigeria's overall trade flows, roughly 65% of the country's entire manufacturing sector, and approximately 10% of the country's GDP (Osho & Adishi, 2019). Three Southwest states in Nigeria have the highest number of SMEs in the country with Lagos, Osun, and Oyo states having the highest numbers by states across the federation (National Bureau of Statistics in Nigeria, 2019). Small and medium enterprises in the six southwest states of Nigeria accounted for 14,997,184 jobs of a total of 57,836,391 jobs by SMEs in the country, which is 26% in all (SMEDAN, 2013).

The Nigeria Bureau of Statistics (2019) reported SMEs in Nigeria have contributed about 48.5% of the national GDP in the last 5 years. With a total of about 17.4 million, they account for about 50% of the industrial jobs and nearly 90% of the manufacturing sector in terms of the number of enterprises. Lagos State, which is in the Southwest region of Nigeria, has the largest labor force, thereby putting the highest concentration of SMEs arguably in the region. Adebayo, Alheety, and Yusoff (2019) argued chains of issues and challenges plague the overriding importance of SMEs despite their significance. However, the common ground is that these challenges are not insurmountable. A clear and objective assessment of the type of products in which SMEs

in Nigeria have distinctive competence to produce with a clear analysis of their strengths and weaknesses should be carried out. They can be supported with adequate attention to the issue of technical and technological advancement of the production processes of SMEs (Adebiyi, Banjo, & Regin, 2017).

Access of SMEs to a credit facility and business performance is challenging. Financial management practices have a significant impact on the performance of SMEs in Lagos. The availability of funds can help SMEs acquire appropriate technology and expand the operations and scale of their businesses (Adebiyi et al., 2017). Lagos state has arguably developed a more sophisticated and effective strategy for working with MSMEs than has the federal government. Local business groups praise state officials for engaging constructively with them and other key stakeholders, seeking their advice as they design and implement new initiatives. For example, the Lagos State Employment Trust Fund (LSETF), a professionally staffed state agency created to help MSMEs boost productivity, has carefully planned its programs after internalizing best practices and studying the successes and failures of other schemes (Page & Okeke, 2019).

Impact of Small and Medium Enterprises

Small and medium enterprises create and nurture employment opportunities that will improve the economy of Nigeria. Small and medium enterprises are essential because they promote the economy (Bello et al., 2018). People require employment opportunities to make a living. Small and medium enterprises are critical because they provide the necessary goods and services to the consumers in society, and in so doing,

they make sure to meet the demand of the people in the market for the benefit of the community (Nwugballa, Elom, & Onyeizugbe, 2016).

Nwugballa et al. (2016) reported SMEs to contribute to up to 55% of the gross domestic product (GDP) of Nigeria; the sector contributes up to 75% of the total employment rate in Nigeria. Small and medium enterprises are also relevant because they take part in CSR important in promoting social welfare in the country through the promotion of education, provision of clean water to drink, and development of individual talents in society (Gorondutse & Hilman, 2016).

Impact of small and medium enterprises to the stakeholders. A business entity cannot exist without people, even with the advent of technology and its advancement in artificial intelligence, the human factor is essential. Human beings are important to the existence and success of a business organization. The creative idea and innovation of setting up a business entity emanate from an entrepreneur who, in the context of this study, is a SME owner. A SME owner needs people who are employees with whom to engage and share ideas to achieve the objective of setting up a business entity (Li, Wang, Van Jaarsveld, Lee, & Ma, 2018). The product or service delivery offered would need people to either transfer it to consumers or consume it themselves, which makes people imperative in the existence of a business entity. In a business organization, human resources management is the aspect of management that manages the employees; these are the people behind the activities or operations in the organization.

For a sustainable business organization and economic development, entrepreneurship needs to include economic generation and the need to hire employees.

The integration of entrepreneurship, leadership, and human resources and its proper implementation leads to wealth and job creation for the economy and the people (Kim, ElTarabishy, & Bae, 2018). Hakimian, Farid, Ismail, and Nair (2016) noted that human resources unit needs to motivate employees to enhance commitment at work, which can bring about innovation and creativity. The creative act of motivating others is crucial because it enables SMEs to perform exceptionally in the market, and in so doing, the organization manufactures products and delivers its services using the best practices, which are essential to both the business and society as a whole.

Employees hold an important and critical position in an organization as the organization interface with the customers, especially the frontline employee. Employees at the frontlines are the link between the customers and the management of an organization. How employees perceive the work environment affects their satisfaction on the job and their commitment (Marques, Leal, Marques, & Cabral, 2018). Employers could achieve employee job satisfaction by fostering a warm working environment, emotional intelligence, employee engagement, and teamwork (Feyerabend, Herd, & Choi, 2018; Gander, Ruch, Platt, Hofmann, & Elmer, 2018; Mahipalan & Sheena, 2018). Job satisfaction reduces employee intention to leave and puts employees in the right frame of mind to serve customers (Feyerabend et al., 2018). When employees are satisfied with their jobs, they become more productive for the organization, which is one of the ways SMEs add value to the people inside and outside an organization.

Impact of small and medium enterprises in society. Small and medium enterprises are a source of empowering rural and urban communities. In a rural

community, they help in developing the rural economy and improve the lives of rural settlers (Miranda & Miranda, 2018). However, some variables are imperative for SMEs to establish these impacts. Miranda and Miranda (2018) noted variables of SMEs such as owners' structure, communication system, and networking are significant in rural community empowerment. Small and medium enterprise owners might face challenges in sustaining their businesses if these variables are not well guided and would affect rural community empowerment. Also, Masama and Bruwer (2018) explained that SMEs are important in the development of urban settlement and the economy. However, SME owners in urban communities find it challenging to sustain their businesses over a long period (Masama & Bruwer, 2018), and these could be lack of finances, poor management skills, poor infrastructure, and the high cost of electricity adversely affecting businesses.

Economic and social impact. The economic and social impacts of SMEs in a society are the impacts that affect revenue generation in society, equalizing income distribution and its contribution to the GDP. Small and medium enterprises reduce the rate of unemployment in society by creating jobs, which has a ripple effect in reducing the crime rate for a friendly and creating safe society (Stępnia-Kucharska, 2016). Creating jobs also enables people to meet their social obligations to their family, and it adds social values to the community.

Most SMEs get their resources locally from their country, which increases the total monetary value of goods produced within a nation (Van Scheers, 2016). Also, there is an opportunity to export locally made products to the international market where these products are needed (Chong et al., 2019). Many individuals purchase their resources

locally, which means that they can improve the market of the locally produced raw materials, which enhances the economy for the benefit of society (Chong et al., 2019). SMEs also provide goods and services to be consumed by members of the community. It is, therefore, essential to promote SMEs due to the vital societal role they play.

Small and medium enterprises also provide employment opportunities and in so doing, improve the economy. The improvement in the performance of SMEs is what determines the number of employees they will hire, which means the performance of the firms is directly proportional to the number of employment opportunities the firm creates. SME managers should ensure that SMEs improve innovative aspects and SME knowledge to ensure the organizations are well placed to provide much-needed opportunities in society. Innovation is the key to competitiveness, which will improve the performance of SMEs in making high-quality goods and delivering services to the people as well as employment opportunities to enhance the economy of the society (Aksoy, 2017).

Areas of Perceived Challenges Faced by Small and Medium Enterprises

Small and medium enterprises face diverse challenges that hamper their sustainability, because they are business enterprises run as sole proprietorships, partnerships, or limited liability companies with limited funds, leadership skills, taxation, inadequate electricity supply, among others. Some of these enterprises are founded by people who wanted to try business on their own because they could not get a job, thereby lacking leadership skills to manage the organization when it is set up (Ibrahim & Mohd Shariff, 2017). Small and medium enterprises are enterprises with small capacities when

compare to large corporations. Most SMEs cannot afford to pay high salaries like the large corporations do, which makes them look at unskilled labor. These challenges and others affect the operation, management, and performance of SMEs.

Inadequate leadership skills. Small and medium enterprise owners have a large role to play in the sustainability of their businesses. A business owner or top management of an organization's capacity to manage an organization goes a long way to determine the sustainability of an organization (Prentice & Zeng, 2018). Owners need effectuation and causation strategies to run a SME or a new venture for sustainability (Prentice & Zhang, 2018). The business environment is dynamic and competitive, which requires an entrepreneur's alertness to the changes that could guide him or her in decision-making. An entrepreneur could make some changes in the organization using a leadership style that would enable the employees to adapt to the changes in the organization and business environment for sustainability (Prentice & Zeng, 2018; Prosperi, Kirwan, Maye, Bartolini, & Vergamini, 2019).

The leadership style incorporated into the organization influences the organization's performance. Leadership in an organization could have both positive and negative impacts on an organization. A transformational leadership style motivates the employees and encourages them to do more than they can imagine of themselves (Northouse, 2016). However, an organization with an abusive leadership approach demotivates the employees and threatens their jobs, which leads to employee turnover and reduced human capital (Abolade, 2018; Barnes & Spangenburg, 2018). Additionally, human capital enhances employees' performance and organizational performance (Muafi,

Suwitho, Purwohandoko, & Imanirrahma, 2017). Therefore, employees should be motivated to increase their performance, human capital, and organization performance.

A leader stirs the wheel and progress of the organization. The leadership ideology of product or service innovation and creativity influences the employees and determines the progress and sustainability of the organization (Ayranci & Ayranci, 2015). The leaders need to possess the required skills to manage an organization successfully (Dunne, Aaron, McDowell, Urban, & Geho, 2016; Mohsin, Halim, Ahmad, & Farhana, 2017).

The owners and managers of SMEs need knowledge acquisition to manage the organization successfully (Kim, Song, & Sambamurthy, 2012). The business incubator is one of such support by the government, where individuals selected for the tutoring gather knowledge to manage their organizations. Business incubators are institutes formed by the government to promote entrepreneurship in the community and support them in their growth (Ayatse, Kwahar, & Iyortsuun, 2017; Iyortsuun, 2017).

Inadequate financial capacity. Small and medium enterprises contribute to the growth and development of the country (Abbasi, Wang, & Alsakarneh, 2018). However, sustainability and development in SMEs is a challenge. Small and medium enterprises face various challenges that include finance, supply chain, and knowledge gaps. Researchers have identified finance as a significant challenge for SMEs (Quartey, Turkson, Abor, & Iddrisu, 2017). Ezeagba (2017) mentioned SMEs have financial problems because they lack adequate financial management. Many SME owners lack the proper books of accounts and records that are important for making sure the organization

accounts for all the money spent. The lack of adequate financial resources leads to hampering SME success. However, SMEs could overcome the challenge by identifying the factors responsible for the problem and finding a way around it. Some types of funding could be available for SME owners to overcome this challenge (Ezeagba, 2017), whose descriptions follow.

Supply chain financing. Supply chain financing (SCF) could provide financial support to SMEs to overcome finance issues. The support could be for both the supplying organization and the buying organization (Abbasi et al., 2018). SCF bridges the financial gap that exists between the buyer and the seller. To the seller, SCF provides immediate payment on goods ordered by the buyer, while SCF gives the buyer the comfort to pay overtime. It is a form of financing that some SMEs leverage to support their businesses. Some study participants whose businesses were successful after 5 years might have had access to SCF.

Crowdfunding. Crowdfunding is a platform through which SME owners can raise funds that they might not have the capacity to obtain from commercial banks (Brown, Boon, & Pitt, 2017). It is a platform where a small business owner introduces the product or project to people to raise money with the benefit of a reward or equity to interested people (Savannah, 2018). Some factors are essential to consider raising funds successfully on a crowdfunding platform. The knowledge of the founder or the owner is vital to know an ideal campaign period; when the people are not distracted with other activities to successfully hit the fundraising target (Janku & Kučerová, 2018). Rewarding the people who contributed money is another factor for consideration in crowdfunding.

