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## Strategies for Small Business Sustainability Beyond 5 Years in New Restaurant Industry

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# Walden University

College of Management and Technology

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Alexandria Norma Wilhoite

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2021

Abstract

Strategies for Small Business Sustainability Beyond 5 Years in New Restaurant

Industry

by

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MBA, Albertus Magnus College, 2015

BS, Johnson & Wales University, 2012

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Business Administration

Walden University

March 2021

## Abstract

More than half of small businesses in the United States are unsustainable within the first five years of existence. Small business owners who do not implement successful and sustainable strategies are at a high risk of failure. Grounded in the resource-based view theory, the purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies that some small restaurant owners use to sustain business beyond five years. The participants included three small business owners in Connecticut who have been in business for five years. Data were collected from semistructured interviews, company websites, and company documents. Yin's 5-step thematic analysis was used to analyze the data. Five major themes emerged: financial capital resources; education, technical experience, and skills; challenges implementing technology and social media strategies; customer loyalty, customer retention, and offering quality services and resource-based strategic planning, flexibility, and seasonality. A key recommendation is that small business owners identify useful resources and effective business strategies to ensure their long-term sustainability. The implications for positive social change include the potential for small business owners to serve as leaders in furthering sustainable economic prosperity that benefits their communities. Further positive implications include the potential to create new jobs.

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## Dedication

To my uncle Roque. Thank you.

“Plan your work, then work your plan!” (Jim Hodge)

## Acknowledgments

I am very thankful for my chair, Dr. Ify Dalia, whose unwavering patience and guidance got me through the most challenging parts of this journey. Your constant disciplined push for nuance helped me refine my perspective and stay focused. I would also like to thank you for your encouragement and valuable feedback throughout the process. Finally, I would like to thank the faculty, staff, mentors, family, friends, and fellow scholars who have been a positive support system through it all. I am so appreciative of everyone's continued support.

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## Section 1: Foundation of the Study

Scholars lack an in-depth understanding of the restaurant failure phenomenon in the United States. Restaurant owners must understand and possess the essential skills required for establishing and sustaining successful businesses. Parsa et al. (2014) noted that an estimated 50% of restaurants are not sustainable beyond 5 years of operation. According to the Small Business Administration officials (SBA) (2016a), many factors affect the high-failure rate in the restaurant industry, ranging from short to long-term effects. Small business owners face limited resources, which increase the difficulty of remaining sustainable (Shields & Shelleman, 2015).

Although business failure has encouraged a fluctuating body of research, scholars have no clear definition of *business failure* (Amankwah-Amoah, 2014). Khelil (2016) indicated that the failure of an integrated multidisciplinary approach leads to the collection of incomplete and questionable findings. A holistic lens is necessary for understanding restaurant failure in a strategic context.

### **Background of the Problem**

An estimated 99.7% of employers in the United States operate in the small business sector. In the United States, small businesses compose 54% of the total annual sales, 50% of the private workforce, and 64% of the new jobs created each year (Campbell & Park, 2017; SBA, 2016b). However, a high rate of new small businesses fail within the first 5 years of operation (Taneja et al., 2016). Boo (2017) asserted causes for business failure including a poor business climate, poor leadership capabilities, and a lack of skill, knowledge, capital, and strategic management. Falkner and Hiebl (2015)

suggested that small business owners do not survive because few have access to sufficient resources.

The lack of effective implementation of successful strategies to create long-term sustainability has led to high failure in the United States for some restaurant businesses (Klein & 2015). Horne and Ivanov (2015) also explored common problematic challenges that small business owners encounter when they start their businesses. Some owners and managers of small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) do not use new resources for innovation to secure a sustainable competitive advantage (Woschke et al., 2017). Owners often do not create business plans or have clear success strategies, resulting in high failure rates (Chi et al., 2016). In general, researchers have linked SME failure to a lack of access to finance (Kumar & Rao, 2016) and inadequate financial management strategies (Karadag, 2015). Attention to resources and strategic approaches to anticipate challenges may determine a business's long-term sustainability.

### **Problem Statement**

More than 50% of small businesses fail within the first 5 years of operations (SBA, 2016b). An estimated 20% of SMEs fail within the first year, whereas more than 50% do not surpass 5 years (Neagu, 2016). Fifty percent of small business owners close their businesses by the 5th year, and only one third of small business startups survive beyond 10 years (Small Business & Entrepreneurial Council, 2016). The general business problem was that some small business owners venture into small business practice without adequate preparation or the skill necessary to ensure sustainability. The specific

business problem was that some small business owners in the restaurant industry lack the strategies to sustain business beyond 5 years.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive multiple-case study was to explore strategies small business owners in the restaurant industry use to sustain business beyond 5 years. This target population included three small business owners of three full-service restaurants in Connecticut that have successfully sustained their businesses beyond 5 years. A full service restaurant offers fine dining with table service and a wide selection of foods and beverages. An attached coffee shop, and specialized ethnic or fast-food offerings could be part of the service. The findings from this study could assist small independent full service restaurant owners in sustaining their business operations for more than 5 years and, as a result, create wealth for the owners, employment opportunities, and improved welfare for individuals in communities.

### **Nature of the Study**

The three common types of research methods are qualitative, quantitative, and mixed (Yin, 2018). I used a qualitative research method for this study to appropriately answer the research question. Conducting a qualitative study does not require in-depth statistical analysis of data for examining phenomena but typically answers a research question that addresses *what*, *how*, or *why* (McCusker & Gunaydin, 2015). Mixed methods research incorporates both quantitative and qualitative research strategies (Yin, 2018). The quantitative and the mixed method approaches were not appropriate for this

research study because statistical analysis of variable relationships is not necessary for understanding strategies needed to support small businesses to survive beyond 5 years.

Four research designs appropriate for qualitative research include case study, narrative, ethnography, and phenomenology (Yin, 2018). Ethnography, phenomenology, and case studies are common qualitative research designs (Cahyadi & Prananto, 2015). Among the available designs, I used a case study because researchers use case studies to explore a topic or phenomenon in depth within its real-life environment (Yin, 2018). Narrative analysis is appropriate for discovering participants' experiences by obtaining stories in a chronological story format (Yin, 2018). Researchers use ethnography to identify the culture or behavior of a specified group. The focus of this study was to explore business strategies rather than business cultures. Phenomenological researchers focus on describing in-depth meanings of individuals experiencing a phenomenon based on their lived experiences (Gill, 2014). I did not select a phenomenological, narrative, or ethnography design. Case studies are most appropriate for exploring a contemporary phenomenon within its real-world context (Yin, 2018). I used a case-study design because the results of a case study could provide a holistic, in-depth analysis of a real-life, contemporary system bounded by time and place (Yin, 2018).

### **Research Question**

What strategies do small business owners in the restaurant industry use to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years?

### **Interview Questions**

The interview questions for this study were the following:

1. What strategies did you use to sustain your restaurant operations during the first 5 years?
2. What type of key resources helped you to increase the chances of business survival?
3. How did you overcome the key challenges to implementing your strategies?
4. What key characteristics do you think are the most critical to your business success?
5. What additional information can you share that was not already covered about your successful strategies for sustaining your business beyond 5 years?

### **Conceptual Framework**

I chose the resource-based view theory (RBV) as the conceptual framework for this study. Penrose (1959) developed the resource-based theory, studied by other researchers to identify major contributors of firms' resources (Barney, 1991; Schumpeter, 1934; Wernerfelt, 1984). Strategic management is a framework that researchers use to assess organizational resources essential to SME's daily operations and help create a competitive advantage (Perrigot and Pénard, 2013). The RBV theory includes a framework for understanding how organizational leaders can create economic value not merely through possession of resources but effective and innovative resource management (Penrose, 1959). Leaders can create economic value by understanding that an organization's performance and sustainability depend on the resources possessed and controlled by the organization (Wernerfelt, 1984). The categories of resources for an organization include (a) physical resources, (b) financial resources, (c) technological



resources, (d) human resources, and (e) organizational resources (Greene et al., 2015).

The RBV theory was suitable for my study, serving as a lens to understand how performance and sustainability rely on the resources owned and controlled by the firm.

Researchers utilized the RBV theory in research focusing on small business sustainability, including the restaurant industry (Jogarathnam, 2018; Kurian & Muzumdar, 2017; Wernerfelt, 2016). The RBV theory emphasizes that ownership and control of strategic assets determine which organizations will earn profits and secure a competitive advantage over other firms. Organizational resources are a source of competitive advantage and firm survival (Wernerfelt, 1984). The RBV theory supports the idea that SME owners who efficiently use their resources can increase business survival. The research and interview questions from this study include a platform for small business owners to reflect on which strategies and resources are essential to business sustainability.

### **Operational Definitions**

*Business failure:* This term is an owner's decision to discontinue the business as an outcome of a real or projected performance inferior to his or her satisfaction (Khelil, 2016).

*Business success:* Business success is a business or firm with sustainable profits for 5 or more years (SBA, 2016b).

*Entrepreneur:* An entrepreneur is an individual who is an innovator pursuing a desire toward a positive outcome (Arend, 2015).

*Independent restaurant:* An independent restaurant is an independently owned enterprise that has no association with any other business (Parsa et al., 2014).

*VRIN resources:* VRIN resources is a unique resource that are valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable, which can help a firm gain a sustainable competitive advantage (Barney, 1991).

*Small business:* A small business is an independently owned business with fewer than 500 employees (SBA, 2016a).

### **Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations**

#### **Assumptions**

Assumptions are perspectives that researchers believe as truth but not received verification (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). In my attempt to explore business strategies that small business restaurant owners use to sustain their businesses, I needed to make several assumptions. The first assumption was that a case study was an appropriate design to explore the strategies required for new and existing small businesses to become sustainable beyond 5 years. The second assumption was that the participants would provide truthful feedback in response to interview questions. The third assumption was that conducting this research study in Connecticut would ensure a geographical area large enough to provide sufficient data.

#### **Limitations**

Limitations are barriers, weaknesses, or restrictions encountered during the research process that the researcher cannot control (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). A limitation of this study was the focus on business owners in the restaurant industry.

Another limitation of this study was the small sample size. The final limitation of this study included a limited population of interview participants. Therefore, the findings of this study might not transfer to small business owners in other parts of the world.

### **Delimitations**

Delimitations refer to the bounds that researchers establish to control the scope of the study (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The first delimitation of this study was the focus on small restaurants with employees fewer than 500, as highlighted by SBA guidelines (SBA, 2016a). The narrowness of the research problem, restrictions on the type of firms studied, and the use of semistructured interviews narrowed the study's scope. Another delimitation of this study was to focus on a specific geographic area instead of a broader geographic area. Incorporating a broader geographic region may require a larger sample size, and more time to obtain data.

### **Significance of the Study**

#### **Contribution to Business Practice**

The findings presented in this study could provide value to business practices by offering insights into how leaders of successful organizations develop and implement their strategies to remain sustainable and competitive. Results from this study may potentially supply further knowledge to small business leaders regarding quality business performance and ways to enhance profitability. Further the results of this study might encourage leaders to implement strategies to help small businesses remain competitive and effective. These results could also support small business owners in gaining and sustaining profit by the end of the first 5 years of business. Results from this study may

also contribute to business practices by increasing the overall success rate of small businesses that contribute to the U.S. economy. Employing the knowledge gained from this study may enable small business owners to refocus their limited resources to those identified as areas critical to the business's survival. The value created through the productive use of resources might improve the overall chances of survival for those firms.

### **Implications for Social Change**

The results of this study may contribute to a positive social change. The SBA officials reported 70% of businesses fail within 2 years, and a significant number lacked access to financial resources (SBA, 2016a). These statistics reflect the continued need to support small business owners' chances of succeeding to create jobs, acquire various resources, and create stability in various communities. Small business failure could mean the depletion of personal incomes, job loss, and family disarray. The purpose of this study was to provide business strategies that potential and current owners in the restaurant industry use to sustain their small business operations beyond 5 years. The findings of this study may contribute to mitigating small business failure and foster job creation. The results of this study may aid small business leaders to improve the performance of their business, enhance economic development in various communities, decrease unemployment, and create jobs for surrounding communities. In addition, taxpayers can help increase the local and state tax base by owners creating more jobs and improving living standards in communities.

