

2021

Strategies E-Commerce Entrepreneurs Use to Achieve and Maintain Sustainability Beyond the First 5 Years of Operations

Steven Sierra Alcabes
Walden University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.waldenu.edu/dissertations>



Part of the [Entrepreneurial and Small Business Operations Commons](#)

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Walden Dissertations and Doctoral Studies Collection at ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Walden Dissertations and Doctoral Studies by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact ScholarWorks@waldenu.edu.

Walden University

College of Management and Technology

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Steven Sierra Alcabes

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
and that any and all revisions required by
the review committee have been made.

Review Committee

Dr. Theresa Neal, Committee Chairperson, Doctor of Business Administration Faculty

Dr. Mohamad Hammoud, Committee Member, Doctor of Business Administration
Faculty

Dr. Brenda Jack, University Reviewer, Doctor of Business Administration Faculty

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

Walden University
2021

Abstract

Strategies E-Commerce Entrepreneurs Use to Achieve and Maintain Sustainability
Beyond the First 5 Years of Operations

by

Steven Sierra Alcabes

MPH, Benedictine University, 2016

BS, Interamerican University of Puerto Rico, 2012

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

Walden University

July 2021

Abstract

E-commerce entrepreneurs who fail to develop and implement strategies to sustain business operations beyond the first 5 years face high business failure rates. Grounded in Porter's five forces model, the purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies used by e-commerce entrepreneurs to achieve and maintain sustainability beyond the first 5 years of operations. Participants were e-commerce entrepreneurs from five companies in Texas who implemented successful strategies to achieve and maintain sustainability for more than 5 years. Data were collected from semistructured interviews and reviews of company documents and were analyzed using thematic analysis. Five themes emerged: best practices for consistency, relationship building with customers, networking, risk tolerance, and education. A key recommendation is for e-commerce entrepreneurs to seek ways to create processes that enable replicability of results and customer experiences. The implications for positive social change include the potential of survivability of e-commerce businesses beyond the first 5 years of operations with improved local cash circulation and added taxes improving programs and infrastructure for local schools and other public facilities.

Strategies E-Commerce Entrepreneurs Use to Achieve and Maintain Sustainability

Beyond the First 5 Years of Operations

by

Steven Sierra Alcabes

MS, Benedictine University, 2016

BS, Interamerican University of Puerto Rico, 2012

Proposal Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Business Administration

Walden University

July 2021

Dedication

This doctoral paper is dedicated to my lord and savior Jesus Christ with whom all things are made possible and my father, Jose L. Sierra Ruiz, an entrepreneur by heart who worked arduously since childhood and built a successful family-owned business that has remained operational for over 30 years. Dad, thank you for teaching me the value of tireless dedication to pursuing a goal and a process. I also want to dedicate this paper to my seven children, Andrew, Jeremy, Ian, Noah, Steven, Ava, and Rachel; each one of you provides me the motivation to push myself further and provide in the best capacity I can as both a father and human being. Finally, I dedicate this doctoral paper to my life partner and wife, Ann Marie; each day, you inspire me to be the best version of myself. I love you, Ann; thank you for being my best friend, soul mate, and life partner.

Acknowledgments

My most sincere thank you to Dr. Theresa Neal (chair), Dr. Mohamad S. Hammoud (second committee member), and Dr. Brenda Jack (university research reviewer). Dr. Neal, your continuous guidance and motivation through this doctoral journey was an absolute blessing.

Table of Contents

List of Tables	iv
Section 1: Foundation of the Study.....	1
Background of the Problem	1
Problem Statement	2
Purpose Statement.....	2
Nature of the Study	3
Research Question	4
Interview Questions	4
Conceptual Framework.....	5
Operational Definitions.....	6
Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations.....	6
Assumptions.....	6
Limitations	7
Delimitations.....	7
Significance of the Study	7
Contribution to Effective Business Practice	8
Contribution to Positive Social Change.....	8
A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature.....	9
Conceptual Framework: Porter’s Five Forces Model.....	10
Porter’s Competitive Strategy Theory	16

Entrepreneurship.....	18
Sustainability.....	20
Operational Sustainability.....	20
Financial Sustainability.....	22
Small Business Entrepreneurial Failure.....	23
Small Business Entrepreneurial Success	25
E-Commerce Sustainability Strategies	27
Transition	36
Section 2: The Project.....	38
Purpose Statement.....	38
Role of the Researcher	38
Participants.....	40
Research Method and Design	41
Research Method	42
Research Design.....	43
Population and Sampling	44
Ethical Research.....	46
Data Collection Instruments	47
Data Collection Technique	48
Data Organization Technique	50
Data Analysis	51