The reward should be attractive with different rewards available with different conditions for the backers to select (Savannah, 2018). Crowdfunding is also a platform for start-up and existing businesses to market their products. Further, more people get to know the product from individual reviews on crowdfunding websites on a product or project (Brown et al., 2017). Some SME owners could leverage on this form of funding to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years.

Debt financing. Debt financing is a form of financial support through bank loans in which a company receives a loan, does not give up ownership or profits, and is bound to pay back the principal and interest at specified dates. It is a kind of financing that comes with strict conditions secured by collateral as a guarantee for repayment. Small and medium enterprise owners have full authority and ownership of their businesses, and most SMEs choose debt financing over equity financing (Abbasi et al., 2017). Aysa (2018) conducted a qualitative study on factors affecting SME access to bank financing in Turkey and found the commitment of a SME to its credit obligations, combined with its financial data, affect the bank's decision to approve the credit facility.

Banks evaluate (a) equity, (b) area of activity, (c) the profitability of the firm, (d) its debt and current ratios, and (e) the firm's ability to generate sufficient cash flow. Other factors that affect access to bank loans include (a) length of the firm's relationship with the bank, (b) the industry in which the SME operates, and (c) the age of the firm and impressions gained by the bankers during on-site visits. Firms that have a long relationship with the bank have better chances to access loans. These factors are also relevant in Egypt and Mozambique, with additional findings that a mindset change for

top bank management to SMEs is necessary as well as government through relevant agencies like the central bank that can equally intervene (Boushnak, Rageb, Rageb, & Sakr, 2018; Osano & Languitone, 2016).

Other sources of funding for small and medium enterprises. Aside from owners' savings are other funding sources: (a) friends and family; (b) angel investors/business angels; (c) trade credit, factoring, and invoice discounting; (d) leasing; (e) venture capitalists; (f) equity financing; (g) informal financial markets like cooperative societies; and (h) specialized funding facilities like NERFUND, CBN and AfDB. SMEs require credits from deposit money banks whenever fund in the business is not adequate for its operations. The availability of funds from deposit money enables investment, employment, productivity, and savings accumulation (Abbasi et al., 2017; Taiwo, Falohun & Agwu, 2016).

Taiwo et al. (2016), in their qualitative research study on SMEs' financing and its effects on Nigerian economic growth, mentioned that the Nigerian government should formulate policies for facilitating and empowering growth, development, and performance of SMEs. It could be a policy towards a loan that would assist the SME to grow through soft loans at low-interest rates and other fiscal incentives to enhance the socioeconomic development of the economy like alleviating poverty, generating employment, enhancing human development, and improving social welfare.

Inadequate electric supply. Small and medium enterprises face the challenge of access to efficient, useful, and sustainable sources of energy. The fact that the SMEs operating in Nigeria have a challenge accessing electricity means that they will struggle

to compete with other firms with access to various sources of energy at a cheaper cost (Nerini, Broad, Mentis, Welsh, Bazilian, & Howells, 2016). Access to electricity is still a challenge in Nigeria, even though it is a required resource to improve the country's economy. The government has the role of promoting the business environment by ensuring access to electricity for SMEs. Some of the firms get access to electricity through corrupt dealings including bribery and nepotism in the power distribution agency (Bertheau, Cader, & Blechinger, 2016).

Adhekpukoli (2018) addressed ineffective access to electricity in Nigeria because of the grid system. A change to the grid may appropriate a costly exercise that will take a lot of time and may intensify power outages for all the periods when the change is made. The best option is to look for ways already available to improve the grid to make it useful to everyone. The problems regarding access of electricity make a good number of employers lose their businesses or sell them. Having sustainable energy solutions is essential when it comes to sustainability in SMEs. The business owners also have a role to play to ensure they have access to the energy required for them to run their businesses sustainably. The state of Nigeria has made some progress in ensuring that its citizens have access to electricity. One strategy was the privatization of the state-owned electric power utility and the introduction of a feed-in tariff and mini-grid regulations.

Multiple taxation instead of tax incentives. Officials of many government agencies and their third-party contractors for the federal, state, and local governments pester many SMEs with various taxes and levies. The small-scale business entrepreneurs, especially in Lagos State that serve as the commercial nerve center of Nigeria, have

diverse problems that often lead to the liquidation of their businesses (Adeniyi & Imade, 2018). While taxes are an important channel for government revenue, the administration should not inflict pain on businesses, and payment should not be detrimental to business sustainability beyond 5 years. The government sometimes appoints consultants for tax collection, and the agents of these consultants are known to harass most SMEs in collecting taxes and levies, which are extra burdens to businesses' overheads.

Bello (2018) argued multiple taxes negatively affect business profitability. Favorable policies such as tax waivers can also help in encouraging and promoting micro, small, and medium enterprises' performance, growth, and productivity (Tahir & Inuwa, 2019). The findings of a study on factors affecting MSME performance in Borno state, Nigeria explained that multiple taxation is a secondary factor affecting MSME after insecurity and the need for infrastructure upgrades, especially power supply (Tabet & Onyeukwu, 2019). Most SME owners agree that multiple taxations affect the financial performance of their businesses; they also agreed that disproportionate multiple taxation impacts the budgetary and planning performance of SMEs (Tabet & Onyeukwu, 2019).

The tax incentive is any special tax treatment that is particularly beneficial for enterprises within the SME spectrum, granting preferential treatment to certain activities and investments (Bergner, Bräutigam, Evers, & Spengel, 2017). Aribaba, Oladele, Ahmodu and Yusuff (2019) claimed multiple taxation portends great danger to the sustainability of entrepreneurship if not tackled head-on, while tax rate and tax incentives have a positive influence on the sustainability of SMEs.

Lack of access to the latest technology. Small and medium enterprises may lack access to technology, which is a big challenge in developing growth strategies. The reasons for these issues are lack of knowledge of technology, lack of research and development (R&D), and lack of capital to invest in R&D for selecting the appropriate technology (Al Bulushi & Bagum, 2017). While technology can automate several operational business activities, many SMEs continue to perform these activities manually. It often makes the businesses, and their founders, burn out sooner than what was envisioned originally. Manual operation also leads to loss of efficiency, reduction in capacity to scale production of goods and services, and a decrease in the capacity to gain market share.

The relationship between technological innovation (product and process) and SME performance (measured as firms' turnover) has a significant impact on SMEs' performance at a 10% level of significance (Akinwale, Adepoju, & Olumu, 2017). Small business owners often, because of cost of necessary technology, continue to operate manually or utilize old, outdated, and antiquated technology. There are also technologies too expensive to deploy in Nigeria because they are developed in other parts of the world and too costly to set up due to logistics costs and the lack of local capacity to install and support them.

Vast amount of human and monetary resources and information are a prerequisite for driving innovation. Information and resources are important in pursuing innovation, and deficiency in the required information and resources to sustain innovation increases

the likelihood of disappointment, resulting in a lack of SME sustainability (Salisu, Aslam, Iqbal, & Hameed, 2019).

The high rate of corruption. Corruption is endemic in the government of Nigeria, especially in the agencies that have the role of helping SMEs. Crime has eroded the trust that the people had in the government, and it prevents the success of SMEs. Corruption is a threat to the long-term development of Nigeria as a country and prevents SMEs from being sustainable (Page & Okeke, 2019). Corruption has exacerbated mismanagement because of massive policy failures. The policies that have been put in place to improve the business environment do not have the expected impact. The SMEs in Nigeria are also affected by the corruption that disrupts their success. Crime hurts the assistance the government provides to the firms operating in Nigeria, which negatively affects economic growth (Obamuyi & Olayiwola, 2019).

Amodu (2017) noted the presence of an assumption that there is enough legislation to combat corruption in the Nigerian business community. Such legislation would challenge irresponsibility from corporations and regulators' minimal enforcement of the law. Instead, the legislation is weak and foreign principles faultily transplanted as well as disparities in policy between the regulatory provisions and subsidiary laws. The primary argument involved the undermining of poor legislation by "fallacious legal transplantation" (Amodu, 2017, p. 105).

Sustainable Strategies that can be applied by Small and Medium Enterprises

Many scholars have emphasized the need for sustainable management in SMEs. Feniser et al. (2017) brought up the idea of using eco-innovative levels. The importance

of innovation and innovation management would make SMEs sustainable by meeting the needs of their clients on time. Sustainability is a direction also useful in innovation where economic, social, and environmental responsibilities are integrated in the management of innovation. Firms need to understand what sustainability means to their businesses to enable them to apply it successfully (Feniser et al., 2017). There are two things sustainability in business addresses, namely the effect that the business has on the environment and the effect that the business has on society. The role of a sustainable business strategy is to have a positive impact on both. When companies fail to focus on sustainability, some form of harm will result such as environmental degradation, social injustice, and inequality (Feniser et al., 2017). Engert, Rauter, and Baumgartner (2016) addressed the integration of corporate sustainability into the strategic management of various firms in the industry, the need for the firms to ensure that there is a strategic approach as part of the business strategy and process. Baumgartner and Rauter (2017) defined sustainable development as an economic, environmental, and social development to meet present needs but not pose a threat to future generations. Therefore, sustainability takes care of both the present and the future to safeguard resources, meeting both present and future needs.

Roome and Louche (2016) noted an organization can create new business models that ensure sustainability in the workplace. For these models to be successful, the businesses should be sustainable to the extent that they are beneficial to both business owners and society in general. Unsustainable business models could be discouraged in favor of sustainable ones. The firm must transform the whole business logic to achieve

sustainability. A business model for sustainability (BMS) will create value for the natural environment as well as various stakeholders. Understanding the BMS can address the broad perspective of sustainability in addition to incorporating the natural environment as an important element (Abdelkafi & Täuscher, 2016). The formation of sustainable business models is important in the various sustainable tasks they carry out in the organization to ensure genuine sustainability.

The leader of a business organization is tasked with setting the direction of the operation of a successful business model and influencing the strategies and policies of the organization (Ahmed & Abdullahi, 2017). The leader also manages the change process to avoid resistance to change for a sustainable organization (Hussain et al., 2018). The sustainability of an organization largely depends on the organization's leader, a leader with the mindset to achieve sustainable development goals (SDGs).

Scheyvens, Banks, and Hughes (2016) suggested that to ensure the sustainability of a business, the business needs to consider SDGs to improve the lives of the people in society. Small and medium enterprise owners should, therefore, come up with effective business models that will ensure success in whatever they do as a way of focusing on sustainability since it is clear such models put in place by business leaders can be sustainable in the long run. Sustainability exists both for the needs of the present generation and the needs of the generations to come by ensuring that the environment is well protected for the benefit of society in general. It is also important to align the goals of the company with SDGs to ensure the given business is beneficial to society (Abdelkafi & Täuscher, 2016; Scheyvens et al., 2016).

Additionally, Hahn, Figge, Aragón-Correa, and Sharma (2016) mentioned that corporate sustainability is a legitimate research topic because it has a great influence on business operations, society, and the environment. Small and medium enterprises that operate in Nigeria can use the knowledge on how the concept of sustainability has been applied in several businesses in other countries and markets to get an insight into what they can do to ensure their own workplace sustainability. Al-Tit, Omri, and Euchí (2016) identified four success factors in Saudi Arabia, which are (a) individual factors, (b) management factors, (c) business support, and (d) capital availability. These indicators were selected by conducting exploratory factor analysis. The study demonstrated that SMEs have a greater opportunity of being sustainable beyond 5 years if they have access to the required financing at the right time. Also, entrepreneurial characteristics of the founder such as age, skills, and personal financial needs are also critical to success of SMEs.