### **A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature**

Literature reviews include a critical appraisal of the subject matter and proffered that an unbiased synopsis of the information provided gives a balancing view that includes conflicting findings and inconsistencies and establish and current thinking. The literature review includes an analysis of articles, books, and other scholarly works on a specific subject (Wee & Banister, 2016). The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies that small business owners in the restaurant industry use to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years in Connecticut.

Conducting a literature review is paramount for developing a research idea to help identify any knowledge gaps in the literature and clarify how the research of a new study might expand the literature. Onwuegbuzie and Weinbaum (2017) and Yin (2018) described the literature review as an accumulation of similar scholarships from multiple scholars that analyzes, synthesizes, and provides further knowledge. Therefore, a literature review enables the researcher to identify other literature that corroborates or contradicts a study's findings (Winchester & Salji, 2016).

For this literature review, I identified scholarly peer reviewed research on the (RBV). The literature review contained scholarly books and information from government agencies. Using the Walden University Library, I retrieved articles from various academic databases, including Emerald Management, Sage Journal, Journal of Business, EBSCOhost, Hospitality & Tourism Complete, Scholarworks, ProQuest, ScienceDirect, and government databases. I also used Google Scholar to identify resources. The primary source of information for the literature review was peer-reviewed

journal articles. Other sources that I included were books and other published dissertations that discuss small business survival. *I used the following keywords to conduct the literature search (a) restaurant failure, (b) restaurant success, (c) sustainability, (d) strategic management, (e) restaurant sustainability, (f) entrepreneurship, (g). The following resources were appropriate (a) business sustainability; (b) business success; (c) business failure; (d) strategic risk, and strategic planning; (e) Resource Base-Theory framework; (f) Resource Base-View, and VIRN Valuable; (g) Rare, Inimitable, and Non- Substitutable Resources.* I selected these search terms to identify the skills, knowledge, and strategies used by restaurant owners to remain sustainable beyond 5 years.

### **The Resource-Based View**

I used RBV theory in this study as the lens to understand restaurant success. Resource-based view theory includes different performance drivers to gain a competitive advantage. The performance drivers of competitive advantage are resources that are unique, strategic, valuable, and difficult to imitate (Barney, 1991). Competitive advantage may lead to greater chances of business success. Previous researchers suggested that small firms are more efficient and effective than larger firms in using their resources and capabilities. The leading cause of a business's success or failure is its lack of resources.

Scholars used the RBV theory as a management tool to assess firm assets, practices, systems, and critical elements for a competitive advantage (Ketokivi, 2016). Economic development depends on SMEs' success or failure related to how they

influence economic growth through SMEs' development (Ndesaulwa & Kikula, 2016). The RBV theory can lead to comprehending a companies' different performance drivers in various economic or industry environments (Almarri & Gardiner, 2014). Firms' resources remain an important research topic in management and organizations. The RBV theory includes a narrative of competitive heterogeneity based on the theory that competitors vary in resources and capabilities in significant and enduring ways (Helfat & Peteraf, 2015).

Different researchers provided different definitions and classifications for resources in the context of the RBV theory. Kor et al. (2016) highlighted that Penrose (1959) contributed both directly and indirectly to the firm's fundamental concepts of the current RBV theory. The theory of the firm's growth, which Penrose developed in 1959, was the foundation of the RBV theory (Kor et al., 2016; Simba & Ojong, 2017; Woschke et al., 2017). Wernerfelt (1984) introduced the RBV of the firm. Barney (1991) further defined the RBV theory by outlining distinctive attributes for critical resources. Barney (1991) concluded that in explaining and predicting the basis of a firm's competitive advantage and performance, organizational leaders could procure and sustain their competitive advantage if they acquired valuable, rare, inimitable and nonsubstitutable (VRIN) resources.

The RBV theory is a construct in strategic management that reflects organizational management from the notion of how well a small firm utilizes the resources under its control to attain its objectives and achieve a competitive advantage and sustainable growth (Wernerfelt, 1984). The RBV theory reflects how small firms

must possess various resources to secure a competitive advantage above other firms. Firms should have strategies for resource assessment and resource integration (Wernerfelt, 1984). Firms can perform above average by identifying and acquiring a critical set of resources. Porter and Kramer (2018) described resource value as the willingness to invest in building a resource internally.

A resource is valuable when business leaders can use the resource to strategically enhance or improve the overall effectiveness, sustainability, and structure of a firm. In the seminal work that produced a significant shift in RBV practice, Penrose (1959) investigated the association between a firm resource and a firm's growth. Penrose defined a firm as a set of resources, and those resources impact a firm's growth. This relationship is positive when resources are adequate, and the growth is minimal when the resources are inadequate. Penrose further indicated that the optimal growth of a firm involves the exploitation of existing internal and external resources alongside the development of new resources.

Organizational resources are sources of a competitive advantage and a firm's survival (Wernerfelt, 1984). Previous researchers suggested a business leader cannot define things that firms can readily implement because of imitation. Researchers noted the firms that possess the resources must understand how it works, which is a potential issue for small business leaders. The underlying issue is that if an owner fully understood the resources, other companies could hire the manager and duplicate the resources.

The RBV theory and the resource-based theory (RBT) have similar concepts. Both the RBV and the RBT reflects that a business is a collection of tangible and



intangible resources, and both enhance the criteria of ownership and control of the firm's resources (Lin & Wu, 2014). Barney et al. (1991) argued that leaders can use the RBV theory to prevent creativity and discounts entrepreneurial orientation as a resource that can increase a firm's ability to strengthen its competitive advantage. A list of resources under the RBV theory could appear infinite as new resources continue to emerge, and some contend that specific resources previously considered significant are no longer contributors to strategic business models. Campbell and Park (2017) expanded the list of resources for SMEs to integrate social capital, entrepreneurial orientation, and intellectual capital and concluded that the presence of these resources as assets and capabilities. Nada and Ali (2015) indicated that sufficient resources help improve overall performance and sustainability.

Bromiley and Rau (2016) identified the RBV framework of valuable resources as problematic. Business leaders cannot define things that leaders can readily implement because of imitation. Bromiley and Rau argued that using the RBV theory does not align with operations management research objectives and activities in multiple ways because there is no concrete way exist to measure the impact. Broimley and Rau found that using a sustained competitive advantage as a dependent variable result in comparing the relatively few businesses with a sustained competitive advantage and all the other firms, ignoring performance variations in context.

Bromiley and Rau (2016) argued that competitive advantage exists at the business level or the firm and does not directly correlate to operations management's normal level. Measuring a sustained competitive advantage can also present challenges.

Andersén et al. (2016) found that the utilization of the VRIN resources only led to temporal attainment of a firm's performance. When VRIN resources were immobile, the studied firm was more able to ensure a sustainable competitive advantage in sustainable performance over the long term.

Hitt et al. (2016) challenged Bromiley and Rau's assertion that firms operating in the same competing environment could use similar strategic resources. Hitt et al. indicated that firms could apply strategies utilizing identical resources but result in various outcomes because of differentiations in SMEs' skills and abilities. Hitt et al. (2016) conducted a study based on Bromiley and Rau's perspective of the RBV and found that Bromiley and Rau's investigation limits to the works of Barney et al. (1991), making the analysis insufficient of strong supporting evidence to form a contradictory perspective.

Hitt et al. (2016) argued that the RBV theory is a valid theory for business strategy and suggested that the appropriate frameworks strengthen the use of the RBV in strategic management, incorporating the knowledge-based view and the dynamic capability view. The uniqueness of resources and an SMEs' achievement of a competitive advantage do not depend solely on inimitability, but more on the merging of capabilities contemplating the implementation of business strategies with the use of unique resources (Lin & Wu, 2014). The focus of the RBV theory on a sustainable competitive advantage and sustained performance will, therefore, include resource substitutability, mobility, and inimitability. Therefore, competitiveness results from resource uniqueness, while sustainability results from resource immobility.

Previously highlighted, the primary cause of business success or failure is its resources. Alternative theories that could form the conceptual framework for this study but not used include systems theory, Porter's five forces, and entrepreneurial orientation. Analyzing the business system structure through a restaurant lens is critical to understanding its relationship and interaction.

### **VRIN Resources**

The VRIN model of strategic resources can serve as a foundation for generating high performance and a sustainable competitive advantage. Specific characteristics are essential for a resource to be considered as a VRIN resource. According to Barney (1991) and Barney et al. (2011), a resource exists if it meets the VRIN criteria. As a competitive advantage source, the RBV theory is resourceful for a firm that is unique, strategic, valuable, and difficult to replicate. Greene et al. (2015) categorized this list into five facets: (a) physical resources, (b) financial resources, (c) technological resources, (d) human resources, and (e) organizational resources. Researchers used the diverse nature of resources and their fragmented distribution among competing firms as a foundation of the RBV theory (Barney, 1991). Nason and Wiklund (2015) highlighted that valuable resources positively influence growth, but inimitable resources have a negative effect.

Porter and Kramer (2018) described resource value as the willingness to invest in building a resource internally. This definition aligns with Barney's (1991) original argument that leaders will acquire or build the resources they expect will make them better in the product market. VRIN resource features can have conflicting implications for the same performance outcome (Nason & Wiklund, 2015).

Not all researchers agree that the characteristics above are necessary for VRIN resources. Authors disputed that the contradicting effects of distinct VRIN characteristics undermine RBV approaches since VRIN features are often the only additive (Nason & Wiklund, 2015). Bromiley and Rau highlighted that the RBV theory is not conducive for operations management because few firms secured a sustainable competitive advantage using VRIN resources. Hitt et al. (2016) challenged Bromiley and Rau's assertion that firms operating in the same competing environment could use similar strategic resources, making them invaluable. Hitt et al. (2016) highlighted that firms could apply strategies utilizing identical resources, but the results varied in outcomes because of differentiations in SMEs' skills and abilities. Inimitability leads to a competitive advantage when a resource or capability cannot receive duplication or is expensive to replicate or acquire. A firm's leader organized to capture and exploit the resources and capabilities at its disposal can prevent competitors from gaining access or developing insights into the organization's valuable, rare, and inimitable resources (Dyer et al., 2016).

### **Systems Theory**

Systems theory is an alternative theory to support the RBT theory to address the essential strategies needed for small restaurant owners to sustain their business beyond 5 years. Systems theory emerged in the 1930s by Von Bertalanffy (1972). The main objective of systems theory is creating wholeness (Von Bertalanffy, 1972). A system consists of factors or components, working together as an interactive network or system (Sayin, 2016). Von Bertalanffy called interrelations between components within a system interdependency and suggested that the system's outcomes or an organization derive

from its components' relationships. The overall goal of many leaders to use systems theory is to identify a pattern or set of principles that help improve a process (Sayin, 2016).

Systems thinking is useful in any field and includes both hard and soft practical methodologies to analyze a phenomenon (Mingers, 2015). Systems theory fits this study because restaurant owners must consider multiple resources and develop strategies to financially sustain business. Small businesses are usually dependent on the same resources throughout the restaurant industry; therefore, a business owner must know how to use resources properly in any situation. Knowing how and when to practice is key and the influencing and maturity of the follower or team is important to achieve a goal in situation.

Systems theory can guide small restaurant business owners to recognize the complexities in the restaurant business and how to connect and differentiate systems for effective operations (Mingers, 2015). I was able to understand the strategies successful restaurant owners use to achieve a profitable business. The results of this study could help restaurant owners develop strategies to sustain business beyond 5 years financially.

### **Financial Sustainability**

A successful small business owner must have a business plan that indicates the startup funds needed. Inadequate resources and distinctive factors are the leading causes of organizational failure (Amankwah-Amoah, 2014). Kremen and Ohol (2017) defined financial stability as a small business existing in a stable condition, including the ability to restructure resources promptly. Business owners who do not have enough startup funds

may face fiscal challenges. A financial plan aligns with a small business owner in knowing their cash flow, break-even point, opportunity assessment, strategic development, and profitability prospects (Sihite & Simanjuntak, 2015). Such resources include financial injections at reinvesting in the brand, driving innovation, marketing, technological systems, and improving human resource capabilities to lead the new strategic impetus (Vernon, 2016).