Yin’s 5-Step Qualitative Data Analysis Process.....	52
Conclusion	55
Reliability and Validity.....	56
Reliability.....	56
Validity	57
Transition and Summary.....	59
Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change	60
Presentation of the Findings.....	60
Theme 1: Best Practices for Consistency.....	61
Theme 2: Relationship Building With Customers	63
Theme 3: Networking	66
Theme 4: Risk Tolerance	68
Theme 5: Education	70
Applications to Professional Practice	73
Implications for Social Change.....	75
Recommendations for Action	76
Recommendations for Further Research.....	77
Reflections	77
Conclusion	78
References.....	80
Appendix: Interview Protocol.....	108

List of Tables

Table 1. Best Practices for Consistency.....	62
Table 2. Relationship Building With Customers	65
Table 3. Networking	67
Table 4. Risk Tolerance	70
Table 5. Education	72

Section 1: Foundation of the Study

Small businesses strengthen the global economy and enhance living conditions by increasing a country's gross domestic product (Blankson et al., 2017). As of the third quarter of 2019, e-commerce sales comprised 11.2% of the total sales across the United States with a total market value of \$154.5 billion in sales (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2019). The market share of all e-commerce sales continues to grow across the United States with an increase of 0.75% per year since 2010 (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2019). E-commerce business owners are not immune to high small business failure rates experienced across all industries (Small Business Administration, Office of Advocacy, 2019). The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the strategies used by e-commerce entrepreneurs to achieve and maintain sustainability beyond the first 5 years of operations.

Background of the Problem

Small business refers to any enterprise that employs up to 499 individuals (Small Business Administration, 2018). Small businesses provide 99% of all employment in the United States and accounted for 64% of all jobs generated from 1993 to 2011 (Small Business Administration, Office of Advocacy, 2019). However, high business failure rates indicated the need for business owners to develop strategies that enable operational sustainability (Shields & Shelleman, 2016). Additionally, the lack of academic literature that addresses operational sustainability among e-commerce businesses increases the potential for business failure among emerging e-commerce entrepreneurs (Shields & Shelleman, 2016). Some of the leading factors that contribute to poor operational

sustainability include (a) limited access to external funds, (b) lack of business development experience, (c) poor communication skills, (d) lack of financial management knowledge, (e) poor time management, and (f) ineffective marketing strategies (Cantamesa et al., 2018; Dvorský et al., 2020; Ferreira et al., 2020).

Problem Statement

Small business entrepreneurs contribute to greater job creation opportunities than large businesses (Small Business Administration, 2018); however, small business entrepreneurs fail at high rates (Park et al., 2017). Forty-four percent of small business entrepreneurs fail to maintain successful business operations beyond 5 years (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). The general business problem was that some entrepreneurs start small business operations without effective sustainability strategies. The specific business problem was that some e-commerce entrepreneurs lack effective strategies to achieve and maintain sustainability beyond the first 5 years of operations.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the strategies used by e-commerce entrepreneurs to achieve and maintain sustainability beyond the first 5 years of operations. The targeted population included e-commerce entrepreneurs from five companies across San Angelo, Texas, who implemented successful strategies to achieve and maintain sustainability for more than 5 years of beginning operations. The implications for positive social change may include improved sustainability of businesses for existing and aspiring entrepreneurs. Additionally, increased e-commerce sustainability may benefit a wide range of stakeholders including individual business

owners, potential employees, customers, and other local community members who may benefit from the added cash circulation resulting from entrepreneurs' improved business operations.

Nature of the Study

There are three research methods available to researchers: quantitative, qualitative, and mixed (Yin, 2018). I selected a qualitative method to explore strategies e-commerce entrepreneurs use to achieve and maintain sustainability beyond the first 5 years of operations. Although selecting a qualitative research method increases threats to reliability, including participant error, participant bias, researcher error, and researcher bias (Ghezzi, 2020), researchers can gain greater insights into a business problem using open-ended questions in qualitative research studies. Some quantitative research methods include closed-ended questionnaires with responses measured and converted into data for increased reliability and validity (McKim, 2017). Additionally, researchers use the quantitative method to understand the significance of variables' relationships or differences by testing hypotheses (Ghezzi, 2020). In contrast, researchers use the mixed method to strengthen the meaning of an explored phenomenon by including qualitative and quantitative methods to develop and support findings (McKim, 2017). Using a quantitative or mixed-method approach was not appropriate for my study because I did not analyze numerical data or test theories using statistical methods.