Human, financial, and social capital is also important to sustainability of businesses. The role of human capital cannot be overemphasized, for even technology and artificial intelligence must be driven by competent personnel who understand business operations (Jones, 2018). A good business relationship between the organization and the host country is also critical. Some business operations can be hampered or totally halted if good relationships are not maintained with the host community. It is essential that the business owner keep all stakeholders happy to have smooth business operations, leading it to long-term sustainability (Prasadh, 2018; Yung & Lee, 2018).

Font, Garay, and Jones (2016) emphasized that sustainability motivations are essential for success. It is important to note the fact that motivation is important if anyone has to make accomplishments. Sustainability gives individuals or companies the willingness to do something to improve operations. The best way to ensure sustainability in the SMEs in Nigeria is by looking for motivating factors. While considering a sustainability strategy that gives value to the environment and the society, the government also has the responsibility of motivating SME owners instead of pressuring them for the sustainable growth of their businesses (Masocha & Fatoki, 2018).

A sustainable strategy should give value to the environment, society, and the organization. One that does not positively impact the bottom line of the organization is not sustainable; therefore, one that does should be holistic in considering the bottom line and the profitability of the organization, adding economic value to motivate the business owner and organizational management (Lee & Hu, 2018). Font et al. (2016) mentioned that the firms driven by value and individual lifestyles tend to be more sustainable compared to commercially oriented firms. The best way to ensure sustainability in SMEs is to make them focus on individual lifestyles and wellbeing as opposed to focusing on profits and the amount of revenue (Font et al., 2016). The firms that focus on high profits tend to do everything to get them, and some of the measures they put in place may be detrimental to the lives of the people in society as well as the environment (Font et al., 2016).

Factors Affecting Sustainability

Sustainability entrepreneurship is an entrepreneurial process that exploits opportunities in an innovative way not only for economic gains, but also as equally important goals for social equity, environmental quality, and cultural preservation (Koe et al., 2015). Sustainability of SMEs now has serious attention from social entrepreneurship and environmental management (Sarango-Lalangui, Santons & Hormiga, 2018).

According to the study, Imran, Salisu, Aslam, Iqbal, and Hameed (2019) argued that in the era of industrial revolution 4.0 (IR 4.0), sustainability is a serious challenge of contemporary SMEs. Through their survey, they found that environmental and social responsibilities are equally important factors affecting sustainability.

Environmental factors. Hosseininia and Ramezani (2016) claimed environmental factors that include recycling and the future of the earth affect the sustainability of SMEs. However, securing shareholder value remains the overarching tenet in profit organizations. There are more challenges in the business environment. The need for SMEs to respond reactively to emerging and pressing stakeholder expectations and demands is one of the added challenges (Saunders et al., 2015). Even though the operational performance of SMEs affects the possibility of enjoying business turnover and long-term business relationships with customers, specific environmental and social dimensions of performance appear to affect business turnover negatively (Malesios et al., 2018). SMEs in the Pakistani leather industry perceive environmental sustainability as social and moral responsibilities towards their stakeholders and the natural environment (Wahga, Blundel, & Schaefer, 2017).

Implementing green and lean manufacturing practices for SMEs in the manufacturing space is considered a critical success factor for enhancing the environmental and operations performances of SMEs, which results in sustainability. Such implementation also improves their public image as a green-oriented organization and demonstrates environmental stewardship (Gandhi, Thanki, & Thakkar, 2018). Social responsibility along with environmental responsibility contributes significantly through green practices to sustainable business performance (Choongo, 2017; Rekik & Bergeron, 2017). Small and medium enterprises in Pennsylvania indicated they would implement environmentally sustainable practices in their businesses in response to pressure from competitors' implementation of the same, and from other businesses in their immediate geographic area (Hughes & Troy, 2017).

Social factors. Corporate social responsibility is a company's discretionary actions and policies that appear to advance societal well-being beyond its immediate financial interests and legal requirements (Hoi et al., 2018). CSR could be shaped by all organizational activities that contribute to its socially responsible mission (Seivwright & Unsworth, 2016). Small and medium enterprises in the food industry reveal that customer orientation and human resources are social factors that affect the sustainability of SMEs (Hosseininia & Ramezani, 2016). Business organizations need employees and managers with sustainability competencies to drive the competitiveness and sustainability of the organization (Muafi et al., 2017). Corporate social responsibility is a marketing communication tool that SMEs could utilize for marketing campaigns and branding to

communicate to prospective clients about their products and services, safety, social issues, and environment security (Youssef, Leicht, Pellicelli, & Kitchen, 2018).

Corporate social responsibility helps to balance economic priorities and rent-seeking models from the social services provided through SMEs (Wang, Tong, Takeuchi, & George, 2016). Corporate social responsibility practices were also confirmed to have a positive influence on SME competitiveness (Camacho & Fernandez, 2018). Beyond the social responsibilities and philosophical duties of companies and SMEs, correctly tailoring CSR strategies in SMEs is efficient for SME owners in meeting strategic business objectives, whether they be economic, environmental, or social (Zbucea & Pinzaru, 2017).

Cultural factors. Small and medium enterprise owners could explore business sustainability and growth through innovation for economic gains, social equity, environmental quality, and cultural preservation, all at the same time (Koe et al., 2015). The business environment will always take socio-cultural factors into account (Al-Tit et al., 2019). Business capital is the resources entrepreneurs utilize to create business and generate income. The level of entrepreneurial activities and business building in a country are affected by cultural norms, among other factors. Entrepreneurs in both the Czech Republic and Slovakia believe in the family environment motivation to start a business and aid entrepreneurial activities (Cepel, 2019). The business environment in Africa is noted to have a complex web of social-cultural, economic, and technological factors, resulting in challenges for owners of SMEs and business sustainability (Johnson, George, Owoyemi, & Adegboye, 2014).

Socio-cultural factors significantly influence the profitability of SMEs in Kenya, even though there is no significant association between the socio-cultural factors and production/volume/output of SMEs (Mwangemi, Wilson, & Mung'atu, 2017). Furthermore, an entrepreneurial orientation, which is shaped by culture, is associated with the degree of sustainable entrepreneurship as found in Malaysian SMEs from an entrepreneurial bricolage. Conversely, socio-cultural barriers are commonly encountered by SMEs during the time they intend to scale their businesses internationally, which includes the use of different social approaches from the market of origin into the new market (Mendy & Rahman, 2019).

Transition

Section 1 indicated the problems found with the sustainability of SMEs; it revealed that most SMEs find it difficult to survive beyond 5 years. The review of literature shows that SME owners could embrace sustainability strategies to sustain their businesses beyond this period. The sustainability strategies involve the incorporation of economic, social, and environmental values in the operation of the organization. The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies SME owners used to sustain their business beyond 5 years. The findings of this study could contribute to SME owners in Nigeria adopting sustainability strategies to expand the life of their businesses.

Section 2 indicated the description of the roles of the researchers, the criteria for the participants, the choice of research methodology, and the design of the study. Section 2 described the population and sampling of the study. It enumerated the ethical components

of the research and their implication in the study. The end of the section included the reliability and validity of the study and a summary of the section.

Section 2: The Project

Small and medium enterprises are business organizations with a limited number of employees and capital that contributes to the growth and development of a country (Fatoki, 2018). The focus of this study was on unveiling the sustainability strategies that SME owners can use to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years. I used a qualitative research method, which enabled the collection of data from the participants through interviews. The results from the study may be useful for SME entrepreneurs to sustain their business beyond 5 years and create social value in the community. This section includes discussion on the purpose, the role of the researcher, the participants, research design and methods, and data reliability and validity.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore what strategies SME owners used to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years. The targeted population comprised of three owners of SMEs in southwest Nigeria who had successfully managed their businesses for over 5 years. This research may have implications for positive social change by creating awareness for SME owners on how to sustain their businesses, which can ultimately affect the economy of Nigeria. An effect of such awareness might lead to increase in government revenue through tax generation. The creation of jobs to reduce the unemployment rate, reduction of the poverty level, and improvement of the standard of living in Western Nigeria are other potential positive social changes that may emerge from awareness of business sustainability.

Role of the Researcher

As the researcher for a case study, I assumed the role of a data collection instrument. Approaching participants and building a relationship with them to gain their trust is part of the role of being such an instrument (Saunders et al., 2015). I collected data from the participants using semistructured interviews with open-ended questions until I reached data saturation, which occurs when no new words emanate from the interviews (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). I sent a sample of the interview questions and the research question with an invitation letter to the participants for awareness of the interview questions that were used in the study and to get familiar with the phenomenon (see Appendix A). I followed the interview protocol (see Appendix B) to avoid any form of bias for the reliability of the study (see Noman, Awang Hashim, & Shaik Abdullah, 2018). Using interview protocol can guide the researcher on the steps to follow to avoid personal bias during data collection and to collect comprehensive data within the time allocated (Yeong, Rosnah, Hassim, & Isa, 2018). I also recorded the responses from the participants and took notes during each interview.

I run a small-sized business, and I see how SMEs struggle with the sustainability of their businesses before their fifth anniversary. To mitigate bias, I selected participants who are not in the same industry as I am. In qualitative research, a researcher interacts with the participant to collect data for the study (Moser, & Korstjens, 2018). I communicated with the participants on phone and by e-mail to prepare them for the interviews.

As a researcher, it was also my role to seek the consent of the participants for the study, protect their identity, and ensure confidentiality (see LeCroix, Goodrum, Hufstetler, & Armistead, 2017; Surmiak, 2018). According to the Belmont Report, the researcher should seek the consent of the participants, maintain their confidentiality, and respect them (Van den Hoonaard, 2018). I requested participants to sign a consent form by responding to the mail with “I consent.” The respondents who accepted to participate in the study signed the consent form, which made them eligible to participate. I also accorded the participants their due respect and make them comfortable during the interview sessions. For the participants to remain anonymous, I represented them by using an alphanumeric symbol P1, P2, and P3. I informed the participants that all the information they provided would remain confidential and that they are at liberty to withdraw from the study at any time.

To avoid bias and to view data through a personal lens, I used my interview questions and follow the interview protocol to ensure that I follow the steps. I also rehearsed the interview questions to get used to them and comported myself during the interview sessions. To avoid bias, I also took notes during the interview session and avoid controlling the participants’ reactions. The interview was a semistructured one supported by archival documents. The interview questions guided each semistructured interview and allow me to probe the participants to get more information on the phenomenon. Mitigating bias and engaging in judgment are essential steps in studying a business phenomenon (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013). To mitigate error and bias, I based my judgment and analysis only on evidence gathered on the phenomenon. I transcribed the data

collected and conducted member checking. I also use NVivo software for the analysis process to present bias-free results.

An interview protocol is pertinent in qualitative research. In qualitative research, the researcher is an instrument of data collection. The researcher also has a relationship with the topic under study, which points out that the researcher could be biased during data collection. Using interview protocol can guide the researcher on the steps to follow to avoid personal bias during data collection and to collect comprehensive data within the time allocated (Yeong, Rosnah, Hassim, & Isa, 2018). According to the interview protocol, I used the interview questions and follow-up questions during the data collection stage until I reach data saturation on the phenomenon.