Small businesses change their business models out of a desire to grow the firm's brand and enhance the overall performance and consequently, the profitability of the business (Vernon, 2016). Decisions by restaurant owners to sustain their operations should hinge on the entrepreneur's ability to anticipate change coupled with their risk propensity to amend their business model to sustain operations past the 5-year mark.

Investigating and analyzing SMEs' financial factors' capacity ensures economic development even during environmental chaos (Kremen & Ohol, 2017). For small business owners to succeed and sustain their businesses, they must foster a culture of innovation, risk-taking, decision making, and concrete management skills (Rahman et al., 2015). Small business owners should identify barriers to accessing financial loans because they often lack a business plan or an efficient accounting system, making securing a loan difficult for banks to evaluate their capabilities (Baradwaj et al., 2015). To mitigate financial risk, small business owners need to implement economic systems that are accurate, consistent, timely, and complete (Rahman et al., 2015).

The application of the RBV theory may help let SMEs owners identify what strategies are appropriate to obtain financing that could help achieve financial

sustainability. The RBV theory may also include practical approaches for owners in obtaining funding sources to sustain small businesses (Hong & Lu, 2016; Williams, 2014). Business owners who do not have enough startup funds may face fiscal challenges. Having a financial plan helps small business owners to know their cash flow, break-even point, opportunity assessment, strategic development, and profitability prospects. A successful small business owner must have a business plan that indicates the startup funds needed.

### **Strategic Planning**

Strategic planning is critical to small business success. Planned and unplanned strategies are two forms of strategic implementation within organizational operations. The lack of effective implementation of successful strategies to ensure long-term operations led to failure of some restaurant businesses (Klein & Ferrari, 2015). Business planning strategically involves a vision, an evaluation of the industry, knowledge of competitors, business model innovation, and implementation. Business model innovation strategically enhances many different types of changes to an existing business model. These models can range from incremental to transformative. An effective formulating strategy must include a critical analysis of the company and experience to facilitate an effective and adaptive decision-making process.

Creating sustainability strategies begins with understanding the social or environmental issues, target market (including environmental customers), and the competitive landscape. SME business owners need to incorporate sustainability into their core values and develop sustainability competencies (Loucks et al., 2010). Sustaining

high growth requires resources, distinctive leadership competencies, a sustainability strategy, and innovative practices (Dillen et al., 2018; Loucks et al., 2010). Firms constrained by financial resources are less likely to invest in sustainable strategies.

Long-term success and sustainability strategies depend on value creation for all stakeholders, effective planning, and strategy orientation (Zhang & Zhang, 2016; Jansson et al., 2016). As noted by Dillen et al. (2018) during the growth phase, entrepreneurs that give managerial tasks to other managers tend to experience long-term sustainability because they focus on strategically important issues to sustaining high growth. According to Ikebuaku and Dinbabo (2018), entrepreneurial education and business, develops positive affect entrepreneurial success strategies.

Influential leaders should analyze their planning processes annually and quarterly to ensure their business' production, competition, and opportunities remain. Restaurant owners must create standard operating procedures that provide employees with step-by-step operational instructions to ensure consistency and compliance with regulations (Barbé et al., 2016). An effective formulating strategy must include a critical analysis of the company and experiences to facilitate an effective and adaptive decision-making process. The strategy also needs to include objectives to ensure strategic priorities are working at all levels of an organization to coordinate actions, and employees feel motivated to implement plans that will lead to superior performance and growth.

Firms that engage in sustainability tend to adopt innovative practices (Loucks et al., 2010). Strategy development includes an understanding of the business environment and predicting future performance. Understanding the components is vital to



entrepreneurs and financiers like venture capitalists and shareholders. Without prior knowledge of failed ventures, future failures will plague SMEs, which is a group that suffers a high failure rate. According to Bilal et al. (2017), business failure is costly and disruptive to firms and entities that fund these projects. SMEs oriented toward sustainability and multifaceted, meaning they have endless possibilities for strategy development. However, such a firm must understand whom benefits (customer and stakeholders) and the risks and challenges of building a sustainable business (Loucks et al., 2010).

With an improved understanding of potential strategies, restaurant owners may improve their sustainability, raising their businesses' chance of surviving beyond 5 years. Establishing operating practices and having a strong market understanding of systematic processes can help business owners adjust their business models proactively as external environmental factors change, thus supporting sustainability. Service and quality inconsistency are strategic risks to restaurants and cause failure (Attri & Kushwaha, 2018). Small business owners must acquire the ability to implement both planned and emergent strategies to ensure that the overall performance remains high and sustainable (Frid, 2015).

### **Customer Engagement**

Customer loyalty and retention are essential. The process of owners managing the relationship with stakeholders affects the firms' propensity to gain and sustain a competitive advantage. Increased engagement occurs where stakeholder engagement

activities are numerous and of a high quality, which indicates the importance and quality of collaboration between an organization and its stakeholders (Dyer et al., 2016).

Loyalty and trust among leaders are essential components in a business, and both must sustain for continued success. Marketing or customer service can promote loyalty and trust. Employees and customers must equally invest in loyalty and trust factors. The factors leading to positive and negative attitudes are different; motivating factors (those that are more likely to lead to satisfaction) give employees a sense of accomplishment (McKnight et al., 2017). Several positive outcomes associate with having the loyalty and trust of customers. Increasing these emotions is part of relationship marketing. The cost associated with marketing to serving loyal customers is lower than accumulating new customers. Loyal customers are less sensitive to price changes, as they emotionally connect to the brand and products, and they are likely to recommend a brand based on their experiences (Bardauskaite, 2014).

The reliance on customer relationships within the framework of strategic planning is fundamental to understanding the impact of corporate social responsibility (CSR) and corporate social irresponsibility (CSI). Restaurant owners increasingly push to participate in CSR activities (Albus & Ro, 2017). Kim and Kim (2014) noted that restaurant owners who incorporate CSR activities into daily business operations will increase profitability and customer loyalty. Restaurant owners using CSR's can increase their focus because consumers have direct access to social media platforms, which provide real time information on socially responsible and irresponsible activities. The use of technology and social media by business owners and consumers increased competition drastically

(Musonera & Weber, 2018; Schaupp & Bélanger, 2013). Restaurant knowledge is critical in the consumer decision-making process regarding food, experience, and price (Seo et al., 2013).

Customer engagement in establishing product and service differentiation aligns with the business owner in developing products that consumers demand (Katona, 2015). Therefore, restaurant owners need to provide informative advertising and marketing, including illustrations of food, employees, and the restaurant, allowing consumers to establish familiarity and associate risk with the restaurant (Seo et al., 2013). Restaurant owners should implement practices of providing quality customer service into strategic plans. Quality customer service that influences customers and fosters strong customer loyalty has a strategic competitive advantage for restaurants. Business leaders achieve sustainability by finding solutions for improving unsustainable products and services to benefit consumers, society, and the environment (Hörisch et al., 2014). The lack of CSR activities may decrease restaurant profitability because of increased reputational risk (Kim & Kim, 2014).

Consequently, intentional CSR sometimes involves a legal violation and could result in penalties, large compensation payouts, customer losses, decreased employee engagement, and irreparable reputation damage (Lin-Hi & Müller, 2013). Consumers hold firms to a higher standard of accountability for exceeding expectations and responding to negative events quickly and positively (Kane, 2014; Wilburn & Wilburn, 2016). Attri and Kushwaha (2018) highlighted that service and quality hiccups are

dangers to restaurants that can cause business failure. Creating a relationship with customers is critical to maintaining sustainability (Glabiszewski, 2016).

### **Marketing Strategy**

The knowledge, skills, and abilities in the present crop of small restaurant marketers are deficient (Kooli, 2016). Restaurant owners who focus on market orientation may increase their competitive advantage through strategic competition. According to Kooli (2016), education and training on modern marketing approaches and techniques are essential for all companies that wish to compete globally. Regarding the restaurant industry, Kooli asserted that advancements in information technology communications, mobile telephony, and social media impacted marketing tremendously. This change empowered customers to have a significant influence on the marketing process. Therefore, restaurant owners' marketers need to remain aware of these changes to gain the advantage.

A small business owner's motivation to change their business model to the franchisee has a desire to grow its brand and enhance the overall performance. The promotion can come through marketing or customer service. Employees and customers must equally invest in the business. Factors leading to positive and negative attitudes of business leaders vary. For example, motivating factors (those that are more likely to lead to satisfaction) give employees a sense of accomplishment (McKnight et al., 2017). Several positive outcomes exist associated with loyalty and trust in the parts of customers. The cost associated with marketing to and serving loyal customers is lower than accumulating new customers. Loyal customers are less sensitive to price changes, as

they emotionally tie to the brand and its product, and customers are likely to recommend a brand based on their experience (Bardauskaite, 2014).

### **Social Media Marketing**

Perry (2014) concluded that small restaurants owners are changing marketing models from traditional offline models to models using innovative online channels such as social media, email, and websites. Kooli (2016) concluded that advancements in information technology communications, mobile telephony, and social media are impacting marketing tremendously. These changes empowered customers to have a significant influence on the marketing process. Therefore, restaurant owners' marketers need to remain constantly aware of these technology and communication changes to gain an advantage.

Social media marketing involves utilizing forums on community-based applications such as Facebook, Instagram, Yelp, and Twitter (Agnihotri et al., 2016). Adopting social media usage in the restaurant industry requires leadership and management to disconnect from the four social media capacity levels. After internalizing the concepts in the context of the four levels, leaders should try to strategically adapt to stay competitive (Wang et al., 2016). Wang et al. (2016) indicated that many business leaders and marketing professionals lack insight to drive social media agendas. Creating barriers to develop and implement digital content strategies increase trust of the brand distinguishes the brand from others. Since social media has an integral part in strategic planning and change how consumers communicate and interact, marketing is a major factor in the success or failure of small independent restaurants (Perry, 2014). Social

media serves as an effective communication platform for two-way feedback between businesses and consumers.

Social media are online forums where users can share opinions, content, perspectives, and insights on anything (Agnihotri et al., 2016). Social media include web-based platforms that facilitate interaction, collaboration, and sharing content between its users. As social media expanded in popularity replacing traditional media forms. Consumers are now using social media as a primary source of news and information about services, products, and brands. Through social media, buyers and sellers interact with one another in a different way through traditional forms of communication.

Restaurant owners can gain a competitive advantage by creating a friendship type relationship with customers by social media rather than traditional marketing methods. After engaging customers by sharing recipes, asking for feedback on dining experiences and menu items, restaurant owners can add posts that include promotions or marketing materials (Kwok & Yu, 2012). Unlike traditional selling or advertising, a two-way communication exists (Kaivo-oja & Lauraeus, 2018).

Barry and Gironda (2018) indicated that many business leaders and marketing professionals lack insight into driving social media agendas, creating barriers to developing and implementing digital content strategies that increase the trust of the brand and thereby distinguishing the brand. Further, Barry and Gironda concluded that marketers may underestimate or misinterpret the value of social capital and content in garnering their targeted audiences' attention. When Media companies like Zagat and

Infatuation share a less than stellar review, it can negatively influence the business because those reviewers can influence the opinions of potential visitors.

Creating perceived value through platforms like social media may also create value for a firm in profitability (Kumar & Reinartz, 2016). Perceived value is a critical concept when trying to develop relationships with customers because it aligns with business owners who develop a competitive advantage in the market. Perceived value leads to customer value, which leads to the creation of customer loyalty and satisfaction (Kumar & Reinartz, 2016).

### **Sustainability**

The function of strategic management is to promote the development and sustainability of resources and capabilities and the selection of strategies that result in sustainable competitive advantages. Inadequate training strategies can threaten the sustainability of small businesses (Froelich, 2015). According to Bekmezci (2015), sustainability integrates economic, environmental, and social objectives into business operations. Operating sustainably is an essential responsibility of business owners. Business incubators and venture capital are effective instruments and critical resources for supporting new small business development and creating a competitive advantage. A leader can gain a competitive advantage when they organize, develop, or acquire a set of attributes to execute actions that allow them to outperform its competitors.

