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Small and Medium Enterprises Strategies for Winning Mining Contracts for Profitability and Sustainability

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Walden University

College of Management and Technology

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Patrick Sipopa Akayombokwa

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Abstract

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and Sustainability

by

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MBA, Walden University, 2014

BEng, University of Zambia, 1993

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Business Administration

Walden University

April 2021

Abstract

Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in Zambia experience annual failure rates of 20%. SME survival is essential for improving national economic development and social benefits. Grounded in a resource-based view and Freeman's stakeholder theory, the purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies supply and contracting SME owners used to avoid failure. Data were collected through semistructured interviews from four successful SME owners in Zambia and a review of company documents. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Three themes emerged: competitive quality products, interactive marketing and financial strategies, and resource acquisition and effective utilization. The key recommendations are for SME leaders to maintain quality product delivery, maintain SME visibility, and nurture value chain stakeholder relationships. The implications for positive social change include potentially improving mining industry SME leaders' ability to create and sustain local community jobs and increase tax revenues that support infrastructure improvements and social programs in local communities.

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Dedication

I dedicate this study to my parents, who I was blessed enough to have as my first tutors in life, whose principles still guide me, and to my late mother Florence, rest in peace. I also dedicate this study to my family who have been there for me. I also dedicate this study to my friends who have supported me, and those who did not as they nevertheless encouraged me.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study

Small- to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) globally contribute to nations' economic growth through the generation of employment and value addition, and they makeup over 95% of global enterprises (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2017). In Zambia, SMEs account for the development of the economy by creating employment and increasing the tax base and revenues (Nuwagaba, 2015). SMEs' effective performance is thus cardinal to the country's development for various economic and social benefits. The Zambia Development Agency (ZDA) has been state mandated to regulate and monitor SMEs, but there are inadequate documentation and clarity of ZDA activities (Nuwagaba, 2015).

Zambia's SME capacity utilization was among the lowest in the Sub-Saharan Africa region at 67% (World Bank Group, 2018). The Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) indicated a high Zambian SME failure rate of 20% for the period from 2012 to 2014 from surveys carried out by GEM (GEM, 2019). GEM identified key constraints that include lack of finance, weak capital market, poor business operations knowledge, lack of sufficient government support, lack of technology, and unsupportive cultural and social norms. Other researchers have identified SMEs' critical success factors like management competence (Celec & Globocnik, 2017), firm strategic orientation, the capacity to learn and innovate (Adamseged & Grundmann, 2020), and SMEs' contribution to gross national product (Nuwagaba, 2015). In this qualitative study, I aimed at exploring strategies that SME owners and managers use to win contracts for profitability and sustainability.

Background of the Problem

SME owners in developing countries invest and create profitability strategies that contribute significantly to national economic and social development with the government's right infrastructure and strategic policies (Nuwagaba, 2015). Zambia's main export commodity and direct foreign exchange earner was copper, accounting for over 70% of total exports (Central Statistical Office, 2019). Despite this dominant export market share, Zambian SMEs' participation in the mining industry through the provision of goods and services to mining companies was neither accounted for nor analyzed explicitly by the ZDA. The ZDA is the Zambian government's premier economic development agency that derives its overall direction from its economic development plan.

According to the ZDA (2019a), 4,126 ZDA-supported SMEs created 10,970 jobs in 2018 compared to 10,328 jobs created in 2017 by 4,955 ZDA-supported SMEs. ZDA recorded an increase in the number of jobs created, despite a decline in the number of ZDA-supported firms over the period from 2017 to 2018. Hence, the number of jobs created was not proportional to the ZDA-supported number of firms over the 2017–2018 period. SMEs' capacity utilization may be low due to the failure to win mining contracts due to SMEs' lack of knowledge and effective strategies. SMEs' success depends on the strategy employed by SME managers to obtain contracts. Thus, it was imperative to explore, understand, and provide SME strategies to Zambian and global SMEs that may support SME owners and managers and provide business learning.

Problem Statement

SMEs' profitability is critical to national economies for economic and social growth, value addition and creation, and gross domestic product (GDP) increases. SMEs comprise the highest percentage of firms and contribute the largest number of new jobs (OECD, 2017; U.S. Small Business Administration, Office of Advocacy, 2018).

Zambia's SME capacity utilization of 67% was below the regional average of 70% and the global average of 72% capacity utilization per a 2012 to 2014 survey of 720 Zambian firms (World Bank Group, 2018). The general business problem was that owners of supply and contracting SMEs to mining companies could not obtain sufficient business contracts, resulting in SMEs' lost profitability. The specific business problem was that some supply and contracting SMEs' owners lack strategies for winning mining contracts to improve their profitability and sustain their businesses.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies supply and contracting SME owners used for winning mining contracts for their profitability and sustainability. The targeted population consisted of four SME owners located in the Copperbelt province of Zambia who won mining contracts and sustained their business for over 5 years. The implications for social change include SME business owners' potential to gain knowledge of profitability and sustainability strategies that improve SME business practices and improve Zambian SMEs' performance. SME performance improvement can increase SMEs' contribution to the national GDP and create more jobs in the economy, reducing unemployment. More people employed

increase tax revenues, which can fund and sustain infrastructure improvements and social programs in local communities.

Nature of the Study

Fusch et al. (2018) and Strijker et al. (2020) discussed three research methods: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed. I chose to use the qualitative research method for this study. Researchers use qualitative research methods to explore and understand social phenomena such as behaviors by reducing the problems into words and themes (Abutabenjeh & Jaradat, 2018). I used a qualitative method using open-ended interview questions and reviewing company documents to collect data, analyze patterns to generate themes, and interpret the results. The quantitative research method involves testing a hypothesis by collecting measurable numerical data and statistically examining the relationships among variables (Abutabenjeh & Jaradat, 2018). The quantitative method was not appropriate for this research study because I did not test hypotheses or collect measurable numeric data for inference testing. The mixed-methods approach is a hybrid method that researchers use to systematically integrate qualitative and quantitative methods to collect, analyze, and interpret data (Green et al., 2015). As I was not testing hypotheses about variables' relationships or groups' differences, the mixed-methods approach was not appropriate. The qualitative methodology was the most suitable for this study.

In qualitative studies, researchers use several designs that include (a) case study, (b) phenomenology, (c) ethnography, and (d) narrative inquiry (Mohajan, 2018). I used the case study design. A case study is the in-depth exploration of a social phenomenon or

program to understand what, how, and why behavior in a particular context (Mohajan, 2018; Yin, 2018). A multiple case study design is appropriate when more than one case study is involved and the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are obscure (Yin, 2018). In the case study design, researchers use interviews, observations, and open-ended questions to obtain textual data to analyze and interpret themes to understand the social world context (Mohajan, 2018). Phenomenology research is interpretivism in which researchers explore the personal meanings of participants' lived experiences or their recollections and interpretations of their experiences to generate meanings and gain insights into phenomena (Alase, 2017; Mohajan, 2018). Because I was not exploring the personal meanings of participants' lived experiences with a phenomenon, phenomenology was not appropriate for this study.

Mohajan (2018) and Saunders et al. (2016) defined ethnography as observations used to study the in-depth culture, people, or a group's social world. I did not observe specific people or groups' cultures and hence did not select an ethnographic design. Narrative inquiry interprets a sequence of events from personal stories about participants' lives (Mohajan, 2018; Saunders et al., 2016). I did not study and interpret successful SME owners' life stories, documenting life stories not relevant to the current strategic business practice. Thus, the narrative inquiry was not appropriate for this study. Yin (2018) defined a single case study as an in-depth study of a single case's complexity. Thus, the single case study would not be reliable or appropriate for exploring strategies used across SMEs. The multiple case study design was appropriate for exploring a phenomenon across multiple organizations or for understanding a replicable phenomenon

from the context of business owners (Yin, 2018). The most suitable design for this study to explore SME managers' strategies across SMEs was the multiple case study design. The multiple case study design was suitable for exploring SME managers' strategies through semistructured interviews and reviews of company documentation to understand SMEs' strategies for winning contracts for profitability and sustainability. Triangulation refers to the convergence of evidence from different sources, such as open-ended interviews, company documents, and direct observations (Renz et al., 2018). The multiple case design increased rigor and improved the validity of the findings through data triangulation.

Research Question

The overarching research question for this study was as follows: What strategies do supply and contracting SME owners use to win mining contracts for profitability and sustainability?

Interview Questions

To address the research question, I asked the participants these open-ended interview questions:

1. What key strategies do you use to win mining contracts for competitive advantage for profitability and sustainability?
2. What key strategies do you use to sustain your complement of business contracts?
3. What key strategies do you use for obtaining and deploying resources for winning contracts?

4. What strategic business relationships do you develop to support winning mining contracts?
5. What key capital strategies do you use for winning and sustaining business contracts?
6. What were the key challenges to implementing the successful strategies for winning mining contracts for the business?
7. How did your organization address the key challenges to implementing the successful strategies for winning mining contracts for the business?
8. What other information would you like to add regarding key strategies for winning and sustaining business contracts?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual study framework I selected for this multiple case study was the resource-based view (RBV; Barney, 1986; Bhandari et al., 2020; Wernerfelt, 1984) and Freeman's stakeholder theory (FST; Freeman, 1984; Miles, 2017). In the RBV theory, researchers and scholars posit that a firm has resources and capabilities that help the firm achieve growth, competitive advantage, and long-term sustainability (Bhandari et al., 2020; Celec & Globocnik, 2017). Resources are the combination of land and labor that enables a firm to make products and provide services, while capabilities are a combination of human, physical, and technical resources a firm's members possess and the higher-order systems that are deployable as processes (Sims et al., 2016). SME leaders use resources and capabilities to formulate strategies and obtain strategic

positions for their competitive advantage to win business contracts for their profitability and sustainability (Chen & Schiele, 2017).

Freeman developed the FST in 1984 to understand the redistribution of organizational benefits and important decision making for addressing stakeholders' needs for maximum organizational benefits (Amis et al., 2020; Freudenreich et al., 2020). FST is not a single theory per se but an amalgamation of eclectic narratives with multiple interpretations and applications from business ethics and corporate social responsibility to strategic management, corporate governance, and finance (Miles, 2017). An organization's relationships, ethics, and corporate social responsibility (CSR) can provide a competitive advantage that drives profitability and sustainability (Boso et al., 2017). I used the theoretical insights provided by the RBV and FST as possible lenses for exploring the strategies that SME managers use to win mining contracts for profitability and sustainability.

Operational Definitions

The terms I used in the study are defined as follows:

Capacity utilization: Capacity utilization calculates the comparison of an enterprise's current output with its maximum possible output using all available resources (GEM, 2019).

Competitive advantage: Competitive advantage is the attributes of an SME that help the SME have improved efficiency, quality improvement, above-average profits, and productivity improvement or cost savings (Sołoducho-Pelc & Sulich, 2020).

Freeman's stakeholder theory (FST): FST is a new paradigm that extends enterprise responsibilities from shareholders to all stakeholders who are affected or affect the enterprise (Miles, 2017).

Resource-based view (RBV): RBV is a theory that explores how firms can build, access, control, and leverage firm-specific resources for sustainable competitive advantage (Greve, 2020).

Small- to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs): SMEs are firms with fewer than 100 employees (World Bank Group, 2016).

SME manager: For this study, an SME manager is an owner or manager who plans and organizes the SME resources and labor, including SME strategy, planning, marketing, financial, project management, and time management (Mukata et al., 2018).

VRIN resources: VRIN resources are valuable, rare, imitable, and nonsubstitutable resources, which help enterprises create a competitive advantage over other enterprises (Bhandari et al., 2020).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

Theofanidis and Fountouki (2018) stated that any research attempt carries limitations, assumptions, and delimitations of its underlying theories, study design, data collection/analysis, causal relationships, replication potential, the short time for data collection, and many other aspects of the research. Researchers should report their research assumptions, limitations, and delimitations to improve the quality of their findings and interpret the evidence presented such that their research can be likely cited and can act as a benchmark for future research endeavors (Theofanidis & Fountouki,

2018). Simon and Goes (2013) saw the assumptions, limitations, and delimitations as necessary to address the validity and reliability of a study.

Assumptions

Research assumptions are issues, ideas, or positions found within the study report accepted and taken for granted by the author as reasonably correct and true (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). Assumptions are relevant to researchers for crafting findings, inferences, and theories (Yin, 2018). Researchers use assumptions to synthesize research findings, develop research methods and design, and develop theories that influence the research on what evidence counts (Wolgemuth et al., 2017). A different set of assumptions will thus have different research constructs and findings.

My first assumption was that a qualitative research methodology with a multiple case study was appropriate for exploring successful SME strategies for profitability and sustainability in Zambia and obtaining correct, objective, thorough, and honest responses from the interviewees. The second assumption was that the SME owners and managers had the right knowledge, experience, and understanding of the business strategies. The third assumption was that the participants are sufficient and representative of the successful strategic business practices in the target population to answer the research questions, and there was sufficient documentary evidence to support the interview data. The fourth assumption was that the conceptual framework was appropriate to the research problem and the collected data provided the insight necessary to address the research question.

Limitations

According to Morgado et al. (2018), limitations are potential weaknesses of the study beyond the researchers' control that may affect the trustworthiness. This study's first limitation was the limited research studies in SME strategies in Zambia and SME statistics or monitoring information. The second limitation of this study was my failure to entirely avoid some form of bias when collecting research data and reporting the findings. Honest disclosure of information in research can mitigate research bias. Participants may have been unwilling to disclose information about their business success or failure, accounting for the third limitation. Creating a conducive environment and encouraging the participants to be honest and disclose information can limit nondisclosure. The fourth limitation of this study was that participants might have failed to remember details of their experiences resulting in their business success or failure.

Delimitations

Delimitations are self-imposed boundaries by the researcher to shape the study's scope and design (Simon & Goes, 2013). According to Simon and Goes (2013), delimitations may impact the study results' external validity or generalizability. The study's first delimitation was the geographical location of SMEs operating in the Copperbelt province of Zambia. The second delimitation was the study limited to SME managers who had used strategies to succeed in business for over 5 years by winning contracts.

Significance of the Study

This study's findings may be significant for understanding SME managers' strategies in the Copperbelt province of Zambia to win mining contracts for their growth and sustainability to identify best practices. Zambia's economy depends heavily on the mining sector, which contributes about 70% of the export value and 28% of government revenues (Central Statistical Office, 2019). SMEs' profitability contributes to diverse national economic and social benefits (OECD, 2017; World Bank Group, 2016). The SME managers' business practices may improve, and the SME capacity utilization may increase to match global SME utilization due to understanding the strategies to win mining contracts.