Participants

In a qualitative study, participants are those who are willing to participate in the study after the researcher has explained what the research entails, which is to gather data that gives an in-depth understanding of the participants' experiences (Yin, 2018). I selected my participants by checking public domain to get SMEs within the southwest part of the country with an excellent business performance for more than 5 years. Using purposeful criteria, from the list I selected the participants based on the following criteria: (a) SME owners who manage a business, (b) who have between 10 and 199 employees, (c) whose enterprise has been in existence for more than 5 years, (d) who understand the phenomenon under study, and (e) are available during the data collection period. There are some uncertainties in a qualitative study (Moore, Blom, Whitehouse, & Gooberman-Hill, 2017), but for the purpose of uncertainty on the acceptance of the participants, I

invited more prospective participants than I needed for the study and used these criteria to ensure that I gather relevant data for the purpose of the study.

I obtained institutional review board (IRB) approval for data collection, after which I contacted the selected participants by e-mail. Researchers need to open up to the participants on what the research entails to earn the trust and support of the participants (Kiernan, Opezzo, Resnicow, & Alexander, 2018). First, I sent an e-mail invitation with the interview protocol and consent form to potential participants explaining the study, the research method, and the data collection process. I also explained the reasons I selected them as participants in the study. I requested that they send me their telephone numbers if they were willing to participate in the study and requested, they consent by responding to the e-mail. Participants must show a willingness to take part in research (Nolan, Hendricks, & Towell, 2015). I considered those who showed their willingness to participate. I followed up with the eligible participants to get an appointment for the interview.

Further, a working relationship with the participants is imperative to the success of qualitative research (Råheim et al., 2016). As a small enterprise owner, I developed a working relationship with the participant by sending an email and making a call to discuss related issues on SMEs. I informed the participants of their ability to withdraw from the study at any time. I also informed them that their identity is protected, and the data will be confidential.

Research Method and Design

The purpose of this study was to answer the research question of what sustainability strategies are used by SME owners to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years. To get to the root of this phenomenon, I selected a qualitative research method, which involves the interpretation of subjective data that gives an in-depth understanding of the participant's experiences and actions (Mohajan, 2018).

Research Method

The three types of research methods are quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods (Saunders et al., 2015). The type of method used depends on the research problem (Chu & Ke, 2017). A qualitative method is a method that produces findings without any statistical analysis of the data collected. It is a valuable tool used to answer complex *how* and *why* questions to get an in-depth understanding of the factors leading to the actions or inactions of the participants (Hamiton, & Finley, 2019). In conducting a qualitative research study, the researcher becomes aware the circumstances underlying the behavior of the participants during the semistructured interviews guided by some open-ended interview questions. Qualitative research enables the researcher to collect data from more than one source to form data triangulation. Data could be collected from the interviews, documents, and archives to give information related to the phenomenon. I selected the qualitative research method to explore sustainability strategies SME owners used in sustaining their businesses beyond 5 years.

A researcher uses a quantitative method to find out the cause and effect among variables using a statistical structure to support the validity of the data and interpret the

findings (Esfandiari et al., 2018; Rahman, 2016). A quantitative method becomes suitable when the researcher wants to analyze the relationship between dependent and independent variables. The purpose of this study was to explore the sustainability strategies SME owners used in sustaining their businesses beyond 5 years rather than finding out the relationship between variables using statistical measures. Therefore, the quantitative method is not suitable for this study.

A researcher could use a mixed-method in situations in which they want to adopt both quantitative and qualitative methods for their studies (Molina-Azorin, 2016; Saunders et al., 2015). Here the researchers assumed a hypothesis and compared the relationship between the dependent and independent variables. In the same study, the researcher also explores the reason behind the phenomenon to gain an in-depth interpretation of the action or inaction of the participants (Kelley-Quon, 2018). A mixed method combines the analysis of numerical data and the interpretation of subjective data (Leppink, 2017). I chose qualitative method because I intended to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon by exploring the data that I gathered from the participants' experiences and behaviors.

Research Design

Qualitative research designs include case study, ethnography, and phenomenological design (Gelling, 2015). A case study design can be a single case design, where the researcher works with a single participant or a multiple case study, which involves more than one participant in the study (Yin, 2018). I used a qualitative

multiple case study to probe through open-ended questions and gathered data that would give a holistic view of the phenomenon (Marshall & Rossman, 2015).

An ethnographical qualitative research design involves the interpretation of a given culture or subculture, studying cultural group beliefs and interactions (Gergen & Gergen, 2018). In this study, I did not intend to study a given culture; therefore, an ethnographical design was not suitable for the study. A phenomenological research design is another form of qualitative research design to interpret participants' lived experiences. I did not want to interpret participants' lived experience, making the research design unsuitable for my study. In this study, I wanted to explore and gain an in-depth understanding of the sustainability strategies participants used in sustaining their businesses beyond 5 years with the use of open-ended semistructured interview questions.

I collected data by interviewing the participants and used six interview questions to explore the phenomenon. I carried out member checking after the interviews to ensure that I properly interpreted the participants and that no new words emerge. If new words emerged during member checking, I would have selected another participant and continue the interview until I reached data saturation. However, no new data emerge after the third interview.

Population and Sampling

Population and sampling in a qualitative study involve requirements for participants. The conceptual framework and the research question guide the selection of the sample (Farrugia, 2019). The sample should represent the population of people or

organizations within the area of study (Gentles & Vilches, 2017) who would answer the research question. This ensures the quality and richness of the data. The sample selection was to generate quality data rather than the volume that might not give the required quality of data needed for the study.

Sampling is critical in a qualitative study. Sampling is not only about the size of the sample. It is more importantly about the richness of the data and the integrity of the study (Roy, Zvonkovic, Goldberg, Sharp, & LaRossa, 2015). I used purposeful sampling for this study to enable the collection of data from ready participants who would answer the research question (Farrugia, 2019). I used a purposeful sample to get quality and data from the participant using a suitable process for a qualitative study (Bryman & Bell, 2015), which is the most suitable sampling for the nature of my study that enabled me to collect in-depth data for analysis to answer the research question (Farrugia, 2019). I based the selection of the participant on the qualities of the participants and the knowledge of the study and the research question, which was what sustainability strategies SME owners used to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years.

The size of the sample is also part of the sampling of participants. The sample size should give data saturation, meaning no new data or information from the participants (Tran, Porcher, Falissard, & Ravaud, 2016). I planned to interview three participants for the study; however, I selected two more participants to be on standby. I planned to interview them if I did not reach data saturation at the end of the third participant's interview. However, I reached data saturation at the end of the third interview.

Based on the purposeful sampling method that I used in this study, I selected three SME owners in southwest Nigeria. These are people that have been in SME for more than 5 years and have sustained their businesses beyond 5 years. They are also people who understand what sustainability strategies mean and have applied it in their enterprises. I selected SME owners from different industries so that I could gather quality data. Selecting participants allowed me to understand if the industry affects adopted sustainability strategies and to have rich data on SME owners' sustainability strategies across various industries. I used semistructured interviews to collect data from the participants; using purposeful sampling allowed me to interact with the participants, get subjective data of their experiences and implementation, and give meaning to it (Mohajan, 2018).

Ethical Research

The IRB ensures compliance of all research to the University ethical standard and U.S. federal regulations (Walden University, 2019). Oye, Sorensen, and Glasdam (2016) noted the IRB gives guidelines and permission to do research based on the principles and guidelines of research ethics, as stated by international bodies. Qualitative research requires a researcher to seek the consent of the participants, support it with the consent form, and give the form to the prospective study participants. Qualitative research participants are usually vulnerable, for they might be exposing themselves to the risk of divulging personal issues during the interview (Peter, 2015). It is ethical for a researcher to seek the consent of the participants properly and inform them of their right to participate, decline, or even withdraw from the study if they change their mind in the

course of the research. I gave no incentive to the participants of the proposed study so that they can be free to make any decision on participating or otherwise in the study.

I contacted the selected participants and informed them of the purpose of the study and the reasons I have selected them as participants. In qualitative research, the researcher sends an informed consent form to the participants (Ditai et al., 2018). The consent form contains the participants' right to privacy that protects their identities and personal information (Kaye et al., 2015). I gave them the consent form to fill out and sign to indicate their willingness to voluntarily participate in the study (see Appendix B).

I obtained my IRB approval number 07-10-20-0825408 before I started data collection, and I assured the participants of the protection of their identities in the study. I identified the participants with the nomenclature P1, P2, and P3, as the three small business owners are participating in the study, so their identities remained confidential. I saved the data collected from the participants in an external drive with a password and kept the external drive in a safe with a lock, and it will be in the safe for 5 years to protect their confidentiality of the participants. After 5 years, I will delete the data.

Data Collection Instruments

I was the primary data collection instrument for the qualitative multiple case study. A qualitative research involves collection of data through a semistructured interview with open ended questions (Saunders et al., 2015). It involves the researcher who is the interviewer and the participant, who is the interviewee. I collected data through semistructured interview and used the archival record of the participants financial statements, which involves the cash flow, income statement and the balance

sheet (Yin, 2018). Other methods of data collection are documentation, daily and monthly records.

This study involved two primary sources, the interviewing of the participants and the business documents of the participants. The semistructured interview involved a preset interview question prepared in a systematic and consistent manner to cover the related area of study and to enable elaborate responses from the participants (Yin, 2018). To enhance the reliability of the study, I used the preset interview questions (see Appendix A), also I designed and followed an interview protocol (see Appendix B) during the interview.

I interviewed the participants using the preset interview questions, during the interview I made some recording and took notes to capture all the responses of the participants. Member checking verifies the accuracy of data after data collection from the participants (Naidu & Prose, 2018), to ensure the reliability of the study, I conducted member checking to confirm the interpretation of the participant responses.

Data Collection Techniques

In a qualitative multiple case study, data collection comes through interviews of the participants, site visits, archival records, and recording. The interviews can be structured, unstructured or semistructured, and for the present study, I used semistructured interviews. It is the type of interview with preset questions called interview questions that guide the researcher during the data collection process. Semistructured interviews enable the researcher to collect in-depth data based on each participant's experiences (Yin, 2018). Heath, Williamson, Williams, and Harcourt (2018)

noted there are different options to conduct interviews, which can be (a) face to face, (b) online, or (d) by email. For this study, I had an online teleconferencing with the participants. The participants did not allow face to face interview because of COVID-19.

The semistructured interview has advantages and disadvantages. It is of advantage to the study because it enables an in-depth interview of the participants. Interview questions are used in a semistructured interview to allow open-ended questions, which help to avoid bias and strengthen the quality of the study. In a semistructured interview, an open-ended question helps to capture detailed usable descriptive data of the phenomenon (Morse, 2015; Young et al., 2016). A semistructured interview has a disadvantage because it takes commitment and concentration to list out interview questions that are for data collection to answer the research question on the phenomenon. The questions are carefully selected to be useful in the collection of data and it can be time-consuming (Morse, 2015; Young et al., 2016). To overcome this disadvantage, I started early, followed the interview protocol, took time to review the research questions and carefully listed them for the study.

Another disadvantage of a semistructured interview is researcher bias during notetaking and the interpretation of the data. The researcher could be biased having an opinion in mind on the phenomenon. Such opinions could cause bias when taking notes during the interview, which would affect the interpretation of the data. To militate against bias, I conducted member checking with the participant to ensure the validity and accuracy of the data (Amankwaa, 2016; Naidu & Prose, 2018).

To ensure the reliability of the study, I conducted data triangulation by checking other records and documents of the organization and compared with the data collected during the interview to confirm these data and ensure data saturation (Flick, Hirsland, & Hans, 2019). Data saturation is the point in research where the study does not generate new words or themes from the data; it an exhaustive point in data collection (Tran, Porcher, Falissard, & Ravaud, 2016).

