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Strategies for Improving Small Restaurant Success Rates Beyond Three Years

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This is to certify that the doctoral study by

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has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
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Walden University
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Abstract

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MS, King University, 2017

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Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

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Abstract

Only 65% of new restaurants remain in business after the first three years of operations. Leaders of small restaurants who lack strategies to ensure sustainability witness significant financial losses in their organizations. Grounded in the general systems theory, the purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the strategies small restaurant owners use to sustain their business beyond three years. A purposeful sampling of three small restaurant owners in Washington County, TN, who successfully used strategies to ensure sustainability beyond three years participated in this study. Data were collected from semistructured interviews, financial documents, and public websites and analyzed using thematic analysis. Three major themes emerged from data: customer service and relationships, product quality and consistency, and promotion and marketing. A key recommendation is for leaders to adopt a customer-centric approach to balance cost management to achieving long-term sustainability. The implications for social change include the potential for small restaurant owners to reduce employee turnover and unemployment levels and positively affect their communities by contributing to increased local spending and economic growth.

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Dedication

I dedicate this study to my family, both those who passed before this study was complete and those who continue to give me the encouragement and support necessary to keep going. To my late grandmother, Willie, thank you for the iron devotion to see me achieve my goals, no matter what they were. To my wife, Elizabeth; You are the rock of perseverance that I needed to stand on whenever I could not go any further. To my children, Emma and Josiah, who believe anything is possible if you set your mind to it. I would also like to thank my parents, Shirley Cornell and Bob Wilder, and my late stepfather, Robert Cornell. Through their encouragement, support, love, and motivation, I was able to dream bigger than I thought possible.

Acknowledgments

I want to give a special acknowledgment to my chair, Dr. Tim Truitt, whose guidance and support was invaluable to me throughout this journey. Dr. T has continued to maintain my alignment while I did the same with my study. My SCM and URR also provided a trove of knowledge, expertise, and wisdom to improve the flow and synthesis of the study. To my colleagues, I truly appreciate all the advice, wisdom, and tips you shared throughout this journey. The time and other resources saved through their guidance and sharing were immensely valued. Finally, I acknowledge the past researchers and thank the participants of this study, for, without them, this study would have never been possible.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study

Economic development in the United States relies heavily upon small business owners (Karadag, 2015). Small businesses account for 65% of net job creation for the private sector (SBA, 2018). Alstete (2014) stated that gaps in management skills, knowledge, and planning impact sustainability rates for small business owners and increase unemployment rates in the United States. The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the relationship between strategies small restaurant owners use and sustainability beyond 3 years.

Background of the Problem

The U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA) defines small businesses as those with 1-499 employees (SBA, 2018). Small businesses rely heavily upon capital streams for revenue and job creation, which in turn creates a healthier economy (SBA, 2018). Despite the latest technological advancements and communication platforms that enable small restaurants to compete on a similar level as larger corporations, small restaurants still fail at a high rate. As a result, identifying and analyzing the strategies of small restaurant owners that have successfully sustained a small restaurant for at least 3 years can provide guidance and insight to future entrepreneurs.

Problem Statement

Over one million restaurants operate in the United States, and the restaurant workforce comprises 10% of the overall U.S. workforce (National Restaurant Association, 2017). However, only 64.9% of the 45,182 independent restaurant businesses that opened in 2014 remained in business beyond 3 years (BLS, 2018). The general business problem is that some small restaurant owners lack strategies to ensure sustainability, resulting in diminished profits and higher business failure rates. The specific business problem is that some small restaurant owners lack strategies to ensure sustainability beyond 3 years.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the strategies small restaurant owners use to ensure sustainability beyond 3 years. The targeted population consisted of owners of three small restaurants in Washington County, Tennessee, who developed successful strategies to sustain their businesses beyond 3 years. The implications for social change included the potential for small restaurant owners to learn strategies they can use to sustain their businesses beyond 3 years, thereby reducing employee turnover and unemployment levels and positively affecting their communities by contributing to increased local spending and economic growth.

Nature of the Study

Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods are the three methods of researching the social science field (Yin, 2018). Quantitative researchers measure and study variables to quantify the relationship and variables (Park & Park, 2016). I did not examine the relationship between variables to explore strategies small restaurant owners use to sustain their businesses beyond 3 years, so the quantitative method was not appropriate. Mixed methods researchers employ both quantitative and qualitative data to examine a specific problem, not to identify the cause of the problem (Yin, 2018). I did not include a quantitative element in my study of the relationship between knowledge of strategies and sustainability in small restaurant owners, so a mixed method approach was not appropriate. Qualitative researchers explore complex or hard-to-quantify phenomena to understand how and why questions about human experience (Park & Park, 2016). A qualitative research study was appropriate for my study of strategies small restaurant owners use to ensure sustainability of their businesses beyond 3 years.

Qualitative research designs include ethnographic, narrative analysis, phenomenological, and case study (Prasad, 2015). Ethnographic researchers study culture formation and development (Prasad, 2015), which was not the objective of this study. Narrative analysis researchers create a narrative story through an individual's experiences (Prasad, 2015), which was also not appropriate for my exploration of the strategies small restaurant owners use to ensure sustainability beyond 3 years. Phenomenological researchers seek to explore lived experiences (Prasad, 2015). The phenomenological design was not appropriate as I did not seek to explore the lived experiences of small restaurant owners. Case study researchers use how or why style questions to explore complex phenomena in real-world situations (Yin, 2018), which was appropriate for my exploration of how small restaurant owners ensured sustainability beyond 3 years. Researchers conducting multiple case studies interview more than one business owner and entity to enable an intensive analysis of multiple individual units such as specific people, groups, or phenomena to uncover the inner workings of factors within each unit (Yin, 2018). A multiple case study was most appropriate for my study as I obtained and explored multiples sources of information to identify strategies small restaurant owners use to ensure sustainability beyond 3 years.

Research Question

The research question was: What strategies do small restaurant owners use to ensure sustainability beyond 3 years?

Interview Questions

1. What strategies does your organization use to ensure your small restaurant's sustainability beyond 3 years?
2. How did you identify strategies to ensure your small restaurant's sustainability beyond 3 years?
3. How did you assess the effectiveness of strategies to ensure sustainability beyond 3 years?
4. What key barriers did you encounter in the implementation of strategies to ensure your small restaurant's sustainability beyond 3 years?
5. How did you overcome these key barriers?
6. What additional information regarding strategies to ensure your small restaurant's sustainability beyond 3 years would you like to share that we have not already discussed?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study was general systems theory (GST). Von Bertalanffy (1950) introduced GST in 1937 at the University of Chicago and again in 1949 in a German journal. GST emerged out of a need to solve real-world problems (Skyttner, 2005). The core tenets of GST include solving real-world problems through understanding the interconnections and complexity of human existence and adopting solutions that are complex yet understandable (Skyttner, 2005). A system is a collaboration of components working together as an interactive network (Sayin, 2016). To explain the interactions of the elements and functions of an open or closed system, a system theory establishes a logical, mathematical, self-consistent, self-existing, and coherent model (Sayin, 2016). Small restaurant owners can experience challenges related to finances, competition, and strategy use when establishing and sustaining their businesses. GST was appropriate for my study as the purpose of this study was to determine what strategies small restaurant owners used together as a system to ensure sustainability beyond 3 years.

Operational Definitions

Entrepreneurship: Entrepreneurship is the practice of creating a new business to sell a product or provide a service (Kuratko, 2016).

Small business: A small business is any activity, firm, or trade carried out by a small group of people with less than 500 employees (SBA, 2018).

Small Business Administration (SBA): The United States (U.S.) SBA is an independent agency created through the Small Business Act of July 30, 1953, whose function is to aid, counsel, and protect the interests of small business owners (SBA, 2018).

Systems theory: Systems theory refers to the study of the abstract organization of phenomena and the relationship between the parts of a system that connect them into a whole (von Bertalanffy, 1950).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

Assumptions, limitations, and delimitations have a positive relationship with the reliability and validity of the study. The researcher must understand and analyze the assumptions, limitations, and delimitations of the study to recognize and address any weaknesses or gaps that may exist when solving the business problem. Addressing the weaknesses or gaps will ensure the production of the highest quality study and set appropriate expectations for small restaurant owners looking for strategies to ensure sustainability of their businesses beyond 3 years.

Assumptions

Assumptions are postulations accepted as the truth, although based on unverified beliefs (Field, 2015). Three assumptions guided this study of the strategies small restaurant owners use to ensure their businesses' sustainability beyond 3 years. First, I assumed that participants would provide accurate, non-biased answers to questions regarding what strategies they use to ensure their business's sustainability beyond 3 years. Second, I assumed that participants were qualified to answer the questions regarding ensuring sustainability of their business beyond 3 years. Third, I assumed that the number of participants included in this study would be sufficient to provide quality data for addressing the research question on small restaurant owners' strategies to ensure sustainability beyond 3 years.

Limitations

Limitations are the thresholds beyond which a study cannot reach and the threats that are beyond control and may impact the validity of the study (Sufian, 2015). A limitation of this study of strategies to ensure sustainability of small restaurants beyond 3 years was potential researcher bias towards the outcome of the study. I ensured that I addressed a business phenomenon that I had no relationship with to eliminate any potential bias. I did not work in a small restaurant, have plans to open a small restaurant in the future, have friends or relatives who work in a small restaurant, or have any financial investments in any small restaurants. Another potential limitation of the study pertained to the location of the participants I used to address the business phenomenon. The strategies that small restaurants located in Washington County, TN, use to ensure sustainability beyond 3 years may not represent the same strategies that restaurants in other geographical locations used.

Delimitations

Delimitations are the thresholds and reach of the study (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Researchers deliberately impose delimitations to restrict and contain the study to a specific scope of data. The SBA (2018) defines small businesses as having less than 500 employees, so I did not include restaurants with more than 500 employees. The business phenomenon addresses the failure rates of small restaurants that fail within 3 years of operations, so I contacted small restaurant owners that had operated for more than 3 years. Another delimitation of the study was the location, as all the participants were in Washington County, TN.

Significance of the Study

Contribution to Business Practice

Uncertainty and risk are the underlying threats behind start-ups and small and medium-sized enterprises (Herciu, 2017). Markets and environments are more complex and ever-changing, presenting challenges to scholars and practitioners alike (Linton, 2014). Small business owners in the United States create nearly two out of every three net new jobs and employ over half of the U.S. workforce (U.S. Small Business Administration, 2018). Applying and combining the findings of this study with other qualitative and quantitative research may provide business practitioners with the solutions to obtaining financing, effective employee management, and identifying the ideal business location, increasing the success rates of future small restaurant owners. Understanding what strategies small restaurant owners need to implement is crucial for business owners to respond correctly to market changes to increase sales and profitability. By implementing the strategies identified from this study, small restaurant owners may increase their sustainability rates beyond 3 years.

Implications for Social Change

Small businesses rarely face social responsibility pressures, and many small business owners do not believe that social responsibility will affect the business's profitability (Panwar et al., 2017). When a small restaurant fails, both local and national economies suffer, increasing unemployment and increasing the need for food and medical benefits. In the Washington County, Tennessee region, 288 accommodation and food service establishments employed 6,700 individuals (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016).

Consequently, small restaurants play a vital role in the local community, and identifying and sharing strategies of sustained success for small restaurants may accelerate new small business growth and assist in reducing employee turnover and unemployment levels and positively affect the community by contributing to increased local spending and economic growth.

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

Researchers enhance credibility and reduce bias by searching for literature in a systematic manner (Booth et al., 2016). Researchers conduct a literature review to examine a phenomenon through the collection of data from existing literature (Machi & McEvoy, 2016). The purpose of conducting this qualitative research study was to explore the strategies small restaurant owners use to ensure sustainability beyond 3 years. Through analysis and argumentation, I presented the literature conducted on the topic and debated the similarities and differences between the findings. The scholars presented in this literature review have contributed their expertise, time, and other valuable resources to inform small business owners of the strategies that exist to ensure their business sustainability.

This literature review contains a comprehensive amount of research on the strategies for small business sustainability. The literature review contains extensive coverage of the foundational theory (GST) and an alternative theory (contingency theory). I detailed strategies that small business owners may successfully implement to provide and maintain long-term sustainability. I addressed the challenges and weaknesses that small business owners experience and exhibit while owning a small business.