Contribution to Business Practice

This study's findings may contribute to SMEs business leaders' ability to develop and deploy business strategies for SMEs sustainability. Organizations' leaders build strategies around resources for developing and delivering key products (Suh & Lee, 2018). The integration of supply chain and relationship strategies with market driven capabilities can deliver competitive customer value (Suh & Lee, 2018). The SMEs' relationships with the mining industry and the government may be improved and benefit the whole supply chain and all business stakeholders. Government lawmakers may gain benchmark knowledge for formulating laws and regulations that may foster an enabling business environment by adapting the study findings.

Implications for Social Change

Implications for positive social change include the potential for more job creation, increasing local commercial revenues, and local households' derivative incomes critical in developing countries (see OECD, 2017). According to Choongo (2017), positive social change can result from growing SMEs' profitability improvements that enable SMEs to implement, grow, and sustain CSR programs. This study may help leaders increase SME profitability and sustainability, improving the SME employees and their dependents' human and social conditions. The SMEs may develop and sustain CSR programs that promote organizations and communities that improve the dignity and well-being of human and social conditions in local communities.

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

A literature review is essential for the provision of a theoretical ground and guiding a research study. According to Shahsavari and Kourepaz (2020), the purpose of a literature review is to identify a gap in literature or practice, describe the previous methodology and research techniques, define key research terms and important variables, synthesize an overview of current knowledge for a specific study topic, and provide a framework for the research study. The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies supply and contracting SME owners use for winning mining contracts for their profitability and sustainability. The targeted population consisted of four SME owners located in the Copperbelt province of Zambia who won mining contracts and have sustained their business for over 5 years. The World Bank Group (2018) found that Zambian SMEs' capacity utilization at 67% was below the Sub-Saharan

region average of 70% and the global average of 72% between the years 2012 to 2014.

The significance of success strategies that positively impact profitability and sustainability for improved SME capacity utilization substantiates this study.

The literature review contains data obtained through searches from scholarly sources for journal articles, books, dissertations, and websites accessed through the Walden University Library and Google Scholar. The main databases searched included ABI/INFORM, Academic Search Complete/Premier, Emerald Management Journals, Business Source Complete, SAGE Premier, EBSCOhost, ScienceDirect, ProQuest, and Google Scholar. The key content searches used in the databases included *RBV*, *Freeman's stakeholder theory*, *SME strategy*, *SME sustainability*, *small business profitability*, *small business success*, *SMEs in Zambia*, *SME success factors*, *SME failure*, *SME performance*, *small business entrepreneurship*, and *SME operation strategies*. I selected and studied a total of 81 articles for this literature review, of which 79 (98%) were peer-reviewed or governmental sources, and 55 (68%) were published within 5 years of my expected graduation date.

In this literature review, I begin by discussing and analyzing the conceptual frameworks of RBV and FST and their appropriate use by SMEs as profitability and sustainability strategy bases. I analyze the RBV and FST in detail and address their relevance to this study. In the second subsection, I discuss and analyze alternative theories with the relevant potential for use but did not use them. The rest of the subsections are analyses of SME entrepreneurship and national economic growth, global SME performance and organizational strategies, SME success factors and failures, and

SMEs' profitability and sustainability, with specific issues relating to small businesses in Zambia and the Sub-Saharan region of Africa.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework provided lenses through which I viewed the study phenomenon to understand the business problem. This study's conceptual framework was the RBV (Barney, 1986; Bhandari et al., 2020; Wernerfelt, 1984) and FST (Freeman, 1984; Miles, 2017). The conceptual framework is key to the study design and consists of all the concepts, assumptions, expectations, beliefs, theories that support and inform the research, and a thorough and integrated review of relevant literature (Johnson et al., 2020). The conceptual framework defines and justifies the research question and helps researchers focus on narrowing the study's scope to the primary exploration areas (Johnson et al., 2020).

Resource-Based View

In the following subsection, I describe and justify the RBV framework for this study. The RBV is a strategic management framework in which researchers consider the organizational resources as competitive leverage tools used to meet organizational objectives, gain competitive advantage, and sustain organizational growth (Wernerfelt, 1984). Wernerfelt (1984) defined a resource as any tangible or intangible asset that can be a strength or weakness of an organization. Resources are the various combinations of fundamental building blocks of land and labor used for production (Sims et al., 2016). Wernerfelt developed the RBV by using the foundation work by Penrose (1959).

Management applies and coordinates various resources to produce goods and services. Penrose (1959) viewed organizations as a set of broader resources of a firm that positively affect growth and constrain growth when inadequate. When authoritatively and administratively coordinated, the collection of human and nonhuman productive resources determines the productive goods and services that any resource can produce for sale in a market for a profit (Penrose, 1959). Sims et al. (2016) reinforced that the interaction between human and material resources determines the production output available from any given resource. Researchers have posited that a firm has resources and capabilities that help the firm achieve growth, competitive advantage, and long-term sustainability (Bhandari et al., 2020; Celec & Globocnik, 2017).

The RBV is not static but is continuously being researched and improved by scholars. Although the RBV continues to evolve, Wernerfelt's (1984) and Penrose's (1959) foundation work is still crucial to RBV development. The RBV and its derivatives are applied in strategic management (Davis & DeWitt, 2021). Davis and DeWitt (2021) stated that the strength of RBV is that it is not a theory of organizations but of how productive resources and attributes yield persistent profits. Thus, RBV's relevance does not require firms.

The RBV is versatile such that when applied in different combinations of resources and capabilities, the RBV defines different and specific frameworks. Barney (1991) developed a framework that evaluates how firm-specific resources could be a source of sustained competitive advantage and how a firm could effectively and efficiently develop, control, and leverage resources for sustainable competitive

advantage. Barney posited that superior firm performance is achievable by the resource advantage exploitation efficiencies, rather than based on the firm creation of imperfect competitive conditions that do not maximize social welfare profits. Barney identified unique resources that are valuable, rare, imitable, and nonsubstitutable (VRIN) and can help a firm achieve a sustainable competitive advantage over rivals. To be successful, a firm needs resources and capabilities that must have VRIN attributes (Barney, 1991; Jones et al., 2018). Barney (2001) posited that the emphasis on mobilizing, developing, controlling, and synergizing unique resources embedded in collaborative partners would bring about resources in interfirm collaboration and value creation.

For SMEs to achieve a competitive advantage, SMEs need to accumulate resources that follow the VRIN criteria. The VRIN resources are difficult to imitate, copy, or follow due to their unique VRIN attributes (Barney, 1986, 2001; Bhandari et al., 2020). The VRIN resources form the foundation for generating firm performance. Resources are more beneficial to any business's growth or success if they are VRIN or heterogeneous and difficult to imitate (Bhandari et al., 2020; Jones et al., 2018). Although Wernerfelt (1984) addressed the emergent strategy to some extent, the dominant view of strategy formulation in RBV approaches is a rational, stepwise progression through a series of capability and competency acquisitions and deployments, leading to their embedding in organizational routines (Sims et al., 2016)

Strategies used in practice are developed and refined in practice by practitioners or through scholarly research. There are two ideal models of strategy development identified in the literature: One is rational stepwise, and the other is emergent, ex-post,

relying on experimentation where strategy is used to legitimize accomplishments (Sims et al., 2016). Researchers have characterized four broad approaches on a continuum representing processes ranging from deliberate to emergent: classical, processual, evolutionary, and systemic (Sims et al., 2016). Rational models are deliberate, classical, and processual organizational planning and control, while emergent models are systemic and evolutionary (Sims et al., 2016). The rational approach basis is planning and control, with managers perceiving the need to change that triggers dynamic capabilities that implement the change (Sims et al., 2016). The emergent approach seeks to ensure firm survival and optimize its fit with the environment (Sims et al., 2016).

Internal and external resources play key roles in the development of a strategy. Capabilities for both strategy emergent and rational stepwise development models may be acquired through internal or external resources. However, with the emergent, ex-post model, core capabilities are acquired internally through experimentation, leading to a richer RBV of emergent strategy with diverse strategic options (Sims et al., 2016). Sims et al. (2016) viewed internal resources as organizational learning, experimentation, and new technology/knowledge integration, while external resources are acquired by outsourcing or vendor purchase transactions. In their findings, Sims et al. suggested that firms might deliberately take an ambidextrous approach seeking a balance between planning (rational) and emergence in their strategy process.

The firm's resource combinations that change and maximize its market position enable firms to create a capability. Dynamic capabilities are a firm's ability to integrate, build, and reconfigure internal and external competencies to address rapidly changing

environments that allow firms to maintain a competitive advantage (Moreno et al., 2020; Yuan et al., 2021). The dynamic capabilities view is an extension of the RBV to suit dynamic markets. Researchers have suggested that dynamic capabilities are antecedent to organizational and strategic routines and new value-creating strategies. Bhandari et al. (2020) emphasized using the selected practice to effectively implement the strategy using resources to develop important capabilities for the selected practice's performance.

The RBV theory is used to define and explain SME growth mechanisms and strategies. Researchers use the RBV to explore SMEs' growth strategies based on how SMEs build, access, control, and leverage VRIN type resources to achieve sustainable competitive advantage (McGahan, 2021). The RBV is relevant to explore strategies used by SMEs to achieve business profitability and sustainability because of the RBV's applicability to resource competitive advantage and VRIN criteria for a long-term new strategic orientation of successful SME business (McGahan, 2021).

Freeman's Stakeholder Theory

In the following subsection, I describe and justify Freeman's stakeholder framework for this study. Freeman (1984) developed the FST theory. FST was a new paradigm that extended organizations' responsibilities from shareholders to all stakeholders who affected the organization and those affected by it (Freeman, 1984). Researchers use the FST to understand the redistribution of organizational benefits and important decision making for addressing stakeholders' needs for maximum organizational benefits (Barney & Harrison, 2020). Business leaders use their stakeholder relationships to engage with disaster-affected communities for mutual benefits that

provide community resilience (McKnight & Linnenluecke, 2016). The private sector is intertwined with community resilience and responds to disasters through stakeholder relationships with governments, community organizations, owners, consumer advocates, suppliers, customers, competitors, employees, and business managers (McKnight & Linnenluecke, 2016).

Earlier seminal works by other researchers helped to develop the FST. Before Freeman's 1984 seminal work into the organizational responsibilities toward the larger group of stakeholders, Friedman in 1970 had extensively written on the responsibilities of the organizational business leaders' duty of enhancing shareholder value (as cited in Ferrero et al., 2014). FST has become increasingly important in most fields rather than Friedman's seminal work that lacked the integration of business environment interactions that FST provides (Ferrero et al., 2014). Stakeholders are people, groups, or organizations that have a direct affiliation with a firm and are influenced by its operations or can affect the firm's operations (Freeman, 1984; Freudenreich et al., 2020; McKnight & Linnenluecke, 2016).

The development, analysis, and categorization of stakeholders were achieved much later in the evolution of the FST. Kristen (2015) categorized stakeholders into internal and external business influencers who, according to Kristen, exist everywhere regardless of the type of enterprise. Kristen developed the list of stakeholders, including employees, regulatory agencies, suppliers, external special interest groups, and customers. Kristen used two perspectives of power and interest to evaluate the influence of stakeholders on corporate activities. Kristen posited the importance of stakeholders'

direct influence on the firm's business policies, resulting from voting rights to modify its strategic plans. Small businesses must proactively engage with stakeholders to maintain and resume operations and sustainability (Ferro et al., 2017).

The FST encompasses many aspects of the business for value creation. FST extends to many other eclectic narratives, such as multiple interpretations and applications like business ethics, corporate social responsibility, strategic management, corporate governance, and finance (Miles, 2017). All the organizational narratives of FST can provide a competitive advantage that drives profitability and sustainability (Boso et al., 2017). The FST's importance is its reinforcement of creating value for different stakeholders for an organization to be successful (Barney, 2020).

The FST is used to explore how business managers can achieve firm-level objectives through stakeholder management for improved financial performance and sustainability (McKnight & Linnenluecke, 2016). Rogers (2016) posited that the FST is a valid small business research studies conceptual framework. I used the theoretical insights provided by the FST as a lens for exploring the strategies that SME managers use to win mining contracts for profitability and sustainability.

SME Entrepreneurship and National Economic Growth

Human resources that run businesses own and exhibit entrepreneurship skills. Entrepreneurship is a process of risk-taking for a new process motivated by some perceived value for anticipation, identification, or creation of opportunities and then innovatively using a combination of firm resources to exploit the opportunities (Osiri et al., 2015). Entrepreneurship is more than just the management of an SME by strategy,

planning, marketing, financial, project management, and time management skills, but focuses on the perceived ability to create, identify and exploit opportunities.

Entrepreneurship can occur in any size or age of a business as it is concerned with innovation, the disciplined effort to improve a business's potential based on a deliberate, conscious, and purposeful search for opportunities within the company, industry, and the broader social and intellectual environment (Osman et al., 2017).

There are several scholarly classifications and definitions of entrepreneurship. Osiri et al. (2015) posited that researchers and scholars use the broad definition of entrepreneurship to enable them to identify its key features, its interactions, and motivations to develop specific subfields into a general entrepreneurship framework. Scholars and researchers have identified and classified primary subfields of entrepreneurship over time, including academic, corporate, family, international, small, social, and technological entrepreneurship (Osiri et al., 2015). I focused on the small subfield of small entrepreneurship or SME, particularly strategies for profitability and sustainability. Aldrich and Ruef (2018) found that it is essential to identify and analyze what small entrepreneurs do when carrying out entrepreneurship studies. Aldrich and Ruef identified the research on Silicon Valley firms with a focus on high growth and highly capitalized firms, a focus on innovation and creativity, and a variant focus on the recognition of promising opportunities as distortions of entrepreneurship research because emergence model of entrepreneurial and organizational learning can explain all the three case studies.

To maximize the chances of profitability and sustainability, SME managers need to be entrepreneurs by seizing internal and external resources more so in the dynamic markets. All SMEs start with entrepreneurship but do not necessarily carry out entrepreneurship activities after startup (Osman et al., 2017). Osman et al. (2017) described entrepreneurship as integrating the various strands of knowledge, recognizing an underlying theme in the public perception, or extracting new insights from entrepreneurship failure. The SME manager's entrepreneur activities also lend themselves to other organizations; entrepreneurs decide to start SME entrepreneurship if they are unemployed, perceived opportunities exist, or have limited or unappealing career progression in employment (Rider et al., 2019). Rider et al. (2019) posited that entrepreneurship is part of a set of choices that includes worthwhile entrepreneurship, paid employment, and unemployment. The implications are that entrepreneurship thrives in markets that foster or have entrepreneur opportunities, have limited employment opportunities, or limited well-paying jobs; factors that all impact SME profitability and sustainability that ultimately impact the national economy.

International organizations and governments document global entrepreneurship performance and contributions. SMEs comprise the most significant percentage of firms in all world economies (OECD, 2017; Small Business Administration, 2018). Small entrepreneurs contribute the most significant number of new jobs (OECD, 2017; Small Business Administration, 2018). OECD (2017) stated that SMEs play a key role in national economies the world over by generating employment, adding value to local industrial and international trade, and contributing to innovation. Beynon et al. (2018)

posited that SMEs significantly contribute to global economies and economic recovery for economic growth.