Data Organization Technique

During the data collection process, I collected data for the multiple case study through interviews and archival records of the participants. From the interviews, first, I transcribed the online semistructured interviews using NVivo software. Second, I used my reflexive journal in which I kept notes before, during, and after the interview process. The archival documents of the participants during the interviews is next, I requested that the participants give me time to collect data from the recordings to record in my notes for triangulation and member checking. After transcription, I went back to the participants to ensure that I properly transcribed all they said during the interviews with no loss of meaning. A good data management is necessary for file processes (Yin, 2018). I named data collected from primary and secondary sources separately and code them anonymously by using P1, P2, and P3, I later save them on Microsoft Excel for ease of analysis.

After the data were collected and analyzed, I stored the data according to IRB specification, I kept the electronic ones on a password-protected flash drive and the notes and reflexive journals in a locked file safe for 5 years to maintain participant

confidentiality. All records of the study will be deleted or destroyed at the end of the 5 years.

Data Analysis

At the conclusion of each interview, I transcribed them within 48 hours. I noted my impressions of the interview process as well as the pre and post interview periods carefully in the reflexive journal. I kept it in a computer folder and file on Microsoft word and excel for summaries and impressions of the notes as well as for an audit trail.

Triangulation, or gathering data from more than semistructured interviews in the form of journals and notes, is worthwhile for researchers to ensure indepth findings (Yin, 2018).

Researchers use audit trails to show the connection of information, results, analyses, and conclusions to the raw data and to enhance the study's confirmability (Bonello & Meehan, 2019; Cutcliffe & Mckenna, 2004; Shosha, 2012).

By being able to examine an audit trail, readers of scholarly research can not only follow the author's logic but can also decide if the findings of the study can be used reliably for future studies (Carcary, 2009). In addition to the reflexive journal, I noted my observations by hand of the general effect of the participants including such audibly apparent thing as voice inflection. Denham and Onwuegbuzie (2013) examined a multitude of articles over the years in a qualitative journal for 22 years and found just 24% of the articles mentioned nonverbal observations, ranging from a brief mention to much interpretation and detail. I used such observations along with the reflexive journal to result in indepth triangulation in the case studies. Denham and Onwuegbuzie (2013) discovered 11 different functions of nonverbal observations including discovery,

clarification, corroboration, and verification, among others. Goldstein (2017) described a reflexive journal used in a qualitative study on women's experiences with a medical diagnosis and treatment. The researcher started writing immediately after interviewing participants and noted the researcher's own thoughts about the participants and information collected as well as the participants' experiences developmentally, interpersonal challenges with clinicians, patterns of relationships, and so on. The researcher, in the reflexive notes especially focused on mistakes and emotions experienced personally.

After the transcripts were completed, I read through them multiple times and compare them to my observations and reflexive journal. At that point, I added notes at the end of each transcript to present a more complete picture of each participant. Babchuk (2019) noted that qualitative researchers describe their research in depth when they use participant observations and other sources to better generate patterns and explain their explorations in depth. Babchuk discovered 10 steps in data analysis that extend to the conclusions: (a) putting together the data to analyze; (b) becoming familiar again with the data; (c) starting the coding process; (d) making categories and giving them codes; (e) finding themes among the categories; (f) using validation strategies; (g) interpreting findings and reporting them, which I did in Section 3, and also in that section; (h) representing the findings graphically as in tables and figures; (i) going back to the literature to corroborate findings; and (j) detailing the limitations of the study and making suggestions for future research. Belotto (2018) noted that few authors describe in

sufficient detail how they arrived at their findings. I avoided that issue by describing the data analysis process in sufficient detail to make the study replicable.

Aldahdouh (2018) stressed the importance of investigating differences and similarities among sequential data. Aldahdouh suggested making a hierarchy of relationships among the categories for purposes of recoding. To ensure an indepth data analysis stage, I went over the codes several times in the case more codes arise, which will in turn lead to themes. I organized my data by highlighting both in word transcript files and highlighting my reflexive journal with physical highlighters. After I re-read the highlighted data, I used Nvivo software to code, verify, and determine themes to identify their meaning and frequencies, which I entered into tables.

Reliability and Validity

In qualitative research, reliability and validity are based in trustworthiness (Belotto, 2018). Qualitative researchers are often criticized for the perceived lack of robustness in qualitative studies, the challenge then is to enhance a study's dimensionality and richness by finding patterns and making sense of the words generated by the data (Leung, 2015). To enhance trustworthiness, which gives strength to the study, researchers can create protocol guides among other steps such as audit trails and member checking (Amankwaa, 2016). Cypress (2017) argued that rigor should be used as a term instead of trustworthiness because rigor can be built into the study from the time participants are first contacted with constant reiteration and reassessment throughout the process rather than during the data analysis stage. I took various steps to ensure the reliability and validity of the proposed study.

Reliability

One of the most important elements of qualitative reliability is dependability as well as transferability, credibility, and confirmability, which not only enhance the trustworthiness of a study but also help researchers fully understand what they are doing (Anney, 2014). The research processes should be repeatable, other research should be able to use the same procedure of the study and come out with the same findings. To enhance the dependability of my study, I ensured I reached data saturation, where nothing new word comes from the participants (Galvin, 2015).

I enhanced the reliability through member checking. Member checking requires a researcher to share with the participants the interpretation of the data, to ensure that I properly interpreted the data that I collected (Naidu & Prose, 2018). I conducted member checking with all the participants by asking them whether the transcripts reflect accurately what they said during the interview. Member checking can also enhance *confirmability* in that the findings should be confirmed by the participants. During the interviews, I asked probing questions when the participants did not answer in sufficient detail. Confirmability was also aided by the reflexive journals. Either are an important element of triangulation or enhancing the in-depth semistructured interviews with more data (Bonello & Meehan, 2019; Yin, 2018).

Validity

Qualitative validity involves the credibility, confirmability, and transferability of the study's findings. One way to ensure *credibility* is the member checking process. One way to conduct a member check is to match the

data generated by the participants in the transcripts is precisely what they related (Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, & Walter, 2016). I called each of the participants when their transcripts were completed to cross check for any errors and inaccuracies. I ensured any distortions or misinterpretations are caught so that I can highlight and correct them. When I call the participants after I have interviewed them, I read through the transcripts meticulously not only to catch errors but also to ask if the tone is a true reflection of their experiences and perspectives (Birt et al., 2016). I also reviewed my observation notes to see what can be added to the data analysis.

To aid in *transferability*, which is related to external validity (Morse, 2015), I complied carefully with qualitative data collection and analysis recorded in my triangulated observation notes and reflexive journal. Marshall and Rossman (2016) noted that triangulation enhance the validity of a research study, collection of data from different sources for analysis ensure the validity of the study. Transferability is how well the findings can be transferred to another scholarly research and how well they can be duplicated (Mosalanejad, Dastpak, Abdollahifard, & Pendar, 2018). Although qualitative studies are not generalized and explicitly transferable, the audit trail I kept, helped to make my study less difficult to understand than if all the data came solely from semistructured interviews and the participants' business records for document review.

Transition and Summary

Section 2 described the role of the researcher, the criteria for the participants, the choice of research methodology; the reason researchers do not use other methods, and the

design of the study. It also described the population and sampling of the study and enumerated the ethical components of the research and their implication in the study. The last heading includes the reliability and validity of the study and explains the elements of trustworthiness: dependability, credibility, transferability, and confirmability.

Section 3 indicated the data analysis of the data collected and analyzed from the semistructured interviews with the three SME owners in the southwest region of Nigeria. It included a discussion of the data results in combination with the literature review information provided in Section 1 in addition to more studies to present a more cohesive conclusion. The section was closed with the discussion of the findings and recommendations for future research.

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implication for Change

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative, multiple case study was to explore what strategies SME owners use to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years. SME owners set up a business to making profits and growing their businesses. In the process, they create jobs, giving a social value to families and homes. The government also gets revenue from the taxes SME owners pay, developing the economy (Albrecht et al., 2017). However, many SME owners cannot sustain their business beyond 5 years. This challenge prompted me to study how SMEs could sustain their business in that time. To explore the strategies SME owners used to sustain their businesses, I conducted semistructured interviews with three SME owners in southwest Nigeria from different industries whose businesses have survived 5 years. Analyzing the data collected from the interviews and the secondary data gathered from SME owners' documents helped me find the answer to the research question and generate findings.

Section 3 includes the presentation of findings or the themes generated from the study: good leadership and entrepreneurial skills, good financial management practices, employee motivation/positive work environment, fostering customer satisfaction/loyalty; enabling the health business community in line with SDGs, maintaining good long term relationships with stakeholders, and innovation and innovation management. This section also includes application to professional practice, implications for social change, recommendations for action, recommendations for further study, reflections, and study conclusions.

Presentation of Findings

This study was designed to determine the strategies SME owners used in sustaining their businesses beyond 5 years. I conducted qualitative research by using a case study research design to explore the sustainability strategies used by three southwestern Nigerian SME owners who sustained their businesses in that time. These SME owners were selected from different industries so that I could gather quality data from these participants. Data were gathered by interviewing the participants, and I used six interview questions to explore the phenomenon.

When I started data collection, I assured the participants that I would protect their identities in the study. This study excluded the participants' personal information, and this study does not include any descriptive demographic information. Participants' information (i.e., characteristics) were recorded in a Microsoft Word document on an external drive with a password and kept secured in a personal safe. To ensure confidentiality, I used the codes P1, P2, and P3 to denote the participants. I also used alphanumeric designators to identify the company documents that I got from the participants to substantiate their responses during the interview. For the participants' confidentiality, the alphanumeric designators do not appear in this document.

I used the semistructured interviews to collect data from the participants, which allowed me to interact with them, get subjective data about their experiences and implementation, and give meaning to the data (Mohajan, 2018). I asked the three SME owners six open-ended interview questions to gain insights into their sustainable strategies. I stopped the interviews and data gathering when data saturation occurred.

I used NVivo 11 software to code, verify, and determine themes from the interview transcripts. This helped identify the meaning and frequencies of emerging themes and connect the gathered information to generate conclusions (Bonello & Meehan, 2019). To validate my data, I used member checking by calling each of the participants to check for errors and inaccuracies. I corrected all distortions or misinterpretations. I cross-examined my recorded transcripts with my triangulated observation notes and reflexive journal. I analyzed the emergent themes to yield the sustainability strategies of the SMEs, which answered the main research question. These sustainability strategies resulted from a wide-ranging study of the emergent themes, theoretical framework, and literature review.

From the results, I developed seven major sustainability themes for SMEs. These themes already reside in the literature I reviewed, which are as follows: (a) good leadership/entrepreneurship skills, (b) decency in financial management, (c) promotion of good working environment and employee motivation, (d) fostering customers' satisfaction and loyalty, (e) building a business community in line with SDGs, (f) maintaining good long-term relationships with stakeholders, and (g) constant innovation and innovation management practices (see Table 1).

Table 1

Summary of Sustainability Strategies Adopted by Participant Small and Medium Enterprises

S/N	Sustainability Themes	P1	P2	P3
1	Good leadership & entrepreneurship skills	✓	✓	✓
2	Good financial management practices	✓	✓	✓
3	Positive work environment	✓	✗	✓
4	Fostering customer satisfaction/loyalty	✓	✓	✓
5	Enabling a healthy business community in line with SDGs	✓	✗	✓
6	Maintaining good long-term relationships with stakeholders	✓	✓	✓
7	Innovation and innovation management	✓	✓	✓

Note. ✓: attributed as a sustainable strategy by the participant; ✗: not attributed as a sustainable strategy by the participant

In the following sections, I present the summaries of the responses from the three SME owners under these seven themes. The extracted themes are discussed relative to stakeholder theory, which helped me identify how these strategies were used to address the needs of the stakeholders. I also compare the findings from this study with concepts and ideas from the literature review, and the findings from this study either confirmed existing theories or updated the extant references.