This literature review contains literature from academic and peer-reviewed articles, books, government websites, and multiple databases. I used the Walden University databases ABI/INFORM Complete, ERIC, and ProQuest in addition to Google Scholar and government websites such as the United States SBA. I used the following keywords to search the existing literature: *business strategies, contingency theory, general systems theory, marketing, restaurant success factors, small business challenges, small business customer service, small business leadership, small business location, small business management, small business risk management,* and *small business sustainability.* The literature review includes 96 references, including 83 (86.5%) peer-reviewed references.

General Systems Theory

von Bertalanffy (1950) developed the GST in the 1940s to explore the unpredictable challenges modern business leaders face in an organization. Research conducted on GST indicated usefulness to researchers and business leaders alike in examining the relationships between phenomena either within or outside of an organization. von Bertalanffy stated that GST contained both open and closed systems; open systems allow interactions between the organization’s internal elements and the external elements of the environment, and closed systems remain isolated from the environment and have no external interactions.

Most research regarding GST provides similar findings, with each researcher further cementing the theory and its’ usefulness in a variety of fields. Systems theory can provide a unifying conceptual framework to understand the process of biological evolution (Sayin, 2016). Sayin provided a comprehensive introduction to GST and detailed the conditions required for a GST to survive. Sayin’s and von Bertalanffy’s (1950) research on GST are similar in their understanding of GST; however, Sayin goes further into detail regarding the subcategories of systems theory, including general behavior systems theory. Additionally, both Sayin and von Bertalanffy’s research indicated that modern business leaders should use GST to explore the “wholeness” of a business system, rather than using the traditional method of breaking the phenomenon into elementary units for analysis. As prior research (Sayin, 2016) grounds GST as a versatile approach to examining the whole, GST provided the best framework for addressing small restaurant owners’ sustainability strategies.

Research studies indicated that using a complex systems approach can yield far greater results than using reductionist strategies. Diez-Roux (2011) used a complex systems approach to understand population health problems, including genetic factors and life course processes. Barr’s (2013) study regarding interprofessional education indicated that GST could elucidate the learning process in health care. van der Schaft and Jeltsama (2014) used the Port-Hamiltonian systems theory to network model multi-physics systems ranging from artificial intelligence to computing mathematics.

Although GST may seem complex and foreign initially, a more in-depth understanding will reveal the system’s intuitiveness to many professions (Hanson, 2014). Hanson (2014) defined and explained 31 GST concepts, including causality, action and inaction, emotion, tools, and data. Hanson’s study is significant in providing an in-depth yet easy to understand GST analysis and how GST is useful for a multitude of issues, ranging from nuclear disarmament, AIDS, anorexia, and spousal abuse.

Researchers have successfully applied GST in the communications, health, and safety fields. Lang (2014) used the dynamic human-centered communications systems theory to define and break down the elements of communication. Using a human-centric viewpoint, Lang described communication as a complex dynamic system that consists of a human, a message, a medium, and a location. In the health field, Amed (2015) stated that obesity prevention initiatives using systems theory have been effective in decreasing childhood obesity, thereby mitigating the risk of developing type 2 diabetes. Amed recommended applying this knowledge on a community-wide level to enhance the impact of obesity prevention initiatives. Researchers have used systems theory to establish an integrated approach to safety and security for a broad range of technology topics (Young & Leveson, 2014). The safety and security topics included computing and technology policy, computer crime, and the management of computing and information systems (Young & Leveson, 2014). However, contradictory research indicated that increasing complexity might not be the best strategy for all business owners.

Increasing systemic complexity yields differing results when examining the relationship between sustainability and the categories of system, environment, and complexity (Valentinov, 2014). When increasing complexity, Valentinov witnessed an increasing risk that systems developed an insensitivity to environmental conditions critical for survival. As such, Valentinov stated that it might be a rational decision for social systems to reduce internal complexity to maintain sustainability. Further, Luhmann

(2017) reported that systems theory fails to define the actor of structural processes, which may be concerning communication or self-reflexivity. GST lacks a universally agreed-upon definition (Adams et al., 2014). However, GST is a general approach to better understanding system behavior due to its multidisciplinary theoretical foundation (Adams et al., 2014). Thus, prior research indicated conflicting guidance to business practitioners considering applying systems theory to enhance business sustainability. As such, business practitioners may face uncertainty when choosing whether GST is the best approach for understanding and solving their specific business problems.

Researchers have attempted to mediate and diminish the confusion surrounding GST and its usefulness. To assist with understanding GST, researchers created a formal definition and system construct that characterizes and details how a system must operate (Adams et al., 2014). Research grounded in GST indicated that misaligned relationships between actors, structures, tasks, and technology resulted in the underutilization of technology (Hester, 2014). Hester (2014) included a diagnostic tool that allows practitioners to assess the underlying factors that may impede technology utilization. Realizing the complexities involved in GST, other researchers analyzed and interpreted the internal components that comprise GST to assist business owners with understanding and applying GST to their specific business problem (Flood, 2013).

Research indicated and liberated four strands (or themes) of study (Flood, 2013). These strands include the liberation of GST from (a) a natural tendency toward self-imposed insularity, (b) objectivist or subjectivist delusions, (c) internalized localized subjugations of discourse, and (d) for emancipation in response to domination and subjugation in work and social situations. To address these tendencies and promote a cognitive understanding of systems theory, Flood (2013) identified and defined a view on truth and meaning. Flood’s research draws similarities to von Bertalanffy’s (1950) idea that researchers and business leaders can see the world from different perspectives through GST constructs. Prior research indicated what constitutes a system; websites, social media platforms, cars, forests, and a city are all examples of a system (Mangal, 2013). Mangal’s (2013) study is significant as it indicated that the presence of a hierarchy does not necessarily improve a system. These researches parallel von Bertalanffy’s study that described the importance of a comprehensive understanding of systems theory constructs, with newer studies (Sun, Hyland, & Cui, 2014) indicating an underutilization of systems thinking skills due to a lack of knowledge.

Research indicated that many business owners and managers lack the necessary training required for understanding GST. GST has stimulated new conceptualizations in organization theory and management practice (Kast & Rosensweig, 1972). Understanding GST’s constructs enable business leaders to develop better management skills for their business, as research shows that many business managers have no systems thinking skills (Sun et al., 2014). Similar research indicated that curriculums or other school programs do not teach managers systems thinking skills, with the only classes for these skills offered as “bolt-ons” (Gregory & Miller, 2014). The lack of inclusion from curriculums may negatively influence educators on the importance of theories-based education.

Some academics disagree with the use of theories or only support the use of one theory, as it may be too confusing to try to come to terms with multiple theories (Patton & McMahon, 2014). Patton and McMahon developed the systems theory framework (STF) to recognize the contributions of all theories within the career field. The STF has an increasingly broad range of utility, ranging from quality assessment processes, cultural groups and settings, and career counseling (Patton & McMahon, 2014). As a result, with limited deviations, research regarding GST provides extensive, complementary findings; however, rapid technological and innovation advancements on the topic may require further investigation. Researchers and practitioners may find that GST theory does not appropriately address their specific business problems; contingency theory may provide a more appropriate foundation for the business problem, depending on the particular variables and conditions of the business problem.

Alternative Theory (Contingency Theory)

There are many similarities between systems theory and contingency theory. GST encompasses contingency theory, and problems that exist from within whole systems also apply to contingency theory (von Bertalanffy, 1950). GST and contingency theory are similar in decision making and leadership (Meier, 2016). Similar to GST, researchers can analyze leadership abilities and attributes using the contingency theory. Fiedler (1964) developed a framework based on the contingency model that helps understand the factors that determine a leader's characteristics and their impact on group performance. Fiedler discovered a high correlation between the leader's ability score, the group's performance, and the degree of influence over the task. Although time-consuming, additional training can modify a leader’s behavior, and Fiedler recommended extensive research on the topic. Research on leadership ability and attributes using both GST and contingency theory produces similar findings; however, research gaps exist regarding leadership behavior and training.

Management accounting and supply chain risk management (SCRM) are also viable fields that researchers and practitioners can apply contingency theory. Otley (2016) applied contingency theory on management accounting and argued that using a mechanistic approach to develop control systems is not optimal. Instead, Otley proposed a management control package concept that continually changes and evolves. Different actors would loosely coordinate changes to the control package at different times, enabling a quicker response time to improve new system development (Otley, 2016). Alternatively, Grotsch et al. (2013) applied contingency theory in the automotive industry and developed hypotheses through consulting supply chain management and management accounting literature to analyze which antecedents foster proactive SCRM. Although many scholars suggest proactively managing SCRM, many businesses still fail to do so (Grotsch et al., 2013). Mechanical management control systems positively impact managing supplier insolvency risks (Grotsch et al., 2013). Although contingency theory appropriately addressed the business problems, the conflicting findings of SCRM research require further analysis to determine if different industries respond better to a mechanical or fluid SCRM approach.

Multiple studies on large and small firm management draw upon contingency theory. Taylor and Taylor (2014) investigated the influence of organization size on the effective implementation of performance management systems (PMSs), building upon a limited amount of research on size effects. Using contingency theory, Taylor and Taylor developed eight hypotheses regarding size effects for PMS implementation. The findings of this study indicated that practices that enable PMSs in large firms are not necessarily as successful in SMEs (Taylor & Taylor, 2014). Also involving large firms, Menz and Scheef (2015) analyzed the chief strategy officer (CSO) presence in top management teams (TMTs). Menz and Scheef posited that an organization's structural and strategic complexity affects the decision to have a CSO and the CSO's impact. The presence of a CSO did not significantly affect the firm's financial performance (Menz & Scheef, 2015). The findings regarding size effects and CSO presence may indicate lower levels of control among top leadership in larger firms and warrant further research.

Researchers have also applied contingency theory to entrepreneurship and leadership styles. Linton (2014) used contingency theory to analyze the importance of increasing knowledge regarding entrepreneurship. Linton's study is significant due to entrepreneurship's relevance to economic output, social value, and job creation. Increasing entrepreneurship knowledge can accelerate entrepreneurial activity for individuals, firms, and societies (Linton, 2014). McCleskey (2014) analyzed situational, transformational, and transactional leadership and leadership development. Situational leadership follows Fiedler's (1964) contingency theory, as leadership is contingent on follower maturity (McCleskey, 2014). McCleskey provided an analysis of three leadership styles and analyzed modern leadership challenges and leadership development, discovering a need for leadership scholars to continue research into connections between development and efficacy, organizations and outcomes, and leaders and followers. Research on leadership styles through both contingency theory and GST has increased in recent years, and there are no current research gaps. Research indicated that leadership styles and impacts on performance might be significant to business owners in maintaining long-term sustainability.

Researchers may experience paradigm saturation in expanding contingency theory in future research. Some risk-averse researchers may be hesitant to continue researching contingency theory, as growing constraints such as sample availability, access to informants, and intolerance to qualitative work continue to increase (Bitektine & Miller, 2015). Bitektine and Miller (2015) stated that the introduction of new data had expanded the resource space; however, the data sources lack legitimization within the paradigm and thus do not create publishing opportunities. These constraints can lead to paradigm abandonment, with few researchers willing to challenge the boundaries with limited resources available (Bitektine & Miller, 2015). Although contingency theory can assist business owners in maintaining long-term sustainability, GST provided a useful framework for studying long-term sustainability in small restaurant owners, as I viewed small businesses as complex systems.

Business Strategies and Innovation

Research indicated that business owners might need to implement multiple strategies to maintain sustainability. Small and medium-sized businesses (SMB) in declining or volatile markets can develop a multiple-strategy approach to sustain growth (Bamiatzi & Kirchmaier, 2014). Bamiatzi and Kirchmaier (2014) stated that SMB owners could develop and pursue both innovative differentiation and a product or service-customization strategy. SMB owners in strained markets should intentionally search for high-margin products, avoid aggressive price competition with competitors, and strictly maintain costs (Bamiatzi & Kirchmaier, 2014). Bamiatzi and Kirchmaier demonstrated through analysis of 20 case studies how SMB owners could implement firm-specific strategies to overcome declining or volatile markets.