The OECD recognizes the SMEs' central roles to achieve environmental sustainability and more inclusive growth. The SME contributions vary widely across firms and countries, and sectors due to several factors ranging from internal SME factors to the external local and international environment (OECD, 2017). The SME sector's success depends on some business environmental factors (Adamseged & Grundmann, 2020). The economic status of the developing nations is, in turn, dependent on the success of the SME sector (OECD, 2017). Daño-Luna et al. (2018) found that although firm and entrepreneur characteristics affect firm productivity, the business environment at various levels of the economy can provide barriers for SMEs to grow and develop. The study of small entrepreneurship is critical for understanding, analysis, and interventions by any SME growth and sustainability stakeholders to enable SMEs' significant contribution to the national economies for economic and social growth, value addition and creation, and GDP increases.

SMEs Profitability and Sustainability

Profitability is the ability of a business to make profits. Profitability is an earnings measure of the gross profits (total revenues less the cost of goods) scaled by the book value of total assets (Ball et al., 2015; Bhootra, 2018; Novy-Marx, 2013). Ball et al. (2015) concluded that gross profit scaled by the book value of total assets (profitability) predicts the cross-section of average returns. Novy-Marx's (2013) motivation for studying gross profitability was that it represented the cleanest measure of a firm's

economic profitability, without expenditures that might depress other earnings measures in the short-term, but maybe value-adding in the long-term, such as research and development. Novy-Marx concluded that economic profitability is a better performance measure of profitability than other measures, such as cash flows, bottom-line net income, and dividends, because of the cleaner numerator of gross profit and deflator assets value.

Ball et al. (2015) posited an even better measure of profitability, operating profitability, which is the gross profit scaled by the total assets. Ball et al. showed that operational profitability with total assets denominator better matches current expenses with current expenditure rather than a priced market value of equity to total assets' book value. Operating profitability exhibits a far stronger link with expected returns than either net income or gross profit and is useful for predicting returns in advance.

SMEs' role in national economic growth and essential employment generation is undisputed the world over. Numerous factors influence internal or external SME growth activities due to their operation's nature (Arthur-Aidoo et al., 2018). Determinant entrepreneurial success factors in the rapidly changing and global environment involve quick interventions and adaptation to the changing market conditions. SME owners and managers need to carefully consider and study factors that affect business performance to achieve maximum firm value and long-term profitability (Blažková & Dvouletý, 2018). Valdez-Juárez et al. (2018) found that SMEs that develop social and sustainable practices increase their financial profitability, level of innovation, reputation, and improve their image and reputation.

Scholarly discourse has no convergence for the definition of sustainability. The lack of one standard and accepted definition of sustainability is a foundational challenge alluded to by Moore et al. (2017) that makes research difficult considering the variety of synonyms used in literature. Sustainability is a complex concept (Aragon-Correa et al., 2017). Sustainability refers to something long-term, regardless of its use or areas of application (Aragon-Correa et al., 2017). Entrepreneurs at startup prioritize the three sustainability dimensions of economic, environmental, and social and reprioritize them in response to stakeholder interests (Fischer et al., 2020). Business sustainability involves practices that help ensure growth and profitability, environmental protection, and a firm's social equity and maintain practices over time (Catlin et al., 2017; Chakravorty & Hales, 2017). Business sustainability involves the balancing or equilibrium of the interrelated economic, social, and environmental objectives of an organization in the natural and social environment (Adamseged & Grundmann, 2020).

It is difficult and unclear how researchers can operationalize and measure sustainability in developing a sustainability research agenda. Clarity about the definition and use of sustainability concepts and terminology is thus of utmost importance. Moore et al. (2017) researched sustainability using 209 articles and found key constructs that included (a) taken after a defined period; (b) the program, interventions, and/or implementation strategies continue to be delivered; (c) individual behavior change is maintained; (d) the program and individual behavior change can evolve or adapt; while (e) continuing to produce benefits for the individuals/systems. Moore et al. summarized that sustainability is an organization's ability to maintain system practices and evolve or

adapt to new system practices or individual behavior changes for individuals and systems' benefits over a long time (Moore et al., 2017). Johnson and Schaltegger (2016) found that research on SMEs' sustainability management tools was hard to find despite many types of research in the different approaches and potential barriers to implementation. Johnson and Schaltegger found 26 sustainability management tools applicable to SMEs out of a total of 146 reviewed. Sustainability management tools specifically designed for SME applications were only eight of the 26 tools (Johnson & Schaltegger, 2016).

SME managers face the challenge of choosing among the numerous tools and making a correct combination for corporate sustainability success, depending on their business context, because sustainability management does not follow the one-size-fits-all approach. Johnson and Schaltegger (2016) emphasized the need to develop SME-specific sustainability management tools and consider additional sector-specific tools and indicators among SMEs. For instance, sector-specific differentiation could be made in terms of the SME size, SME environment, or the SME industry sector. As an example, Adane (2018) explored the competitive advantage of adopting cloud computing strategies for SMEs operating in Sub-Saharan Africa, specifically Ghana, and found that an adoption strategy should include adoption goals, considerations, and a roadmap despite SME's unique expectations for adopting cloud computing. Adane made specific recommendations for SMEs to develop adoption strategies that meet SME specific needs for cloud computing to play a sound role and support more strategic initiatives for business growth and sustainability. A large number of mostly not specific tools to SMEs

can be a real burden for SME managers to evaluate for operationalizing to the extent that most SMEs use tools that suit their current strategies or modify tools to suit their context.

SME Success Factors and Failures

The identification and study of factors that nurture business performance are vital to business strategy. The success factors are thus widely studied, as evidenced by the abundant research. There is a large body of knowledge on factors that impact business performance and how they correlate to each other (Adámek et al., 2017; Blažková & Dvouletý, 2018). There are still some under-researched regions where empirical evidence of factors of business performance is still scarce. The Sub-Saharan region of Africa is one such region that I plan to add to empirical evidence of SMEs' profitability and sustainability with specific issues relating to small businesses in Zambia. Celec and Globocnik (2017) identified success factors for SMEs' sustainability based on assets, capabilities, and firm posture obtained using the RBV and the dynamic capability view.

The critical success factors for superior performance identified by Celec and Globocnik (2017) identified were management competence, market orientation, financial and human resources, negotiation flexibility, and a proactive and risk-taking posture. The significance of Celec and Globocnik's study is that findings can infer and correlate best practice strategies. The sustainability and growth of SMEs depend on SMEs' ability to manage performance factors.

Adamseged and Grundmann (2020) found that businesses need to interact and collaborate with stakeholders in social and natural systems in different areas such as regional, national, and beyond in this broad, complex, and dynamic environment

characterized by very tight, dynamically changing rules and regulations. Clearly, with that diversity of business environment, there are no “one-size-fits-all” success factors. Adamseged and Grundmann confirmed five inherent categories of success factors, including strategies, cooperation, steering structures, processes, and capacity to learn and innovate. Alfoqahaa (2018) found critical success factors of SMEs in Palestine as brand reputation, reliable delivery, customer service excellence, and product innovation. Alfoqahaa concluded that SME success is tied to customers and competition more than production, structures, or finance.

Researchers study the SME growth hindrance factors and infer business growth hindrance by the absence of success factors or reduced factor impact on performance. Wang (2016) found that SME managers see a lack of finance as the most significant growth and sustainability hindrance obstacle in a survey utilizing World Bank survey data of 119 developing countries. SMEs in developing countries are in a financial dilemma complicated by the high costs of borrowing and a lack of consultant support as the main barriers to SME external financing (Wang, 2016). Wang found that the SME's ownership, the growth rate of the SME, SME characteristic size, and SME characteristic age were the key determinants influencing the growth and sustainability hindrance obstacles. In a study in Ethiopia, Bokoro (2016) showed a relationship between SME age and SME survival as most SME failures in the study lie in the early stages of establishment, and the probability of failure decreased the age increased. The research study implications are that surviving SMEs face hazard rates that decline over time by learning survival skills by staying in the market (Bokoro, 2016). Hence older SMEs are

more likely to survive than new businesses. Bokoro also noted the impact on stakeholder and policy intervention, such as lending approaches by microfinancing NGOs and special government support of vulnerable SMEs through appropriate policy.

The identified critical success factors are important for SME managers' strategic formulation to focus on a profitable and sustainable existence. Critical success factors are invaluable to government regulators that use them to nurture SMEs by creating an enabling environment for SMEs that suit the critical success factors. The critical success factors are also significant to research as they can infer and correlate best practice strategies.

SME Performance and Organizational Strategies

There is a growing global awareness of SMEs' impact on economies and employment. The increasing acknowledgment of SMEs' role in economic growth and reducing unemployment in the Sub-Saharan region of Africa brings forth the need for research into understanding the role and impact of the SME policy and its outcome in Sub-Saharan Africa (Mamman et al., 2019). Mamman et al. (2019) argued that there are still some gaps in the literature on the wholesome transfer of Western-based SME policy without the adequate consideration of the assumptions within and across Sub-Saharan African countries (Mamman et al., 2019). Mamman et al. developed a conceptual framework and propositions to enable the holistic research that can shed more light on our understanding of the interactions between SME policies, the business environment (context), the entrepreneur, and policy outcomes. The framework considers SME policy and the context of the business environment, social-cultural, and industrial

characteristics, impacting the SME owner for specific SME outcomes and SME policy outcomes (Mamman et al., 2019).

Despite numerous research studies of SME policy outcomes in Sub-Saharan Africa, there are many research issues associated with the diversity of outcomes, the sustainability of desirable outcomes, the link between policy, the entrepreneur and the diversity of contexts across Sub-Saharan Africa, and the link between the outcomes and implementation (Mamman et al., 2019). An examination of the impact of the entrepreneurs' competence, orientation, and motivation on SME outcome and policy outcomes within and across Sub-Saharan Africa was an example. From the preceding, it was clear that successful SME managers' strategies are linked to the context of the specific Sub-Saharan Africa region.

The business environment's critical success factors and characteristics feed onto the SME policy for regulators' desired outcomes to enhance SME contribution to national economic growth and increasing employment. Bhandari et al. (2020) found decision-makers' attention to be a key moderator in achieving sustainable competitive advantage for growth, especially for firms with VRIN entrepreneurial competencies and dynamic capabilities in the dynamic business environment. Iwasaki and Kočenda (2020) found large shareholding, labor productivity, and high firm age factors mediate business failure.

Raza Bilal et al. (2017) found the strategy implementation process to require the necessary power of distinctive managerial decisions besides efficient strategies that translate into distinctive managerial decisions that lead to more effective and significant SMEs' performance and SME capabilities. The concept of core capability has been used

interchangeably with core competency, distinctive competency, or distinctive capability by many different researchers (Li et al., 2018). VRIN resources became recognized as unique, inimitable, and universally applied resources in different markets with the emergence of the RBV in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Capabilities and competencies are such VRIN resources that SMEs acquire and use for profitability and sustainability.

Organizational strategies lend themselves to many factors that include internal and external capabilities and resources. Ifekwem and Adedamola (2016) concluded that business owner capability for new business acumen in modern business management practices and corporate vision is a recommendable survival strategy. SMEs' sustainability and survival strategies are significantly related with the significant implication that maintaining a small committed and motivated workforce is critical for the survival of the SME in a volatile economy (Ifekwem & Adedamola, 2016). El Shoubaki et al. (2019) found that the reasons to start a business mediates the relation between firm growth and SME owner-manager's human capital. The implication is that the dimensions of human capital cannot be used to their full potential to understand firm growth without a proper assessment of the reasons to start a business (El Shoubaki et al., 2019).

SME owners need to have a formal labor force specializing in the business who are either motivated or have reasons to start or working in a business. Ibidunni et al. (2018) found that technology-based firms could enhance their access to financing through capacity building in entrepreneurial competencies, such as acquiring the right skills and attitude. Kihara et al. (2016) showed that the SME firm's structural adaptations are positively and significantly related to Nigeria's performance within Sub-Saharan Africa.

Kihara et al. examined structural dimensions and found that formalization and specialization are positively and significantly related to the SME's performance.

Understanding SME profitability and its interaction with organizational capital are essential for strategy formulation and execution. Pais and Gama (2015) found that SME strategic practice of very aggressive working capital management increases the profitability and also that there is an optimal level required for the working capital components. Pais and Gama showed that SMEs should maintain an optimal working capital by reducing the inventories held, collecting payments from their customers, and the number of days that firms take to settle their commercial liabilities for higher corporate profitability. Pais and Gama tested the robustness of their results across different industries controlled for industry-specific effects and obtained similar results, thus supporting the working capital's robustness link to SME profitability. SME profitability has quadratic dependences on specific working capital variables like the number of days of inventory, the number of days of accounts payable, the number of days of accounts receivable, and the cash conversion cycle implying a decreasing trend of return on assets with increasing values of these working capital variables (Pais & Gama, 2015).

Knowledge management plays a vital role in dynamic and resource capability development. Li et al. (2018) developed a knowledge management process model in their research on the analysis of core competencies and enhancing the understanding of knowledge-based strategizing by African countries. Li et al. found that the conventional transfer of technology alone from developed world companies cannot create African

companies' core competencies. Li et al. argued that African companies should build their strategy to create core competencies rather than rely on conventional international technology transfer.

The business environment, as shaped by stakeholders and policies, affects organizational strategies. Crick et al. (2018) investigated how and to what extent SMEs adapt to climate risks in developing countries of Kenya and Senegal in the Sub-Saharan region. Crick et al. found that SMEs resort to unsustainable adaptation practices due to financial barriers within the business environment. SMEs adapt sustainably to the business environment changes by responding to the facilitation through information technology, general business support, and adaptation assistance (Crick et al., 2018). Crick et al. identified a clear role for public policy in facilitating good adaptation as firms' ability to respond to climate risks largely depends on factors such as a business environment typically shaped through policy intervention. Crick et al. found support for many SMEs' strategies that use adaptation to current climate variability to build resilience to future climate change. Bokoro (2016) had similar policy implications for government and other stakeholders, particularly to newly emerging manufacturing SMEs, to understand and intervene in the difficult first 3 years of establishment.

Strategies are either developed and refined in practice by practitioners or developed through scholarly research. SMEs organizational strategy for profitability and sustainability based on Sims et al. (2016) identified two ideal strategy development models; one was rational stepwise; the other was emergent, ex-post, relying on experimentation to legitimize accomplishments (Sims et al., 2016). Strategy falls on a

broad continuum of four processes ranging from rational (deliberate) to emergent: classical, processual, evolutionary, and systemic (Sims et al., 2016). The rational approach basis is planning and control, with managers perceiving the need to change that triggers dynamic capabilities that implement the change (Sims et al., 2016). The emergent approach attempts to optimize the firm's fit and environment (Sims et al., 2016).