Resources are a major component in business, especially in a small business. As markets continue to expand, having and sustaining a competitive advantage becomes more vital. Kane (2014) argued that to sustain a profit, to gain a competitive advantage

the resource should appear as unique (a resource competitors cannot duplicate). An effective formulating business strategy must include a critical analysis of the company and experience. Business leaders must ensure strategic priorities are appropriate at all levels of an organization so actions can motivate employees to implement plans that can lead to superior performance and growth.

Business leaders achieve sustainability by providing solutions, products, and services that benefit consumers, society, and the environment (Hörisch et al., 2014). The integration of both resources and a competitive environment drive performance, strategy, and competitive behaviors. Operating sustainably is an essential responsibility for business owners. Implementing effective operating strategies helps restaurant owners provide quality products and services that will stand out among competitors (Bolisani & Bratianu, 2018). Continuously modifying and acquiring resources is beneficial for owners to remain sustainable with a competitive advantage (Hitt et al., 2016).

### **Entrepreneurship**

Entrepreneurship has a critical role in the global economy and within market economies. Huang and Knight (2017) conceptualized entrepreneurs as agents of change and growth in a market economy that can accelerate the generation, dissemination, and application of innovative ideas. Entrepreneurship changes the world, create new products and services, and helps global economic growth. Technology is changing quickly. Entrepreneurs need training in technical and personal entrepreneurial skills to adapt to changes.



A business owner will achieve a sustainable competitive advantage to maintain high performance and above-average profitability (Ahmed et al., 2018). To accomplish superior performance, owners, including new venturous, must develop distinctive competencies that are firm specific and include internal processes, decision-making, resources, innovation, and human resource capabilities. Ahmed et al. (2018) highlighted that entrepreneurial competency, based on Penrose's (1959) definition of resource competencies, is unique, critical, and impossible to imitate, which is the entrepreneur's strength.

Entrepreneurship requires ongoing learning to grow and compete (Ahmed et al., 2018). Entrepreneurs must develop strategies to move a business from infancy through the growth phase and to maturity. However, Gray and Saunders (2016) argued that fewer than 61.5% of SMEs survive beyond 3 years. Similarly, Bilal noted more than 50% of SMEs that survive for 5 years fail to survive beyond 10 years. Therefore, business leaders must develop or acquire unique competencies to gain a competitive advantage to survive in an increasingly competitive and dynamic global environment. However, the most valuable resource of a firm are entrepreneurs, who must understand the limitations of their capabilities and place suitable people in strategic roles to sustain high growth (Jansson et al., 2016).

Entrepreneurial orientation and management competencies are not interchangeable skills (Jansson et al., 2016). Strategic entrepreneurship, including managerial entrepreneurs, must have flexibility and adaptability. Business owners must

possess a team skill in maintaining and growing the business over time. Bilal et al. (2017) found that experienced managers are crucial to the successful performance of SMEs.

Entrepreneurial culture emphasizes the emergence of new opportunities, the means to capitalize, and the creation of adequate infrastructure. Entrepreneurship education is the process at human development in the context of identifying and exploiting opportunities and the subsequent transformation into reality, contributing to the generation of financial values, social and cultural society (Hockerts, 2017). By planning and developing strategies and mitigating risk measurement and goals the RBV attributes firms' success to the entrepreneurs' ability to reconfigure, develop, and acquire resources and capabilities to adapt to the external environment.

### **Leadership**

Leadership serves an important function in small businesses (Hockerts, 2017). Most problems and failed projects or objectives in an organization result from inadequate communication processes or poor communication skills. Miscommunication usually occurs if the receiver does not understand the information or idea that the sender tried to transmit. To prevent confusion and misunderstandings, a good leader must know the basics of effective communication and hone their communication skills. In addition, Kautonen et al. (2015) concluded that the development of dynamic communication capabilities of leaders in high technology firms matter significantly for innovative activity.

Leadership is the most important aspect of organizational behavior and can define, influence, and motivate others to achieve a set of organizational goals (Ghasabeh

et al., 2015). Leadership consists of the effective process of delegation and empowerment. In every organization, leadership should delegate work to subordinates by considering the capabilities of the employees. A leader should lead the team, keep them motivated, review outcomes, provide continuous training, and evaluate performance.

Situational leadership is an adaptive leadership style (Ghasabeh et al., 2015). This approach encourages leaders to learn the leadership preferences of their team members. Leaders weigh the many variables in their workplace (for example, gender), and choose the leadership style that best fits their goals and circumstances. The impacts of a leader's mood and emotional intelligence on their leadership behaviors may serve thoroughly by considering potential interactive relationships. Emotionally intelligent leaders should avoid the potentially adverse effects of positive or negative moods by effectively managing their perspectives and engaging in impression management strategies.

### **Customer Loyalty**

Strategic marketing is when companies strive to provide a better customer value than their competitors (Hanssens & Pauwels, 2016). Loyalty and trust are critical factors in business, and both are necessary for success. Promotion can come through marketing or customer service. Employees and customers must invest equally in the company. Business owners must look for different ways of offering more value to customers to satisfy them and establish loyalty. The factors that determine customer perceived value differs significantly from one industry to another. When focusing on a customer-oriented strategy, a leader needs to know which of the offered value components effectively increase customer satisfaction and loyalty.

Creating perceived value for a potential customer may also create value for a firm's profitability (Kumar & Reinartz, 2016). Perceived value is a critical concept to understand when trying to develop relationships with customers. Value is essential in businesses to develop a competitive advantage in the market. Perceived value leads to customer value, which leads to the creation of customer loyalty and customer satisfaction (Kumar & Reinartz, 2016). Bose et al. (2016) considered consumer evaluations on branding while identifying customer engagement differences, perceived value, purchasing procedures, and decision-making in different environments. Organizational psychology, culture, structure, and management objectives leads to a background of knowledge adoption and customer engagement (Gummeson, 2014). Customers' attitudes, intentions, motivations, and experiences with technology might lead to technophobia within a company. The complexity of technology and scope might become overwhelming to management and the organizational culture (Bose et al., 2016).

The components of the everchanging business-to-business (B2B) market environment to improve organizational sustainability are, networking, and business intelligence strategies. Additionally, these components are useful with business owners in becoming profitable. Perceived value is a dual concept that requires marketers to develop a perceived value for their customers. Porter (1985) noted that a firm's competitive advantage comes from its capability to create value for its customers that exceeds the company's costs of creativity. Customer understanding is an essential part of the B2B relationships. Organizational sustainability includes an understanding of customers, their

customer businesses, and the end users' demands to identify needs and add value to product lines (Garrido-Moreno et al., 2015).

### **Transition**

This study consists of three sections: Section 1, Section 2, and Section 3. In Section 1, I presented an introduction to the study, the background of the problem, a problem statement, purpose statement, nature of the study, the overarching research question, and the interview questions used for the study participants. Section 1 also included the conceptual framework used for this study, operational definitions, assumptions, limitations, delimitations, and the study's significance. In Section 1, I discussed strategies for small business sustainability beyond the first 5 years and collected data through semistructured interviews with three small business owners in Connecticut. I concluded Section 1 with a review of the professional and academic literature and focused on areas that influence the small business restaurant industry, and the potential management strategies essential to the survival of small businesses.

In Section 2 of the study, I restate the purpose statement, present information on the researcher's role, the participants, research method, research design, population and sampling, and ethical research discussion. Within Section 2, I also discussed the data collection instruments, data organization techniques, a data analysis, and a section of reliability and validity. Section 3 of this study includes an introduction to the section, a presentation of the findings, application to professional practice, implications for social change, recommendations for action, further recommendations for future research, reflection of the research, and a conclusion.

## **Section 2: The Project**

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive multiple case study was to explore strategies that small business owners in the restaurant industry use to sustain business beyond 5 years. This target population for this study included three small business owners of three full service restaurants in Connecticut who sustained their businesses beyond 5 years. A full service restaurant includes fine dining with table service and a wide selection of foods and beverages. A full service restaurant may also have a coffee shop and specialized ethnic or fast-food offerings. The findings from this study could help small independent full service restaurant owners in sustaining their business operations for more than 5 years and, as a result, create wealth for the owners, employment opportunities, and improved welfare for individuals in communities.

### **Role of the Researcher**

The researcher has a critical and direct role in developing any qualitative study (Yin, 2018). I was the data collection instrument and primary researcher for this qualitative study. The role consisted of selecting an appropriate framework, designing the study, identifying participants, collecting, organizing, assessing, and interpreting data, and presenting the results of the findings.

The researchers should conform to the ethical provisions of *The Belmont Report* (1979). The report includes guidelines that limits any potential risk to vulnerable participants stipulating fair and equal treatment of each participant and gives each participant the right to disengage from interviews (U.S. Department of Health and Human

Services [HHS], 1979). As a doctoral student, I adhered to *The Belmont Report's* ethical standards through all phases of the research.

The researcher's primary objective is to craft a credible argument to gain a perspective and a better understanding of the phenomena through exploration (Takyi, 2015). I was the primary data instrument, collector, organizer, and interpreter of this study. Patton (2015) highlighted that the researcher's role in a qualitative research study is to collect data through in-depth, open-ended interviews. As the researcher, I conducted one-on-one interviews by creating an interview guide to ensure participants received the same questions. Researchers use written communication through conducting a semistructured interview protocol as guidelines for face-to-face interviews (Dikko, 2016).

Quality research is necessary to promote evidence based findings. Researchers should examine their approaches to the process through reflection (Saunders et al., 2015) to engage in sound research strategies. To avoid bias, reflexivity is a relevant and valuable strategy for improving qualitative research. According to Darawsheh (2014), reflexivity is the continuous self-reflection process that researchers engage in to generate awareness about their actions, feelings, and perceptions. Member checking is appropriate for the interviews through audio notes to validate the accuracy of data collected during the semistructured interview process and to eliminate data analysis based on perceptions (Birt et al., 2016).

Part of the role as the researcher involved my interest in the study topic. The relationship with this topic was multiple because of my experience working in the hospitality industry. I have no prior experience in owning an independent full service

restaurant, but I am interested in strategic management, restaurants, and hospitality, and sustainable development topics regarding small businesses.

The relationship between a researcher and a research area aligns with the researcher in understanding participants' perceptions (Berger, 2014). I operated in various managerial positions in the restaurant industry as a seasoned professional, served as a business consultant to restaurant owners, and owned a thriving catering company for 10 years. The prior lack of knowledge about restaurant ownership lessens the extent of the researcher bias (Raheim et al., 2016).

### **Participants**

A researcher should choose participants whose characteristics align with the research question before collecting data (Schrag, 2017). For this study, the eligibility criteria for selecting the participants included small business owners in the restaurant service industry that remained sustainable for 5 years or more. They are successful at creating and implementing strategies relating to the specific business problem.

Selecting the participants was a critical task in the study. Researchers need to choose participants who can provide information that can directly contribute to finding a resolution to the business problem and research question (Kristensen & Ravn, 2015). I selected participants using the purposeful sampling method, and the population sample included the owners of three independent full service restaurants from Connecticut in operations beyond the first 5 years. Purposeful sampling was appropriate for this study because it provided a more in-depth understanding of the strategies participants used to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years.



Before gaining access to the participants, researchers must develop guidelines to ensure participant protection (Chan et al., 2017). Researchers should receive permission from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) before contacting potential participants (Morris and Morris, 2016). In preparing for the participant selection, I made the initial contact by email. I sent an invitation letter to the restaurant owners to introduce myself and provide an overview of the research study. Detailed consent forms were sent through email when potential participants met the eligibility criteria and agreed to participate. The consent forms elaborated on the research, indicated the risks and benefits of being in the study, and included the expectations and participation requirements (Roulet et al., 2017). A follow-up discussion with participants took place by telephone or email to confirm their participation in the study. Speaking to potential participants by face-to-face or telephone is more intimate and effective than electronic communication concerning participation in a research study (Hershberger & Kavanaugh, 2017).