Theme 1: Developing Good Leadership and Entrepreneurship Skills

All other emergent themes rely on the concept of good leadership and entrepreneurship skills. The lack of this skill has significantly impacted the growth and sustainability of SMEs in Nigeria. However, all three participants exhibited adept leadership styles and entrepreneurial abilities. For instance, P1 and P3 showed traits of

transformational and democratic leadership styles that enabled them to constantly interact with their subordinates and employees, which fosters good relationships with their customers. But P2 had a mixture of democratic and a somewhat bureaucratic style of leadership. It is a necessity in P2's business, given the fact that they are involved with finances only (see Table 2).

Table 2

Summary of Leadership Style Adopted by Participant Small and Medium Enterprises

S/N	Leadership style	P1	P2	P3
1	Transformational	✓	✗	✓
2	Democratic	✓	✓	✓
3	Bureaucratic	✗	✓	✗
4	Autocratic	✗	✗	✗

Note. ✓: attributed as a sustainable strategy by the participant; ✗: not attributed as a sustainable strategy by the participant

A business owner or top management of an organization's capacity to manage an organization goes a long way to determine the sustainability of an organization (Prentice & Zeng, 2018). An organization with an abusive leadership approach demotivates the employees and threatens their jobs, which leads to employee turnover and reduced human capital (Abolade, 2018). P1 bridged the skill-set gap by training and retraining employees and seeing to their satisfaction (i.e., trying to maintain their work-life balance). Another attribute P1's SME exhibits is the constant reiteration of company goals to employees in their preferred languages. P2 claimed to ensure that meeting targets and holding onto the relationship between stakeholders by not faltering on agreements has kept the business

going. P3 also claimed to have constantly been doing research (capturing data), getting sponsorships, organizing a funfair for donations, partnering with companies with sustainability goals (e.g., nongovernment organizations), and conducting expositions into the communities. Maintaining work–life balance among employees and rewarding outstanding employees and trainees has also helped them sustain the SME’s ventures.

All three participants also exhibited good entrepreneurship skills (i.e., portrayed a wide array of talents, abilities, and skills in managing their businesses). For instance, P1 has used field experience to develop an organizational structure that involves a management board and several constituted teams (e.g., the human resource department), to see to staff welfare and settle grievances. P3 also claimed to conduct market research continually, for this SME relies largely on routine feedback from both employees and customers. P2 relied on previous work experience, reviews of past mistakes from failed projects, and a high understanding of the market system to sustain their business. The ability to adapt was an added advantage for P2 in sustaining their business: “There were losses in the first year (some customers defaulted); but because there was little capital, we gave out small loans and this helped. We realize the mistakes we made, so we learned from those mistakes in subsequent years.”

Additionally, P3 imported experience from corporate businesses (telecoms) to develop an organizational structure in a fashion model business and constantly conducted research. This SME draws their strength from constant innovation, which stems from identifying the limitations of some of the public activities. For instance, P3 said, “We adopt the circularity model as our mode of sustainability. That is, we upcycle products;

we make our delivery packages (not plastic bags) from wastes (offcuts) we generate.” P3 continued, “You know fabric wastes do not decompose easily, making the government intervention on waste reluctant to accept our fabric wastes (cut-offs).” The SME owner makes use of routine documentation of activities and consultations to experts.

An organization’s sustainability largely depends on the organization’s leader, a leader with the mindset to achieve SDGs. It is also important to align the company’s goal with SDGs to ensure the given business is beneficial to society (Abdelkafi & Täuscher, 2016; Scheyvens et al., 2016). Good entrepreneurship skills are characterized by different performance outcomes that have attracted research from several disciplines including economics, sociology, history, management, psychology, anthropology, and even humanities (Nuvolari et al., 2018).

Theme 2: Good Financial Management Practices

One of SMEs’ major problems is access to a convenient credit facility that ultimately hinders business performance (Ezeagba, 2017). Financial management practices have a significant impact SMEs’ performance (Quartey, Turkson, Abor, & Iddrisu, 2017). The availability of funds can help SMEs acquire appropriate technology and expand their businesses’ operations and scale (Adebiyi et al., 2017).

Having a good financial management practice is one of the significant strengths P1 (60%) and P2 (100%) mentioned, though P3 only mentioned keeping track records and ensuring accounts are balanced to avoid or minimize losses. P1’s strategy was:

We stick to retained profit; getting loans from banks is difficult for SMEs. Business profit is strictly for the business, not for the owner. Every individual was getting a

salary and no profit sharing for 5 years. There is the Working capital financing strategy, i.e., building cooperate integrity such that suppliers can supply items and take 50% of the cost and 2-3 weeks' pay the balance, it runs into millions getting cheap overdrafts. Also, there is the Profitability model; no fund is taken above our profit margin taking cognizance of interest from the loan giver.

P2 relied almost solely on financial discipline: "We have a strict expense management system, based on experience (from the banking industry), lots of companies run into problems from little expenses. We started with just three of us (consciousness of the overhead cost), then later employed professionals." P2 continued, "It was strictly a formal affair, where the CEO is on salary. If the CEO takes any money from the company, it is a loan properly documented (receipts) and must be refunded." P2 stated that they grew the business organically, meaning that business funds were raised from within families and friends (basically on trust). Owners usually set up businesses with a little capital from individual savings along with financial support from family, friends, and acquaintances (van Klyton & Rutabayiro-Ngoga, 2017). The reason is that small business owners have minimal capacity to obtain resources needed for their businesses but not enough resources to manage more employees.

All three participants (P1, P2, and P3) had a structure of routinely reviewing their account books, which enhances the sustainability of the organization. They review their profit and working capitals and retain funds for capital projects. Small and medium enterprises have financial problems because they lack adequate financial management (Ezeagba, 2017). Many SME owners lack proper accounting books and records important

for ensuring the organization accounts for all the money spent. The lack of adequate financial resources leads to hampering SME success. The best way to ensure sustainability in SMEs is to focus on individual lifestyles and well-being instead of on profits and the amount of revenue (Font et al., 2016).

Theme 3: Positive Work Environment

A positive work environment motivates the employees and provides comfort for the employees, which increases employee morale and results in increased employee productivity at work, improved financial performance, and enhanced sustainability of the organization (Ružić & Benazić, 2018). Conversely, low employee motivation hinders the business's success, leading to high employee turnover, low employee engagement, lack of customer loyalty and continuous patronage, and low community support (Reina et al., 2018).

Two of participants had a proper structure for employee motivation, thereby creating a positive work environment. P1 has an operational strategy that ensures adequate workforce and other resources: "We engage in periodic training and retraining of our employees to ensure sustenance and reduced turnover, gain their trust; we have staff working with us for six years, and we are involved in their personal and academic growth." This owner asserted that they engage the human resource unit to read the moods of their employees.

P3 has effective human resource management, and they promote female empowerment:

We train women and youths and domestic workers for empowerment. We are also involved in mentorship, and training on the business side of fashion. Despite that, we train them, we engage them and pay them salaries, increasing their dedication and loyalty to the business. Also, employees and trainees are required to notify (notification period) prior to their termination of the contract with us. This system allows for continual relationships even when they are no longer with us. We also engage in routine feedback from them; we have weekly meetings, to review our activities of the previous week. We call a Village meeting twice a year, where the staff is free to express their feelings as they please. Promoting work-life balance is one of our primary objectives.

Although this strategy comes with challenges that include lack of competent staff, the low intellectual capacity of some staff, the difficulty of align appropriately with company goals, and conflicts among workers, the participants shared some of their resolve. P1 highlighted that they train some employees on the job, which has yielded positive results:

Getting all to align isn't easy, so the managers read their moods and ensure that they are always happy. One of our objectives is that they should earn satisfaction too from us e.g., our accountant had to be trained despite having the qualification degree. Still she couldn't use the tools, so we embarked on training and retraining on the job, and today she is one of the experts on our team.”

P3 outlined a different strategy:

Let me add something important here, there are issues of staff turnover, lackadaisical attitude of the staff, personal differences. These are well taken care

of by our recruitment processes. There is a retaining-ship strategy in place – the recruitment system – first, we start with a one-on-one interview with the potential trainees and later undergo personality tests. We do this by considering their age-groups, and most youth fall on this category. Then there is an interview on the technical aspect; there are certain criteria we look out for in this regard. Another phase of the interview will commence, and this time it will involve panel (board) members. All these steps of the interview allow us to determine if they will comply with our culture (values and goals). Also, we have a probation period (1-3 months). There are penalties and rewards for our staff, staff performance of the month, attendance sheets, end of the year gifts, staff retreat. These are some of the ways of motivating/appraising our employers and trainees. We mostly hire people who are 35 to 50 years because they have a more stable lifestyle. Interest in the venture is another major factor considered when we select for recruitment.

Masocha and Fatoki (2018) stated that the best way to ensure sustainability in SMEs in Nigeria is by looking for motivating factors. While considering a sustainability strategy that gives value to the environment and society, the government also has the responsibility of motivating SME owners instead of pressuring them for the sustainable growth of their businesses.

Theme 4: Fostering Customer Satisfaction and Loyalty

The theme is largely related to the previous theme, which was to employees' satisfaction and empowerment. It was confirmed by Humphrey (2017), who argued that empowering employees and creating teamwork motivates employees who can build good

relationships with customers to earn their loyalty, which positively impacts the profitability of the organization. Customer satisfaction and loyalty is a priority in an organization, leading to increased patronage of customers and marketing of the organization through referrals to their friends, acquaintances, and families (Hosseininia & Ramezani, 2016).

P1, as part of their operational strategy, engages in working capital financing strategy; that is, building cooperate integrity such that suppliers can supply items and take 50% of the cost and in 2-3 weeks' pay the balance. It runs into millions and thereby getting cheap overdrafts which might not be available at commercial banks. This is one strategy that keeps suppliers attached to the SME. This SME also trains their suppliers on how to extract their products properly, teaches them how to avoid hazards on the job, and introduces strategies that could enhance productivity more quickly than their usual practice output. P2 stated that they were able to identify their target customers before servicing them: "Very early into the venture, we had a target of lending to white-collared officers only (e.g., bank, telecoms, oil and gas officers). We selected few SMEs (and we carefully selected those who have tertiary education degrees)." It really helped them maintain a cordial relationship with their customers and helped them create a market for themselves. One of a good entrepreneur's qualities is to have training on customer specificity (Abdul, 2019). P3 on the other hand adopts what they called the circularity model; it allows recycling old models of clothing and expanding or extending their life span, giving it a renewed value. It enables customers to bring in their old clothes like traditional apparel, wedding clothes, etc. and they get them renewed. They campaign with

a slogan “clutter to convert,” or convert one’s old clothes to convenient everyday use.

This innovation has given the SME opportunities to have more customers and gain the trust of their existing ones. P1 and P2 claimed they have remained relevant in the market because of how they interact with their customers. P3 stated, “We keep doing research (capturing data), getting Sponsorship, organizing a funfair for donation, expositions into the communities. We also welcome feedback and communications from employees and customers.”

Theme 5: Building a Good Business Community in line with Government Policies and Sustainable Development Goals

Miller (2016) posited that managers must incorporate CSR to the community and care for the environment. This strategy has shown to influence the organization’s profitability. To a large extent, P1 and P3 have strongly shown their integration into the community, which has strengthened their enterprises. P1 stated, “We keep our customers and the general public close to us through marketing; that is, ensuring people are conscious of our products always, by doing a lot of publicity.” P1 went on: “We also have a project called save the shea initiative aimed at solving the problems of the women that pick the shea nuts in the villages.” P3 claimed to have used campaign strategies such as “clutter to convert,” which involved awareness, consultations and marketing, and integration of SDGs with the concept of “why waste it” (green environment), to incorporate their businesses in their immediate communities.