Stakeholders are both a resource and a source of SME capability, increasingly becoming important for organizational strategy. Stakeholders have increasingly become interconnected such that a firm's actions toward one stakeholder are visible to others and can affect members of the stakeholder ecosystem (Crane, 2020). An organizational strategy towards stakeholders categorizing and prioritizing stakeholders for the limited SME resources and attention to maximize their returns with the belief that some stakeholders are more important is no longer a good strategy. Thus, SME managers need to leverage this for profitability, with actions such as an SME's actions toward any of its stakeholders can inform other stakeholders of its trustworthiness and determine to what degree other stakeholders assume vulnerability and engage in future exchange relationships (Crane, 2020). Crane (2020) explored the conditions in which a firm's actions toward one stakeholder can build or erode trust across stakeholders and made a model of stakeholder connectedness. Rather than use detrimental stakeholder prioritization, Crane proposed a trust model with trust-building actions of ability, benevolence, and integrity that are made clear by characteristic stakeholder voluntary action, stakeholder transparency, and stakeholder responsiveness.

Some SMEs cannot compete effectively against large and multinational companies in a dynamic and highly competitive environment. O'Dwyer and Gilmore (2018) explored the strategic partnerships between two or more firms, who share reciprocal inputs to realize improved organizational competitive performance over a range of functions by sharing resources while maintaining their own corporate identities. The research findings were that SME alliances should focus on either value capture or value creation and that the capabilities demonstrated by the alliances vary according to strategic alliance formation (O'Dwyer & Gilmore, 2018). The strategic alliances model is a strategic organizational tool in which recent studies have demonstrated the benefits of inter-organizational alliances for improved organizational performance across a range of functions.

Some firms develop an organizational strategy of knowledge and resource sharing through strategic alliances with other firms. Rapaccini et al. (2019) researched the interplay between SME servitization and strategic alliances. They showed that similar SMEs operating in the same industry and motivated mainly by the need for experienced and knowledge sharing and cost savings could build a strategic alliance. Rapaccini et al., in their study, further demonstrated that the strategic alliance also acted as a driver for the external firm to create awareness of the convenience and relevance of servitization. Servitization is defined as transforming a firm, either deliberately or emergent, and introduces service elements in its business model (Rapaccini et al., 2019). Servitization in the study occurred as an emergent strategy of the SME consortium rather than a consortium's deliberate strategy (Rapaccini et al., 2019). Emergent competencies and

skills are achieved in this way by the SME consortium in a step-by-step process that require the identification of leadership figures, the development of trust-based relationships, the establishment of a proper governance structure, and the development of a shared strategy that guides the design of the initiatives and projects needed (Rapaccini et al., 2019).

SMEs in Zambia

SMEs are organizations used for national economic development and the creation of employment. Mamman et al. (2019) showed a diversity of outcomes for similar SME policy and context in Sub-Saharan countries. Mamman et al.'s findings support the case for more research to narrow the SME literature gaps that can help SME managers with profitability and sustainability strategies to improve the role of SMEs in economic growth and reducing unemployment in the Sub-Saharan region of Africa. Global Entrepreneurial Monitor (GEM; 2019) is a trusted resource on entrepreneurship for the United Nations, World Economic Forum, World Bank, and the OECD by providing data sets, special reports, and expert opinions apart from the countries themselves to identify and make evidence-based policies. Researchers also use GEM for reliable cross-country comparisons, and its indices serve as targets for development and improvement. GEM report has data from the 2012 Sub-Saharan African countries' world surveys.

Performance monitoring figures of SMEs in Zambia require improvement for benchmarking, comparisons, and indications. In Zambia, SMEs contribute to the development of the economy by creating employment and increasing the tax base and revenues (Nuwagaba, 2015). SMEs' effective performance is critical to the country's

development for various economic and social benefits, as documented by the OECD (2017). ZDA has been state-mandated to regulate and monitor SMEs, but there are inadequate documentation and clarity of ZDA activities (Nuwagaba, 2015). Noteworthy was the slight improvement in documentation in the 2016 to 2019 reports, which show a drop in annual GDP growth from 6.1% to 4.1% over the period 2011 to 2018 (Zambia Development Agency, 2019b).

Zambian SMEs' performance figures are below average regional and global figures. The number of jobs created in Zambia by SMEs in 2017 accounts for only 35% of the total jobs created, which was well below the OECD global standard of SMEs' creation of the largest number of jobs. Zambia's SME capacity utilization at 67% was one of the lowest in the Sub-Saharan Africa region (World Bank Group, 2018). The GEM recorded a rather high Zambian SME failure rate of 20% from 2012 to 2014 (GEM, 2019). GEM identified key constraints that include lack of finance, weak capital market, poor business operations knowledge, lack of sufficient government support, lack of technology, and unsupportive cultural and social norms.

Zambian SMEs face challenges in growth and sustainability in rural Zambia. Maliti and Mwewa (2015) researched challenges SMEs face in the rural Zambian town of Solwezi, which has become a center of entrepreneurial activities due to the upswing of significant mining activities. SMEs in Solwezi face many challenges that mainly revolve around banks' lack of credit access (Maliti & Mwewa, 2015). These financial challenges identified have implications on the SME strategic formulation and business practice and the policy and context. The SME manager's competence and other mediating factors in

accessing credit, like relationships with the bank, collateral, and SME size, play a critical role in the sustainability and profitability of the SME. SME managers could seek strategic alliances or public-private partnerships (PPP) to solve the issues of finance. ZDA has the mandate to impact SME managers' skills, financial support, and change policy to support the SMEs in Solwezi for sustainability to engender economic growth and create employment.

The Zambian SMEs' business environment is mainly informal and requires more research. SMEs in Zambia employ 50% of the working class, similar to countries like Indonesia, Nigeria, Tanzania, and Kenya. However, over 90% of Zambian SMEs operate in the informal sector (unregistered), making it difficult for the government to support the subsector (Nuwagaba, 2015) efficiently. As a result, Nuwagaba (2015) concluded that SMEs' contribution to the country's development is not very clear. Nuwagaba identifies capital as a significant inhibitor of SME growth and the lack of research on SMEs in Zambia for policy formulation and development of sustainable and sustainability measures.

Zambian SMEs' non-financial growth constraints have been researched. Haselip et al. (2015) researched SMEs to explore non-financial constraints of Sub-Saharan African countries, including Zambian SMEs and found SME barriers that include human capacities, institutional frameworks, and social and cultural factors. Choongo (2017) investigated CSR's impact on firm performance in SMEs who supply goods and services to the mining industry in Zambia using surveys carried out from 2013 to 2014. Choongo found that CSR is significantly related to financial performance. Researchers have found

that CSR is significantly related to SME performance (Bahta et al., 2020; Boso et al., 2017; Ikram et al., 2020).

Important research on SMEs has been carried out in Zambia, but more follow-up studies are needed. Munyeka (2015) explored and provided insights on the dynamics of economic, technological, human resource, and organizational challenges in knowledge management in SMEs in Zambia using 100 randomly selected SMEs. Munyeka found that economic, technological, human resource, and organizational challenges in knowledge management play a critical role in SMEs' growth, with over 50% of the obstacles attributable to economic challenges. Charles et al. (2017) explored state-business relations (SBRs) data from 210 local firms, complemented with interviews with 41 firms from the food-processing sectors of Kenya, Tanzania, and Zambia. Based on experiences from developed and emerging economies, most African governments have initiated close SBRs crucial for economic development and structural transformation, including amendments to existing laws to facilitate public-private interaction and direct support to existing business associations. Charles et al. showed that despite initiatives taken by the states, and an increase in formal relations between state and businesses, local businesses in these countries find policies and programs inadequate, have limited policy influence, and poorly organized business associations. Charles et al. could not find the SBRs to be collaborative or collusive. Charles et al.'s findings impact current SME strategic formulation practice.

Research on sustainable opportunities for SMEs in Zambia was carried and had a recommendation for further research. Choongo et al. (2016) explored factors influencing

the identification of sustainable opportunities among SMEs in Zambia, focusing on three explanatory factors of (a) knowledge of the natural/social environment, (b) perception of threat to the natural/social environment (c) and altruism towards others, with entrepreneurial knowledge as a moderator. Choongo et al. (2016) found that that entrepreneurial knowledge does not positively moderate the relationship between explanatory factors of (a) knowledge of the natural/social environment, (b) perception of threat to the natural/social environment, (c) and altruism towards others and the identification of sustainable opportunities.

One factor of SMEs' success that requires investigation is barriers to SME procurement tender participation. Determinants of SME success requiring further research include the barriers to SMEs' participation in procurement (Flynn & Davis, 2017). Flynn and Davis (2017) examined the role of relational and procedural tendering capabilities in explaining SME performance in public contract competitions. Flynn and Davis used primary survey data from 3,010 SMEs that support a capability-based perspective. They found that procedural capability had a significant effect on the number of tenders submitted and the value of contract sought, while relational capability did not. Flynn and Davis also found that procedural and relational capabilities had a significant and positive effect on the number of contracts won and the percentage of total revenue derived from public contracts. Implications of Flynn and Davis's findings are that SMEs should emphasize the importance of SME investment in tendering skills and means of making buyer engagement strategies. Flynn and Davis carried out their research in the

public procurement sector and argued that besides the scholarly contribution, their findings apply to the business industry, for they studied the same SME entities.

SME Core Competency and Capability

SME core capabilities or competencies that formulate strategic management are critical to SME strategy for profitability and sustainability. Core competencies are the collective learning in the organization; how to coordinate the diverse production skills, integrate and harmonize the multiple streams of technologies for the organization of work, and deliver value, which is a set of business processes strategically understood (Li et al., 2018). Celec and Globocnik (2017) defined capability as ill-structured activities embedded in the firm's standard set of processes that determine the deployment of resources for achieving sustainable competitive advantage. Business strategy is the determination of goals and objectives by allocating resources and skills necessary for carrying out these goals and objectives (Maritan & Lee, 2017). Maritan and Lee (2017) posited that scholars agree that resource allocation is fundamental to strategic management. SME core capabilities or competencies that formulate strategic management are thus at the core and are critical to SME strategy for profitability and sustainability.

To maintain a competitive advantage, SMEs require different capabilities over different contexts. The differentiation of a firm's internal and external activities is the dynamic capabilities theory, which is the firm's ability to integrate, build, and reconfigure internal and external competencies to address its rapidly changing environments (Li et al., 2018; Suh & Lee, 2018). Dynamic capabilities consist of a set of the firm's sensing,

learning, seizing opportunities, and redeploying their resources as a new learned capability (Li et al., 2018; Suh & Lee, 2018). Suh and Lee (2018) posited that researchers agree that dynamic capabilities are antecedent to strategic and organizational process routines.

Dynamic capabilities (or dynamic markets as per RBV) are significant for organizational reconfiguration and strategy change that align the organization with the environment. Suh and Lee (2018) also recognized dynamic capabilities as an extension of the RBV to dynamic markets. Many researchers have interchangeably used the concepts of core capability, core competency, distinctive competency, and distinctive capability (Li et al., 2018). According to Suh and Lee, the emergency of the RBV in the late 1980s was characterized by references to VRIN resources applied in different markets. The dynamic capability, as defined, is an interaction of resources and capabilities to adapt to changing environments; these resources and capabilities are all considered resources in the RBV, implying its equivalence to a dynamic market.

SME leaders can learn the stable pattern of the dynamic capabilities' collective activity and systematically generate and modify their operating strategies to enhance SME profitability and sustainability. The concept of dynamic capability also provides a basis for module suppliers in SMEs' supply chain sustainability that explains the structural relationships among the constructs concerned (Suh & Lee, 2018). Celec and Globocnik (2017) used the RBV and the dynamic capability view to identify SMEs' sustainability success factors based on assets, capabilities, and the obtained firm posture. Celec and Globocnik identified success factors that included management competence,

market orientation, financial and human resources, negotiation flexibility, and a proactive and risk-taking posture.

There is a small body of literature on strategic resource allocation. Despite the importance of strategic management of the strategic allocation of resources, Maritan and Lee (2017) found a small body of literature on allocating human, financial, technological, and physical resources that support strategic firm strategies. Maritan and Lee characterized resource allocations into three primary areas of (a) the resource allocation processes in a firm, (b) the corporate capital allocation to divisions in a multibusiness firm, and (c) the examination of factors affecting specific types of resource allocation.

SMEs in practice rethink, reshape, and synchronize their existing competitive sources and capabilities to be competitive and capture new market offerings. Flexibility and agility are the primary abilities that help them produce various products or services in a cost-effective manner (Suh & Lee, 2018). Agile capability includes organizational structure, logistics processes, information systems, and flexibility in flexible production systems (Suh & Lee, 2018). The achievement of SME flexibility and agility are key success factors for sustainability.

All SMEs need entrepreneurship for strategic stewardship. Bibuljica and Ukaj (2018) examined the relationship between technology and business strategy in SMEs' management. Bibuljica and Ukaj found that entrepreneurship involves constant changes and responses to changes and innovation. Bibuljica and Ukaj concluded that strategic management was relevant to all SMEs that involve changes in the innovation of products and services and high-quality new products that can only validate the market. Bibuljica

and Ukaj validated the strategic nature of SME dynamic capability strategies for insights and exploration.

The set of investment opportunities for organizations differs due to their privileged access to different investment opportunities. Maritan and Lee (2017) postulated that firms face distinct opportunity sets. Maritan and Lee noted possible divergent investment opportunities as central in discussions of strategic factor markets and real options with behavioral and evolutionary perspectives on capability development, providing a backward-looking perspective on the presence of distinct opportunity sets. The impact of differential beliefs and perspectives on the resource allocation process plays a significant role in that diverse budgetary entities, both internal and external, influence the selection criteria among alternative investment opportunities (Maritan & Lee, 2017).

High ethical stakeholders are increasingly becoming more critical and beneficial to firms. Jones et al. (2018) researched instrumental stakeholder theory that considers the performance consequences for firms with highly ethical relationships with stakeholders with high levels of trust, cooperation, and information sharing. Jones et al. developed a model that illustrates that close relationship incremental benefits can exceed the costs of a strategy used to develop and maintain it given particular contextual and firm-specific conditions. Firms that are successful in developing a close relationship capability may enjoy a sustainable competitive advantage because such capabilities are likely to be rare and are very difficult to imitate, even in contexts in which they are the most advantageous (Jones et al., 2018).