I chose a multiple qualitative study design versus a single case study due to the limited insight that could be gained from a single company or entrepreneur. Researchers may favor a case study design when there is no control over behavioral events and the

attempt to answer research questions pertinent to contemporary events exists (Yin, 2018). Other study designs available for selection included phenomenological and ethnographic designs. Researchers use the phenomenological design to understand the business problem solely from the perspective of the participants' meanings of experiencing phenomena (Ghezzi, 2020). The phenomenological design was not suitable for my study because the focus was the strategies used by participants, not the recollection of participants' experiences. Researchers use the ethnographic design over an extended period of time to understand one or more groups' cultures (Yin, 2018). An ethnographic design was not appropriate for my study because I was not concerned with assigning meaning to participants' behaviors or understanding one or more groups' cultures.

Research Question

What strategies do e-commerce entrepreneurs use to achieve and maintain sustainability beyond the first 5 years of operation?

Interview Questions

1. What strategies have proven successful in achieving and maintaining sustainability beyond the first 5 years of operations?
2. What strategies do you attribute the most to facilitating sustainability beyond the first 5 years of operations?
3. How do you measure the effectiveness of strategies to achieve and maintain sustainability beyond the first 5 years of operations?

4. What were the most significant challenges in implementing effective strategies to achieve and maintain sustainability beyond the first 5 years of operations?
5. How did your organization address the key challenges to implement effective strategies to achieve and maintain sustainability beyond the first 5 years of operations?
6. What additional information can you share regarding the strategies you developed and implemented to achieve and maintain your business's sustainability beyond the first 5 years of operations?

Conceptual Framework

I used Porter's (1998) five forces model as the conceptual framework for this qualitative study. Porter developed the five forces model to determine companies' sustainability and profitability within an industry. Porter sought an understanding of why some firms failed and others succeeded by studying external factors to businesses. Porter's study led to the development of the five forces model, which includes (a) buyer power, (b) supplier power, (c) threat of substitutes, (d) threat of new entrants, and (e) competitive rivalry. New e-commerce entrepreneurs should understand how they may best exploit their threat as a new entrant and how to protect themselves against new entrants within their market as their businesses grow. Understanding each of the five forces explained by Porter may provide new e-commerce entrepreneurs a better understanding of areas in which to focus the development of business strategies, which could increase business profitability and sustainability. The use of Porter's five forces

model facilitated my ability to detail and describe the strategies used by e-commerce entrepreneurs to achieve and maintain sustainability beyond the first 5 years of operation.

Operational Definitions

Business strategies: Business strategies refer to the operational actions and approaches employed by a business owner or organizational member to increase the company's competitive advantage within a market (Pattinson, 2016).

Exploitative approach: Exploitative approach refers to the process by which the entrepreneur exploits an opportunity by either introducing new products or services or improving upon existing ones (Yang et al., 2021).

Operational sustainability: Operational sustainability refers to the business owner's ability to maintain a business operation through time despite existing external influences including market threats and competition (Aragon-Correa et al., 2017).

Sustainability: Sustainability refers to the ability to maintain something long term (Aragon-Correa et al., 2017).

Small business: A small business is a privately owned organization with no more than 1,500 employees (Small Business Administration, 2019b).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

Assumptions

Assumptions are what an individual believes to be true without the factual knowledge that what is assumed is the truth (Pyrzczak & Bruce, 2017). The first assumption in this study was that participants would answer all interview questions honestly and truthfully. The second assumption was that participants would willingly

provide all information and not due to some sense of undue pressure. The third assumption was that the strategies used by each participating e-commerce entrepreneur would vary from the strategies of the other participants.

Limitations

Limitations are weaknesses in the study that the researcher cannot control (Pyrzczak & Bruce, 2017). The most significant limitation of this study was the lack of a large sample population to develop a series of generalizable trends in findings. Although the answers provided by the study participants served as insight into the strategies used by entrepreneurs to achieve and maintain sustainability beyond 5 years of operations, the strategies mentioned did not necessarily represent the experience of all small business entrepreneurs across a geographical location or industry.