This SME owner stated, “We have partnered with companies who support and finance SMEs and some NGOs [nongovernment organizations] through SDG campaigns.

We train women, youth, and domestic workers, in empowerment. We are also involved in mentorship, and training on the business side of fashion.” The participant also brands their customers, tagging them as part of those who limit pollution in the environment:

We also have campaigns switch community (green environment), any consumer of upcycled products are branded “switch consumers” or ambassadors of a green environment. We are meeting 10 out of the 17 SDGs, most importantly, building sustainable cities and communities. We weigh the wastes brought in and use it as an index to measure what the society had gotten rid-off by recycling, i.e. what could have ended up in the water bodies or gotten into the ozone layer.

Yung and Lee (2018) have attributed successful businesses to promoting an environmentally friendly operation that shows the concern and recognition of the organization to the community, where an organization runs and gives benefits back to the community. P1 and P2 strategies include their respect for the environment and the people in their communities. With this strategy, they impact their environment positively, adding value to the people and the community.

Theme 6: Maintaining Good Long-term Relationships with Stakeholders

Maintaining long-term relationships with stakeholders is a strategy borne out of other sustainable strategies. Developing and deploying these other strategies enables organizations to create long-term value for key stakeholders: employees, shareholders, customers, governments, and communities (Matzembache, & Meira, 2019). However, an effort to maintain long-standing relationships with stakeholders requires an exceptional business plan properly implemented.

All three participants acknowledged having strategic business plans for maintaining long-term relationships with their stakeholders. For instance, P1 claimed their primary strategy for maintaining long-standing relationship with their customers is by constant advertising. Also, financially, there is a structure for the organization involving the board of directors with which business profit is strictly for the business, not for the owner, and every individual, regardless, gets a salary and no profit sharing for 5 years.

Another strategic activity is the capacity building for primary workers, domestic staff, and suppliers. They have not remained the same way in which they were engaged and could boast of self-improvement. “Bridging skillset gap-training and retraining of employees and seeing to their satisfaction and try to remain relevant in the market i.e., creating awareness to our subsidiaries,” P2 claimed that growing organically solely relied on trust from friends and families and not for once faltering on laid down agreements. The choice of niche market (i.e. identifying eligible customers) helped the SME maintain a cordial relationship with their customers: “Our key strength is ensuring a good capital base to ensure constant lending, and we continue to raise money from family and friends. We constantly work on structuring the business to be self-sustaining and employing more staff, advertising, having more branches.”

P3’s long term relationship relies basically on innovative strategies and capacity building:

Our sustenance has largely been attributed to a well-structured recruitment process, which helps us filter those with less passion and personality problems.

We also have a long-term relationship with ex-employees; some work as

contractors at times and some call us for consultancy. Also, our feedback/communications from employees and customers helped us and our attitude of promoting work-life balance among employees.

An organization deploying strategies that add value to key stakeholders also benefits long-term relationships with stakeholders, enhancing the sustainability of the organization (Matzembacher & Meira, 2019). Some business operations can be hampered or halted if the SME does not maintain a good relationship with the host community. The business owner must keep all stakeholders happy to have smooth business operations, leading it to long-term sustainability (Prasadh, 2018; Yung & Lee, 2018).

Theme 7: Innovation and Innovation Management

According to Aksoy (2017), innovation is the key to competitiveness, which will improve SMEs' performance in making high-quality goods and delivering services to the people as well as employment opportunities to enhance the economy of society. This idea is one of the strengths of all three participants. Innovation should be the product of all internal stakeholders for sustainability; however, it requires adept possession skills to manage an organization successfully.

P3 combines innovative strategies with marketing strategies. However, they combine all other sustainability strategies that have I have outlined. Some of the inventive concepts include the circularity model (upcycling and recycling), campaign strategy (awareness, consultancy, and marketing), and integration of SDGs with the idea of "why waste it" (green environment). These strategies by P3 are reviewed and fine-tuned from time to time. This SME also engages experts and consultants in the areas of

their innovations: “Our company became the first fashion recycling company in Nigeria, which started just as an initiative is now a registered company. P3 continued, “We even carry out research, and started modifications to make better market products like smaller cuts into throw pillows, party souvenirs from old clothing such as hair bonnets, cribs, dispenser covers, tissue holder covers.” P3 concluded they were “transitioning into a cooperate profit body and also saving the environment from waste pollution.”

P1 asserted that they had developed a plan to grow the shea tree for firewood in a way that it grows to maturity in 3-4 years instead of the usual 7 years. It is a good innovation too: “We will keep learning about sustainability, developing more innovative strategies.” P2 does not have a clear innovative activity but has a structure that incorporates innovations:

I plan on developing a succession plan/business continuity plan. Grow the business and take it to the next level. Scale it up, take bank loans, employ more staff, advertise, having more branches, and structure the organization to be self-sustaining. And probably selling off the business (i.e., take a lesser share) in 5-6 years to a bigger organization.

Sustainability Themes and Stakeholders

The incorporation of stakeholder theory as the conceptual framework of the research study is to understand the strategies the managers used to meet key stakeholders’ needs for achieving the sustainability of their organizations. Stakeholder needs, when met, ensure to a large extent sustainability of any business. Many SME owners fail to realize and consider the different organizational stakeholders and how they affect an

organization's sustainability (Mile, 2017). Some SME owners experience high employee turnover, low employee engagement, low employee motivation to improve the success of the business, lack of customer loyalty and continuous patronage, and low community support (Reina et al., 2018), which jeopardize the growth and sustainability of SMEs in Nigeria. Sustainability strategies are elements of businesses or companies that keep the stakeholders bonded together to produce a successful business venture and furthermore provide economic value, social equity, and environmental quality.

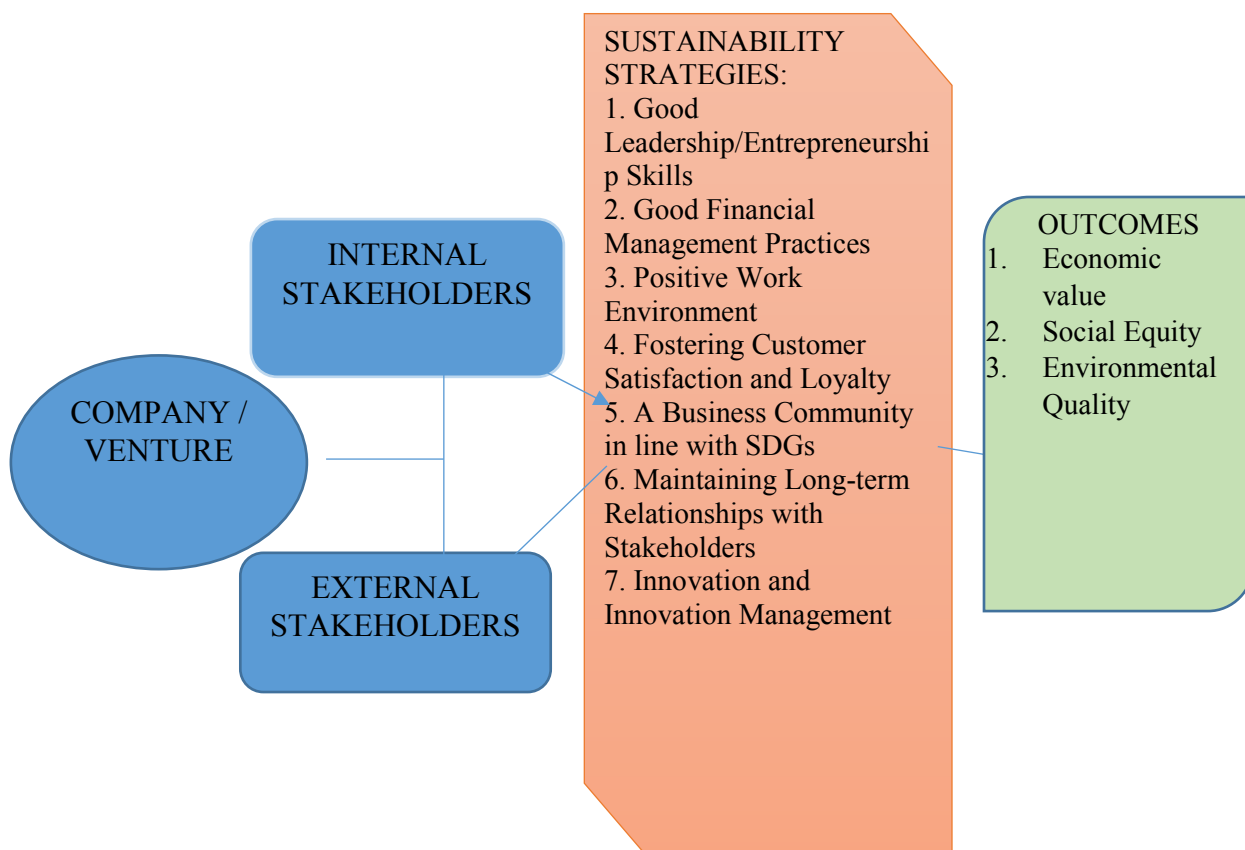


Figure 1. Sustainability strategies themes interactions with stakeholders.

Sustainability entrepreneurship exploits opportunities in an innovative way not only for economic gains, but also as equally important goals for social equity and environmental quality (Koe et al., 2015). Imran et al. (2019) argued that in the era of industrial revolution 4.0 (IR 4.0), sustainability is a serious challenge of contemporary SMEs. Through their survey, they found that environmental and social responsibilities are equally important factors affecting sustainability. These participant SMEs have shown that they incorporated all these factors to sustain themselves over the years.

Economic factors. P1, P2 and P3 demonstrated their ability to make profit for their organizations and to protect the organization fund. P1 ensured the profits made in 5 years were retained in the organization. After the first-year loss that P2 had, the financial report shows consistency in the profit of the organization. P3 through innovation and concern for a safe environment developed a product that became another profit center in the organization. These organization are financially stable, which has enhanced their capacity to keep their employees, creating employment opportunities that enhance the economy (Aksoy, 2017).

Environmental factors. P1 and P3 showed they have the capacity to maintain an eco-friendly business. Participant 1 (P1) engages in tree planting while P3 carries out recycling and upcycling of materials. Hosseininia and Ramezani (2016) claimed environmental factors that include recycling and the future of the earth affect the sustainability of SMEs, which to a large extent has drawn the interest of virtually all the stakeholders; from employees (more remuneration and development of skills), government (that was finding it difficult to recycle fashion waste because they are not

organic wastes and do not easily decompose), shareholders (creating a public image as a green-oriented organization), community (demonstrating environmental stewardship), suppliers, and so on.

Social factors. All three participant SMEs in this study have shown they have a good marketing and campaign strategy, which is in tune with advancing societal well-being beyond immediate financial interests. For instance, P1 tries to train their suppliers to better enhance their productivity and minimize job hazards. P2 identified a market niche of those that will not be strained by loans. P3 incorporated training of apprentices and even putting them on a payroll. Business organizations need employees and managers with sustainability competencies to drive the competitiveness and sustainability of the organization (Muafi et al., 2017). Another strength exhibited by P3 to customers is branding them ambassadors of a green community (switching customers), which creates a positive influence on the competitiveness and value to the society. Table 3 shows the stakeholders who are impacted by the sustainability strategies deployed by the participants. The organizations are adding value economically socially and environmentally to the stakeholders.