FST applies to a firm's strategy focused on human dignity. Westermann-Behaylo et al. (2016) developed a conceptual model of enhancing stakeholder capability by improving stakeholder enhancement, based on the capability approach to incorporate dignity notions on FST theory foundations. Westermann-Behaylo et al.'s common enterprise strategy model integrates stakeholder management with the human capability approach for cooperative advantage to stakeholders and the business, including the social well-being and dignity advantages when stakeholder capability was enhanced. Westermann-Behaylo et al. explored stakeholder capability tradeoffs that suggest firms continue to profit through a trade-off one stakeholder's capabilities for another's, that constrains the managerial discretion to exploit stakeholders to a level below the minimum threshold to make a life of dignity possible. This approach provides a strategy study basis for implementing an enterprise-level strategy focused on human dignity.

Small businesses sometimes chose to collaborate for pooling resources to win contracts and create a superior collective capability. Banchuen et al. (2017) examined appropriate collaboration choices that enable winning orders that lead to improved business outcomes. Banchuen et al. used cross-sectional data from 800 firms in a structural equation modeling to test the hypothesized relationships among order-winners, modes of collaboration, and business outcomes. Banchuen et al. found that firms focused on flexibility, delivery, and quality, need to develop strategic collaboration with suppliers for market and innovation improvement. While cost-focused and quality-focused firms need to develop operational collaboration to achieve resource efficiency, Banchuen et al.'s model provides guidelines for firms' strategic tool using a supply management

approach to find the right combination between strategy and type of supplier relationship that can lead to an excellent outcome. Banchuen et al. provided a conceptual model and approach using dynamic capability for SMEs for possible factors and process adoption. In conclusion, the mediation of resource allocation by the firm overtime on a given initiative plays an important role that potentially provides different bases for interim selection processes that define its strategic capabilities for profitability and sustainability.

Transition

Section 1 included introducing the business problem and the foundation of this study of gaps in SME profitability and sustainability strategies. Section 1 also included the problem statement, the purpose statement, the study's nature, the research questions, and the conceptual framework. The other components in Section 1 were operational definitions, assumptions, limitations, delimitations, the study's significance, and a review of the professional and academic literature.

Section 2 provides the project overview, the purpose statement, the researcher's role, the participants, and the research method and design. I also provide data collection and analysis, population and sampling, ethical research, data collection instruments and techniques, data organization techniques, and analysis. I end with a discussion of the reliability and validity of the study.

In Section 3, I begin with a presentation of the findings of the study, the application of professional practice, and implications for social change. I conclude Section 3 with recommendations for actions and further research, reflections, and a concluding statement.

Section 2: The Project

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies supply and contracting SME owners used for winning mining contracts for their profitability and sustainability. The targeted population consisted of four SME owners located in the Copperbelt province of Zambia who won mining contracts and sustained their business for over 5 years. The implications for social change include SME business owners' potential to gain knowledge of profitability and sustainability strategies that improve SME business practices and improve Zambian SMEs' performance. SME performance improvement can increase SMEs' contribution to the national GDP and create more jobs in the economy, reducing unemployment. More people employed increase tax revenues, which can be used to fund and sustain infrastructure improvements and social programs in local communities.

Role of the Researcher

There are many ways a researcher can conduct qualitative research, and the researcher can assume a variety of roles in qualitative research (Yin, 2018). The researcher plays critical roles in identifying and interviewing participants, collecting data from participants, and analyzing the data to develop qualitative research themes (Saxena, 2017; Yin, 2018). Researchers need to realize that their subjectivity informs the research and shapes the methodology, the analysis, and the treatment of the collected data and the researcher's interactions with the study participants (Karagiozis, 2018). I studied SME owners in the Copperbelt province of Zambia who successfully used profitability and

sustainability strategies beyond 5 years. I previously had a direct connection with SME sourcing for contracts in the company I worked for. I had an indirect connection to the SMEs and the research topic at the time of the study. I was familiar with the geographical area where the participants operated as I worked in Zambia's Copperbelt province. In my formative years of work, I had always desired to have SMEs work and sustain their business practices.

Researchers use the multiple exploratory case design study to collect information from participants using interactive semistructured interviews and reviews of company documents (Yin, 2018). My role consisted of choosing a suitable methodology and design; identifying and interviewing participants; collecting, organizing, and analyzing data; and writing the investigation results. I used semistructured interviews to obtain data, and I reviewed some company documents such as standard operations manuals.

The interview protocol was important for providing a uniform way of collecting comparable data from participants that incorporates both collection instruments and participants (Braaten et al., 2020). Yin (2018) posited that following an interview protocol helps the researcher stay focused on the research goal and improves the reliability of the study. I followed my interview protocol (see Appendix A) to ensure I asked the participants the same questions in the same order. I shared the same interview protocol with the participant before the interview. As the data collection instrument during the telephone interview, I recorded the conversations and wrote notes of the conversations and interactions. I also inspected company records and obtained photos of the organizational documents, as detailed in Appendix A.

The researcher's sensitivity and respectfulness of the participants while maintaining a nonjudgmental attitude is a key factor in eliciting information that encourages the participants to share information to a greater extent (Karagiozis, 2018). The researcher develops multiple perspectives for analyzing the material, perceiving its importance, order, and form with acts of imagination and logic rather than mere narrations of participants' experiences (Karagiozis, 2018). Additionally, the researcher develops a scholarly voice in articulating the phenomena (Karagiozis, 2018). In this way, the researcher needs to be present and fully engaged with the participants. *The Belmont Report* published by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (1979) provided a structured framework for analyzing ethical issues and provides ethical research principles. *The Belmont Report* requires researchers to follow the principles of (a) respect for persons, (b) beneficence, and (c) justice (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1979). I followed all the principles of *The Belmont Report* protocol for ethics. Thus, I respected the participants, used beneficence by maximizing the research benefits and minimizing the participant risk, and used justice to provide fair procedures and to treat participants fairly in all aspects.

I used transcription software to transcribe collected data, organize the data, manipulate the data, and interpret themes and meanings. I recorded the interviews using a handheld device and used member checking and triangulation to ensure that the interpretations of findings were accurate to mitigate bias and view data through a personal lens. Researchers use member checking to obtain feedback from interviewees on

the researcher's interpretations. I will store the data a minimum of 5 years after the study before destroying it.

Participants

I interviewed four SME owners who were successful in their supply or contracting business for over 5 years in Zambia's Copperbelt province. In qualitative multiple case design research, the number of samples is determined by the principle of data saturation and pragmatic considerations, without which the study's validity and generalizability are threatened (Vasileiou et al., 2018). Researchers select participants whose characteristics align with their research question before collecting data (Campbell et al., 2020; Schrag, 2017). I used purposeful sampling to select the participants to obtain relevant and rich data.

The eligibility criteria for participants were that they (a) are a small supply or contracting business owner with fewer than 100 employees, (b) have a small business located in Copperbelt province of Zambia, (c) have a successful experience in being profitable and sustainable by winning mining contracts, and (d) have survived business operations beyond 5 years. I used a purposeful approach to reach the participants that qualified using email and telephone and described the purpose of the contact and the study. The email invitation (see Appendix B) to the prospective participants contained the purpose and details of the study and its voluntary nature such that a participant could withdraw at any time. The email invitation explained that participants would receive no payments or incentives for voluntary participation.

I also explained the privacy of the study and obtained written consent from the participants before proceeding with the research. The written consent form documented the research and the risks and benefits of being in the study. I received Walden University IRB approval, #06-25-20-0349038, before contacting potential participants. To ensure the privacy of the participants, I will permanently delete all the recordings and electronic data after 5 years of completion of the study.

Research Method and Design

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore strategies supply and contracting SME owners use for winning mining contracts for their profitability and sustainability. The following subsections detail the research method I used. The subsections also detail the research design.

Research Method

Researchers need to consider and choose the research method they will use (Fusch et al., 2018; Yin, 2018). The three methods researchers use are (a) qualitative, (b) quantitative, and (c) mixed. I chose the qualitative method for this study. Qualitative research is appropriate for researchers who need to explore and understand the phenomenon's in-depth meaning (Morgan et al., 2017; Yin, 2018). Qualitative researchers use data collection methods such as interviews, focus groups, and document analysis to understand phenomena (van den Berg & Struwig, 2017). A quantitative researcher uses numerical data and statistics to interpret findings and understand or guide the hypothesis (Henson et al., 2020). I did not select quantitative because I would not use statistics and numerical data to interpret data or test a hypothesis.

Mixed-method researchers use quantitative and qualitative methods to address complex phenomena (Creamer & Reeping, 2020). The use of this pluralistic methodology affords the researcher the ability to make a strategy to analyze data from different perspectives that offsets researcher bias (Fusch et al., 2018). Mixed-method researchers combine qualitative measures such as semistructured interviews and focus groups and quantitative measures such as surveys, databases, and questionnaires (McKim, 2017). I did not select mixed methods as I would not be testing hypotheses about variables' relationships or groups' differences.

Research Design

In qualitative studies, researchers use several designs that include (a) case study, (b) phenomenology, (c) ethnography, and (d) narrative inquiry (Mohajan, 2018; Saunders et al., 2016). In a multiple case study, researchers collect data from multiple appropriate research subjects using various data types to study a real context phenomenon (Yin, 2018). The case study is appropriate for understanding a specific problem over a particular period or area (Morgan et al., 2017; Yin, 2018). A case study is the in-depth exploration of a social phenomenon or program to understand what, how, and why behavior in a particular context (Mohajan, 2018; Yin, 2018). In the case study design, researchers use interviews, observations, and open-ended questions to obtain textual data to analyze and interpret themes to understand the social world context (Mohajan, 2018; Morgan et al., 2017).

I selected multiple case study designs to explore SME managers' strategies to win mining contracts for profitability and sustainability. The multiple case study design was

appropriate for a real-world context data collection through observations, document reviews, and participant interviews with follow-up member checking to understand SME managers' strategy experiences. I used the multiple case study design to target multiple participants across the SMEs that are profitable and sustain their business. A multiple case study population is determined when data saturation is achieved (Guest et al., 2020; Moser & Korstjens, 2018). Data saturation is reached when no new themes or information can be obtained by the researcher from the data (Guest et al., 2020; Moser & Korstjens, 2018). I achieved data saturation by exploring the participants' responses until I obtained no new themes from the interview data. The data triangulation method involves data collected from different sources using multiple methods to achieve data saturation and to increase the study's richness, reliability, and trustworthiness (Fusch et al., 2018; Jentoft & Olsen, 2019). I analyzed the themes from the participants' responses and compared them with my interview notes and company documentation to conduct data triangulation that enhanced the study's credibility, richness, and reliability.

Phenomenology research is interpretivism in which researchers explore the personal meanings of participants' lived experiences or their recollections and interpretations of their experiences to generate meanings and gain insights into phenomena (Alase, 2017; Mohajan, 2018; Saunders et al., 2016). Because I did not explore the personal meanings of participants' lived experiences with a phenomenon, phenomenology was not appropriate for this study. Mohajan (2018) and Saunders et al. (2016) defined ethnography as observations used to study the in-depth culture, people, or a group's social world. I was not observing specific people or groups' cultures and hence

did not select an ethnographic design. Narrative inquiry interprets a sequence of events from personal stories about participants' lives (Mohajan, 2018; Saunders et al., 2016). I did not study and interpret successful SME owners' life stories. Documenting life stories was not relevant to present strategic business practice. Thus, the narrative inquiry was not appropriate for this study.

Yin (2018) defined a single case study as an in-depth study of a single case's complexity. Thus, the single case study would not have been reliable or appropriate for exploring strategies used across SMEs. The multiple case study design was appropriate for exploring phenomena across multiple organizations or for understanding replicable phenomena from the context of business owners (Yin, 2018). The most appropriate design for this study was the multiple case study design, which I used to explore multiple SME managers' strategies through semistructured interviews with open-ended questions and reviews of company documents to understand SMEs strategies for an in-depth understanding of SMEs strategies for winning contracts for profitability and sustainability.

Population and Sampling

The study's population was small business owners in the Copperbelt province of Zambia, who had fewer than 100 employees and successfully implemented business strategies for winning mining contracts to achieve profitability and sustainability for over 5 years. These business owners operated a supply or contracting company. Sampling is the process of sample sourcing and selection. Sampling is an important factor that determines the accuracy of the study (Bhardwaj, 2019). Bhardwaj (2019) defined a

sample as a selected group taken from a population for some kind of research measurement. A researcher selects participants with characteristics that align with the research question before collecting data (Campbell et al., 2020; Schrag, 2017).

The two main types of sampling are (a) probability sampling, which includes simple random sampling, systematic random sampling, and (b) non-probability sampling, which includes quota sampling, self-selection sampling, convenience sampling, snowball sampling, and purposive sampling (Bhardwaj, 2019). I used purposive sampling to select the appropriate participants for the study. Researchers may purposefully choose participants with similar and distinct characteristics related to the research topic (Campbell et al., 2020; Schrag, 2017). Researchers also use purposeful sampling to select participants who have been most affected by the phenomena (Campbell et al., 2020). Purposive sampling maximizes the participants' diversity to gain the most relevant and rich information from a specific group who are willing and have the desire to share the information (Sodeify & Tabrizi, 2020). Yin (2018) suggested that a sample size of three could be sufficient for a case study research to reach data saturation.

There are hundreds of small business owners in the supply or contracting industry in my interest area. I started by selecting four SME owners who met the participant criteria. I followed this process to obtain rich and relevant data from SME managers who are profitable and sustain their business. Researchers reach data saturation when they obtain no new information about the study, no new themes, and replicable (Guest et al., 2020). Following the interview protocol and asking the interview questions of the four participants helped me reach data saturation.

Researchers use data saturation to determine the sample size (Guest et al., 2020; Moser & Korstjens, 2018; Yin, 2018). I ensured data saturation using an interview protocol to explore the participants' responses and continued to interview new participants until there was no new information or themes. To enhance data saturation, I carried out member checking by sending my interview summary to each participant to check and validate my interpretation of the interview responses. I continued adjusting my interview summary according to their responses until the participants validated my interview summary. Researchers use data triangulation to help achieve validity, reliability, and legitimation, encompassing dependability, confirmability, credibility, and transferability of research findings. (Moon, 2019). I conducted data triangulation by analyzing the participants' responses, interview notes, and company documentation to help achieve the data's reliability, credibility, and trustworthiness. The interview setting was important for interviewees in qualitative studies to feel comfortable contributing to the research (Doll, 2017). I interviewed the participants at a private location away from the company premises to preserve the participants' privacy and confidentiality.

Ethical Research

I commenced research only after receiving Walden IRB approval, number 06-25-20-0349038, for the research participants' protection. The successful completion of a qualitative, exploratory multiple case study depended on the researcher's adherence to strict ethical standards. Ethical considerations are critical while conducting research that involves living beings, especially human beings (Pope, 2017). *The Belmont Report* contains basic ethical principles intended to protect the rights of human research subjects.

I followed the three basic principles of respect for individuals, beneficence, and justice during the study to ensure participants' comfort.