Delimitations

Delimitations refer to the bounds or scope of the study (Pyrzczak & Bruce, 2017). The first delimitation of the study was the geographical location. I chose to focus on participants located in San Angelo, Texas, to avoid issues associated with different time zones or cultural nuances, which may have affected the communication's adequate flow. The second delimitation was the type of business structure analyzed; only e-commerce entrepreneurs participated in this study.

Significance of the Study

The findings of this study might add value to businesses through added insight into e-commerce sustainability practices. Business owners should not discount the positive effect of successful small businesses on the U.S. economy. Small businesses

account for most employment opportunities in the United States (Small Business Administration, Office of Advocacy, 2019). The high failure rate of entrepreneurs maintaining a successful business beyond the first 5 years of operations leads to significant losses in employment opportunities and financial well-being within the communities affected across the United States. This study's findings might enable small business owners to identify strategies to reduce the potential for business failure and help grow the local economy by maintaining successful business operations.

Contribution to Effective Business Practice

This study's results may contribute to effective business practice through increased awareness of effective strategies to achieve business sustainability beyond the first 5 years of business operations. Analysis of Porter's five forces model may aid new business owners in identifying roots of profitability and competitiveness within their industry (Prasad & Warriar, 2016). E-commerce entrepreneurs may use the study's findings to identify methods of generating and strengthening revenue and competitive advantage. A business owner's profitability and sustainability are directly affected by the owner's ability to implement and consistently use effective operational strategies (Jamza et al., 2020). E-commerce entrepreneurs may implement study results to generate positive business value and maintain operational sustainability.

Contribution to Positive Social Change

Study results may facilitate positive social change by increasing employment and self-employment opportunities in locally affected communities. Small business owners comprise 97.7% of all employment in the United States and account for 46% of the gross

domestic product (Small Business and Entrepreneurship Council, 2018). Small business sustainability is critical to a nation's gross domestic product (Small Business Administration, 2019a). Local communities may benefit from the increased circulation of cash generated through reduced unemployment and increased local business revenue.

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

The purpose of this study was to explore the strategies used by e-commerce entrepreneurs to achieve and maintain sustainability beyond the first 5 years of operations. Forty-four percent of small business entrepreneurs fail to maintain successful business operations beyond 5 years (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). E-commerce entrepreneurs should understand the strategies used by existing successful business owners to reduce the likelihood of business failure. This literature review was a product of an analysis of Porter's (1998) five forces model and key concepts within the model. I selected Porter's five forces model as the framework for this study due to its relevance and usefulness in aiding business owners in identifying external factors or forces that affect their businesses' profitability. Identifying such factors may lead to insights used to develop business strategies that may facilitate a competitive advantage.

Throughout the literature review, I address multiple e-commerce business topics, strategies, and business considerations that may increase a business's operational sustainability. To complete the literature review, I analyzed a series of peer-reviewed articles published within the preceding 5 years. To identify relevant studies, I used the following search terms: *entrepreneurship, innovation, financial sustainability, operational sustainability, social media marketing in both B2B and B2C firms, pricing,*

product return policies, small business success, and small business failure. I used a series of academic sources to search, including the Walden University library, Dissertations, Google Scholar, ProQuest, SAGE Journals, government websites, and EBSCO. I used extensive research sources to strengthen my study's validity and reliability (see Yin, 2018), which were crucial to the research's relevance. I used 185 references for this study, of which 163 (88%) were peer reviewed. A total of 134 (72%) of sources were published between 2017 and 2021.

Conceptual Framework: Porter's Five Forces Model

Porter (1998) developed the five forces model to identify an industry's potential sustainability and profitability level. Porter identified external interindustry competition intensity as a strong determinant of existing and new business profitability and sustainability. Porter's five forces model details a series of external forces interacting with each other to illustrate and explain the complexity of business success and failure determinants: (a) buyer power, (b) supplier power, (c) threat of substitutes, (d) threat of new entrants, and (e) competitive rivalry. Multiple studies indicated that some business owners use Porter's five forces model to attain long-term business sustainability, increase competitive advantage, strengthen market position, and increase customer base (Khurram, 2020; Nasser Al-Yasiri et al., 2020; Yoon, 2020). Analysis of Porter's five forces model may help business leaders identify the roots of profitability and competitiveness within their industry (Prasad & Warriar, 2016). Also, business owners may strengthen long-term business sustainability by considering the external forces

detailed in Porter's five forces model (Jamza et al., 2020). Understanding the external forces may help businesses maintain a strategic advantage in the marketplace.