Researchers use interviews in a case study design to ask in-depth questions from participants who experience the phenomenon analyzed (Yin, 2018). In a virtual video conference, prior to interviewing participants, I developed and reviewed the interview protocol with each respondent with a similar method of collecting information. Establishing an interview protocol is critical because it creates a consistent approach to gathering information from participants (Devotta et al., 2016).

Furthermore, when interacting with potential participants, I avoided direct engagement that could cause bias, influence the respondent, or impact the intent of the research. After collecting the information, using NVivo was appropriate to transcribe data

and aid with manipulating information to facilitate data interpretation. During the data collection, the researcher can take notes to capture participants' conversations and record their voices if they have permission from the participants (Chongo et al., 2018). To ensure the participants' privacy, data for this study will remain stored for 5 years and then destroyed.

### **Research Method and Design**

A research design should include a strategic approach for exploring a phenomenon (Fletcher et al., 2015). The research methodology consists of three approaches: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods. For this study, I chose the qualitative research method. Leedy and Ormrod (2016) noted that qualitative research permits a researcher to ask open-ended questions to learn about the research problem. Researchers using the qualitative approach collect and analyze data from various resources to explore the research phenomenon (Morse, 2015). Harrison and Rouse (2015) indicated that qualitative data is appropriate for a researcher in exploring trends, patterns, and themes associated with the study content. A researcher gathers data through interviews, observations, and archival documents (Yin, 2018).

### **Research Methods**

I selected a qualitative method to explore strategies and gain knowledge of strategies and resources small business owners in the restaurant industry use to sustain business beyond the first 5 years. Yin (2018) described qualitative research as (a) a phenomenon on real world experience, (b) insight from participants, (c) recognize interaction conditions of participants, (d) understand participants' behaviors, and (e) tools

to gain multiple sources. Qualitative researchers use open-ended questions and words to obtain a complete understanding of a phenomenon through people's lens (Mertens, 2016). Qualitative research does not involve testing relationships between variables or examining any statistical data (Barnham, 2015).

Quantitative researchers use numbers and hypotheses to test variables and examine numerical data, processes, and relationships that demonstrate certainty and predictable uncertainty (Duta & Duta, 2017). A quantitative approach is most appropriate when the focus is to remain cognizant of objective data and facts that researchers can quantify to determine causality (Crane et al., 2016). Miller and Hill (2017) concluded that researchers could use quantitative research to examine a social phenomenon. The quantitative method was not appropriate for this study because I did not test the relationship between variables, report any statistical findings, establish reliability, or examine a phenomenon. Conducting a qualitative case study was the best approach for this study.

Arbo et al. (2015) described mixed methods research as quantitative and qualitative methodologies to examine a research problem. The mixed method approach, a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, include more time and resources (Yin, 2018). The qualitative approach is adequate when a researcher wants to interview fewer participants in-depth in a natural climate and review written documents (Park & Park, 2016). Reilly (2016) noted that mixed methods research is applied when researchers focus on *why* questions include collecting, analyzing, and incorporating quantitative and qualitative data concurrently or sequentially in a single study. Neither quantitative nor

mixed methods were appropriate for this study. The qualitative research method was more suitable for gaining knowledge of small business owners' strategies and resources in the restaurant industry to sustain business beyond the first 5 years.

### **Research Design**

For this study, I chose to use a case study design. A case study research design is an in-depth and detailed investigation of the development of a single event, situation, or an individual or group of people over time and within a real-world context (Colorafi & Evans, 2016; Saunders et al., 2015; Yin, 2018). I explored and compared three qualitative research designs, phenomenology, ethnography, and a case study, to determine the design appropriate for the study. Phenomenology, ethnography, and narrative designs were unsuitable for this study.

The phenomenological research design was not appropriate for this research study because the objective was to identify the effectiveness of specific strategies applied by owners of independent full service restaurants to remain operable beyond 5 years. The intent was not to expound on the social and psychological perspectives of the owners. The purpose of a phenomenological design is to understand how individuals view themselves based on their experiences of a particular phenomenon and thus draw conclusions about how those experiences influence their lived experiences (Robson & McCartan, 2016). The phenomenological design was not suitable because I did not need to investigate human lived experiences correlated to a phenomenon.

Researchers identify ethnography as describing and interpreting the shared behaviors, patterns, and language of a specific culture over an extended period.

Ethnographic researchers focus on a specific cultural group over long-term use, primarily observational and interview information (Cincotta, 2015). I did not consider the ethnography design for this project because the intent was not to conduct long-term research on site since the participants are independent, full service restaurant owners and not a distinct cultural group (Ellis, 2015).

Researchers use the narrative research design to understand individuals' lives as told through their lens (Yin, 2018). In this study, participants' individual lives are not appropriate because the emphasis is on restaurant owners' strategies for restaurant sustainability. I collected data until no additional information emerged. Data saturation occurs when the researcher can no longer collect data or gather any new data related to the research question. The researcher does not identify new codes or themes (Saunders et al., 2018). For example, I collected data until data saturation emerged without obtaining new information or data. Interviews and data collection are efficient ways to collect quality data to reach data saturation. When further information does not reveal new meanings or themes, researchers achieve data saturation (Varpio et al., 2017).

### **Population and Sampling**

The sample of participants for this study consisted of three small business restaurant owners. Choosing the three participants provided me with a substantial amount of rich data to support the study results. Two types of sampling methods are probability and non-probability. Probability sampling is the distinctive characteristic that each participant in the population has a chance of inclusion (Etikan et al., 2016). Nonprobability sampling is a technique when a researcher collects samples, which does

not give the participants in the population equal opportunities of inclusion (Etikan et al., 2016). I used the nonprobability sampling method because nonprobability sampling is a method of purposive sampling. In addition, nonprobability sampling is the best method for choosing the study population's appropriate sample. Researchers use purposeful sampling to collect as much relevant data as possible to reduce bias (Yin, 2018).

Purposeful sampling permits the researcher to procure select participants rich in information by providing quality, in-depth knowledge of the phenomenon (Benoot et al., 2016; Boddy, 2016; Etikan et al., 2016). I feel that nonprobability sampling was the most appropriate method to use for the study.

Purposive sampling is a method of nonprobability sampling (But & Ap, 2017).

Purposive sampling is the process of finding the appropriate participants who have specific knowledge regarding the research topic. The purposeful sampling method helped me choose small business owners who had success sustaining their businesses beyond 5 years because this specific group possessed the knowledge necessary to answer the research questions.

Data Saturation can ensure that quality and adequate data collected enhances the study (Malterud et al., 2016). Data saturation exists when a researcher continues to come across no new themes or patterns. (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Once data saturation occurs, the process begins for the researcher to analyze the data collected. I ensured data saturation when no new themes or patterns emerged from the interviews with the research participants.

Fusch and Ness (2015) found that researchers who fail to reach data saturation decrease content quality and weaken research validity. Ensuring data saturation entails crafting a saturation grid and the possibility of having another party conduct the coding of transcripts (Fusch & Ness, 2015). I ensured data saturation for the research by conducting interviews with semistructured, open-ended questions with each of the research participants. I summarized the interview results as a part of ensuring data saturation. To determine whether the participants were appropriate for the study, I established an eligibility criterion to avoid gathering data that would not appear adequate. I began by establishing the elements that were critical to the validity of the study. Restaurant owners who successfully sustained their businesses beyond 5 years of operation in Connecticut were appropriate to participate in the study. The participants needed previous experiences in the restaurant industry to ensure they could answer each interview question.

### **Ethical Research**

Practicing ethical procedures during research is critical for a successful study. To maintain ethical standards, researchers must comply with three principles, which are (a) respect for persons, (b) beneficence, and (c) justice (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [HHS], 1979). I issued consent forms to each research participant and provided further clarity on their privacy protections and their rights to discontinue the interview at any time during the interview. Informed consent is a legal, ethical, and regulatory requirement for most research (Grady, 2015).

Informed consent forms are for documenting the researcher's intentions to obtain the maximum level of confidentiality, the trustworthiness of the research participants'

identities, and to inform participants of any potential risks (Perrault & Keating, 2018).

The consent form includes (a) research background information, (b) the interview procedures, (c) participation, (d) the compensation statement, (e) the statement of withdrawal procedures, (f) confidentiality, (g) contact information, (h) IRB approval information, and (i) the interview questions.

The overall goal of most research is to ensure and apply the highest ethical standards in compliance with *The Belmont Report's* standards (Miracle, 2016). The researcher must also emphasize the participants' rights to withdraw from the study at any time. To withdraw their participation, participants could contact me by email or phone to withdraw from the study. During the interview, participants may stop at any time and inform me verbally of their withdrawal. Research participation is strictly voluntary, and no incentives were available for participants in exchange for their time.

During the data gathering, data storage, and data analysis phase, protecting the participants' rights is critical to preserve their privacy (Yin, 2018). To ensure the research participants' ethical protection, I removed each participant's information for anonymity and replaced them with the classified identifiers P-1, P-2, and P-3. Additionally, the data gathered during the research process was safely electronically stored in a code-protected computer for 5 years to ensure the research participants' full confidentiality. After 5 years of completing the study, I will delete all the data obtained during the research. The approval number from IRB for this study is 05-20-20-0673101.



### **Data-Collection Instruments**

I was the primary data collection instrument in this study. In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary instrument for the data-collecting process (Yin, 2018; Bryman & Bell, 2015; Fusch & Ness, 2015). The data collection technique for this study was a set of semistructured, open-ended interview questions. To ensure convenience, I conducted semistructured video conferences and phone interviews at a day and time chosen by the participants as part of the interview protocol. Additionally, before each interview, I provided documents to the participants, which detailed the interview process and protocol. This information within the documents provided the participants with an in-depth understanding of the research and interview process.

As the data collection instrument for this research, I designed and followed the interview protocol (see Appendix A) to ensure the research topic and enhanced reliability. Interview protocols of a case study included an overview, the data collection protocol, interview questions, and a guide for a case study report (Yin, 2018). I enhanced the research data's reliability and validity by member checking, with a summary of my interpretations of each participant's responses. The member-checking process allows participants to review the interview findings' summaries, check for errors, and provide further insights (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Member checking is a significant factor for researchers to enhance the data collected trustworthiness (Birt et al., 2016). Overall, member checking validates understanding between the researcher and the interview participants (Årlin et al., 2019). In the documentation provided to participants at the end of each interview, additional information on the process of pre-approved follow-up

interviews occurred for verification of the perspective from the first audio- recorded interviews.

The follow-up interviews took place 1 to 2 days after the initial contact by email. During the follow-up interviews, the participants reviewed the data and the interpretations from their primary interview for accuracy and error. The data review confirmed the information's overall credibility and ensured the data aligns with the participants' descriptions of their experiences.

### **Data-Collection Techniques**

Data collection is critical in a qualitative research study. Data-collection methods in a case study involve integrating purpose and insightful data through a variety of sources to gain a full and accurate view of an area of interest (Clark & Vealé, 2018). After IRB approval, I started the data collection process, including three sources: semistructured video conference and telephone interviews, audio recording, and note taking. A duration time of approximately 45 minutes in length was appropriate, using voice interpretation and observation and reviewing business documents to align with the interview data. Researchers use various sources to enhance data triangulation and data saturation, which improves the credibility of the results (Mazerolle & Eason, 2018).

A primary source of data collection was open-ended semistructred interviews. I created an interview guide and template, listing the main questions and topics to answer the research questions. This interview template served solely as a guide to maintain uniformity in the wording of questions and preserve the interview's integrity and questions. Notes gathered to confirm the credibility of the information ensured the data

aligns with the participants' descriptions of their experiences. The questions were appropriate to gather information in a variety of ways to attain triangulation with follow-up questions to comprehend the phenomenon (McGrath & MacMillan, 2000). The scheduling of the interviews came by phone call and email to the participants.