Research from Devece et al. (2016) indicated that innovation and opportunity recognition are success factors during periods of recession. Devece et al. identified the essential entrepreneurial characteristics and drivers of entrepreneurship that increase the likelihood of success for new businesses. Using data from Spain’s recent economic cycle, consisting of the 2008 financial crisis and the economic boom before the crisis, Devece et al. revealed that innovation and opportunity recognition enhances sustainability more during periods of recession than periods of prosperity. Strong economies may misdirect an entrepreneur’s opportunity recognition, as entrepreneurs may overestimate consumer behavior changes (Devece et al., 2016).

Entrepreneurial Activities and Behaviors

Possessing a high level of entrepreneurship initiative and innovation may assist business owners in maintaining sustainability. Researchers have identified and linked entrepreneurial activities and success in organizations. Entrepreneurship has a significant effect on economic renewal and change (Andersson & Henrekson, 2015). Increasing personal initiative can increase entrepreneurial success (Glaub et al., 2014). A 3-day personal initiative program conducted on 100 small business owners in Africa indicated an increase in entrepreneurial mindset and an active approach toward entrepreneurial tasks (Glaub et al., 2014). Similar research indicated that corporate entrepreneurship (CE) could revitalize operations and build new competencies (Kearney & Meynhardt, 2016). Kearney and Meynhardt (2016) stated that the corporate entrepreneurship strategy (CES) model creates new public value and generating new economic activity. The CES model is significant in breaking down the organizational conditions that support entrepreneurial processes and behavior (Kearney & Meynhardt, 2016).

Local economies that do not support innovative entrepreneurship fall behind their global competitors (Andersson & Henrekson, 2015). Entrepreneurship self-efficacy and innovation activities positively impact restaurant performance (Lee et al., 2016). Lee et al. (2016) conducted a partial least squares structural equation model (PLS-SEM) analysis, discovering that developing new products and market opportunities have a substantial effect on restaurant performance. Contrary to similar entrepreneurship research, the PLS-SEM analysis indicated that business owner experience and entrepreneurship education did not significantly affect business performance (Lee et al., 2016). Similar research from Agarwal and Dahm (2015) indicated that entrepreneurship education did not significantly impact business success from 20 owners of successful ethnic restaurants. As a result, there is conflicting evidence between the effectiveness of experience, entrepreneurship education, and business success. Recent entrepreneurship research addressed entrepreneurship in first-world economies; however, there are research gaps in entrepreneurship research regarding second and third-world economies.

Effective Marketing

Business owners, managers, and entrepreneurs must understand the importance of marketing for maintaining long-term sustainability. Utilizing an 11-year longitudinal study, Lam and Harker (2015) studied the significance of marketing as an entrepreneurial activity at different business life stages. Business owners and entrepreneurs that are market-oriented achieve higher performance and are more successful (Jakada et al., 2014). Lam and Harker stated that entrepreneurship is neither ends-driven nor means-driven, but rather a consequence of the interaction between actors and social context. Lam and Harker remarked that entrepreneurs should maintain customer involvement in shaping marketing activities to best suit the customer's needs.

Marketing is an essential activity for entrepreneurs of both SMBs and large firms, even during constrained or volatile conditions. Kenny and Dyson (2016) posited that marketing is beneficial to small businesses, even if the business owner experiences resource constraints. Customers satisfied after patronizing a business may advertise the business through word of mouth at no cost to the business (Pandya et al., 2016).

Business owners may use collected data to analyze sales, pricing, and customer experience. Business owners that use real-time data to effectively market are less likely to fail (Wang et al., 2015). Kenny and Dyson (2016) provided an in-depth analysis of the benefits of marketing decisions, including product, pricing, distribution, and promotion. One of the more prominent marketing approaches in consumer industries is customer experience management (CEM) (Homburg et al., 2017). Unfortunately, there is confusion among researchers and practitioners regarding CEM's concept; however, Homburg et al.

(2017) developed a model to conceptualize CEM as a resource for integration, strategic directions, and firm capabilities of customer experiences. Understanding how to enhance a customer's experience may assist business owners with maintaining long-term sustainability. Homburg et al. posited that CEM could systemize and serve an evolving marketing concept.

There are multiple forms of marketing, including email, web, mobile, and social media (Westwood, 2019). Fong et al. (2015) indicated that mobile-based marketing targeted at customers close to a competitor's location could increase returns. Additionally, over 49.3% of the top 10,000 websites contained links to Facebook (Mangal, 2013). Westwood (2019) created a step-by-step guide on how to write a marketing plan for business owners to boost product sales or business performance. This marketing plan guide includes how to conduct a marketing audit, set objectives, and maintain budgets for writing, presenting, and implementing the plan (Westwood, 2019). Westwood stated that many business owners are under time and resource constraints and do not have the time to develop complicated and ineffective marketing plans.

The market is ever-changing and can make conducting market research difficult (Babin & Zikmund, 2015). Babin and Zikmund (2015) stated that researchers must work together with decision-makers to uncover the current market needs, as many decision-makers are under intense pressure to make quick decisions. Small businesses rarely take the time to conduct a comprehensive review of business activities (Cook & Wolverton, 1995). Cook and Wolverton (1995) developed a quick and easy-to-use evaluation tool to measure strategic performance indicators (SPIs). Cook and Wolverton's tool is significant as it not only provides an in-depth explanation of how these SPIs are essential, but it also provides a mechanism to measure the primary functions of a business: management, marketing, and finance.

O’Cass and Sok (2014) studied marketing capabilities, intellectual resources, reputational resources, and product innovation of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). The findings of this study indicated that SMEs with high marketing capabilities, intellectual resources, reputational resources, and product innovation experience growth (O’Cass & Sok, 2014). O’Cass and Sok demonstrated that high levels of resources do not compensate for low levels of capabilities. Decision-makers should conduct market research to address information gaps that prevent the decision-maker from making the best possible decision (McQuarrie, 2015). McQuarrie posited that conducting marketing research is not always the best decision for the decision-maker, even for marketing decisions. Market research can be expensive; therefore, the effect must be large enough to justify the cost (McQuarrie, 2015).

Other researchers advocated the use of inexpensive marketing techniques to understand customer demographics better. Analyzing results from 129 smartphone users using latent class analysis, Hamka et al. (2014) discovered several clusters relating to the users’ demographics, psychographics, and lifestyles. Hamka et al. posited that these clusters correlated with customer segmentation. Customer segmentation is useful for understanding what customers want and can help decision-makers project future market changes and create effective marketing campaigns (Hamka et al., 2014). Rubin (1999) advocated the similarly inexpensive Geographic Information System (GIS) in breaking down data into customer demographics and other information. GIS enables small business owners to take advantage of the same data capabilities that were once the domain for large corporations (Rubin, 1999). Rubin provided a comprehensive breakdown for business owners to decide if GIS would support their business needs.

Davcik and Sharma (2015) suggested that marketing investment, brand equity, price, and product differentiation are closely related. After conducting a regression analysis on 735 fast-moving consumer goods, Davcik and Sharma discovered that premium prices had a significant association with product differentiation. As a result, research indicated a positive correlation between product differentiation and charging premium pricing.

Competition and Competitive Advantages

Both individual firms and regional areas must remain competitive to achieve long-term sustainability. Local competitiveness depends on the environment for entrepreneurship (Andersson & Henrekson, 2015). However, business competition presents dynamic challenges for entrepreneurs, managers, and executives, creating uncertainty, fear, and doubt (Fleisher & Bensoussan, 2015). Geographical regions that do not remain competitive and adapt to technological innovations experience declining prosperity (Andersson & Henrekson, 2015). Market saturation, resource scarcity, rapid information exchange, and constant technological innovation have increased competitive pressure on firms (Pivoda, 2016). Additionally, competition is constraining when many businesses sell similar products and services in the same market (Khosa & Kalitanyl, 2014). Pivoda recommended that business owners maintain a balance between quality and price and conform to environmental standards. Maintaining competitive advantages will assist business owners in achieving long-term sustainability (Pivoda, 2016).

Fleisher and Bensoussan (2015) stated that decision-makers must conduct a competitive analysis to determine how to compete effectively and create more value for shareholders. Fleisher and Bensoussan provided an in-depth analysis and application method for effective competition, cash flow, benchmarking, and critical success factors. Similar research from Kirzner (2015) illustrated a comprehensive breakdown of competition, including monopolistic competition, competitive pricing, and the *wastes* of competition. Conducting a competitive analysis may be difficult for business owners that compete globally as market, labor costs, and customer demographic changes continually shift (Tate et al., 2015).

Small business owners must be aware of where customers are going and at what times. Mobile-based location check-in services may give business owners a competitive advantage in staffing and business operation decisions (Wang et al., 2015). Wang et al. (2015) stated that researching and understanding check-in data might help business owners achieve long-term sustainability. Online services provide small business owners with many of the same tools that larger corporations use, increasing competitive and marketing abilities.

Increasing web technologies and competition have forced SMEs to develop or enhance their online business presence (Otero, et al., 2014). Otero et al. (2014) assisted business owners with increasing online visibility with in-depth information on the required tools, including backlinks, infomediaries, and other mechanics. Similar research from Visser and Weideman (2014) indicated a need for high rankings on search engines on multiple keywords or phrases. Visser and Weideman stated that in addition to high visibility, websites must provide users with easy navigation, interaction, and transactional ability. Providing a better shopping experience can increase customer satisfaction and sales volume (Yazdanifard & Li, 2014). To test the impact of search engine optimization and website usability, Visser and Weideman developed multiple websites and measured the conversions and financial spending on each site. The findings of this study highlighted the complementary and contradictory elements of search engine optimization and usability, which can assist business owners who rely on online visibility (Visser & Weideman, 2014).

Business owners can leverage online commerce businesses such as Alibaba to compete more effectively with larger firms (Yazdanifard & Li, 2014). Supply chain management (SCM) improves competitiveness by integrating organizational units and coordinating material, information, and financial flows to meet customer needs (Kilger, 2005). Kilger (2005) provided a comprehensive definition and analysis of SCM, including the implications for business performance and competitiveness. SCM failure reasons include overvaluation of information technology, poor alignment between SCM and supply chain strategy, and an ineffective organizational and management culture (Kilger, 2005).

Research indicated that competitive advertising might increase returns for small business owners. Focusing on customers that are physically near the business location may result in cannibalizing profits (Fong et al., 2015). However, Fong et al. stated that business owners who promoted their business near competitors' locations rather than focal location targeting saw an increase in returns. The findings of this study are significant as many small business owners may be financially constrained and cannot afford mass advertising methods.

Small business owners may obtain a sustainable competitive advantage through product or process innovations (Palmer et al., 2001). However, Palmer et al. (2001) stated that these innovations are risky and depend on the firm having an effective business strategy and appropriate market conditions. Palmer et al. provided a framework that assists business owners with evaluating possible environmental and business strategy effects on the success of product and process innovations. Therefore, business owners may create a competitive analysis, enhance their online presence, streamline SCM, and maintain innovation to maintain long-term sustainability.

Customer relationship building is essential for both increasing brand loyalty and gaining a competitive advantage. Business owners may create competitive advantages through building relationships with customers (Peppers & Rogers, 2016). Peppers and Rogers (2016) stated that customers that build a relationship with one business would incur a loss if deciding to patronize a competitor. Current research similarly indicated a necessity for small and large firms to compete, even in monopolistic competition.

Ideal Business Location

Many small business owners may consider obtaining the ideal business location a critical factor for achieving long-term sustainability. Business owners and researchers have assumed that business location is the primary reason for SMB failure (Self et al., 2015). However, many entrepreneurs stated that they discovered their business location by chance rather than conducting a systematic search (Berg, 2010). Additionally, Berg (2010) provided evidence from entrepreneurs that choosing a business location was about satisficing rather than optimization. Other factors that may present entrepreneurs' difficulties when selecting a business location include high rent and crime (Khosa & Kalitanyl, 2014). Consequently, research indicated that avoiding high rent and crime and satisfying business needs drive the business location decision rather than systematically choosing a location for optimization.

Andersson and Henrekson (2015) recommended that business owners choose geographic locations that respond to technological, innovation, and globalization changes. Cities that do not respond to technological, innovation, and globalization changes are susceptible to rapid declines in prosperity, job growth, and population, which may negatively affect business performance and sustainability (Andersson & Henrekson, 2015). Additionally, Tate et al. (2014) indicated that small business owners must carefully consider factors including (a) currency valuation, (b) customer location, (c) tendency for natural disasters, and (d) transportation costs when choosing the business location. As a result, research indicated that business owners should select locations that are responsive to technological, innovation, and globalization changes, close to target customer locations, low in natural disasters, favorable in currency valuation, and maintain low transportation costs.