I followed Walden IRB procedures as specified and required to protect participants and ensure reliable findings. I ensured that (a) participants are protected, (b) the selection plan was followed, (c) the informed consent process was done properly, (d) the participants' privacy was secure, and that (e) participants' rights are respected.

Informed consent is the process researchers use to inform participants of potential risks and get the participants' agreement (Perrault & Keating, 2017). There was a need to obtain informed consent for the research participants to secure potential research participants' ethical rights before starting the interview process (Biros, 2018). I wrote an invitation letter (see Appendix B) to each of the selected participants explaining the voluntary participation and that no incentives would be provided for participating in the study.

Additionally, the invitation letter included the nature of the study, the purpose of the study, my responsibilities, confidentiality guidelines, and the participants' role.

Together with the invitation letter, I included a consent form for each potential participant with the Walden IRB approval. If the participant were willing and decided to participate, they would indicate their consent on the form and sign and date the consent form. I also informed the participants of the withdrawal procedure from the study. The consent form included information that a participant could withdraw from the study at any time, without recourse, by merely indicating their intention to withdraw. The participant could

use an email or text message to convey a request to be removed from the study. No participant withdrew.

A critical requirement for ethical research was protecting participants' privacy, confidentiality, and private information during the processes of collection and analysis of data (Williams & Pigeot, 2017; Yin, 2018). I collected and secured data in a lockable cabinet to which only I had access. I will store the data for 5 years, after which I will destroy the data by deletion and shredding. Researchers are responsible for protecting and preserving the identity and the rights of the participants during the whole research process of collecting data, analysis, and storage (Yin, 2018). The participants' privacy was protected as I used pseudonyms to label and store participants' personal information and names. I was the only one who knew the name of the coded organizations.

The purpose of the study was for educational purposes only; I did not share any information about other participants nor offer any rewards, except a one- or two-page summary of the findings and a copy of the finished study itself upon participant request. I anticipate a lack of legal or economic risk for the participants.

Data Collection Instruments

The researcher's role in qualitative studies is to collect data, develop themes, understand and interpret the themes. Damsa and Ugelvik (2017) stated that the researcher was the primary data collection instrument in qualitative multiple case studies. I was the primary data collection instrument for this study. I conducted semistructured interviews remotely via telephone using eight open-ended questions to collect the data. I also reviewed company documents such as policy documents, innovation guidelines,

corporate social responsibility guides, and operation procedures. I obtained additional information by noting audible observations of the participant's voice tone and language. Researchers use triangulation of data from multiple sources to enhance a study's reliability and validity (Foley et al., 2017). Therefore, I used company documentation as a source for data triangulation to enhance this study's reliability and validity. The case study protocol is an essential tool when carrying out multiple case studies to keep the researcher focused on the case study topic and avoid problems (Yin, 2018). According to Yin (2018), a typical case study protocol consists of (a) an overview of the case study objectives, auspices, issues, and relevant readings, (b) data collection procedures for protecting human objects, (c) identification of data sources and potential evidence sources, and (d) a guide for the case study report.

The interview protocol in Appendix A and the open-ended interview questions in Appendix C align well with the research question. I used the interview protocol and interview questions to stay focused on the research and asked the participants the same questions in the same order to enhance the reliability of the study. Researchers use the same data collection instruments, organization, technique, and analysis in multiple case studies to enhance a study's reliability (Braaten et al., 2020; Yin, 2018). I audio recorded the interview and transcribed it using Otter software to ensure the study's validity and reliability. I conducted member checking and asked the participants to review my interpretations of their responses to avoid errors and misinformation. According to FitzPatrick (2019), member checking provided the researcher's interpretations of the interview answers to the interviewee to check the accuracy, enhance validity, and confirm

the findings' credibility. Researchers use qualitative data analysis software to reduce raw data into common themes (Davidson et al., 2017). I used NVivo software for coding and developing themes from the interview data.

Data Collection Technique

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies that small businesses use to win contracts for sustainability and profitability. In a multiple case study, the researcher is the main data collection instrument (Yin, 2018). The main data collection techniques for this study were semistructured interviews and company documentation. I used the interview protocol in Appendix A and the interview questions in Appendix C to stay focused on the study and develop the protocol to foresee any steps and carry them out.

I used semistructured telephone interview methods of data collection technique to explore the participants' views and experiences. I asked SME owners open-ended interview questions (see Appendix C) and asked follow-up questions to obtain thick and rich information quality data. Using the semistructured interview method, the researcher asks targeted, in-depth and open-ended questions while the interviewee responds about the phenomenon (Yin, 2018). According to Bearman (2019), semistructured questions are very significant in qualitative studies to obtain rich and quality data.

During interviews, I recorded the interviews and wrote notes to ensure information fidelity and data analysis. I asked for permission and audio recorded the interview and later transcribed it. I was attentive during the interview, noting any perceptions in the interviewee's language. Member checking was the researcher's process

of returning a summary of the interview to the research participants to review and confirm the researcher's interpretation of their answers (Brear, 2019). After transcribing, I carried out member checking by summarizing my interpretations of the participants' responses to the interviewee for confirmation. Member checking enhances the study participants' credibility, validity, and involvement (Brear, 2019).

Yin (2018) posited that multiple case studies should rely on multiple sources of evidence rather than relying on a single source of evidence. Apart from the semistructured interviews, I reviewed company documents such as policy documents, responsibility guides, and operation procedures. I also obtained additional information by noting audible observations of the participant's voice tone and language. The researcher's conclusions' validity is improved when the conclusions are derived from multiple sources (Foley et al., 2017; Fusch et al., 2017). I used the multiple data collection sources of semistructured interview data and company documents for data triangulation to enhance the study's reliability and validity.

The semistructured interviews' advantages include that they are relevant to the study and provide answers with a great depth of rich and clear data (Kopp et al., 2017). Weller et al. (2018) stated that probing and prompting follow-up questions during interview sessions matter the most rather than the number of interviews. The use of member checking helps ensure that the researcher's interpretations align with what the participants meant in the interview. I used telephone interviews to help ensure each participant was committed and focused on the interview process.

The documentation review and analysis allow for the collection of secondary data to enhance reliability. Yin (2018) stated that some participants give inaccurate responses to interview questions due to poor memory. Other participants give inaccurate responses when they are not comfortable. Peyrefitte and Lazar (2018) stated that researchers review company documents to compare data from different sources. Some SMEs may not readily share some sensitive business documents with me, which may be a disadvantage for reviewing company documentation, so I focused on publicly available documents. The likelihood of a researcher imposing his own beliefs and interests in all qualitative research stages exists (Brear, 2019).

Data Organization Technique

Data must have adequate protection through safekeeping in line with ethical research considerations (Yin, 2018). I used a pseudonym for all participants, such as S01, and had a file for each participant, including the date, time, company documents, notes, informed consent, and the interview transcription. I used writing instruments normally used by researchers such as pen and paper and electronic devices such as computers and smartphones to write, record, and store data. I collected several types of data and labeled them separately as (a) interview recordings, (b) field interview notes, and (c) company documents. I audio recorded the interview and transcribed the interviews. Brear (2019) noted that narratives warrant immediate transcribing to avoid loss of information and achieving accuracy.

According to Watkins (2017), a data organization technique was essential for accurately labeling, analyzing, reviewing, and reporting interview data. I used NVivo

software as a data management and analysis software. According to the Walden University IRB requirements, I will store all the participants' files and data for 5 years to protect the participants' confidentiality. I will keep participants' data locked in a fireproof place and accessible only by me before destroying it at the lapse of 5 years.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was the search for patterns, insights, or concepts that seem promising to result in thematic answers to the qualitative study's research question (Yin, 2018). It was the next step after the field step, data collection, and transcription. Yin (2018) noted that data analysis was one of the least developed aspects of doing case studies; however, a researcher needs to use a comprehensive analysis of the large data and ensure qualitative research rigor. Triangulation was an important part of data analysis to ensure reliability and credibility. Triangulation refers to the convergence of evidence from different sources, such as open-ended interviews, company documents, and direct observations (Renz et al., 2018). Renz et al. (2018) defined the four categories of triangulation as (a) methodological triangulation, (b) investigator triangulation, (c) data triangulation, and (d) theoretical triangulation.

I used data triangulation as part of my data analysis for this study. Researchers use triangulation to collect data about a phenomenon from multiple sources rather than focusing on one perspective (Varpio et al., 2017). Yin (2018) stated that data triangulation collected data from multiple sources to corroborate the same findings. According to Turner et al. (2017), triangulation is critical for ensuring a study's validity and credibility. Therefore, I used multiple SME successful managers as multiple sources

of interview notes, company documentation, and semistructured interview data to collect, observe and interpret the same meaning for this study's data triangulation to ensure trustworthiness, reliability, and credibility. I also used methodological triangulation by using different data collection methods, including interviews, writing field notes, and collecting company documentation to ensure the study's richness, reliability, and credibility, as articulated by Moon (2019).

In this qualitative multiple case study, I analyzed the data using Yin's (2018) 5 step process. Yin posited that the following five steps analyze data: (a) collecting data, (b) grouping data, (c) regrouping data based on themes, (d) evaluating the information, and (e) recognizing emergent themes. I collected company documentation, wrote interview notes, and collected interview data after member checking, transcribed the interview data as a first step for my data analysis.

I manually read the interview data, notes, and company documentation, noting and coding and grouping into themes and iterating process three times to understand and gain researcher insights into the thematic data before using the software. I used NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software (QDAS), to sort, integrate, synthesize and develop new themes and confirm emergent themes. I loaded my collected and transcribed data into NVivo software. NVivo is a QDAS that researchers use to expedite thematic coding and categorize the data collected, developed by QSR international (Dalkin et al., 2020; Wilk et al., 2019). Realistic researchers use NVivo software to manage, organize, code, and analyze datasets and develop key themes (Dalkin et al., 2020). Davidson et al. (2017) stated that researchers use thematic analysis to code open-ended questions and use

matrices to compare different respondents' answers to reduce raw data into common themes. Researchers use QDAS thematic analysis to get more profound insights to understand fundamental concepts and meaning in larger volumes of texts and multiple sources while promoting transparency and displaying flexibility (Dalkin et al., 2020). Nvivo QDAS was thus appropriate for the data analysis for this study.

As a second step, I grouped the data and coded the data using NVivo software using frequency or common keywords and patterns. I also autocoded the data to similar group themes using NVivo software. I then regrouped the data while evaluating the information for themes and developing emergent themes. I continued regrouping to higher-order themes until I had three major themes and several subthemes. The process to develop themes using NVivo was in line with Yin's 5 steps (2018). I used NVivo to identify the key themes and map their relationships to the overarching research question. I correlated the emergent themes with existing current literature and the conceptual framework.

Reliability and Validity

Research studies and their design need to be a set of logical statements, and the design data judged to be composed of certain valid tests that enhance its quality (Yin, 2018). Demonstrating and achieving quality in qualitative research involves providing a rich explanation of the research process and using precision methods to collect data, all of which need a critical eye (Moon, 2019). Qualitative researchers use reliability and validity to ensure the exactness, accuracy, and trustworthiness of a study (Assarroudi et al., 2018). Yin (2018) posited that following a rigorous and specific procedure during

data collection, data analysis, and interpretation was essential. Moon (2019) stated that reliability and validity include dependability, transferability, credibility, and confirmability. According to Johnson et al. (2020), qualitative research analysis requires trustworthiness, which includes establishing credibility, confirmability, transferability, and dependability to collect and analyze the data.

Reliability

Researchers use reliability and validity to strengthen a research study. Reliability was the consistency of research study components and their repeatability to get the same results (Yin, 2018). Reliability and validity include dependability, transferability, credibility, and confirmability (Moon, 2019). For studies to be relevant and trustworthy, researchers must ensure their study meets the reliability and validity criteria. Reliability refers to consistency and replication, while validity indicates the accuracy of the results' analysis and the findings' potential transferability (Saunders et al., 2016).

I used the interview protocol (see Appendix A) to help ensure the data gathering's reliability. I used Otter transcription software to transcribe each audio recording and accurately capture the participants' views and experiences. I then conducted member checking as suggested by Brear (2019) to enhance the results' dependability and trustworthiness. Finally, NVivo software's use with its database further enhanced the dependability for unbiased, ethical, and confidential findings.

Dependability is considered as the audit trail of the research, from research method startup to reporting the research findings (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Qualitative researchers must have a research design stage for ensuring dependability to enhance the

consistency of the data and trustworthiness of the research findings (Johnson et al., 2020). Yin (2018) stated that researchers can use the interview protocol to demonstrate dependability in case study research. According to FitzPatrick (2019), member checking provides the researcher's interpretations of the interviewee's answers to the interviewee to check the accuracy, enhance validity, and confirm the data's credibility. Researchers maintain consistency during the research process to ensure its dependability (Nowell et al., 2017). I interviewed and audio recorded all the participants in the same consistent manner, transcribed the interview, reviewed company documents, and used NVivo to analyze data to enhance the study's reliability, validity, and dependability. I conducted member checking by sending a summary of my interpretations of the participants' responses to the participants for review for authentication and checking the accuracy to help achieve data saturation for the study's reliability. I used triangulation by reviewing company documentation and corroborating that data with interview data to enhance the study's reliability and validity. Data saturation was reached when no new themes or information can be obtained by the researcher from the collected data (Guest et al., 2020; Moser & Korstjens, 2018). I aimed to achieve data saturation by exploring the initial four participants' responses until no new themes emerged from successive new interviews.

Validity

The accuracy and the truthfulness of the data collection, analysis, and interpretation of the findings demonstrate the research study's validity (Dennis, 2018; Fusch et al., 2017). There are two sources of data: interviews and company documents. I ensured that the questions are consistent and mitigate bias. To ensure the validity of

qualitative research, researchers triangulate several data sources to validate the interview data, including documentation, field notes, and direct observations (Moon, 2019). I carried out member checking by sending a summary of my interpretations to the participants for authentication and checking the accuracy.

Credibility

Credibility refers to the level of impartiality and objectivity of the research findings (Bradshaw et al., 2017). Researchers use credibility to ensure that the research study's results are a correct and true reflection of the data. Nowell et al. (2017) and Turner et al. (2017) confirmed that researchers use credibility to ensure a study's findings' integrity and trustworthiness. I enhanced credibility by member checking my interpretations of the participants' interview responses and triangulating the interview data with the company documentation. I also followed the interview protocol consistently and helped ensure consistent rich data aligned to the SME leader's perspective.

Transferability

Transferability involves the degree to which the results of a qualitative research study could be transferred or applied further than the research boundaries (Nowell et al., 2017). Researchers enhance transferability by including a systematic description of the geographic boundaries, the population of the study, and the data collection process. Future researchers can test this study's findings for transferability by ensuring they meticulously follow the data collection and analysis techniques for the research design, using interview protocol and NVivo QDAS software and the other outlined procedures like data saturation. I enhanced transferability by purposefully using study participants

with rich experience in the phenomenon, meticulously following my interview protocol for data collection, comprehensively detailed my research design and context, and carried out comprehensive data analysis using NVivo showing the validity and reliability of the research findings.