Careful consideration of the intensity of external forces within an industry may facilitate a business owner's ability to identify and assess effective strategies that may increase competitive advantage. Porter (2008) argued that the five forces model's effective implementation might lead business owners to increase and sustain customer value and strengthen competitive advantage. The intensity of external forces detailed through Porter's five forces model may indicate profitability within an industry. Business profitability and sustainability are also directly affected by an owner's ability to implement and consistently use effective operational strategies (Jamza et al., 2020). E-commerce entrepreneurs who implement and consistently use effective strategies may have the greatest potential to attain competitive advantage and operational sustainability.

Buyer Power

E-commerce entrepreneurs should possess a strong sense of awareness of the market's buyer power and how that power may affect a business owner's need for improved operational strategies. Although a business's lifeline is its clients, buyers may lead to a business's reduced profitability by forcing competitors within the industry against each other, advocating for greater product or service quality and demanding reduced prices (Mou et al., 2020; Porter, 1998). Lack of product differentiation, consumer price sensitivity, and public awareness of business suppliers and costs leads to stronger buyer power to exercise external force against a business (Mou et al., 2020; Porter, 1998). Buyers of e-commerce-based services and products are increasingly aware

of the numerous competitors that provide the same products and services; this awareness leads to stronger buyer power among e-commerce buyers (Mou et al., 2020). E-commerce entrepreneurs should make consistent efforts to create product or service differentiation to reduce potential negative effects of buyer power.

Supplier Power

E-commerce entrepreneurs may face business operational and financial challenges associated with the prices of products and the availability of materials established by suppliers. A business's dependability on its supplier may lead to a necessary and delicate relationship between the two, referred to as business-to-business (B2B) transactions. Suppliers can exert external force against businesses in an industry by altering the availability of materials, products, and prices (Porter, 1998). Business owners who rely on the purchase of raw materials or other products to produce and sell products or services depend on the suppliers they purchase from (Porter, 2008). Higher buyer switch costs reduce competitive supplier options and increase the perceived value of products sold by a supplier, leading to stronger supplier power (Mou et al., 2020; Porter, 1998). The same force applied against businesses through buyer power is available to businesses against suppliers; businesses are the suppliers' clients in B2B relationships.

Threat of Substitutes

The more specialized and rarer the service or product sold, the less likely the threat of substitute will represent an issue for an e-commerce business owner. E-commerce entrepreneurs may face the threat of substitutes when other e-commerce business owners offer the same or similar products or services at reduced prices or

superior quality (Anand & Mantrala, 2019; Porter, 2008). The potential threat of substitutes increases for existing business owners in the same industry when the number of businesses catering to the same consumer needs increases (Stef & Jabeur, 2018). The strategies available to decrease the threat of substitutes within e-commerce businesses include increasing product or service quality and reducing prices (Baumann, 2015). E-commerce entrepreneurs should remain aware of the strategies necessary to reduce the adverse effects associated with the threat of substitutes within the entrepreneur's business model.

Threat of New Entrants

Increased levels of new businesses in an industry may lead to an increased threat of substitutes for existing business owners. New entrants into an industry's market represent one of the most significant challenges for existing businesses' profitability (Porter, 2008). Business owners may reduce the threat of new entry by establishing business models that increase barriers to entry, including (a) restrictive government policies and licensing, (b) lack of awareness or access to distribution and supply channels, and (c) high startup investment requirements (Choi et al., 2019). New e-commerce owners must exhibit high creativity and innovation levels to overcome barriers to entry posed by existing businesses in the same industry (Porter, 2008). Conversely, existing business owners may reduce the threat of new entry by implementing strategies that differentiate them from their competitors.

Threat of Competitors

Interindustry competition may lead to a severe disruption of a company's profitability when business owners seek to undercut competitors' prices. Many business owners use pricing competition to increase their client base. However, the continuous reduction of costs among competing businesses may destabilize profit across the entire industry (Choi et al., 2019; Stef & Jabeur, 2018). Intense interindustry competition may also become a driving motivational force for business owners to become more innovative and efficient with their resource use (Porter, 2008). E-commerce entrepreneurs may face high levels of threat from competitors due to the abundance of competing businesses within industries and niches that possess strong potential for substitution.