Traditional research focuses on the amount of consumer traffic that a business receives compared to local competitors (Wang et al., 2015). Indeed, collected data from

Foursquare, a location-based service provider, indicated a strong relationship between business failure and traffic data of focal locations and local competitors (Wang et al., 2015). However, not obtaining an ideal business location may not impede performance if the business owner is effectively competing with local competitors (Fong et al., 2015). Instead, Fong et al. recommended ensuring effective competition and marketing to consumers that are closer to competitor locations rather than focal locations.

Customer Satisfaction and Engagement

Obtaining and retaining customers is every business owner’s goal (Peppers & Rogers, 2016). Customer engagement is essential for promoting brand loyalty and trust (So et al., 2016). However, foreign and minority business owners may experience difficulties in maintaining sustainability due to cultural and language differences with customers. Khosa and Kalitanyl (2014) noted that xenophobia, although not typically widespread, can be detrimental to business performance. Additionally, business owners that do not speak the same language as the locals may inhibit business performance (Khosa & Kalitanyl, 2014). Research indicated that business owners can strengthen customer loyalty through engaging beyond the service counters (So et al., 2016).

Multiple variables may enhance customer satisfaction. Factors that determine customer satisfaction include (a) appropriate behavior from employees, (b) friendly and comforting atmosphere, (c) knowledgeable employees, and (d) timely service (Pandya et al., 2016). Promoting restaurant staff’s positive mannerisms increases customer satisfaction (Sweeney, Armstrong, and Johnson, 2016; Alhelalat et al., 2017). Restaurant owners must strive for high customer satisfaction levels as they operate in highly competitive environments (Kukanja et al., 2017). Building relationships with customers can help business owners recognize opportunities (Shu et al., 2018). Research indicated that higher customer satisfaction and building customer relationships may assist business owners with maintaining a competitive advantage and increasing sales.

Rather than environmental sustainability, socio-economic issues have dominated academics' interests regarding product-service systems (Chou et al., 2015). Chou et al. (2015) developed a sustainable product-service efficiency concept to compare product-service value and sustainability impact. Chou et al. stated that life cycles are no longer the only metric to measure product-service systems; product-service quality, customer satisfaction, and full sustainability are now concerns that require evaluation. Customers that are not satisfied after patronizing a business are less likely to return (Pandya et al., 2016). Business owners can measure customer satisfaction and experiences through a variety of tools. A popular method for measuring customer satisfaction is the net promoter score, a tool that gauges customer's experience with both the employees and product or service (Spiess et al., 2014). Therefore, research indicated that product-service quality, measuring and maintaining customer satisfaction, and full sustainability can increase product-service systems' performance for business owners.

Maintaining organizational capability is critical in generating higher revenues and customer satisfaction (Lun et al., 2016). Using empirical data collected from intermodal transporter operators in Taiwan, Lun et al. (2016) discovered a positive correlation between organizational capability and customer satisfaction. Lun et al. (2016) stated that profitability mediates the relationship between organizational capability and customer satisfaction. As such, research indicated a positive correlation between organizational capability, customer satisfaction, and higher revenues. Effective leadership and management may also increase organizational capability, customer satisfaction, and revenues.

Effective Leadership and Management

There are many definitions and concepts of what constitutes effective leadership. Effective leadership often does not have a systematic explanation or identification process (Johnston & Marshall, 2016). Johnston and Marshall (2016) stated that recent leadership approaches have taken on near mystic qualities. Similar research from Northouse (2015) confirmed the confusion regarding effective leadership and indicated that leadership is a complex process having multiple dimensions. Research studies indicated central concepts of what defines leadership, (a) leadership involves common goals, (b) leadership involves influence, (c) leadership is a process, and (d) leadership is group-based (Northouse, 2015).

Researchers at Stanford University Stanford rated technical leadership qualities such as a high IQ lower than soft skills such as self-awareness (Showry & Manasa, 2014). Analysis of three types of public service leaders' skills indicated that 75% of effective leadership related to soft skills (Xavier, 2014). Showry and Manasa explored the relationship between self-awareness, self-ignorance, self-actualization, and leadership effectiveness and discovered that leaders with high levels of self-awareness better navigated business complexities. This relationship contrasts with Seelhofer and Valeri's (2017) research indicating that experience and detail-orientation are better indicators for effective leadership. Thus, research indicated that self-awareness, experience, and detail-orientation may all contribute to effective leadership.

Leaders face many unique challenges when making decisions and developing an implementation strategy (Johnston & Marshall, 2016). Johnston and Marshall (2016) indicated that diverse employees might present challenges for leaders during the decision-making process. Cultural, legal, and behavioral environmental differences may impede leadership decision-making if the leader does not possess the required knowledge and training (Johnston & Marshall, 2016). Leaders that face difficulties when managing diverse employees and multiple environmental differences may find that developing leadership skills will increase performance and effectiveness.

Firms may experience inhibited or enhanced growth after leadership changes. Small firms with resource constraints may experience challenges in maintaining long-term sustainability when changing leadership. Desai et al. (2015) studied the effects of leader succession and prior leader experience on post succession organizational performance. The findings of this study are twofold. First, the results indicated that leaders that transition between leadership positions are associated with higher performance, while leaders that depart to another organization had adverse effects on post succession performance (Desai et al., 2015). Second, leaders with domestic top leader experience had a negative impact on performance, while foreign senior leader experience had a positive effect on performance (Desai et al., 2015). These findings are significant as they may represent and identify conditions of leadership changes that will affect business performance.

Leadership styles may correlate with increased product innovation within small businesses. Dunne et al. (2016) studied the link between leadership and innovation within small businesses. The responses collected for the study indicated that leadership style, negotiation style, and organizational efficacy affect product innovation (Dunne et al., 2016). Dunne et al. (2016) discovered evidence that small business leaders who are inspirational, negotiate competitively, and lead productive organizations create environments more likely to yield product innovations.

Effective communication of business strategies between leaders and employees may be difficult. Leaders may have difficulty communicating business strategies and goals with employees (Rosalin et al., 2016). Conducting interviews on leaders and employees, Rosalin et al. (2016) observed that communication between leaders and employees is mostly related to tactics. Leaders may also face communication difficulties when persuading employees to change policies and procedures (Delmatoff & Lazarus, 2014). Women and minorities may face even more significant difficulties when speaking in group settings or speaking in authoritative roles (Baxter, 2016). Collected interview data from family business owners and employees indicated that many small restaurant owners might lack the necessary skills needed for effective communication, causing high failure rates (Rosalin et al., 2016). As a result, research indicated that communication between leaders and employees might be difficult and limited due to a lack of effective communication skills, resulting in higher failure rates.

Bamiatzi et al. (2015) analyzed the link between personal competencies and leadership styles, particularly among female business owners. The findings of this study indicated that transformational leadership is a dominant leadership style among female small business owners, and this leadership style linked to both the personal and entrepreneurial competencies of the individual (Bamiatzi et al., 2015). As a result, female business owners may be most effective in transformational leadership positions, as this leadership style complements their personal and entrepreneurial competencies.

Booth (2015) examined the traditional approach used by firms when facing a significant change or crisis. Effective leadership is vital to handling crises, risk, and uncertainty, both internally and externally (Booth, 2015). Some theories may oversimplify the causes and solutions of crises, as many theories overlook each firm's individuality and environment (Booth, 2015). Accordingly, firms may handle crises, risk, and uncertainty more effectively by analyzing their unique needs and effective leadership.

Predicting Business Success and Failure

Understanding success and failure rates may help business owners make policy decisions, as statistics may be misleading (Healy & Mac Con Iomaire, 2019). Healy and Mac Con Iomaire (2019) indicated that financial institutions might use invalid or deceptive data when predicting business failure, impacting business growth and long-term sustainability. Lussier and Halabi (2010) conducted testing in the United States, Croatia, and Chili using the Lussier 15-variable business success versus failure prediction model to test which variables lead to business success. Lussier and Halabi included 234 small businesses as the sample: 131 failed businesses and 103 successful businesses. Lussier and Halabi discovered that the Lussier 15-variable model could successfully predict business failure or success more accurately than randomly guessing over 96% of the time. Similar research from Hyder and Lussier (2016) indicated that the Lussier 15-variable model is useful for investors and financial institutions in providing funds to small business owners. Thus, business owners that use the Lussier 15-variable model can more accurately make policy decisions that impact business growth and long-term sustainability.

Entrepreneurial activities alone, including identifying new products, processes, or markets, do not have a significant relationship with successful new venture foundations (Honig & Hopp, 2016). Pre-startup experiences, venture characteristics, and the institutional environment positively correlate with successful performance (Honig & Hopp, 2016). Choosing successful strategies, understanding the business model's implications, and developing or evolving viable operational systems are critical factors for success and require analysis (Aithal, 2016). Aithal (2016) discussed how to use the ABCD model on a business model, business strategy, or business system. The ABCD model helps entrepreneurs choose the appropriate business model and business strategy, similar to other analyzing techniques like Porter's Five Forces, SWOC, and PESTLE analysis (Aithal, 2016).

Small Business Sustainability Challenges

Small business owners face several sustainability challenges in maintaining long-term sustainability. Even though sustainability is a mainstream issue, only a limited number of studies exist on integrating sustainability into daily practices (Parisi, 2013). Sustainability challenges may link to the condition of smallness, a conceptualized idea that reflects a lack of knowledge, time, and capability and inhibits growth (Anderson & Ullah, 2014). Research on small business sustainability indicated strong relationships between financial restrictions, financial expertise, and business failure.

Financial Constraints

Financial constraints and restrictions may inhibit small business owners from growing and maintaining long-term sustainability. Business owners, especially minorities, face difficulties obtaining start-up and growth funding (Khosa & Kalitanyl, 2014). Financial crises may also restrict financing and investment activity and internal and external financing for small business owners (Achleitner et al., 2016). However, the results of collected data from two successful and two failed businesses indicated that non-financial factors, including manager's involvement in organizational strategy, occurred prior to financial factors (Purves et al., 2015). Purves et al. (2015) studied the relationship between non-financial factors and financial factors of failure using mixed methods exploratory case studies and discovered that the non-financial factors impacted the success or failure rate. Small business owners who can identify early warning signs of financial failure may realign failing processes, assisting with long-term sustainability.

Using a financial knowledge instrument containing 23 financial literacy questions, Para (2016) conducted surveys on small business owners. Results from the study indicated a high financial literacy among small business owners and strong relationships associated with gender, age, and education (Para, 2016). Older, educated, male small business owners scored higher than younger, lesser educated, and female counterparts (Para, 2016). The findings of this study are significant in understanding the financial literacy gaps among different groups of small business owners, which may contribute to higher failure rates.

There are many knowledge gaps between the relationship of access to external finance and growth (Fraser et al., 2015). These knowledge gaps are due in part to the current limitations to test financial constraints (Fraser et al., 2015). Fraser et al. (2015) recommended (a) further research to expand current knowledge and address the gaps in understanding, (b) scrutiny in the traditional view that funding gaps and business performance are directly responsible for identifying financial constraints, and (c) to explore the relationship between non-bank sources and growth. Hyder and Lussier (2016) recommended that financial institutions and investors use the Lussier 15-variable business success versus failure prediction model when determining funding for small business owners.

Traditional research indicated that financial resources are more important to small business owners, without considering other types of resources. Greene et al. (1997) argued that human, social, organizational, physical, and financial resources are critical for small businesses. Conducting an exploratory study of 76 small businesses, Green et al. discovered that physical and organizational resources rank higher than financial resources. This research is significant as resource constraint is commonly associated with business failure without providing a distinct resource type.

Transition

Section 1, titled the Foundation of the Study, included the background of the problem, the problem statement, purpose statement, nature of the study, research question, and interview questions. This section also included specific information about the conceptual framework, operational definitions, and the assumptions, limitations, and delimitations of the study. I then detailed the study’s significance, including the contributions to business practice and the implications for social change. Section 1 concluded with an expounding upon the existing body of literature, highlighting the necessity for small business owners to (a) employ effective marketing, (b) create a competitive advantage, and (c) ensure customer satisfaction.