Confirmability

Confirmability was the accuracy and objectivity of the research findings as opposed to the researcher's biases (Nowell et al., 2017). Confirmability is achieved when the researcher ensures and communicates that the study findings reflect the participants' information rather than the researcher's interpretations or bias (Johnson et al., 2020). Johnson et al. (2020) stated that confirmability is the minimal researcher influence on the study result by meeting rigor standards such as member checking, triangulation, and peer review. To enhance confirmability, I followed the interview protocol, used probing questions, conducted member checking of my interpretations, and triangulated collected data.

Data Saturation

Researchers use data saturation to ensure and demonstrate the validity of a qualitative research study (Mazerolle & Eason, 2018). Data saturation was reached when no new data, coding, or themes resulted, and replication occurs from the information given (Nelson, 2017). I purposefully selected multiple participants SME managers familiar with the phenomena, subjected them to probing questions about the phenomena, and used member checking for data validation to ensure the study data saturation was reached when no new information was obtained.

Transition and Summary

In Section 2, I restated the study's purpose, my role, the method I used to select potential participants, and justified the research method and design. I also provided information about the population and sampling of the study and ethical research. Section 2 also includes a description of the data collection instrument and technique, data organization and analysis processes, and the findings' reliability and validity. In Section 3, I presented the findings of the study, application to professional practices, implications for social change, recommendations for actions and further research, and reflections. I also provided a summary and a conclusion.

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies supply and contracting SME owners use for winning mining contracts for their profitability and sustainability. I conducted semistructured interviews using eight open-ended questions with four SME managers who had experience running a profitable and sustainable SME beyond 5 years in Zambia's Copperbelt province. Semistructured questions are very significant in qualitative studies to obtain rich and quality data (Bearman, 2019). I assigned S01, S02, S03, and S04 to each participant for their confidentiality rather than their business names.

I used manual analysis and NVivo Release 1.3 analysis software to manage and analyze the data. Data analysis involved the interpretation of themes from interviews and company documentation. In my data analysis, I determined that the participants' responses and my review of company documentation aligned with the FST and RBV conceptual frameworks and my professional literature review. I identified the following three major themes: (a) competitive quality products in terms of price, quality, and delivery is critical to gaining and retaining customers; (b) interactive marketing and financial strategies are required to build customer relations and to create and deliver customer value, and (c) resource acquisition and effective utilization are critical for SME business growth and survival. The three emergent themes represent the strategies for winning mining contracts for Zambian SME business leaders for profitability and sustainability.

Presentation of the Findings

The overarching research question for this study was as follows: What strategies do supply and contracting SME owners use to win mining contracts for profitability and sustainability? I collected data via semistructured interviews, interview notes, and company documentation obtained from the participants, such as flyers, work plans, quality assurance documents, plant and equipment records, and marketing communications. I conducted member checking for correctness and accuracy of my interpretations of the participants' responses to the interview questions to ensure credibility and reliability. The researcher's conclusions validity is improved when the conclusions are derived from multiple sources (Foley et al., 2017; Fusch et al., 2017). I used the multiple data sources of semistructured interview data and company documents for data triangulation to enhance the study's reliability and validity. I used NVivo Release 1.3 software for data analysis to identify patterns, threads, themes, and subthemes from the transcribed data and determine how they relate to the phenomenon under study.

I imported the four interview transcripts and company documentation and used NVivo to calculate the words' frequency and autocode the files. I deduced several codes from my initial manual coding, the NVivo high word frequency, and NVivo autocode, grouped them based on themes, evaluated the information, and determined emergent themes using NVivo software. For further thematic analysis, the use of NVivo helped organize, describe, and quickly obtain references and frequencies of coding attributable to each participant or emergent theme. Researchers also use data saturation to ensure and demonstrate the validity of a qualitative research study (Mazerolle & Eason, 2018). Data

saturation is achieved when no new data, coding, or themes result, and replication occurs from the obtained information (Guest et al., 2020; Nelson, 2017). I used member checking and data triangulation to reach data saturation. Researchers determine when to discontinue data collection or analysis by reaching data saturation (Saunders et al., 2016). Table 1 shows the codes per interview.

Table 1

Codes per Interview

Interview	Participant	Number of codes	Number of new codes
1	S01	8	8
2	S03	8	1
3	S02	9	0
4	S04	9	0

Data analysis involved identifying themes from the data and coding them by assigning labels, as per Yin's (2018) procedure. I identified eight themes from the first interview and eight themes from the second interview, with one new theme. Nine themes emerged from the third and fourth interviews with no new themes (see Table 1). The absence of new themes confirmed that data saturation was reached (see Guest et al., 2020; Moser & Korstjens, 2018; Nelson, 2017). I aggregated the subthemes, and the main themes that emerged were (a) competitive quality product, (b) marketing and financial strategies, and (c) resource acquisition and utilization.

Theme 1: Competitive Quality Product

The first theme was SME managers' importance to tender and deliver price competitive, high quality, and safe products or services on time. The aspect of making a

business around value chain satisfaction is essential for business success. Integration of supply chain and relationship strategies with market driven capabilities delivers competitive customer value (Suh & Lee, 2018). All four participants identified competitive quality products and services as a driver of growth and survival of their SMEs. The result for Theme 1 is shown in Table 2, with 33 total references with the subthemes cost competitive product, high-quality product, and scheduled delivery.

Table 2

Emergent Theme 1: Competitive Quality Product

Subtheme	Number of sources	References
Cost competitive product	4	15
High-quality product	4	13
Scheduled delivery	3	5

S01, S02, S03, and S04 emphasized that they use competitive prices by lowering input costs and margins to win mining contracts for profits and sustainability. S01 said, “In order to be sustainable, or rather, to win those contracts, your rates themselves have got to be competitive.” S02 shared, “We operate on a very competitive margin. We do not try and overshoot or undershoot ourselves. We just go in with very competitive margins, which are also economical to our clients.” S03 and S04 stated that they source cheaper materials or negotiate the price with input-material suppliers to be price competitive. S01 said, “Keeping our costs low is more competitive and profitable, as well as sustainable for one strategy for going forward.” S01 stated, “How well one negotiates actual pricing and the delivery of those materials to the site is also critical to the aspect of tendering.”

All participants stated that they kept their costs low by cutting costs. S01 stated that they strategically establish near the mines to reduce their mobilization costs. S01 and S03 stated that they keep lean by maintaining a minimum core resource of skilled employees and hire workers as and when required to service contracts for cost-effectiveness. SMEs' sustainability and survival strategies are significantly related with the significant implication that maintaining a small, committed, and motivated workforce is critical for the survival of the SME in a volatile economy (Ifekwem & Adedamola, 2016). S01 elaborated, "We have skilled and semiskilled staff on a more or less permanent basis. The unskilled staff, we hire them on a contract-to-contract basis." Banchuen et al. (2017) found that firm's leaders who focused on cost, flexibility, delivery, and quality develop operational collaboration to achieve resource efficiency and strategic collaboration with suppliers for market and innovation improvement to win orders for improved business outcomes. Bibuljica and Ukaj (2018) found that strategic management was relevant to all SMEs that involve changes in the innovation of products and services and high-quality new products that can only validate the market. The subtheme cost competitive product involves innovating high-quality new products and aligns with the RBV literature, such as Bibuljica and Ukaj's findings.

All four participants identified high-quality products and services as a competitive advantage for winning and sustaining clients and contracts. S01 explained, "To sustain ourselves, we make sure that the quality of our products or whatever we do, our work is of a high standard, safe and trustworthy." S03 stated that they ensured that every work they delivered was of high-quality standards and delivered on time. S04 said, "We make

sure that everything is done as per the specification of the mining requirements. So you have to develop a culture of quality work and service so that you are ahead of your competitors.” S02 shared that they aim to leave a lasting impression on all projects they do and assign a time component to meet the mines' targeted schedule. S03 and S04 identified scheduled or early delivery as a competitive capability by leveraging skilled and experienced human resources to safely and efficiently produce or carry out work without downtime. Resources are more beneficial to any business's growth or success if they are VRIN or heterogeneous and difficult to imitate (Florea et al., 2020; Jones et al., 2018). The participants used cost advantage, high quality, and scheduled delivery that are difficult to imitate to win contracts and sustain mining contracts.

In the RBV theory, researchers and scholars posited that a firm has resources and capabilities that help the firm achieve competitive advantage, growth, and long-term sustainability (Bhandari et al., 2020; Celec & Globocnik, 2017). Competitive quality products are difficult to follow and are a VRIN capability and resource. VRIN resources were identified as the foundation for generating firm performance in the literature review. VRIN resources are difficult to imitate, copy, or follow due to their unique VRIN attributes (Barney, 1986, 2001; Florea et al., 2020). Firms need resources and capabilities with VRIN attributes for success (Barney, 1991; Jones et al., 2018). Barney (2001) and Bhandari et al. (2020) stated that the emphasis on mobilizing, developing, controlling, and synergizing unique resources embedded in collaborative partners would bring about resources in interfirm collaboration and value creation. The Theme of competitive quality products aligns well with the RBV theory, as per Barney.

Theme 2: Marketing and Financial Strategies

The second emergent theme was marketing and financial strategies.

Entrepreneurship is the innovation, the disciplined effort to improve a business's potential based on a deliberate, conscious, and purposeful search for opportunities within the company, industry, and the broader social and intellectual environment (Osman et al., 2017). Marketing and financial strategies involve a firm positioning itself in a market with due visibility, value chain business relationships, fostering and sustaining financial arrangements like credit lines, and continually assessing and improving its capabilities and market position. Thus, SME entrepreneurship involves creating business potentials such as financial and marketing strategies within and outside the market or environment. Dynamic capabilities are a firm's ability to integrate, build, and reconfigure internal and external competencies to address rapidly changing environments that allow firms to maintain a competitive advantage (Yuan et al., 2021). All four participants identified strategic marketing and financial competencies critical to their operations to win and sustain contracts. Theme 2 analysis results are in Table 3, with 61 total references with the subthemes business relations, credit lines, and SWOT analysis.

Table 3

Emergent Theme 2: Marketing and Financial Strategies

Subtheme	Number of sources	References
Business relations	4	43
Credit facilities	4	10
SWOT analysis	4	8

The integration of supply chain and relationship strategies with market driven capabilities can deliver competitive customer value (Suh & Lee, 2018). S01, S02, S03, and S04 elaborated that they maintain visibility and nurture business relationships and communication for rapport with all clients' management levels and all collaborative partners in their value chain for synergistic benefits and value creation. S01 explained, "We need to keep that visibility and contact, so we need to be in touch with the end-user and the decision-makers. End users and decision-makers are very important to us." S01 stated that they call end-users and decision-makers from time to time to find out what is obtaining, such as what medium- to long-term contracts are planned.

According to Jones et al. (2018), firms that are successful in developing a close relationship capability enjoy a sustainable competitive advantage because such capabilities are likely to be rare and are very difficult to imitate, even in contexts in which they are the most advantageous.

Stakeholders have increasingly become interconnected such that a firm's actions toward one stakeholder are visible to others and can affect members of the stakeholder ecosystem (Crane, 2020). SME managers thus leverage visibility with stakeholders for profitability as the SME's actions toward any of its stakeholders can inform other stakeholders of its trustworthiness, transparency, and responsiveness that determine to what degree other stakeholders assume vulnerability and engage in future exchange relationships (Crane, 2020). S02 and S04 stated that they maintain a full-fledged team with visibility in all the mines, actively seek opportunities with all the mining companies, and maintain rapport for new opportunities and work feedback. All the participants

shared that they maintain business relationships anchored on trust, honesty, and reliability.

S01, S02, and S03 indicated that they carry out corporate social responsibility programs in partnership with clients and collaborators. Researchers use the FST to understand the redistribution of organizational benefits and important decision making for addressing stakeholders' needs for maximum organizational benefits (Barney & Harrison, 2020). Business leaders use their stakeholder relationships to engage with disaster-affected communities for mutual benefits that provide community resilience (McKnight & Linnenluecke, 2016). The private sector is intertwined with community resilience and responds to disasters through stakeholder relationships with governments, community organizations, owners, consumer advocates, suppliers, customers, competitors, employees, and business managers (McKnight & Linnenluecke, 2016).

Access to credit for SME cash flow and project financing is critical for business success and growth that SME managers need to leverage. Maliti and Mwewa (2015) found that access to credit from financial institutions mediated by factors in accessing credit, like relationships with the bank, are critical for SME strategic formulation and business practice. All four participants identified credit lines from suppliers and financial institutions with mediating business relationship factors as a strategy for winning contracts and sustaining their growth. S01, S02, S03, and S04 emphasized that they have developed relationships over many years with input material suppliers for several months credit lines and financial institutions for operating and capital cash requirements. S02 shared, "We can walk into our bank and choose whatever equipment we want to buy.

They will easily give us because we have been dealing with them for the past 15 years and our track record is very good.” S03 said,

We work very closely with our bankers, our financiers, and others, which is a huge strategy on its own. We try to keep them well serviced and are in good standing to get project financing and kick start a project.

The credit line strategy is in line with Wang (2016), who found that SME managers see a lack of finance as the most significant growth and sustainability hindrance obstacle from data in a World Bank survey of 119 developing countries. The credit line subtheme is aligned with Pais and Gama’s (2015) finding that for higher corporate profitability, SMEs should maintain an optimal level of working capital through the collection of payments from their customers and in the number of days that firms take to settle their commercial liabilities.

FST extends to many other eclectic narratives, such as multiple interpretations and applications like business ethics, corporate social responsibility, strategic management, corporate governance, and finance (Miles, 2017). All the organizational narratives of FST theory can provide a competitive advantage that drives profitability and sustainability (Barney, 2020; Boso et al., 2017). The FST's importance is its reinforcement of creating value for different stakeholders for an organization to be successful.

S01, S02, and S03 stated that they actively assess other stakeholders in the value chain and the business environment for strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) to innovate products and their capabilities. S01 said, “Being in a niche market,

knowing our competitors is also very important. We need to know who our competitors are, what strengths and weaknesses we all have so we go on and improve our operations.” S03 shared,

One of the strategies we do is revise our rates to be up to date with the market.

Then we also review the previously completed works and assess to see where we did not perform well and make adjustments.

SMEs need to carefully consider and study factors that affect business performance to achieve maximum firm value and long-term profitability (Blažková & Dvouletý, 2018). SMEs that develop social and sustainable practices increase their financial profitability and innovation level and improve their image and reputation (Valdez-Juárez et al., 2018). The participants S01, S02, and S03, use the SWOT subtheme to innovate and improve their reputation for profitability is aligned with Valdez-Juárez et al.'s (2018) findings in the FST literature review. The SWOT subtheme is aligned to the FST conceptual framework as participants assess stakeholders and operations for firm-specific value creation and growth. Stakeholders are people, groups, or organizations with a direct affiliation with a firm and are influenced by its operations or can affect the firm's operations (Freeman, 1984; McKnight & Linnenluecke, 2016).