I sent a follow-up email to the participants to confirm the scheduled interview time. The recording of interview time was at the discretion of the participants. The scheduled interviews were approximately 45 minutes. The participants signed and dated the consent form prior to the start of the interview session. I conducted each interview amenable to the participant, and with their consent, recorded the interview using the I-phone FaceTime App and audio recorder. The information received insertion in a secure password protected account for transcription and analysis. The follow-up interviews took place 1 to 2 days after the initial interview, and the participants received transcripts by email. During the follow-up interviews, the participants could review the data and the interpretations from their primary interview. The data review confirmed the overall credibility of the information and ensured the data is in alignment with the participants' descriptions of their experiences.

### **Data Organization Technique**

I did not use the participants' real names in the data analysis. I assigned each participant a unique identifier to protect their identities (i.e., P1, P2, and P3). The unique identifiers were necessary to ensure that the research participants' identities remain confidential and protect their privacy. After transforming the data into codes using NVivo software, I began the data analysis process, a software used in qualitative studies.

Researchers use NVivo analysis software to organize, code, analyze data, and review information to reduce the risk of bias (Carney et al., 2017). Researchers can also use NVivo to assess the open-ended responses (Feng & Baher-Horenstein, 2019). I uploaded the data to the NVivo software to organize and store the data.

The software allowed me to store all data in a specific area, giving easy access to all available data. Utilizing the software also helped with the data structure, categorizing information, highlighting specific texts, comparing participants' responses, identifying themes, and providing a summary conclusion (Male, 2016). I executed the data analysis and the Nvivo software accurately and adequately managing the data. The research data will remain secured for 5 years in a locked safe and discarded permanently.

### **Data Analysis**

Researchers use methodological triangulation to combine multiple data sources and validate findings (Joslin & Müller, 2016; Kotus & Rzeszewski, 2015). Methodological triangulation occurs when the researcher collects information from multiple sources, analyzes the data, and uses a set of data to confirm other data (Archibald et al., 2015). Researchers use multiple methods to increase the validity of the study (Abdalla et al., 2017; Yazan, 2015). I gathered information from semistructured interviews and business documents to conduct methodological triangulation. I used methodological triangulation to cross-reference data with documents using Yin's (2018) five-step data analysis process of (a) compiling data, (b) disassembling data, (c) reassembling data, (d) interpreting data, and (e) concluding the data.

**Compiling Data**

Researchers use the compiling phase to organize data sequentially to create a database (Yin, 2018). Organizing the data of the study prior to the analysis allowed me to develop a rich analysis. Compiling the data further allowed the familiarization of the research notes and observations. I recorded the interviews and transcribed them upon completion, which allowed me to review and summarize the data thoroughly.

**Disassembling Data**

The disassembling process consists of formal coding procedures, including breaking down the compiled data into manageable segments and labels (Yin, 2018). Disassembling data in a study aligns with the meaning to the surface, with general coding (Ottinger, 2017). Researchers disassemble data to extract information (Yin, 2018). I disassembled data into smaller segments to extract information and offer data interpretation and meaning.

**Reassembling Data**

The reassembling phase involves reassembling the data to identify common themes and putting them into sequences and groups (Yin, 2018). Dasgupta (2015) noted that theme development should occur without manipulation or bias by the researcher. Researchers reassemble data as part of the data analysis process (Yin, 2018). Researchers use the triangulation, segmenting, and reassembling method to analyze data (Weldam et al., 2017). I reassembled, coded, and labeled data to enable data analysis.

### **Interpreting Data**

The fourth step of data analysis is the interpretation stage (Yin, 2018). The interpretation stage includes the researcher interpreting the data to identify deeper meaning by creating summaries from the sequences and groups compiled in the reassembling phase. Researchers use open-ended questions to aid in interpreting and understanding results and findings (Bryman, 2015). I developed narratives to offer conclusions with open-ended questions to draw information that would interpret the findings. I also used data visualizations to support interpretation and methodological triangulation during the data interpretation phase to analyze common patterns and themes that emerged from the interviews and company documents.

### **Software**

Researchers use qualitative data software such as NVivo 11 for Mac to analyze qualitative data (Hashmi et al., 2015). NVivo is a popular research software tool used in qualitative research to facilitate coding and analysis (Woods et al., 2016). This software can assist with entering notes and save comments during the analysis process (Oliveira et al., 2017). NVivo 11 for Mac to code was appropriate for organizing data and identify themes and patterns. I used NVivo data analysis software instead of TEMI analysis software because NVivo can input and save comments, which is helpful during the data analysis process.

### **Key Themes**

Key themes and significant patterns emerged within the data. I used a thematic analysis approach to identify and report all important themes, as Padgett et al. (2016)

recommended. The key themes correlated with existing literature and raw data that included past and current case studies. I also correlated these key themes with the RBV conceptual framework used in this research study. Qualitative researchers should ensure that themes align with the purpose of the study to avoid deviation (Bowden & Galingo-Gonzales, 2015; Gelling, 2015).

Researchers examine qualitative data to identify the commonality between data categories and themes to understand a phenomenon (Kornbluh, 2015). Researchers gather and analyze data to answer the overarching research question (Levitt et al., 2018). I connected key themes, identified patterns in the data, and correlated themes with recent studies with the conceptual RBV theory framework and the raw data obtained from the interviews through methodological triangulation.

### **Reliability and Validity**

Researchers should rigorously ensure the reliability and validity of their data to strengthen their studies. Qualitative researchers use certain research designs and data collection techniques to address a research topic. Still, the data and conclusions' reliability and validity must receive an evaluation to ensure accuracy (Yin, 2018). Qualitative researchers also seek dependable, credible, and confirmable findings. Rather than validity and view high dependability levels as necessary for valid measures and testing (Chmielewski et al., 2017).

#### **Reliability**

Reliability is the enhancement of dependability in the research. Thomas (2017) recommended that researchers use member checking to increase the research's

dependability and credibility. Researchers should describe their research methodology so that any researcher can follow the details and repeat the results (Yin, 2018). To increase reliability, I interviewed the participants using the interview protocol and used member checking (see Appendix A) by sharing and verifying the finding results and making the necessary adjustments.

### **Validity**

Validity in qualitative studies ensures the data collected has the participant responses' accuracy (Yin, 2018). The data collected, analyzed, and interpreted is the results of data triangulation. Yin (2018) noted a credible method is essential when collecting information to the specified research questions. I employed member checking to ensure that the information obtained from the participants is exhaustive and complete. Ensuring the accuracy of findings reported is key to having valid qualitative research (Yin, 2018).

### **Creditability**

A study's credibility reflects on the researcher ensuring the integrity and trustworthiness of the findings (Nowell et al. (2017); Turner & Endres, 2017). I ensured the credibility of this study's data through member checking. Member checking is appropriate in research to enhance the collected data's validity and accuracy (Birt et al., 2016). I conducted member checking through video conferencing with the participants to establish credibility. After the initial interview with the participants, I followed-up with the participants through email, allowing them to review the interview transcripts'



summaries to ensure their words' accurate capture. I also collected company documents to corroborate the information contained in the interviews.

### **Confirmability**

Researchers confirm information through multiple strategies, including probing questions and triangulation. Marshall and Rossman (2016) suggested that researchers provide evidence to allow other readers and researchers to confirm the findings. I ensured the research confirmability by correlating findings to demonstrate the impact of innovative strategy development on small business sustainability in the restaurant industry.

I confirmed the credibility of the data through member checking and transcribed all the data collected after each interview, including document data. Documenting data checking is another way for other researchers to validate that the researcher took the proper steps after the interviews to improve the confirmability of the study (Dudovsky, 2016). The documented data received recording and put in a journal. Each data collection transcript received verification to ensure clarity to identify errors in the information.

I documented the data checking it throughout to allow other investigators to confirm the necessary procedures pursued before, during, and after the interviews to minimize threats to the confirmability. Methodological triangulation was appropriate to increase the validity and reliability of the research. Methodological triangulation includes using multiple sources of evidence to form a comprehensive conclusion (Cope, 2014). Triangulation is a method of analysis used to compare multiple sources of evidence to verify documentation and manage bias in research (Joslin & Müller, 2016).

Researchers can present confirmability by ensuring research findings are clear though concrete data solidifying the study is valid, credible, and transferable (Amankwah-Amoah, 2014). Marshall and Rossman (2016) suggested that researchers provide evidence to allow other readers and researchers to validate the findings. To ensure confirmability, I used methodological triangulation to mitigate biases.

Researchers seek confirmability to mitigate biases and demonstrate research findings that accurately reflect the participants' responses (Cope, 2014). Cope (2014) noted that researchers could show confirmability by explaining their research findings and data interpretations and ensuring those findings align with the research data. In addition, confirmability occurs when researchers authenticate research findings using data to validate findings (Brott, 2015). Researchers can present confirmability by ensuring their research findings are clear and have concrete data solidifying the study as valid, credible, and transferable (Amankwah-Amoah, 2014).

### **Transferability**

Transferability is a critical part of a research study's validity (Kumar & Rao, 2016). Researchers guarantee transferability by briefing the reader on the characteristics of the population and the methodology of the study (Piškur et al., 2017). Cope (2014) and Marshall and Rossman (2016) defined transferability as a process by which the findings of a study are useful to other researchers. To ensure transferability, I provided a copy of the interview protocol (Appendix A) and the data used to assist future researchers in applying the findings from this study to other contexts.

## **Data Saturation**

Achieving data saturation is critical to conducting quality research (Hua et al., 2016). Researchers determine the criteria for stopping data collection or analysis through data saturation (Saunders et al., 2018). Lowe et al. (2018) found that reaching saturation occurs when no new data or information is relevant to the research questions. The four indicators of reaching data saturation are no new data, no new theme development, coding, and the ability to replicate the study (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Thomas, 2017). I collected data until no new information, themes, or patterns related to the research question emerged. When no further information emerges through additional data collection efforts, the researcher has attained data saturation (Thomas, 2017).

## **Transition and Summary**

In Section 1, I provided a background of the problem, the problem statement, and defined the purpose of this study to explore the strategies restaurant owners use to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years. Furthermore, I detailed the nature of the study, the research question, interview questions, the conceptual framework, a list of operational definitions and assumptions, limitations, and delimitations. Finally, I concluded Section 1 with the significance of the study and a review of the professional and academic literature.

Section 2 consisted of a restatement of the purpose statement, a detailed description of the researcher's role, and a description of the participants. Further expounding Section 2 was the research method, research design, population and sampling, ethical research, a description of the data collection instruments, data collection

techniques, and data organization techniques. To finalize Section 2, I provided data analysis and a detailed description of reliability and validity.

Section 3 consists of a presentation of findings, the application to professional practice, and implications for social change. Section 3 also contains sections on recommendations for actions and recommendations for further research. To conclude Section 3, I inserted information in the reflection and a conclusion of the research.

### Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Social Change

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative multi case study was to explore the strategies that restaurant owners used to support sustainable business growth beyond 5 years. In this section, I presented and discussed the identified themes and patterns. I collected data from three small restaurant owners in Connecticut by conducting semistructured, video conference interviews. I engaged the three participants in member checking to verify that the information was correct, and that the interpretation of their responses was accurate. Member checking continued with any additional information obtained until no additional themes, patterns, or codes emerged. Yin's (2018) 5-step approach was appropriate to compile, disassembling, reassemble, interpret, and concluding the data to analyze the data. Using the methodological triangulation of the data sources, NVivo software was suitable for theme identification process. The five emergent themes related to the sustainability strategies to ensure small business survival in the restaurant industry were: (a) financial stability strategies, (b) experience, (c) technology strategies, (d) customer

loyalty strategies, and (e) strategic planning strategies. The findings revealed how owners used firm resources to achieve sustainability and why some businesses outperform others.

### **Presentation of the Findings**

The primary research question of this study was the following: What strategies do small business owners in the new restaurant industry use to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years? With this research question as the foundation of this study, I interviewed three restaurant owners who used successful strategies to sustain their business beyond 5 years. Although the original intention was to interview five small business owners, I found that interviewing three small business owners was enough to provide sufficient data. In a semistructured interview with five open-ended research questions, the participants provided insight into their sustainable strategies. I also collected public documentation, such as business websites and social media, as secondary data for the study.