Section 2 begins with a restatement of the purpose of the study and an explanation of the role of the researcher, participants, and research method and design. An explanation of the population and sampling, ethical research, data collection instruments and techniques, data organization technique, and data analysis follows. Section 2 concludes with a discussion of methods for ensuring reliability and validity. Section 3 includes a presentation of the study findings and a discussion of the recommendations for further research. A thorough detail of the applications of study findings to professional practice and social change follows. Section 3 concludes with a final reflection and conclusions from the conduct of this study.

Section 2: The Project

The focus of Section 2 is on the processes and techniques that I used to collect data to explore the specific business problem. Section 2 begins with a reiteration of the purpose statement and a description of my role as the researcher. In this study, I aimed to expand the amount of information available to small restaurant owners seeking to ensure sustainability beyond 3 years. Section 2 also contains participant information, the research method and design, population and sampling, ethical research practices, data collection instruments, data collection techniques, data organization technique, data analysis, and the reliability and validity information. Section 2 concludes with a summary and transition to Section 3 of the study.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the strategies small restaurant owners use to ensure sustainability beyond 3 years. The targeted population consisted of owners of three small restaurants in Washington County, Tennessee, who developed successful strategies to sustain their businesses beyond 3 years. The implications for social change included small restaurant owners' potential to learn strategies useful for sustaining their businesses beyond 3 years. These strategies can reduce employee turnover and unemployment levels and positively affect their communities by contributing to increased local spending and economic growth.

Role of the Researcher

The role of the researcher in a qualitative case study involves data collection through participant engagement (Yin, 2018). Listening, learning, and developing an emphatic relationship are essential to effectively and efficiently fulfilling the role of the researcher (Berry, 2016). Qualitative researchers collect data in familiar settings for participants to maintain the context of the participant's information and experiences (Yin, 2018). Common themes emerged after the analysis of the data. Triangulation of themes provided summarized strategies and benefits from effective management. As the researcher, I found and recruited qualified participants, conducted face-to-face interviews, and analyzed and interpreted the data collected.

A strong relationship between the researcher and the research topic is crucial in understanding and interpreting the participants' reactions to interview questions (Yin, 2018). Familiarity with both the research topic and the participants increases the efficiency and effectiveness of the data collection process (Berry, 2016). The experience I gained from assisting friends with opening various small businesses over the past 12 years gave me a greater understanding of small business sustainability. As a native to the east Tennessee region for over 30 years, I was very familiar with the location and the residing businesses. My knowledge and experience have provided me a unique understanding of the critical factors involved in opening a sustainable small business in this region.

The Belmont Report outlines the standard of ethics on participant treatment (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1979). There are three major principles included in the Belmont Report: (a) respect for persons involves, (b) beneficence, and (c) justice. I followed each of these ethical principles in conducting my research and maintaining information security.

The researcher has a responsibility for preventing bias (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). To reduce bias, I acknowledged any self-identified biases, conducted member checking, followed identical protocols for all participants and interviews, and ensured data saturation. I also ensured that I had no prior associations with the participants. Avoiding personal assumptions will increase the reliability of the data (Yin, 2018).

Yin (2018) stated that an interview protocol provides a script for the researcher to conduct the interview and record the interaction. Conducting a semi-formal interview instead of a casual conversation will increase the focus and alignment of the interview (Yin, 2018). The interview protocol included interview questions that prevented deviations from the topic and provided organization throughout the interview (Appendix). Accordingly, I followed a structured interview protocol to maintain focus and alignment throughout the interviews.

Participants

Established criteria determined the participants of this qualitative multiple case study. Yin (2018) stated that establishing criteria for participants reduces the risk of invalid or incredible data collection. Researchers must then use their judgment to select participants based on the eligibility criteria (Bernard et al., 2016). I followed Yin's and Bernard et al.'s (2016) advice by establishing specific criteria to ensure validity and credibility. The criteria for this study included (a) owning a small restaurant located in Washington County, TN, (b) achieving sustainability of a small restaurant beyond 3 years, and (c) owning a small restaurant that consists of less than 500 employees.

To obtain participants for the study, I conducted internet searches through search engines such as Yelp, Google, Facebook, LinkedIn, and YP. After discovering participants for the study, I sent out a letter of invitation to explain the purpose of the study and seek their participation. After gaining enough participants for the study, I began the interview process and obtained a verbal agreement from each participant that they met the eligibility criteria of the study.

Establishing a trust-based relationship is critical to gaining participants for the study and ensuring valid and credible data collection (Yin, 2018). Jack et al. (2016) stated that establishing a trust-based relationship with participants reduces the risk of participants withholding information. A trust-based relationship with participants demonstrates a higher level of competence and quality (Yin, 2018). To foster a trust-based relationship with participants, I thoroughly explained the purpose of the study, answered any questions the participants had, and assured participants of their confidentiality and rights. Eligible participants that agreed to the interview process signed a consent form affirming their voluntary agreement to participate.

Research Method and Design

The purpose of this study was to explore the strategies that small restaurant owners use to ensure sustainability beyond 3 years. Researchers must choose the research method and design that best addresses the problem of their study (Yin, 2018). Yin (2018) stated that researchers use the qualitative research method to ensure an in-depth exploration of a phenomenon. I followed Yin’s guidance and provided an in-depth exploration of the problem in this research study using a qualitative multiple case study.

Research Method

For this study, I chose a qualitative multiple case study to explore the strategies that small restaurant owners use to ensure sustainability beyond 3 years. Qualitative research methods enable researchers to explore a phenomenon in a social context (Yin, 2018). I confirmed this research method's appropriateness for this study by reviewing several other similar small business research studies. A qualitative research method was appropriate for this study to (a) conduct face-to-face interviews with participants, (b) analyze and interpret the verbal and nonverbal communication from participants, and (c) allow participants to use their own words to provide descriptive data for the study. Yin (2018) stated that using a qualitative method will enable participants to express their experiences and perceptions of the research topic in their own words. I followed a qualitative method to understand small restaurant owners' experiences and perceptions that have ensured sustainability beyond 3 years.

Researchers use quantitative methods to identify and analyze variables to assess significance or causal relationships (Yin, 2018). I did not use a quantitative research method as my study did not involve measuring the causal relationship between variables. The mixed-method research method is a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods (Yin, 2018). My study did not require statistical analysis or measurement of variables to test a hypothesis; therefore, a mixed method approach was not suitable. A qualitative research method was most appropriate for this study as face-to-face interviews and interactions provided valid, credible, and reliable data for studying the strategies that small restaurant owners use to ensure sustainability beyond 3 years.

Research Design

The research design for this study was a multiple case study. Yin (2018) stated that a case study answers what, why, and how questions. I used a case study design to collect high-quality data from a sufficient number of participants to strengthen the reliability of the findings and ensured no new data or themes, as indicated by Yin. The case study design enables researchers to use triangulation for data collection, combining face-to-face interviews, publicly available data, and internal financial documents to ensure reliability and validity. A case study design was appropriate for this study as I collected high-quality data to answer what, why, and how questions regarding the strategies that small restaurant owners use to ensure sustainability beyond 3 years.

Other qualitative research designs include phenomenological, ethnographic, and narrative research (Yin, 2018). Phenomenological research involves interpreting the participants' lived experiences regarding a specific situation (Doody & Bailey, 2016). A phenomenological research design was not appropriate for this study as lived experiences did not answer the research question of what strategies small restaurant owners use to ensure sustainability beyond 3 years. Researchers use ethnography to research the culture, cultural behavior, and cultural activities of a specific group (Yin, 2018). Ethnographic research was not appropriate for this study as I did not seek to explore small restaurant owners' cultural aspects and behaviors. Yin (2018) stated that narrative research enables research exploration of real-life experiences through the participants' stories. Narrative research was not appropriate for my study, as I did not seek to explore the real-life experiences that influence small restaurant owners.

Researchers use a case study design to explore individuals or events through multiple data collection methods (Yin, 2018). Case studies may be (a) single, (b) multiple, (c) exploratory, or (d) explanatory (Yin, 2018). I chose the research design that best suited the topic of the study, as Yin (2018) recommended. A multiple case study was best suited for my research study as I explored multiple small restaurant owners' strategies. In this study, I conducted semistructured interviews, reviewed internal documents, and analyzed public records to explore the strategies that small restaurant owners use to ensure sustainability beyond 3 years.

Population and Sampling

Many researchers studying the strategies that small businesses use for sustainability use purposive sampling. Researchers that use purposive sampling maintain a balance between time and other resources and achieving data saturation (Iqbal et al., 2017). The purposive sampling participants must be well informed and experienced with the phenomenon (Iqbal et al., 2017). Purposive sampling is an efficient method of collecting data from a small group of participants accurately representing a larger population (Bernard et al., 2016). I used purposive sampling to explore the strategies that small restaurant owners use to ensure sustainability beyond 3 years.

Yin (2018) stated that the standard sample size does not apply to qualitative multiple case study designs. Researchers should aim to attain data saturation when choosing the sample size (Varpio et al., 2017). Researchers should choose a sample size that is small enough to manage effectively yet provides an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Three to five participants are optimal for limited scope case studies (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). A sample size that is too high costs the researcher time and other resources and is impractical (Boddy, 2016). Based on prior successful research, I chose three small restaurant owners in Washington County, TN, that had achieved sustainability beyond 3 years.

Researchers should continue to collect data until reaching data saturation (Yin, 2018). Achieving data saturation alerts the researcher to discontinue collecting data, as the researcher can gather no new information (Noohi et al., 2016). I used data saturation to signify that no new information will come from interviewing participants. To accurately identify data saturation, I transcribed each participant interview, conducted member checking, and ensured that no new themes emerged before discontinuing data collection. I achieved data saturation with the three initial participants and did not require interviewing additional participants.

Researchers can avoid incredible and invalid data collection by establishing eligibility criteria (Yin, 2018). I established eligibility criteria to ensure that each participant possesses the knowledge and skills needed to accurately identify what strategies small restaurant owners use to ensure sustainability beyond 3 years. The eligibility criteria I used for this study were (a) successful small restaurant owners located in Washington County, TN, (b) small restaurant owners that had achieved sustainability beyond 3 years, and (c) small restaurant owners that had less than 500 employees.

I conducted each interview in a convenient and comfortable setting for the participant to promote trust and open dialogue. Participants will experience fewer distractions and share more information when they are comfortable and have scheduled a convenient time for the interview (Wilson et al., 2016). Researchers use between 30 and 60 minutes to gather information from participants during semistructured face-to-face interviews (Theodore-Oklata et al., 2016). I allowed each participant to set a convenient time for the interview and set a maximum time limit of 45 minutes for each interview to ensure that the participant did not feel overly burdened by their participation.

Ethical Research

Providing informed consent is the first step to ethical research. When a participant gives informed consent, they acknowledge and grant voluntary permission to participate in the research study (Dal-Ré et al., 2017). Informed consent enhances the participant's comprehension level of the research study procedures and is an ethical and legal process (Spatz et al., 2016). After obtaining approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) (approval number 08-19-20-0752524), I ensured that each participant received an informed consent form that identified the purpose of the study and the role of the participant and the researcher. An informed consent form also explains the confidentiality and privacy rights of the participant. I used the informed consent form provided by Walden University as an ethical guide for the research study. Participants had the option to withdraw from their participation in the study at any time in person, by phone, or through email correspondence.

Yin (2018) stated that protecting participants' rights and privacy involves a high safety and security level in the data collection, data storage, and data analysis processes. I did not expose the participant's name or business name in the study; instead, I used a coding system that labeled the participants from P1 to P3, where *P* refers to the participant. I only used the collected data from the participants for the intended scope of the study. All data collected, including written, recorded, and electronic data, will remain in a fireproof safe for 5 years to protect the participants' confidentiality and privacy. To maintain safety and privacy, I will use paper shredding to destroy all paper documents after 5 years. Maintaining and adhering to a protocol can enhance the trustworthiness of the research (Amankwaa, 2016). I adhered to a stringent safety and privacy protocol with the participants and expected each participant to reciprocate to promote trustworthiness and ethical behavior.