Theme 3: Resource Acquisition and Utilization

Resources are the combination of land and labor that firms use to make products and provide services, and capabilities are the human, physical, and technical resources the firm's members possess as deployable processes (Sims et al., 2016). Organizational leaders make strategies around resources to develop and deliver key products (Suh &

Lee, 2018). The integration of supply chain and relationship strategies with market driven capabilities can deliver competitive customer value (Suh & Lee, 2018). SME utilization measures the SME strategic orientations' output products and services against the SME's maximum possible output. All four participants identified resource acquisition and utilization as an essential strategy for their operations for winning and sustaining contracts. Theme 3 analysis results are in Table 4, with 26 total references with the subthemes: skilled and trained resources, reinvestment in company resources, and plant and equipment.

Table 4

Emergent Theme 3: Resource Acquisition and Utilization

Subtheme	Number of sources	References
Skilled and trained resources	4	11
Reinvestment in company resources.	4	9
Plant and equipment	3	6

S01, S02, S03, and S04 all shared that skilled and trained human resources are key to their operations and organize their business plan around key personnel for their capabilities. S01 emphasized, “A trained human resource base is key.” S02 explained,

Our key strategies are organizing ourselves in terms of resources, namely human resources and equipment, so we have stayed over and above our competitors because we have got the required things that some of our competitors do not have.

S02 stated that they have people with all the necessary skills employed who are motivated by good salaries and bonuses and encouraged to stay with the SME. S03

shared, “One of the strategies is that we employ the qualified and experienced workforce, thereby enabling us to complete the works within schedule within and within budget also maintain quality.” S04 explained that they employ and maintain a core skilled and trained workforce that works as a team and ensures quality, safe, and minimal or no reworks. The subtheme skilled and trained labor resources align with Ifekwem and Adedamola’s (2016) finding that maintaining a small committed and motivated workforce is critical for the SME's survival in a volatile economy.

The Theme resource requisition and utilization align with the RBV for the participants’ mobilizing, organizing, and producing goods and services as articulated. When authoritatively and administratively coordinated, the collection of human and nonhuman productive resources determines the productive goods and services that any resource can produce for sale in a market for a profit (Penrose, 1959). Sims et al. (2016) reinforced that the interaction between human and material resources determines the production output available from any given resource.

All participants stated that they reinvest in company resources such as cash capital, equipment, tools, and labor for their SME competitive advantage. S01 elaborated, “To make a smooth transition for one contract to another, we make sure that we stockpile all the other resources that we have, so that we are able to tap into those items; you know, for the next contract.” S03 explained, “Other than reinvesting the funds in the new projects, we also set aside some funds, which we fix with the banks also to generate some interest, which will come and reinvest in the business once we have works.” S03 shared that other than labor, they invested in their equipment, transport, tools, and training their

workforce to reduce wastage, thereby reducing the costs. S04 explained, “Basically, we use our equipment, whatever work we get instead of hiring. We refurbish whatever we have, but we deliberately try to upgrade the equipment for the future where the resources allow.”

S01, S02, S03, and S04 identified plant and equipment as a critical competitive advantage for carrying out quality work. S02 stated that they have all the heavy equipment required to do any work in their field of expertise. S02 explained, “Our SME is a full-fledged setup and oiled machine in terms of skills and equipment.” S01 shared,

We make sure our equipment is in viable condition. Capital injection into the company's equipment is key, and we make sure that there is a deliberate policy to capital infuse or rather reinvest some of that money into plant and equipment.

Wernerfelt (1984) defined a resource as any tangible or intangible asset that can be a strength or weakness of an organization. Resources are the various combinations of fundamental building blocks of land and labor used for production (Sims et al., 2016). The participants’ reinvestment in company cash, labor, and equipment resources to create a strategic formulation to create value aligns with the RBV. According to Barney (1991), firm-specific resources are a source of sustained competitive advantage and how a firm efficiently develops, controls, and leverages the resources for a sustainable competitive advantage.

Applications to Professional Practice

The purpose of this study was to explore strategies used by Zambian SMEs for winning mining contracts for profitability and sustainability beyond 5 years. The findings

section includes the collected research data, data analysis, interpretation of results with linkages to the literature review, and conceptual framework. This study's findings and recommendations may provide a practical guide to entrepreneurs, small business owners, and managers to create growth and sustainability strategies. The GEM identified key constraints faced by Zambian SMEs, including the lack of finance, weak capital market, poor business operations knowledge, and insufficient government support. This study was focused on the strategies that an entrepreneur, small business owner, or SME manager can develop and effectively have control of their enterprise success while overcoming the challenges faced in the business environment.

The GEM data revealed a high Zambian SME failure rate of 20% for the study period from 2012 to 2014 (GEM, 2019). Zambian SMEs also have one of the lowest global SME capacity utilizations of 67% (World Bank Group, 2018). Startup entrepreneurs and SME managers may use this research study's findings to sustain their firms, thereby reducing the national SME failure rate. Analysis of the interview data and company documentation using NVivo software yielded the following three themes: (a) competitive quality product, (b) marketing and financial strategies, and (c) resource acquisition and utilization.

The first theme and the last theme upheld the evidence on the RBV and its capabilities and resources to create and sustain the firm's value. The second theme upheld the evidence on the FST theory and the prudent development of close business relations, credit lines, and SWOT analysis of market and stakeholders as articulated by Valdez-Juárez et al. (2018). Entrepreneurs and SME managers may use this study's results to

formulate successful business strategies based on their specific VRIN resources that support long-term growth and sustainability. The findings may also be used to formulate successful stakeholder management strategies to achieve firm-level objectives for improved financial performance and sustainability

Implications for Social Change

According to OECD (2017), SMEs globally contribute to nations' economic growth through employment generation and value addition, and they makeup over 95% of global enterprises. SMEs develop the economy by creating employment and increasing the tax base and revenues (Nuwagaba, 2015). SMEs' performance is thus critical to the development of the country for various economic and social benefits. In Zambia, SMEs face many challenges, such that GEM (2019) surveys revealed a high failure rate of 20% for the period from 2012 to 2014. A World Bank Group (2018) survey of the Sub-Saharan Africa region revealed one of the lowest global SME capacity utilizations of 67% for Zambian SMEs.

The study's findings may lead to positive social change for the SMEs and the communities by helping SMEs create growth and sustainability strategies to sustain SMEs beyond 5 years, increase the country's revenues, and create more career jobs for the communities. An increase in employment increases tax revenues, which can fund and sustain infrastructure improvements and social programs in local communities. Employment creation, increasing local commercial revenues, and local households' derivative incomes are critical in developing countries (OECD, 2017). SME performance

improvement can increase SMEs' contribution to the national GDP and create more jobs in the economy, reducing unemployment.

The findings may improve the Zambian SMEs business practice and capacity utilization by helping SME business owners to adapt and improve their growth and sustainability strategies. According to Choongo (2017), positive social change can result from growing SMEs' profitability improvements that enable SMEs to implement, grow, and sustain CSR programs. The SMEs may develop and sustain CSR programs that promote organizations and communities and improve the dignity and well-being of human and social conditions in local communities.

Recommendations for Action

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies supply and contracting SME owners use for winning mining contracts for their profitability and sustainability. Managing and sustaining a small business has many challenges, does not conform to predefined norms, and involves many stakeholders. Mamman et al. (2019) showed a diversity of outcomes for similar SME policy and context in Sub-Saharan countries. Mamman et al. found that more research is required to narrow the SME literature gaps to help SME managers with profitability and sustainability strategies to improve the role of SMEs in economic growth and reducing unemployment in the Sub-Saharan region of Africa. The owners and managers of SMEs should pay attention to the study results because they might gain knowledge for building growth strategies and sustainability of their competitive advantage. SME owners who are

knowledgeable will manage the dynamic intricacies of growing and sustaining a business, leading to many capabilities that increase revenues and benefits to all stakeholders.

I recommend that the ZDA, chambers of commerce, and the various mining suppliers associations in Zambia pay attention to the results and share them with SME owners and managers. My research recommendations could relate to SME owners and managers in other developing countries interested in SME growth and sustainability strategies like in the SSA. I will provide all the research participants with 1-2 pages of my analysis of the results and provide the study should they be interested in reading my final doctoral research study when published. I shall also facilitate access to this research to scholars through business journals and articles and attend entrepreneur conferences and training events to share the results.

Recommendations for Further Research

The research was carried out in the Copperbelt province of Zambia, using a qualitative multiple case study comprised of four successful SMEs operating in the mining industry. The boundary for this study was mainly the mining industry in the Copperbelt province. Recommendations for future studies include exploration of strategies in other countries and other geographical locations within Zambia that will add to the limited research studies in Zambia. I suggest using other research methodologies and designs not limited to successful SMEs. Further studies may broaden the scope to understand growth and sustainability strategies generally used in SMEs and large firms in all other sectors in Zambia. Participants may fail to remember details of their experiences, which resulted in their business success; hence further studies to augment

research findings could be beneficial. Also, there was minimal literature relating to SME growth and sustainability strategies; researchers may also focus on understanding SME business environmental factors that shape the strategies.

Reflections

I have encountered entrepreneurship from the first day of employment after receiving my bachelor's degree. SMEs have always amazed me as to how dynamic and diverse SMEs are. In my formative years, I was always challenged and finding ways to navigate the intricacies of managing many SME and large firms' participation and performance in the mining industry. The doctoral journey has given me many perspectives and an in-depth understanding of SMEs' dynamics from all stakeholders and the environment. It was challenging to recruit participants and conduct interviews for data collection during the COVID-19 pandemic when most businesses were closed. However, I managed to collect data though it took time and allowed for telephonic interviews, which worked well. I have increased my interest in SMEs and will find ways to enhance the SME and large firms' value addition depending on my future roles.

Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies supply and contracting SME owners use for winning mining contracts for their profitability and sustainability. Three main themes emerged from coding and data analysis of interview data, interview notes, and company documentation. The three emergent themes from the data analysis were: (a) competitive quality products in terms of price, quality, and delivery; (b) interactive marketing and financial strategies; and (c)

resource acquisition and effective utilization. The research adds to the limited literature on Zambian SME business environment and practice. The government, regulators, and other stakeholders may use the research findings as background information to engage with SMEs for improved mutual benefits. SMEs may use the research findings to grow and sustain their businesses, reducing the high business failure rate and increasing the SMEs utilization. The increase in SMEs' utilization and success rate will contribute to national economic development through employment creation and increased tax base and revenues for various economic and social benefits.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Research Question: What strategies do supply and contracting SME owners use to win mining contracts for profitability and sustainability?

Interview Purpose: The purpose of this qualitative multiple-case study is to explore and determine strategies that supply and contracting SME owners use to win mining contracts for profitability and sustainability using 8 open-ended questions and additional follow-up questions.

- A. Select participants and invite them by email or telephone
- B. Send participants a copy of the interview questions, interview protocol, and a copy of the consent form

On the day of the interview
- C. Introduce myself, thank the participant, introduce the study, and review the interview's scope and outcomes.
- D. Present the consent form and answer any questions and concerns of the participant
- E. Collect the signed consent form, authorization, and business permit to operate.
- F. Request permission to record the interview, take notes, and any company document photo evidence
- G. Start recording.
- H. Record the pseudonym name of the interviewee, the date, and the time
- I. Start the interview from question 1 up to question 8.

During the interview questions

- J. Listen to the interviewee attentively without distracting them from answering and observing their body language. Take notes of observations and answers I deem important.
- K. Ask follow-up questions and reply as needed.
- L. End the interview and explain the next steps, including member checking by reiterating the contact numbers for follow-up.
- M. Thank the participant for taking the time and being part of the study
- N. Conduct member checking within 14 days after the interview by scheduling another meeting or by email and telephone communication.
- O. Protocol end.

Appendix B: Invitation Letter to Participate in the Study

Dear (Participant, Name)

My name is Patrick S. Akayombokwa. I am a doctoral student at Walden University in Minneapolis in the Doctor of Business Administration program. One of the requirements of the Walden University doctoral program is to complete research on a current business problem. My doctoral research is “strategies that supply and contracting SME owners use to win mining contracts for profitability and sustainability.” This research may be helpful in determining the successful business practices that sustain small and medium businesses for a long time; that may enhance contribution to national development, increase employment, and raise the standard of living.

As a successful small- and medium-sized business owner and manager, you are in a good position to help me with this research study because you are in charge of the procurement and tendering for works and materials, the management, production, supply, work execution, and corporate social interactions. Your participation will be invaluable in providing the required data that will enable an analysis of the best strategies for winning contracts for profitability and sustainability. The information that you provide and your participation will be protected by adherence to Walden University’s confidentiality protection guidelines. The interview information, together with your name and organization, will be confidential. The interview will be scheduled at your convenience at an acceptable location and will take no more than 40 minutes.

Should you decide to participate, I will send you a consent form via email that details your rights during the process and the purpose of the doctoral study. You will be

free to withdraw at any time, even after the interview, without recourse. The interview will be recorded and conducted via telephone or via videoconferencing. Participation in the interview is voluntary, and a participant has the right to refuse to take part or may withdraw at any time during the interview will be respected.

I will share with you the summary of the interview and request your review and confirmation that I have accurately interpreted your responses in the interview. I hope you will take part in this interview. Please feel free to contact me by email or phone to ask me any clarification questions or request any additional information. I will contact you within the next 10 days to answer any questions about this research and ask you about your participation. My contact information is _____ or _____.

Thank you for taking the time to consider this request.

Patrick S. Akayombokwa (Walden University DBA student)

Appendix C: Interview Questions

This section includes the open-ended interview questions that I use.

Researcher: Patrick S Akayombokwa

Time of the interview: _____

Date: _____

Place: _____

Interviewee: _____ pseudonym (S01)

The basis for the exploration of the strategies that supply and contracting SME owners use to win mining contracts for profitability and sustainability are the following open-ended research questions:

1. What key strategies do you use to win mining contracts for competitive advantage for profitability and sustainability?
2. What key strategies do you use to sustain your complement of business contracts?
3. What key strategies do you use for obtaining and deploying resources for winning contracts?
4. What relationships do you develop to support winning mining contracts?
5. What key capital strategies do you use for winning and sustaining business contracts?
6. What were the key challenges to implementing the successful strategies for winning mining contracts for the business?
7. How did your organization address the key challenges to implementing the successful strategies for winning mining contracts for the business?

8. What other information would you like to add regarding key strategies for winning and sustaining business contracts?

Thank you for your contributions during the interview and for agreeing to be interviewed.