I took notes of the participants' identification for researcher purposes and replaced them with unique identifiers in the study; P-1, P-2, and P-3. The unique identifiers were to ensure participant confidentiality and to distinguish the participants to ensure their confidentiality. Participants' personal information, including names, places of business, and locations, received recording electronically and will remain secured in a locked folder in a password protected computer for 5 years, after which I will destroy. I used personal identifiers to apply to the codes and themes identified in NVivo during data analysis. Five themes emerged from the data analysis: (a) financial capital resources; (b) education, technical experience, and skills; (c) challenges implementing technology and

social media strategies; (d) customer loyalty, customer relations, and offering quality services; (e) resource based strategic planning, flexibility, and seasonality. Table 1 includes the themes that emerged when evaluating the data of this study. The findings' presentation is a comprehensive analysis of primary and related themes regarding critical resource strategies to attain sustainability and the competitive advantages used by small business restaurants owners. Firm leaders may gain insight from the results of the study regarding how to identify, assess, and manage the firm's resources.

**Table 1**

*Frequency of Themes Regarding Sustainability Strategies for Small Business Restaurants*

Theme	<i>n</i>	% frequency
Financial capital resources	57	33.9%
Education, technical experience, and skills	30	17.9%
Challenges implementing technology and social media strategies	27	16.1%
Customer loyalty, customer retention, and offering quality services	26	15.5%
Resource-based strategic planning, flexibility and seasonality	28	16.7%

*Note.* *n* = frequency.

### **Theme 1: Financial Capital Resources**

Each participants' financial capital perspectives in the study were unique and diverse. The participants' responses to interview Questions 1, 3, 4, and 5 identified challenges and effective strategies restaurant owners used to access financial resources. Access to financial resources is vital to business survival, especially SMEs (Augustine & Asiedu, 2017). Lack of financial resources inhibits the development of new products or

services and the growth needed to meet customer demand. Consistent with the RBV framework of competitive heterogeneity and immobility, I aligned financial capital insight with the internal resources revealed by various company documents, participant responses, and confirmation of previous studies. Prior research results identified the lack of funding resources, and a clear financial strategy is the main cause of failure (Wennberg & DeTienne, 2014).

Regarding Barney's (1991) VRIN evaluation tool, the internal resources were valuable, rare, difficult to imitate, and non-substitutable. None of the three participants in the study had access to financial institutions. The lack of small business lending by the banking industry and creditors is a major factor in some small businesses' instability and failure (Bishop, 2015). In this study, all three participants said their savings was how they initially financed their businesses. Two out of the three participants had college degrees in disciplines other than the culinary arts.

The three participants (P1, P2, and P3) shared their financial strategies for starting their business. All participants emphasized that they financed their businesses through their savings since they did not receive any loans. Small business owners struggle to sustain themselves in businesses because of limited opportunities to receive large businesses' financial support (Falkner & Hiebl, 2015). P1 stated, "Over the years, we used the funds we accumulated to finance our business." A former culinary educational experience presented an opportunity for her and a schoolmate to go into business together. P2 and P3 also expressed that becoming a restaurateur was an opportunity that fell into their lap. P2 noted:

By chance, I fell into a business on the other side of town on the Westside. What I mean by 'fell into it' is that a friend's brother was getting rid of his business because he was going bankrupt, and it just became available. My current business. This is now going back 28 years.

P1 stated she was not prepared or financially stable initially, so she could not turn down the proposition. P2 and P3 also deployed personal savings as the immediate option to fund the business. To cut on initial expenses, all participants grew their restaurant businesses organically. P1 stated that in strategizing to cut costs rather than start with fully staffed departments, they ran the entire operation and relied heavily on family members or temporary enlisted help. "We're a family-run business, so it's myself, my business partner, and my middle child. It's keeping the costs low." P1, P2, and P3 stated, "The biggest resource was the fact that I could do a lot of the work myself which covered expenses and bases that normally other business owners have to pay." Other SMEs explore internal and external sources during their business's growth phase (Abe et al., 2015). The RBV theory includes that firm performance differences stem from differences between firms regarding their resources (Barney, 1991; Helfat & Peteraf, 2015; Wernerfelt, 1984). Entrepreneurs who know about funding options are likely to make better choices regarding financing ventures than those who do not. Depending on the venture, some resources of funding are more appropriate than other funding options. Understanding capital funding resources is an essential skill for entrepreneurs (Sayin, 2016).



## **Theme 2: Education, Technical Experience, and Skills**

The second theme of the study was that intangible resources such as education and technical experience are necessary for SME sustainability and success. All respondents indicated that their educational backgrounds, skill sets, experiences, and training had critical roles in developing the strategy that contributed to business sustainability in the first 5 years. All participants acknowledged they had some type of introduction and knowledge into the culinary industry. The (RBV) theory theory scholars argued that knowledge exists as a non-specific means with distinct characteristics, making knowledge the most significant and valuable resource (Lin & Wu, 2014).

P1 indicated they had formal training, having attended culinary school, and worked overseas in Italy. P2 and P3 revealed their college backgrounds encompassed other disciplines besides the culinary arts. P2 stated he had a background in biochemistry, microbiology, and genetics. P2 said that although his background was in carpentry and biology, his introduction to becoming a restaurateur was presented to him by a colleague. Past studies found a direct relationship between an owner's level of education and business success, with a higher level of education resulting in an improvement in turnover, growth, and success (Akinboade, 2015; Williams et al., 2016). From the perspective of scholars reflecting from the knowledge-based view, a firm's knowledge base must reflect the business with a resource advantage that helps create a strategic competitive advantage (Pollitte et al., 2015).

### **Theme 3: Challenges Implementing Technology and Social Media Strategies**

According to Jones et al. (2015), over 95% of SME owners reported that social media and innovative technology had a huge to moderate impact on their businesses. The greatest challenge for companies regarding social media marketing is figuring out how and when to use it appropriately and efficiently (Bruce & Solomon, 2013; Harris et al., 2013; Kiron et al., 2013). The data collected from interview question responses and business documents align with the idea that restaurant owners must adapt to the restaurant industry's changes stemming from technology, social media, and the economic environment. Social media and technology changed the way SMEs relate to their customers (Dewan & Ramaprasad, 2014). Fillis and Rentschler (2010) further asserted that technology became critical for small businesses, but small business owners are apprehensive about adopting modern internet marketing strategies and practices. Greene et al. (2015) explained that one of the five competitive internal resources of a business is technology. All participants revealed social media and advanced technology were key resources used to enhance business sustainability during the current pandemic. Social media platforms used by participants included Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. All of the participants revealed that within 10 years, social media and the evolution of technology are challenging to adjust. DiPietro et al. (2012) concluded that the restaurant industry leaders were unsure how to use social media to benefit.

The COVID-19 pandemic is the most recent challenge that participants experienced. The policies created in reaction to the pandemic contained the spread of the virus, which negatively impacted business. Participants mentioned a need to change their

communication models with restricted human interaction during the COVID-19 pandemic to include more social media marketing. The participants said they had to heavily rely on social media and other technological communication forms to provide their menus and business updates to their clients. Online customer relationships can help bridge the gap between the producer and consumer to create value (Xie et al., 2016). Although Todor (2016) highlighted that the most efficient marketing strategy involves combining both traditional and digital marketing, participants in this study indicated they rely heavily on digital marketing rather than traditional marketing methods because of convenience. None of the participants used common forms of traditional media such as newspapers, brochures, paper menus, and billboards for marketing. The participants converted to a digital menu for contactless interaction.

P1 stated social media is a primary resource that increased business survivability during the pandemic. P2 stated, “Technology has come into our business in the last maybe 10 years, shifting [us away] from the traditional way of utilizing pen and pad for communication and paper menus.” P3 highlighted that “Social media [has] helped [us] communicate to customers, showcase food, and interact with customers to let them know of current status regarding promotions and [the] current status of [the] business.” P3 also stated:

When this whole COVID thing happened, I was on social media so much, promoting my family meals, and they helped me get through this pandemic. I created a whole new cult following because the value and the deals I was giving were so good. But it wasn't that they were so good in price, they were so good at

what they were getting. Everything was at the same standards as if they were going to sit down here at the restaurant.

All participants mentioned that incorporating other technology strategies like delivery services, including ordering online through Uber, Grub Hub, Door Dash, and calling ahead, is essential in contributing to business success. The owners responsible for creating online ordering experiences as a resource can lure larger amounts of customers to their site and expand business (IBIS World, 2018). Technological developments collate with unprecedented changes to how firms engage with existing and prospective customers. Restaurateurs who focus on market orientation can increase competitive advantage through strategic competition.

Implementing social media marketing strategies successfully does not include formal training or a full understanding of various social media platforms' components. However, in alignment with the RBV theory literature, innovative and successful owners likely have some awareness of how to use available technological resources to create a competitive advantage (Perrigot and Pénard, 2013). If business owners do not take the time to understand the general use of social media as a marketing tool, their businesses' growth could experience a negative impact (Li, 2012). Social media can have an adverse impact on business. P3 indicated that a “negative comment on the restaurant’s social media sites could create a loss of business.” P3 also said that

Because we are in a world of social media that can destroy you very fast as opposed to 20 years ago if somebody didn’t like something, how many people can

they tell? You do it on social media, you might have 2,000 friends, and they can all see it.

Being active on social media can allow business owners to facilitate positive conversation, identify customer concerns, obtain information for new menu items and recommendations for better services, and communicate with customers through challenges such as customer dissatisfaction or the current pandemic. Small business restaurant owners should create strategies to combat negative comments and posts on social media sites.

#### **Theme 4: Customer Loyalty, Customer Retention, and Offering Quality Services**

The fourth theme of the study included quality services, identifying talent, and customer retention. All three participants acknowledged that customer retention and quality service were critical components to their overall financial strategies to remain successful in a highly competitive business environment. Guchait et al. (2015) discussed that service quality influences competitive advantage regardless of the industry. All participants said they understood that the source of income for the business was their customer base and that providing exceptional customer service was essential to their success and long-term survivability. P1 stated, “In the restaurant business, offering quality food at great prices motivates customers to keep coming back. It’s these loyal customers that form a solid customer base and spur the business growth.” P2 stated:

Offering quality products is easy for small-restaurant owners that are limited from going big on expensive loyalty programs. I make croissants from scratch, and my wife for many years was in charge of making cookies from scratch. So those two

items along with our gourmet coffee were the basis for creating these groups that would always come back, creating customer loyalty.

Loyalty positively impacts profits (Hwang & Park, 2018). Retaining existing customers costs less than attracting new customers, and loyalty leads to positive feedback and reputation through word of mouth and social media outlets. P3 indicated that another big advantage of small-restaurant owners is the ability to get close to their customers. They can greet them when they come in, call them by name, and take interest in their personal lives. P3 stated, “One woman told us, ‘I came in, you all greeted me, I left with my food, and the next time I came in, you called me by name.’” These personalized experiences make customers happy and encourage them to come back.

Owners using a customer retention strategy align with the RBV conceptual framework. Miller and Hill (2017) stated that a strong relationship exists between customer satisfaction, customer loyalty, customer retention, and profitability. All participants revealed that excellent customer service, tailoring service to customer needs, and developing high-quality products to survive beyond 5 years are primary goals in achieving customer loyalty and retention. Carraresi et al. (2016) highlighted that the RBV view is helpful because it includes the concept that a leader or owner enhances financial performance by exploiting a firm’s internal resources and capabilities. The participants in this study recognized the benefit of retaining customers for their overall financial strategy to survive in business.

Wernerfelt (1984) argued in the RBV construct that making effective use of the firm’s capabilities is an essential factor of organizational success and sustainability.

Business survival is a function of the proper use of resources and capabilities (Hart, 1995). Small restaurants often fail because they lack profitability and growth (Hua et al., 2016). All owners in this study used their resources and capabilities in their customer retention strategy to survive in an industry in which many competitors fail.