Data Collection Instruments

In a qualitative research study, the researcher is the primary data collection instrument (Yin, 2018). The more common methods of data collection are (a) interviews, (b) observations, (c) artifacts, and (d) archived documents (Yin, 2018). The researcher acts as the data collection instrument through observing, interpreting, and recording the collected data (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Yin, 2018). As the data collection instrument, I gathered data from semistructured interviews, archived documents, and publicly available information on local and government websites. In qualitative research, data triangulation enhances understanding of the phenomenon (Varpio et al., 2017). As the data collection instrument, I used data triangulation, including interviews, observations, and archived documents, to enhance the findings' reliability, validity, and credibility.

During the interviews with the participants, seven interview questions guided the meeting explicitly addressing the research topic. Researchers should use face-to-face interviews and audio record interviews for data collection (Moloczij et al., 2017).

Researchers can experience the participant's contextual environment during face-to-face interviews (Yin, 2018). Yin (2018) stated that interview protocols assist researchers in maintaining focus during the interview. Interview protocols provide a step-by-step process for the interviewer to maximize the amount of information that participants can recall from memory (Yin, 2018). Therefore, I used an interview protocol to avoid deviation from the research topic (see Appendix).

Member checking after the interview is vital to ensuring the research study's validity, reliability, and credibility. Member checking after semistructured interviews can enhance the research study's reliability and validity (Birt et al., 2016; Yin, 2018). Member checking involves gaining confirmation from the participant that the interpretation of their responses is what they intended to say (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). In addition to member checking, data triangulation assisted in ensuring the validity of the collected data. Data triangulation is the process of using different sources, such as company documents, to ensure the validity of the study (Varpio et al., 2017). I intended to review financial documents to triangulate the data collected, however, participants did not retain many financial documents supporting their responses.

Data Collection Technique

Yin (2018) identified data collection as the process of gathering information from the participants of a study to understand a phenomenon. Data collection for a case study should come from multiple sources, including questionnaires, focus groups, documents, observations, and interviews (Birt et al., 2016; Yin, 2018). After the initial contact, each participant set a date, time, and place convenient to them for participating in the interview. One participant chose a face-to-face interview, and two participants chose a phone interview. An advantage of semistructured interviews is that researchers can better understand the participant's responses by asking open-ended questions (Brown & Danaher, 2019). Following these researchers' recommendations, the data collection technique for this study was semistructured interviews, a review of financial documents to validate strategy implementation, and a review of public and government websites. I followed the interview protocol, including (a) contacting potential participants by phone, email, and social media, (b) setting up over the phone and in-person interviews at an agreed-upon time, (c) reiterating the purpose of the research study, obtaining verbal consent from the participant, and providing a written consent form to the participant, (d) advising the participant that the interview will be recorded and beginning the interview, and (e) asking the participant six interview questions regarding the strategies the owner use to ensure sustainability beyond 3 years (Appendix).

Interviews are the dominant method of data collection in qualitative research studies (Yin, 2018). Researchers may ask open-ended questions in interviews that encourage the participant to share their thoughts and experiences of a topic (Kristin, 2016). Bailey and Bailey (2017) stated that face-to-face interviews promote rapport establishment, trust-building, and developing mutual respect between the researcher and the participant. Poor memory recollection and providing answers that the participant believes the researcher wants to hear are disadvantages to collecting data through interviews (Yin, 2018). As a result, I followed Bailey and Bailey's (2017) guidance and used face-to-face interviews to build rapport, trust, and respect with the participants.

Member checking followed the interviews and data triangulation to ensure the accuracy and validity of the data. Thomas (2017) stated that member checking is an appropriate method for ensuring interview interpretation accuracy. Each participant received an interpretation of the collected data from the interview and a request that they review it for accuracy and validity. I ensured that all participants had an appropriate amount of time to review the interpretation and provide feedback or corrections if necessary.

Data Organization Technique

Proper data organization helps maintain accuracy in analyzing, reviewing, and reporting collected data (Yin, 2018). A handheld recorder and handwritten notes assisted in data organization while conducting the interview. Each participant and the data collected had a label of P1, P2, and P3 to further assist with data organization. Data storage, data categorization, and data cleaning are forms of data organization techniques (Paulus & Bennett, 2017). Researchers use software to categorize and analyze data collected to identify themes (Male, 2016). A benefit of data organization is creating an audit trail, which allows a researcher to cross-reference different sources of data (Yin, 2018).

The data storage techniques followed the recommendations and guidance of Walden University’s IRB. The IRB requirements included securely storing the collected data for 5 years and destroying all collected data through deletion and paper shredding after 5 years. I am the only person who had access to the participant’s data throughout the

5-year retaining period. I enabled password protection on the master file to ensure the privacy and safety of participant data.

Data Analysis

Empirical thinking is critical to data analysis of case study evidence (Yin, 2018). Researchers identify patterns to interpret the participants' responses regarding a problem or issue (Yin, 2018). Researchers can process collected data by using data analysis techniques (Guo & Guo, 2016). As this research incorporated a case study approach, I employed methodological triangulation to perform the data analysis. Triangulation increases a research study's validity and credibility by using multiple data sources (Varpio et al., 2017). Conducting semistructured face-to-face interviews, analyzing public and private documents, and watching for nonverbal cues are forms of triangulation (Vallon & Grechenig, 2016). As such, I followed these recommendations and conducted a thorough review of business documents to support the interview data.

Yin (2018) stated that compiling, disassembling, reassembling, interpreting, and concluding are elements of data analysis. Manual hand-coding and inputting the data into the NVivo software program ensured proper and accurate analysis. NVivo assists researchers with coding, categorization, and data analysis (Woods et al., 2016) and by reducing the time cost element of the data analysis (Boddy, 2016). Therefore, the purchase and use of the NVivo software combined with hand-coding helped identify the emerging themes from the collected data and enhanced the study's credibility and validity. After hand-coding and using NVivo to analyze the data, I checked for accuracy and redundancies and discovered the emerging themes from the collected data.

Researchers use coding to identify emerging themes from the collected data (Yin, 2018). Using coding to identify themes enables a researcher to reach data saturation, thereby enhancing the study's credibility, validity, and reliability (Yin, 2018). The coding of collected data should continue until achieving data saturation and resolving any discrepancies (Nelson, 2016). Researchers can form interpretations and conclusions of the collected data after organizing, categorizing, and reassembling the data into sequences and groups (Yin, 2018). As themes emerged, so did an increased knowledge of what strategies successful small restaurant owners use to ensure sustainability beyond 3 years.

Ensuring that the themes align with the study's purpose can help researchers avoid deviation (Bogers et al., 2017). A thematic analysis approach can help researchers identify, report, and focus on the key themes of a study (Padgett, 2016). Using a thematic analysis approach can help researchers make an analytical clarification (Vaismoradi et al., 2016). As a result, I used a thematic analysis approach in conjunction with hand-coding and the NVivo software to ensure a correlation between the study's themes, literature, and the conceptual framework.

Reliability and Validity

Reliability and validity signify the accuracy and exactness of a study (Yin, 2018). Reliability involves ensuring the data's accuracy and inclusiveness and that repeat trials yield the same results (Fikkers et al., 2017). Validity means that the measured data reflects the intended concept (Fikkers et al., 2017). Researchers using a qualitative case study design ensure reliability and validity to ensure the accuracy of the findings (Yin, 2018). Reliability and validity correlate with the use of dependability, consistency, and repeatability (Jedrzejczak & Anders, 2017). Qualitative researchers view reliability as an attribute of dependability and must maintain dependability for peers and researchers to deem the research trustworthy (Jedrzejczak & Anders, 2017). As such, I enhanced the study's reliability and validity through member checking and data triangulation.

Reliability

In qualitative research, reliability refers to how a researcher has addressed the study's dependability (Bailey & Bailey, 2017; Hancock et al., 2016). Reliability ensures consistency within the research findings (Yin, 2018). Member checking and triangulation ensured the dependability of this research study. Member checking involves performing the interview, recording the data, confirming the interpretation of the data with the participant, and validating the themes (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). After completing the interviews' interpretation, participants had an opportunity to give feedback on the interpreted data and provide necessary corrections.

Triangulation involves using multiple data sources and may broaden the understanding of the research topic (Varpio et al., 2017). Researchers can use multiple data sources to support the interview data and enhance the study's reliability (Joslin & Müller, 2016). Therefore, I ensured this study's reliability by using multiple data sources, including face-to-face interviews, publicly available data, and internal documents.

Validity

Qualitative researchers enhance the quality of the findings by ensuring the research study's validity and data saturation (Yin, 2018). Selecting the appropriate tools, processes, data collection techniques, and research method and design can ensure a research study's validity and data saturation (Yin, 2018). Insufficient knowledge, biased knowledge, and lack of validity are threats to a research study (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Ensuring credibility, transferability, and confirmability can enhance the qualitative research study's validity and trustworthiness (Plummer, 2017). Researchers should conduct member checking before analyzing the data (Thomas, 2017). Accordingly, I used member checking and triangulation to (a) ensure data saturation, (b) ensure validity, (c) increase trustworthiness, and (d) mitigate bias throughout this study.

Credibility enhances the integrity and trustworthiness of a research study (Yin, 2018). Credibility involves scrutinizing the findings from the collected data to ensure accuracy (Birt et al., 2016). Ensuring data saturation through including a sufficient number of participants also increases the research study's credibility (Yin, 2018). Methods for ensuring research study credibility include plausible criteria, valid evidence (Hays et al., 2016), engagement, documenting observations techniques, member checking, and data triangulation (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Yin, 2018). I followed these researchers' guidance and used member checking and data triangulation to ensure this study's credibility and accuracy.

Transferability refers to how the findings of a study are transferable to different environments. Researchers can enhance transferability by detailing the data collection process in depth so that readers can apply the findings to their situation or environment (Saab et al., 2017). I included detailed information regarding the data collection process, the context of the study, and the findings of the study for readers to transfer the study findings over to their environment and setting.

Confirmability is the degree that others can confirm or support the findings of a research study (Amankwaa, 2016). Researchers can ensure confirmability by not including biased opinions and perceptions in the research study, instead objectively focusing on the participant’s responses (Kallio et al., 2016). Researchers that analyze participant responses using observation techniques must remain cognizant of potential bias (Floman et al., 2017). I used multiple data sources, including data collected from interviews, publicly available data, and internal documents, to ensure confirmability by providing non-biased support to the findings of this study.

Transition and Summary

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the strategies that small restaurant owners use to ensure sustainability beyond 3 years. The three sections of this study include (a) the foundation of the study, (b) the project, and (c) the application to professional practice and implications for change. Section 1 contained the business problem and the need for finding a solution supported by recent peer-reviewed literature. Section 2 began with the breakdowns of the (a) role of the researcher, (b) participant criteria, (c) research method and design, (d) participation population and selection, and (e) ethical research. Section 2 then transitioned into the study’s data element and contained the data collection instruments, data collection technique, data organization technique, data analysis, and the study’s reliability and validity.

Section 3 contains the presentation of the findings as it relates to the research question. In addition to the results, Section 3 contains the themes discovered through data analysis. A discussion of social change implications and recommendations for action based on the findings of the study follows. Finally, Section 3 transitions into the data-driven suggestions for further research and a personal reflection of the study. Section 3 concludes with a summary and conclusion.

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative multiple-case study was to explore the strategies that small restaurant owners use to ensure sustainability beyond 3 years. The findings resulted from interviews conducted with three small restaurant owners in Washington County, TN, and an analysis of publicly available data. After using methodological triangulation on the collected data, I identified four primary themes and several related themes related to the strategies that small restaurant owners use to ensure sustainability beyond 3 years: (a) customer service and relationships, (b) product quality and consistency, (c) promotion and marketing, and (d) experience. I provided a comprehensive analysis of the primary and related themes regarding strategies that small restaurant owners use to ensure sustainability in the presentation of the findings.

Presentation of the Findings

The research question that guides this study was: What strategies do small restaurant owners use to ensure sustainability beyond 3 years? I conducted semistructured interviews using the interview protocol (Appendix) with three participants in Washington County, TN, to collect data pertaining to the research question. As indicated by Table 1, I contacted a total of 32 small restaurant owners in Washington County, TN, and provided an invitation to participate after researching potential participants through company websites. The eligibility requirements for the study were (a) successful small restaurant owners located in Washington County, TN, (b) small restaurant owners that had achieved sustainability beyond 3 years, and (c) small restaurant owners that had less than 500 employees. Three restaurant owners responded and agreed to participate. I conducted two interviews by telephone and one interview in person by participant request.