Table 3

Summary of Stakeholder Interaction with Sustainability Strategies Adopted by Participant Small and Medium Enterprises

S/N	Sustainability Themes	<u>Stakeholders involved with theme</u>	
		Internal	External
1	Good leadership & entrepreneurship skills	Shareholders Managers and Employees	Government
2	Good financial management practices	Shareholders Managers and Employees	Government and suppliers
3	Positive work environment	Managers and Employees	Customers
4	Fostering customer satisfaction / loyalty	Managers and Employees shareholders	Customers, Suppliers
5	Enabling healthy business community in line with SDGs	Shareholders, Managers and Employees	Customers, Suppliers, Government, Society/Community
6	Maintaining good long-term relationships with stakeholders	Shareholders, Managers and Employees	Customers Suppliers, Government, Creditors Society/Community
7	Innovation and innovation management	Shareholders, Managers and Employees	Customers Suppliers, Government, Creditors Society/Community

Application to Professional Practice

This study is important for understanding the sustainability strategies that SME owners could adopt to sustain their business beyond 5 years. The high rate of failure of SMEs within their first 5 years of inception call for this study to understand how SME owners could run their business sustainably. According to Ifekwem and Adedamola (2016), SMEs are of great importance to Nigeria. The contribution of SMEs to the Nigerian economy includes employment opportunities, mobilization of local resources, conversion and generation of foreign exchange, and mitigation of rural-urban movement. These prospects of SMEs in Nigeria are hampered because of a sustainability challenge.

Findings from this study and the recommendations will serve as a source of knowledge of how SME owners could strategize and position their organizations to survive more than 5 years. The results of this study provide suggestions to SME owners to consider the stakeholders of their organizations, both internal stakeholders and external stakeholders. The result shows that SME owners who adopt sustainability strategies giving economic, social, and environmental values to their stakeholders can sustain their businesses beyond 5 years. If SME owners consider these strategies, the sustainability gap that makes them fail to sustain their business beyond 5 years could be avoided. According to Feniser et al. (2017), an eco-innovative system of running an organization which allows economic, social, and environmental objectives enhances the sustainability of the organization. The findings of this study support the above assertion. In developing

a strategy to solve environmental problems and developing the community, more businesses can become a profit center, leading to better economic values.

The study findings are relevant to professional practices, for the study identified ways SME owners could sustain their businesses considering economic, social, and environmental values for the internal and external stakeholders of the organization. This situation creates a win-win situation for all the stakeholders because all stakeholders' needs are met in the running of an organization with sustainability strategies. The themes that emerged from this study give a robust insight on how organizations can be sustained.

Implications for Social Change

The implication for social change from this doctoral study is educating SME owners on the need to consider the internal and external stakeholders in their organizations and employ sustainability strategies to meet stakeholder needs. There are great entrepreneurship opportunities in Nigeria and many people are setting up businesses in the SME category (Afolabi, 2015). When SME owners know how to adopt sustainability strategies to meet the needs of their stakeholders, their businesses will thrive, more jobs will be created and sustained, the lives of the people will improve, and the economy will grow (Scheyvens, Banks, & Hughes, 2016).

The purpose of this study is to explore the strategies SME owners used to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years. The findings contribute to understanding how sustainability strategies could be adopted in the running of the organization to meet the needs of the internal and external stakeholders to enhance the sustainability of the organization. When SME owners can sustain their businesses, more profit is available for

shareholders (Lee & Hu, 2018), more jobs are created, the existing employees retain the jobs, and the community gets to benefit as well as the government and every other stakeholder. All these benefits improve the economy and the standard of living of the people (Font et al., 2016). The results of this study give some insights into what SME owners need to focus on in sustaining their businesses. The seven themes generated, if adopted, could help many SME businesses survive the lifetime of the owner and even surpass it, causing an absolute change in the society and the life of the people.

Recommendations for Action

The entrepreneurship opportunity in Nigeria is enormous. Entrepreneurs in the SME category create many jobs in Nigeria; however, entrepreneurs suffer a great loss when their businesses are not sustained (Afolabi, 2015). The motive behind this study is to find a solution to the problem the SME owners face in sustaining their business beyond 5 years. Using the information gathered from SME owners who have done so could help others who are finding it challenging to sustain their businesses. The participants of this study gave insights into how they used sustainability strategies to sustain their businesses by considering their stakeholders and giving economic, social, and environmental values to them (Prasadh, 2018; Yung & Lee, 2018). The findings yielded several conclusions on strategies that would enhance the sustainability of SMEs.

The results of this study could help SME owners in implementing sustainability strategies to improve the performance of their businesses to meet the needs of the stakeholders, prolonging the existence of the business. I could share the result of this study with SMEs by organizational training, seminars, or conferences in which the

findings are shared to support SME owners. I could also share the results online, send the link of how SME owners could assess the results and gain knowledge on how to sustain their businesses. I could also organize a webinar to reach out to more SME owners. I recommend that SME owners (a) identify their internal and external stakeholders; (b) get involved in operations sustainability strategies that give economic, social, and environmental values to all the stakeholders; and (c) encourage innovations and creativity in their organizations.

Recommendations for Further Research

The purpose of this study was to explore what strategies SME owners used to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years. The findings indicated that considering the internal and external stakeholders in the organization and creating economic, social, and environmental values that meet their needs are important to the sustainability of an organization. According to Sufian (2015), limitations are an uncontrollable threat to the validity of a study; in this study, a limitation was the geographical location where I conducted the study and the low number of interview questions. Further studies should include participants from other geographical locations and more interview questions.

This research study includes three SME owners in the Southwest region of Nigeria. I would recommend that other studies should be conducted in the other regions in Nigeria to involve diversity of industry as in this study with a larger number of participants. The participants selected from these geographical locations have formal educations, yet a further research should be conducted among SME owners with less education. The study participants are SME owners; further studies should be conducted on SMEs in which

managers are running the organization and not the owners. The current COVID-19 pandemic did not allow face to face interviews, which could have affected the emotions of the participants during the interviews; a further study should be conducted when the world has seen possible solutions to COVID-19, when things around the world are back to normalcy, and researchers can once again conduct face to face interviews.

Reflections

My doctoral study journey has been an unforgettable one, I am glad I took the decision to embark on it, for my life has been positively impacted. After I obtained IRB approval to conduct the research, I went online to select SME owners in the Southwest region of Nigeria, and I sent them mail and a consent form seeking their acceptance to participate in the study. I was excited when some of them responded positively to participate because some people after a telephone conversation rejected the opportunity. I allowed the participants to select a convenient time for the interview. Of course, the location was insignificant as all of them preferred an online interview because of the pandemic. However, it was another experience when some of the participants rescheduled the appointment over again and some later declined when they noticed they were not eligible for the study. At that time, I had to select other participants and finally, I was able to work with three participants in the Southwest region of Nigeria who are SME owners from different industries, including manufacturing and service.

According to Roulston and Shelton (2015), in business research, bias can occur when the researcher is close to the data. To avoid personal bias, I selected participants who are not in my field of business. From my experience, I have seen SME owners lost

their money and businesses. My passion to see SME owners grow their businesses made me pick this topic and believe that the results from the study could help many SME owners develop and sustain their businesses. To get a possible solution to this problem, I was dedicated to avoiding all forms of bias. During the interview, I took notes and recorded the interviews, transcribed the interviews, and cross-checked with my notes. I conducted member checking with the participants to ensure that the transcriptions were correct for the reliability of the study. After the interviews, for data triangulation, I requested secondary data from the participants by asking them to share with me some documents to validate their responses during the interview. The participants shared with me their financials, evidence of the capacity building program and training, and evidence of social works to support their communities.

The qualitative multiple case study was to explore what strategies SME owners used to sustain their business beyond 5 years. The participants were happy to share their experiences, which gave me great insights on how they adopted their sustainability strategies to satisfy the need of their internal and external stakeholders, and how their measures have impacted their businesses positively, making them grow. The findings have increased my knowledge on ways SMEs owners could impact their stakeholders positively and how in return could enhance the growth and sustainability of the businesses.

Summary and Study Conclusions

Small and medium enterprises in Nigeria account for over 80% of the enterprises that employ 75% of Nigerians (Afolabi, 2015). Small and medium enterprises contribute

immensely to the growth of the Nigerian economy, helping in job creation, industrial development, export, and social enrichment (Albrecht et al., 2017). In Nigeria, SME owners are finding it challenging to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years and SME sustainability is important for the growth of the economy in Nigeria (Ifekwen & Adedamola, 2016). The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore what strategies SMEs owners used to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years. I conducted semistructured interviews with three participants who are SME owners in the Southwest region of Nigeria. All the participants are adults above 18 years, both male and female. The SME owners were willing to participate in the study and chose online interviews because of COVID-19. I took notes in my reflexive journal during the interviews and recorded them.

I conducted member checking after having transcribed the interviews to cross check my transcriptions with the participants, and also ensure data saturation before I stopped interviewing participants for the reliability and validity of the study (Galvan, 2015). I analyzed the primary data collected during the interview in addition to the secondary data gathered from the archival documents that the participants shared with me with NVivo software and coded and generated themes. The themes generated aligned with the stakeholder's theory, which was the conceptual framework of the study and related to sustainability strategies.

The findings of the study showed how the participants sustained their businesses beyond 5 years. The participants employed sustainability strategies in the running of their businesses, and they considered all their stakeholders in their strategies, which enabled

them to give economic, social, and environmental values to their internal and external stakeholders. The participants showed their empathy and concern for the growth of their employees, and embarked on training and retraining constantly, building the capacity of their employees. They also considered their customers in the strategies they deploy by constantly reviewing their customers' needs and meeting them. The community in which they conduct their business is also important to them along with their concern for their environment in helping to develop the community, in improving the lives of the people, and helping to clean their surroundings to promote an ecofriendly environment.

The results of this study may be of benefit to SME owners who are finding it challenging to sustain their business beyond 5 years. Considering the themes generated from the study and applying them to their businesses could help business owners over a long period. This study also included implications for business practice and recommendations for further study.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. How would you describe your sustainability strategies?
2. How did you implement your sustainability strategies?
3. Based on your experience, what sustainability strategies have impacted your business most?
4. What were the key challenges you face to implement your sustainability strategies?
5. How did you address the key challenges to sustain your business?
6. What additional information would you like to share about your strategies in sustaining your business beyond 5 years?

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Title of Doctoral Study: Nigeria Small and Medium Enterprise Sustainability Strategies

Date _____

Interviewee _____

Participant Consent Form: Yes__ No__

This interview may take between 60 to 90 minutes. According to Walden University guidelines, all interviewee retain the right to withdraw from this study at any time.

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this study is to explore the strategies SME owners used to sustain their business beyond 5 years.

Interview Questions for SME Owners

1. How would you describe your sustainability strategies?

Response _____

Follow up question: _____

Response _____

2. How did you implement your sustainability strategies?

Response _____

Follow up question _____

Response_____

3. Based upon your experience, what sustainability strategies have impacted your business most?

Response_____

Follow up question_____

Response_____

4. What were your key challenges you faced to implement your sustainability strategies?

Response_____

Follow up question_____

Response_____

5. How did you address the key challenges to sustain your business?

Response_____

Follow up question_____

Response_____

6. What additional information would you like to share about your strategies in sustaining your business beyond 5 years.

Response_____

Follow up question _____

Response _____

I will transcribe your responses into a Microsoft Word document, and conduct member checking by sharing the interpretation with you so you can review it. Are you willing to participate in the member checking process?

Yes_ No_

Thank you for your participation.