### **Theme 5: Resource-Based Strategic Planning, Flexibility, and Seasonality**

Seasonality and flexibility emerged by all three of the participants. Reflecting on the RBV theory, successful strategic planning processes in SMEs include the internal resources and externally available resources that the owners can secure and control (Carraresi et al., 2016;). Seasonal cycles of demand present major problems for small business owners (Shields & Shelleman, 2013). All participants indicated that they used resource-based strategic planning to achieve success in their businesses. During member checking, the participants specified the causes of imbalanced sales linked with seasonality: (a) weather, (b) holidays, (c) economic challenges, (d) labor and (e) current trends. P3 highlighted their restaurant only had dine-in service for customers to enjoy food. Reflecting on the current trends and economic challenges, P3 stated, “The pandemic did open my eyes to the things where I was able to learn how to save money on labor and opened my eyes up to a lot of things.” Proper business planning is critical to survival (Box, 2011). P3 also noted:

I think, in hindsight, it did create another market for me that I never thought that I could do, which was takeout. So, for me, the pandemic, as stressful as it was and financially hurting, I think it also positioned me better from a perception of the

consumer seeing me as more than just a steakhouse. So it has evolved me into doing different things.

In the literature, the importance of small businesses' use of internal resources during the strategic planning process emerges to achieve the objectives and goals (Carraresi et al., 2016). Strategic planning is a priority for SMEs in identifying, allocating, and maximizing scarce resources for business growth (Gray & Saunders, 2016). P2 described the recession of 2008 as a massive slowdown and caused so slowdowns in the past. P2 said, "Really that was the only one, but this pandemic has changed things because it has also required us to change and be flexible [about] the way we do business in the restaurant industry as a whole." P1 indicated that the need for flexibility, pivot to challenges, and have enough labor were major issues.

We kept our employees, as many as wanted to work. We allowed them to work, whether we had work or not. Thankfully, luckily, many of them did not want to work, which was good for us because it would have killed us if they all went to work. We would have had to pay people. So, the PPP money came through. That helped me a lot. That helped us go back into the black. Instead of losing money, we started making a little bit of money. Now I would say we are about 80% of normal, which is on the profit side.

The planning processes generally are adoptable by owners based on their unforeseen and current circumstances including various areas such a budgeting, financial planning, operational planning, and production. The process leads toward ensuring that the owner's plan remains within the limits of their available resources. Resource-based



strategic planning aligns with the RBV conceptual framework, which reflects the SMEs' strategic development to enhance growth and profitability when the plan links to resources that are heterogeneous and inimitable (Pergelova & Angulo-Ruiz, 2014).

Considering the limited nature of resources, budgeting and general financial planning are essential aspects of the firms' strategic planning process to achieve sustainability.

Resource-based strategic planning is a critical success strategy according to a detailed review of documents, notes, and member checking with all respondents and this reflects their dependence on the resources that they could easily access during the startup period.

### **Applications to Professional Practice**

Access to resources for business survival remains a significant challenge and conversation in the restaurant industry. Identifying strategies to minimize the challenge is an ongoing concern in business research. The findings and the recommendations of this study could better support restaurateurs, restaurant industry professionals, educators, and small business owners by furthering their knowledge of small business strategies to sustain business beyond 5 years. The findings of the study could also contribute significantly to professional business practices by providing a guide for (a) operating an independent full service restaurant with limited resources, (b) determining whether an internal resource is heterogeneous and immobile, (c) assessing internal resources to determine their competitive advantage, and (d) leveraging internal resources to achieve ideal outcomes. The findings align with the RBV theory, which includes the premise that owners should develop their business strategies based on their internal and external resources. The owners can access and control entrepreneurial and business management

skills, education, technical skills, and previous business experience, enabling a competency-based entrepreneurial strategic development process (Bashir et al., 2018).

SMEs owners can use the results of the study to formulate successful business strategies based on their unique resources that are valuable, rare, non-substitutable, and inimitable that will support long-term sustainability (Kazlauskaitė et al., 2015; Alonso et al., 2015). Mathooko and Ogutu (2015) highlighted that industry allies' benefit from sharing resources to improve cost efficiencies and minimize rivalries. Industry leaders, hospitality professionals, and independent restaurateurs should consider collaborating with individual and collective improvement. Identifying strategies for access to resources might help small business owners obtain loans and take advantage of other opportunities to increase their success rate. Successful small business restaurant owners may create positive social change through innovation, job creation, and economic growth that benefits small businesses, employees, local, state, and the U.S. government.

### **Implications for Social Change**

The findings from the data and analysis clarify the strategies that small business owners used to survive beyond 5 years. The implications for social change for the study include the potential to develop strategies for small business growth and sustainability in competitive environments through effective business practices. The conceptual framework underlying this study was the RBV theory pioneered by Penrose (1959). Wernerfelt (1984) further described that the RBV theory functions on the premise that identifying and evaluating a firm's state internal and external resources is important to sustaining a competitive advantage.

The performance and sustainability of a business weigh heavily on the resources owned and controlled by the firm (Wernerfelt, 1984). Wernerfelt (1984) theorized a firm's success depends on the leader's ability to acquire and control valuable, rare, and non-substitutable resources and capabilities. Culinary arts and hospitality students need to understand the necessary business requirements and components of the restaurant industry. Consequently, these students might increase their chances for success not just in the kitchen but in the marketplace. Successful restaurateurs need to provide training opportunities, for example, internships and apprenticeships, or serving as mentors to culinary students might contribute to positive social change. Business leaders might increase opportunities for success by partnering with external firms in other disciplines as a part of sustainability strategies. Business owners could use these results to develop internal competencies or skills and identify strategies to improve their overall success and survival opportunities (Kor et al., 2016). Small business restaurant owners could contribute to positive social change by implementing recommendations from this study to increase revenues for environmental initiatives, such as programs to promote nutritional awareness and healthy food choices.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

I researched the successful strategies small business restaurant owners used in Connecticut to promote sustainability for more than 5 years. Many recommendations on sustainability strategies for small business restaurant owners emerged based on the results of this study. The findings of this study may contribute to the growth and sustainability of independent full service restaurants across the United States. The findings of this study

are valuable for not only existing owners of independent full service restaurants, but anyone who considers venturing into the new restaurant industry. A restaurant owner opening their establishment with a strategic business plan based on scholarly research should have the ability to anticipate competitive challenges and pivot against them effectively. Established restaurant owners who update their business plans annually mitigate risk and demonstrate flexibility in response to market forces and unforeseen circumstances.

Penrose (1959) focused on versatile resources that business owners could use to recombine resources in various ways to create growth. Restaurant owners could use Porter's five forces, the four Ps of marketing, the RBT, knowledge theory, and SWOT analyses as foundations to revise annual business and marketing plans. New and tenured small business restaurant owners should integrate financial management plans and budget forecasting for short and long-term considerations within initial business plan development or annual strategic management reviews. Penrose (1959) analyzed the linkages between firm resources and firm growth. Available resources can limit growth, stimulate, and largely control the direction of expansion (Penrose, 1959).

The findings of this research could prove valuable for others, besides owners of independent full service restaurants, as a guide for business growth sustainability. The results should receive dissemination in journals at conferences and discussed by organizational leaders during regular meetings. The Connecticut Small Business Association, the American Culinary Federation, and the National Society of Minorities in Hospitality could distribute this study's results to their members.

## Reflections

I chose to study a small business strategy in the restaurant industry for sustainability because restaurateurs influence U.S. economic growth and employment (National Restaurant Association, 2017). In recognizing the specific business problem that some small business restaurant owners lack sustainability strategies for financial growth, I analyzed the study results without preconceived notions about restaurant successes or failures. I explored the results of the data to understand small business restaurant sustainability strategies without bias and desired an understanding of the data in a transparent manner and a nonbinary opinion. I do not work in the restaurant industry and conducted research interviews with participants with no expectations or bias on how they answered the interview questions.

I intend to share this study's results with beginning and struggling restaurateurs, culinary arts students, culinary arts teachers, food-related communities, established restaurant owners, and other independent or corporate restaurant managers. These leaders could use the recommendations from the results of this study to enhance profitability and sustainability. I expect that sharing this study's results may benefit other small business owners seeking strategies to maximize profit and sustainability. As I have associations with local business groups, national organizations, and other professional groups, I will present the findings to them for consideration. Friends who operate restaurants, food carts, or catering businesses, work in the hospitality business, or are professional chefs expressed interest in the business problem of small business strategies to promote

sustainability. No doubt, the results of this study will provide value to other small business leaders outside of the restaurant industry.

I graduated with a Bachelor of Science in Foodservice from Johnson and Wales University in 2012. I obtained a Master of Business Administration in 2015 and chose to pursue a Doctor of Business Administration at Walden University in 2017 to gain advanced management skills for the workplace. Since starting this doctoral journey, my life changed drastically in many ways. I delivered my first child, entered a romantic relationship, and experienced health conditions. I struggled with time management, fitness goals, relationships, work life balance, and focus many times during the DBA journey. However, I chose not to leave but dedicate myself to moving forward and completing the research. I grew professionally and academically through the challenges and rewards of a DBA program. I appreciate the guidance and mentorship of multiple Walden University faculty, especially my department chair, and received encouragement and inspiration from many Walden colleagues that I now call friends.

I held no preconceived opinions on the possible outcome of this study, and completing the last section was exciting and relieving. I could understand the research process better upon having a completed document. The initial months and years of the doctoral studies at Walden University appeared fragmented and compartmentalized. The struggle with the research concepts, styles of writing, and processes was notable. I was frustrated because of the length of the doctoral study and learned the virtue of patience because rushing the work did not produce quality material. After completing the study, I felt confident with the logic, themes, and recommendations for actions. I am encouraged

by the final study and hope that my second and future studies become easier to complete as my research skills improve. I now have a newfound respect for social change.

### **Conclusion**

Some small business owners lack strategies for sustainability. The findings of this study are significant for restaurant owners striving for sustainability and can teach them to leverage their minimal internal resources using informal strategies to create sustained competitive advantage. Although more than 50% of restaurants fail in the first 5 years of operation, costing \$2.1 billion annually in lost national revenue, sustainable restaurants are among the top economic contributors to the United States economy. Restaurants are the second-largest private-sector employer (Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2017). The findings of this study revealed that successful owners of independent full service restaurants knew how to respond to presented challenges. The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the strategies that independent full service restaurant owners use to sustain business beyond the first 5 years. The strategies identified in the findings provide solutions that owners of independent full service restaurants can use to grow and sustain their businesses.

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## Appendix A: Interview Protocol

1. I will contact participants by email or phone to ensure they will participate in the study.
2. I will contact participants by email or phone to set time and location of interviews.
3. Introduce self to participant(s).
4. I will recap the purpose of the study, go over contents, answer any questions, and provide the consent form to be signed.
5. I will record the interview with an audio recorder.
6. Span approximately 60 minutes for responses to the 5 interview questions, including any additional, follow-up questions.
7. End interview sequence; discuss member checking with participants to ensure accuracy.
8. Thank the participants for participation in the study. Reiterate contact numbers for follow up questions and concerns from participants.
9. End protocol.



## Appendix B: Letter of Invitation &amp; Consent

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

Dear: <Participant>:

My name is Alexandria Wilhoite, a student at Walden University. You are invited to participate in a research study concerning small business sustainability. You were chosen for this study because you are the owner of a restaurant that has surpassed the fifth year in business. I need your help to identify the management strategies used in the restaurant industry to sustain business more than 5 years. This form is part of a process called “informed consent” to allow you to understand this study before deciding whether to participate.

If you agree to be part of the study, you will be asked to partake in an interview. The interview will take approximately one hour. With your permission and consent, I will ask you questions and record your answers. Your personal information and documents will remain confidential and will not be published nor shared with any individuals or organizations. The plan is to share the results and outcomes of this study with you, business firms, academia, and organizations, including for-profit and nonprofit organizations. Participants may elect to withdraw from the study through e-mail or phone call to the researcher. Participants will not receive any compensation for study participation.

Your participation can make a difference in fostering business success and employment for small business owners in the hospitality field and restaurant industry. If you decide to participate in this study, please contact me by phone at 917-806-3191 or by email at wilhoite123@gmail.

Thanks for your time and consideration,  
Sincerely,  
Alexandria N. Wilhoite, MBA  
DBA Candidate Walden University