Table 1

Response Rate From Small Restaurant Owners

	Number of participants	Percentage of participants
Number of respondents accepted	3	9%
Number of respondents rejected	0	0%
Number of non-responses	29	91%

I collected data from all three participants that I scheduled an interview for to ensure data saturation. Noohi et al. (2016) stated that researchers should discontinue collecting data after achieving data saturation. Continuing data collection with the third participant also confirmed that I had achieved data saturation. After conducting the semistructured interviews, I used a methodological triangulation approach and member checking to enhance the collected data's validity and reliability. The methodological triangulation process included a review of data collected from interviews, observations, archived documents, and public websites. Member checking involved gaining confirmation from the participant that the interpretation of their responses is what they intended to say, as Marshall and Rossman (2016) have recommended. To gain confirmation, I created an interpretation of each interview and sent the interpretation to the participant for review and feedback.

To protect the participants' confidentiality during the data collection and analysis, I assigned an alphanumeric code for participant identification, including P1, P2, and P3. I transcribed the three interviews by hand and categorized and documented common themes and redundancies. I identified common themes using both hand-coding and the NVivo software program and stopped collecting data after reaching data saturation. To accurately identify data saturation, I ensured that no new themes emerged before discontinuing data collection. As indicated by Table 2, the identified themes included (a) customer service and relationships, (b) product quality and consistency, (c) promotion and marketing, and (d) experience. The identified themes aligned with previous findings addressed in the literature review.

Table 2

Themes

Nodes/themes	Number of respondents	Number of times participants addressed theme
Customer service and relationships	2	24
Product quality and consistency	3	22
Promotion and marketing	3	9
Experience	2	3

Theme 1: Customer Service and Relationships

The first and most discernible theme from participant responses and collected data was the need to develop customer-centric mindsets and customer relationships. Triangulated material and supporting evidence included participant responses, observation of customer interaction during a face-to-face interview, online customer reviews, social media pages, and public websites. P2 and P3 repeatedly responded that high levels of customer service and customer relationship building levels were integral to their long-term sustainability. These findings correlate with Dibyo et al.'s (2021) study on customer loyalty after completing e-commerce transactions that indicated a positive relationship between increased customer relationship management, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty. As P2 stated, "We have the best clientele. Our customers love us and we love them."

This theme corresponds with Kukanja et al.'s (2017) study of marketing quality dimensions that indicated that the business owner and employees most significantly influence post-purchase behavior through customer interaction. The theme also aligns with GST constructs that a business is a system with many elements that must work together, as product sales and profitability are dependent on customer service and customer relationships for continued sustainability. After manually hand-coding the data, I entered the collected data into NVivo to verify this theme, which indicated a total of two participant sources and 24 total participant references, as indicated by Table 3.

Table 3

Theme 1: Customer Service and Relationships

Node/theme	Participant sources	Total participant references
Customer service and relationships	2	24

P2 and P3 mentioned the importance of effective customer service and building long-term relationships with customers a total of 24 times. Regarding customer relationships and customer loyalty, P3 noted, "I do have some customers that come in here 5 days a week. Some of them at least 3 or 4 days a week. There are lots of nice people here, so that helps out."

These findings align with Peppers and Rogers's (2016) study on the importance and effects of building long-term customer relationships. P2 set a goal of establishing 100 regular customers after opening the business and trained employees to remember customer names, favorite foods, and other noteworthy information that the customers may divulge. Referring to customer relationships, P2 stated,

> If you walk in and the servers know your name and they know who you are, it makes you feel important. It's the kind of place you want to go all the time and it's the kind of place you want to bring your friends to impress and your business partners and your family members visiting.

Training employees to focus on customer service parallels Alhelalat et al.'s (2017) study on how employee behavior affects customer satisfaction. Understanding how cues influence customer expectations and perceptions align with Sweeney et al.'s (2016) study on cues in a restaurant setting, as personal and non-personal cues from restaurant staff affect customer interpretations and service evaluations. Thus, existing literature supports these findings that maintaining high customer service levels can contribute significantly to long-term sustainability.

P2 stated that after reaching the goal of 100 regular customers, those customers brought in family members, friends, and coworkers to show off their relationship with the restaurant owner and employees. The benefits of retaining customers draw parallels with Pandya's (2016) study on customer satisfaction that found that it costs business owners more than six times more to attain new customers than to retain existing ones. P2 reported that customers feel valued and prideful when the restaurant owner remembers them by name and their preferences. P3 stated that relationship building with customers had created several long-term customers that have eaten at the restaurant between three and five times a week for over 30 years. As P3 noted,

> My attitude towards people, I'm very friendly around people, going and talking with them. I have lots of friends, especially in this area, which is very good, nice people. Everybody knows me, I know them. Some of them, unfortunately, I forget their name, but face-wise, I know them. Sometimes if I haven't seen a customer in a few days, if I have their number, I call them or if I see them, I say "Hey, I haven't seen you, what happened? Did we do something wrong?" So, I keep a good relationship.

Leveraging social networks and relationships is valuable to entrepreneurs, as indicated by Shu et al.'s (2018) study on the entrepreneurial importance of social networking. Additionally, these findings correlate with Tanford's (2016) study measuring customer loyalty factors, with emotional commitment, satisfaction, and trust providing stronger loyalty effects than monetary and experiential factors. Therefore, the literature review and participant responses support the theme that customer service and customer relationships are vital to achieving long-term sustainability.

P2 and P3 stated that their customer relationships extended beyond the restaurant and into their personal lives. P3 stated that they would call typically devoted customers who have not patronized the business recently to check on their well-being. These findings align with So et al.'s (2016) study on customer engagement that found that customer engagement outside the workplace strengthened service brand loyalty. Although P3 stated that they were not born in the United States, they did not experience xenophobia or any type of resistance from potential customers. As indicated by Khosa and Kalitanyl's (2014) study on foreign entrepreneurs, xenophobia, although not widespread, can be detrimental to success. P3 did fluently speak the native language in the area, which Khosa and Kalitanyl (2014) indicated may influence customer perceptions. Thus, prior research and participant responses support the theme that customer relationships outside the workplace can attribute to long-term sustainability and that xenophobia does not affect every foreign small business owner.

Participant responses correlated to using GST for understanding the unpredictable challenges modern business leaders face in an organization. The responses corresponded with Sayin's (2016) statement that modern business leaders use GST to explore the "wholeness" of a business system rather than elementary units. Participant responses indicated that multiple elements within a system were integral to long-term sustainability, including handling issues or complaints quickly, developing rapport with customers, and training restaurant staff to exhibit positive mannerisms. As P2 noted,

> I always teach my staff this when I train them. There are three keys to success to a business: the food, the ambiance, and the service. If you can achieve all three of them, then you'll be in business forever.

These findings correlate with Skytnner's (2005) assertion that solving real-world problems requires an understanding of the interconnections that exist within a system.

Participant responses and prior research support the theme that small business owners must think of and act on these elements as one system. Each element relies on the effective implementation of other elements to achieve long-term sustainability.

Theme 2: Product Quality and Consistency

The second theme was the need for small restaurant owners to maintain product quality and consistency. Triangulated material and supporting evidence included participant responses, online customer reviews, product quality assertions hanging on walls and windows, social media pages, and public websites. All three participants responded that consistently maintaining high product quality was integral to retaining customers and managing product costs, paralleling Khosa and Kalitanyl's (2014) findings that intense competition between competitors with similar products is constraining to small business owners and that business owners should focus on product differentiation. As P1 noted regarding product quality, "In the initial stages, just put out the best product that we could come up with."

The findings indicated that ensuring consistency can provide a balance to the costs associated with higher product quality. Hand coding and entering the collected data into NVivo revealed a total of three participant sources and 22 total participant references, as indicated by Table 4.

Table 4

Theme 2: Product Quality and Consistency

Node/theme	Participant sources	Total participant references
Product quality and consistency	3	22

All three participants expounded on the importance of maintaining consistently high product quality. P2 noted about food quality, “If the food is horrible, you would never go back. Sometimes a restaurant is just a hole in the wall, but the food is so amazing that they’ll be lined out the door.” The importance of maintaining consistent product quality correlates with Antikasari et al.’s (2021) study on 95 restaurant patrons that indicated that product quality, restaurant atmosphere, and customer value have a positive and significant influence on customer satisfaction and customer loyalty.

P1 and P3 explained the restaurant owner’s necessity to monitor each product during the preparation and serving process to ensure consistent high quality and maintain optimal costs. As P1 noted, “To keep the prices affordable, you make the product yourself. That means more labor intense, which means, as an owner-operator, I’m there doing a lot of the work to keep it at that point.” Also referring to product quality, P3 stated, “My father taught me that if you want to do anything, then be the best on that. It doesn’t matter what it is, if you’re going to have it for a long time, then be the best.”

These findings correspond with Pivoda’s (2016) study on managing sustainability that found that customers desire a good relationship between product quality and price. Maintaining product quality while also assuring customer satisfaction compare with Pivoda’s statement that business owners should maintain a balance between market conditions and customer expectations. Similarly, P3 stated,

> I always stay in my business, I don't go anywhere, I'm always here. If I'm not working, I still come and see how they're doing. And most of the stuff I do it myself, preparing, as far as the food process. They cook, but I prepare everything.

All three participants stated that maintaining high product quality and consistency gave a competitive edge and assisted with long-term sustainability. As P1 stated,

> Keep your menu focus on what you're doing, such as we're a barbeque restaurant, so we keep everything barbeque related, but try to come up with new products and keep them for a while, then change to other products to keep a fresh menu. Instead of getting stuck in time.

Supporting evidence of this practice included the participant's website that displayed multiple product promotions for different days of the week. Although competitive pricing can be advantageous, Bamiatzi and Kirchmaier's (2014) study on superior performance strategies under adverse conditions indicated that business owners should avoid aggressive price competition with competitors and maintain optimal operation and product costs. Referring to product consistency, P3 stated "I've never changed the quality of my food, even though sometimes I have to pay more for some of the products that I use."

P3 stated that providing high-quality ingredients was more important than strictly managing costs and that freshly prepared ingredients enhanced product quality that influenced customer perception and satisfaction. Regarding ingredients, P3 stated,

> I don't buy byproducts or anything. I buy fresh ground beef and make my own hamburger. Everything in here is made in the kitchen, our sauce, marinara, is

> made in here. I usually do some sampling for anything new I want to do, I let the customers try a little bit and see what they think, and go from there.

Therefore, these findings and prior research indicated that focusing on higher and more consistent product quality rather than the lowest price may provide long-term sustainability benefits, depending on specific market conditions.

Participant responses regarding product quality and consistency as a system confirmed the validity of GST as the conceptual framework. Small restaurant owners can use GST while examining the relationships between phenomena within or outside of the organization, aligning with von Bertalanffy's (1950) prior research. All three participants stated that product quality and consistency were integral to higher customer satisfaction, customer retention, increased sales, and managing costs. As P3 noted regarding long-term product consistency,

> I've never changed the quality of my food, that's a strategy that I've used for staying so long. I've never changed to go to a cheaper product, it always stays the same. That's why some of my customers have been coming here for 30 years. Some customers have moved out and came back, and said 'this is the same pizza I ate 30 years ago!'

Collected data and prior literature suggested that business owners should view product quality as a system that relies on consistency, high-quality ingredients, and quality monitoring to achieve long-term sustainability.

Theme 3: Promotion and Marketing

The third theme from the findings was promotion and marketing. Triangulated material and supporting evidence included participant responses, public websites, social media pages, online customer reviews mentioning promotions, and promotional material throughout the restaurant. All three participants responded that running short and long-term promotions and word-of-mouth marketing positively influenced their long-term sustainability, aligning with prior research of Jakada et al. (2014) and Kenny and Dyson (2016). The findings indicated that a temporary loss in profitability from running promotions may be beneficial in achieving long-term sustainability through increased customer retention. Hand coding and entering the collected data into NVivo verified this theme, indicating a total of three participant sources and nine total participant references, as indicated by Table 5.

Table 5

Theme 3: Promotion and Marketing

Node/theme	Participant sources	Total participant references
Promotion and marketing	3	9

P2 stated that running continuous promotions was vital to achieving long-term sustainability due to introducing a new product to the area. As P2 mentioned, “Every Tuesday we do this promotion called free flow hours, and it’s basically from every Tuesday from 5 to 7 you would come in and have unlimited tapas and unlimited wine, like house, white, red, and sangria, for $25.”

Running promotions corresponds with Tanford's (2016) study on hospitality loyalty, although monetary antecedents ranked lower than emotional and satisfaction antecedents. Similarly, P2 stated that promotions increased customer loyalty and customer retention, although at the loss of some profitability. P2 stated that customers who came in for the promotions brought in friends, family, and coworkers on repeat visits, increasing profitability and sales. As P2 mentioned,

> Friends will come hang out after work and eat, and it was a really fun thing to do, and then the next time they'll bring more people. Those kinds of advertising are the best for us to actually get people in your door and try it.

The correlation between promotions and marketing reflects Pandya et al.'s (2016) study on customer satisfaction factors that discovered that customer satisfaction levels directly correspond with whether a customer will patronize a business again. After referred customers started patronizing the business, P2 stated that profitability and sales increased. All three participants indicated that low-cost marketing contributed to long-term sustainability, with word-of-mouth marketing being the more efficient and effective method. As P2 stated, "word-of-mouth is the best form of advertising that we've ever had."

As Kenny and Dyson (2016) illustrated, marketing is effective even when businesses experience resource constraints. Low-cost marketing methods such as a basic website and social media accounts assisted the participants with connecting with the customers and building relationships. As such, participant responses and prior literature indicated that promotions and marketing could help small restaurant owners achieve long-term sustainability.

GST provided the optimal lens to view promotion and marketing as an open system that works together to drive long-term sustainability. Participant responses indicated the necessity of utilizing both promotion and marketing together, as the strategies complement each other. This theme parallels von Bertalanffy's (1950) description of an open system that allows interactions between the organization's internal elements and the external elements of the environment. The internal elements, including profitability and sales, must successfully interact with the external elements, including customer satisfaction, customer referrals, and customer retention. Therefore, participant responses and the literature review confirm that GST was an appropriate conceptual framework to analyze the promotion and marketing that small business owners used to achieve long-term sustainability.

Theme 4: Experience

The fourth theme from the findings was experience. Triangulated material and supporting evidence included participant responses. Two of the participants stated that prior experience in the restaurant industry assisted with achieving long-term sustainability. Hand coding entering the collected data into NVivo indicated a total of two participant sources and three participant references, as indicated by Table 6.

Table 6

Theme 4: Experience

Node/theme	Participant sources	Total participant references
Experience	2	3

Two of the participants had extensive experience in the restaurant industry. P1 and P3 had 35 years and 30 years respectively of restaurant experience at the time of the interviews. P2 did not have any restaurant experience prior to opening their restaurant. As P3 stated regarding previous experience,

> I started out at another restaurant and moved up from busboy, salad worker, bartender, and baker. After graduating, I started coming here more often and learning the pizza process. It was easy because I was working in a restaurant as a baker, so it was easy for me to go through.

P3 stated that their previous experience in the restaurant industry involved multiple staff positions within a small restaurant and significantly affected their ability to achieve long-term sustainability. This aligned with Honig and Hopp's (2016) study on new venture planning that indicated that entrepreneurs with prior experience not only created a business plan but also adapted their plan in later stages to continually enhance business performance. However, the extensive experience from two of the participants contrasted with Agarwal and Dahm's (2015) study on success factors of ethnic restaurants that indicated that formal hospitality experience does not significantly affect business success. Therefore, the collected data contributes to the academic field of research by indicating a positive correlation between restaurant experience and long-term sustainability.

The collected data and literature review confirmed that GST was an appropriate framework for viewing how the participant's experience affected long-term sustainability. The findings align with Skyttner's (2005) study on human complexity working as a system, as learned behaviors from prior experiences can positively impact business performance; examples include implementing effective business plans and understanding how to engage in positive customer interactions. Viewing experience as an open system wherein the internal elements consist of the individual's experiences and the external element consists of entrepreneurial success can assist researchers and business leaders in understanding the positive correlation that exists between the two elements.

Applications to Professional Practice

Small restaurant owners can apply the findings of this study to implement strategies that may assist sustainability while operating in a challenging and highly competitive environment. Understanding what strategies may ensure long-term sustainability might help restaurant owners   create business plans that increase competitiveness, customer satisfaction, and overall sales. Strategies including word of mouth advertising, building long-term relationships with customers through customer interaction and running multiple promotions to attract and retain customers can increase business performance through lowering advertising costs, increasing product sales, and increasing customer traffic. Research has revealed the vital role that small businesses fill within the U.S. economy, with small businesses accounting for 65% of net job creation (SBA, 2018) and 10% of the overall U.S. workforce (National Restaurant Association, 2017). Successful small businesses contribute to job creation, which promotes a healthier economy (SBA, 2018). The findings of this study were also relevant to small business owners in other industries, as these themes are practical solutions that may support any small business owner with ensuring long-term sustainability. Therefore, these findings can help struggling small business owners achieve long-term sustainability by improving business operations and avoiding failure.

Implications for Social Change

The findings of this study can contribute to lower restaurant failure rates, which may provide positive social change through reduced employee turnover, increased compensation, reduced stress, and increased local spending. The tangible improvements to individuals and communities could occur from the themes identified in this study: customer service and relationships, product quality and consistency, promotion and marketing, and experience. Implementing the strategies identified from the themes can lower unemployment levels and assist with achieving long-term business sustainability. Achieving long-term sustainability could lead to positive community benefits including increased local spending, lower unemployment levels, decreased welfare spending, and lower taxes.

Recommendations for Action

The purpose of this multiple case study was to explore the strategies that small restaurant owners use to ensure sustainability beyond 3 years. The results of this study may help small restaurant owners ensure long-term sustainability, reducing employee turnover, unemployment levels, and positively affecting local communities by increasing local spending and economic growth. The framework for this study emphasized strategies small restaurant owners used to achieve long-term sustainability. The restaurant workforce comprises 10% of the overall U.S. workforce (National Restaurant Association, 2017). By implementing the strategies found in this study, small restaurant owners could increase customer retention, customer satisfaction, and product quality and consistency, which can increase profitability and economic prosperity. Based on the results of this study and the themes, I identified three recommendations for action to ensure productive use of the strategies identified in this study:

Recommendation 1

Small restaurant owners could adopt a customer-centric approach to balance cost management and achieving long-term sustainability. Customer-centric strategies promote customer retention, customer referrals, and increased sales. Factors that determine customer satisfaction include (a) appropriate behavior from employees, (b) friendly and comforting atmosphere, (c) knowledgeable employees, and (d) timely service (Pandya et al., 2016). Customers relish and desire recognition for patronizing a restaurant from both restaurant staff and the owner. Small restaurant owners could implement a customer-centric approach that focuses on employee engagement and customer retention that could reduce operating costs, increase brand recognition, and provide community benefits.

Recommendation 2

Small restaurant owners could implement promotion and marketing to attract customers and increase overall sales. Although marketing can be expensive for small restaurant owners, Kenny and Dyson (2016) posited that marketing is beneficial to small businesses, even if the business owner experiences resource constraints. Collected data revealed a high correlation between customer attraction and promotion implementation, particularly when introducing an unfamiliar product. Small restaurant owners could employ low-cost marketing methods, including a basic website and a social media presence, for attracting customers and increasing customer retention.

Recommendation 3

Creating differentiation through high product quality and consistency can assist small restaurant owners in achieving long-term sustainability. Business owners can maintain a balance between quality and price, as recommended by Pivoda (2016). Small restaurant owners could ensure high product quality and resolve any quality issues as quickly as possible by maintaining a physical presence within the business. Ensuring a consistent, high-quality product may enhance customer retention, increase sales, and maintain product costs.

Analyzing and evaluating the results and recommendations from this study could assist small restaurant owners with achieving long-term sustainability in this industry and region. I will provide each participant with a summarized version and a full copy of the study for future reference and distribution. If requested, I will provide the results of this study to other small restaurant owners through conferences, summits, or local training events. I also invite current and future academics to expound upon this study in future research.

Recommendations for Further Research

In this qualitative multiple case study, I explored the strategies that small restaurant owners use to ensure sustainability beyond 3 years. Recommendations for further research related to understanding what strategies small restaurant owners use to achieve long-term sustainability include expanding the study to different geographical locations. The targeted population was small restaurant owners in Washington County, TN, that had achieved long-term sustainability beyond 3 years. Long-term sustainability strategies may differ from small restaurant owners in Washington County, TN, compared to more populated areas. Expanding the study to small restaurant owners outside of Washington County, TN, may provide additional strategies regarding achieving long-term sustainability.

Finally, I recommend conducting a study to research social media strategies that small restaurant owners use to ensure long-term sustainability. Although none of the participants mentioned social media presence as instrumental to long-term sustainability or as a developed strategy, the rural geographical location and customer demographics may have created an undervaluing of this technology. The research question could explore the effects of social media presence on small restaurants or social media strategies that small restaurant owners use to achieve long-term sustainability.

Reflections

While collecting data for the study, I conducted semistructured interviews with three successful restaurant owners who maintained sustainability beyond 3 years. During this process, I was able to gain an immense amount of knowledge regarding small restaurant operations. This knowledge has deepened my understanding of the pressures and challenges small restaurant owners face on a day-to-day basis. I did not have any personal biases or preconceived ideas toward small restaurant ownership, preventing any effects on the participants or collected data. Due in part to the local business owners' affable personalities and my desire to understand the unique difficulties that entrepreneurs face in this industry, the data collection process was enjoyable. Participants did not refuse document verification; they simply did not retain many financial documents supporting their responses. However, the participants were more than willing to divulge all the information they believed would support the research study and other restaurant owners. The data collection process was a unique experience that has inspired an interest in the future ownership of a small business.

Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the strategies that small restaurant owners use to ensure sustainability beyond 3 years. As noted, prior research has revealed the vital importance of small restaurant owners in the U.S. economy. The four themes, including (a) customer service and relationships, (b) product quality and consistency, (c) promotion and marketing, and (d) experience, linked back to prior research and the conceptual framework. The collected data indicated that achieving a higher education also played a role in long-term sustainability, which is a debated topic among prior researchers. The findings of this study may provide practical solutions for any struggling small business owner, even in unrelated industries, to promote long-term sustainability. These findings have contributed to scholarly research on small restaurant owners by filling a gap in the existing literature on what strategies small restaurant owners use to ensure long-term sustainability.

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Appendix: Interview Protocol

The research question is: What strategies do small restaurant owners use to ensure sustainability beyond 3 years? This qualitative multiple case study will consist of six open-ended interview questions to gain strategies and knowledge from small restaurant owners that have achieved sustainability beyond 3 years in Washington County, TN.

Protocol Steps	**Protocol Actions**
Select participants	I will contact potential participants by phone, email, or other online measures deemed appropriate by Walden's guidelines.
Set time and place for interviews	Interviews will occur online, over the phone, via video conferencing, or at the participant's office or public space at an agreed-upon time.
Introduce the interview and obtain consent	I will reiterate the research study's purpose, obtain verbal consent from each participant, and provide a written consent form.
Record the interview and maintain a time limit	I will advise the participant that the interview will be audio recorded for accuracy and follow-up. The interview will begin with the participant's background information, including (a) educational background, (b) title/position, and (c) years of experience. There will be a time limit of 45 minutes for each interview.
Initiate the interview while observing non-verbal cues, paraphrasing when necessary, and asking follow-up questions to ensure complete and in-depth responses	1. What strategies does your organization use to ensure your small restaurant's sustainability beyond 3 years? 2. How did you identify strategies to ensure your small restaurant's sustainability beyond 3 years? 3. How did you assess the effectiveness of strategies to ensure sustainability beyond 3 years? 4. What key barriers did you encounter in the implementation of strategies to ensure your small restaurant's sustainability beyond 3 years? 5. How did you overcome these key barriers? 6. What additional information regarding strategies to ensure your small restaurant's sustainability beyond 3 years would you like to share that we have not already discussed?

Thank the participant and set a follow-up time	I will thank the participant for their time and involvement in the research study and set expectations for receiving the interview transcription.
Conduct member checking	After the interview, the participant will receive an interpretation of the data collected to ensure accuracy and validity.