Historical Business Uses of Porter's Five Forces Model

Many businesses across a wide range of industries may benefit from applying Porter's five forces model. Business owners may use Porter's five forces model to increase their competitive advantage within their industry and increase their customer base (Porter, 2008). Also, the use of Porter's five forces model may facilitate the development of operational strategies that aid business owners in increasing profitability through innovation (Jamza et al., 2020; Porter, 2008). Business owners across various industries have successfully employed Porter's five forces model to develop profitable business strategies.

There are multiple examples of business owners who have successfully implemented Porter's five forces model to increase their businesses' profitability. Ahmadinia and Karim (2016) analyzed a Chinese-based automotive manufacturing company using Porter's five forces model to understand how successful business owners

developed a highly competitive and profitable niche market. Analysis conducted through Porter's five forces model indicated that the company could strengthen profitability by reducing product pricing and increasing total vehicle production output. Snipes and Pitts (2015) analyzed trends within the retail industry that have led to profitability using Porter's five forces model. The objective was to explore how retail industry business leaders use technology and consumer-based strategies to attain competitive advantage and operational sustainability. Findings indicated that the reduction of product or service costs may lead to an increase in a company's potential customer pool and may strengthen competitive advantage. E-commerce entrepreneurs should consider the potentially beneficial effects of balancing consumer demand with the price of goods or services sold.

E-commerce entrepreneurs may also use Porter's five forces model to analyze the existing strength of external forces within an industry to attain competitive advantage and operational sustainability. Porter's five forces model influenced Ahmadinia and Karim's (2016) analysis of the Chinese automotive manufacturing company and Snipes and Pitts' (2015) analysis of retail industry trends. Snipes and Pitts identified that many retail companies that faced intense competitive rivalry were offering and selling identical or similar products to their consumer base. Snipes and Pitts identified strong buyer bargaining power as a result of high levels of product offering saturation within the retail industry. E-commerce entrepreneurs should remain vigilant of the potential negative effects of product or service saturation available to prospective consumers and make a conscious effort to attain product or service differentiation.

Porter's Competitive Strategy Theory

Porter (1998) developed the competitive strategy theory to illustrate how leaders may achieve and maintain competitive advantage through the application of a series of defined competitive strategies. Porter's competitive advantage theory applies to businesses regardless of the firm's age, size, industry, and location (Baronina, 2020). Many organizational leaders lack an adequate understanding of the concept of competitive advantage (Nakamura, 2019). Porter argued that organizational leaders operate in an evolving, dynamic, and highly competitive environment. Further, Porter asserted that organizational leaders must outperform competitors through a series of operational activities aligned with strategies based on differentiation, cost leadership, and focus on attaining a competitive advantage.

Differentiation Strategy

In a market as highly saturated as e-commerce, the use of differentiation among e-commerce entrepreneurs may facilitate strengthening product and service exclusivity, potentially leading to both competitive advantage and operational sustainability. Organizational leaders enhance consumer demand and competitive advantage when services and products offered are perceived as higher quality than those provided by competing firms (Brenes et al., 2020; Porter, 1998). The use of differentiation strategy enables business owners to establish customer loyalty, strengthen customer satisfaction, and create a sense of exclusivity of the company's products and services in the competing industry (Porter, 1998). Organizational leaders may employ a series of methods to attain product and service differentiation; these include (a) product or service design, (b)

company branding strategy, (c) dealer network, (d) use and employment of technology, and (e) customer service (Momsen, 2021; Porter, 1998; Zou & Chen, 2020). In addition, the use of differentiation as a business strategy enables business owners to increase product and service prices as the customer's perceived value of the brand becomes stronger, thereby leading to increased profit margins (Brenes et al., 2020; Mappangara & Kartini, 2019). E-commerce entrepreneurs should understand the value of differentiation strategies toward the process of building, enabling consumer loyalty, and increasing consumers' perceived value toward the business's products or services.

Cost Leadership Strategy

Business owners may employ cost leadership strategies through a diverse series of operational activities. These strategies may include reducing product or service production costs and reducing product or service costs at the expense of profitability per unit. Cost leadership strategy refers to the actions taken by business owners to enhance profitability through the manipulation of product and service costs (Porter, 1998). Many business owners employ cost leadership strategies to broaden the potential client pool and attract price-sensitive customers (Chakraborty, 2019; Porter, 1998). The use of cost leadership strategies may lead to increased profitability when product or service output rises due to price reductions (Chmielowiec-Lewczuk, 2019; Porter, 1998). E-commerce business owners may leverage cost leadership strategies to increase product demand and overall profitability by reducing the price per individual unit sold compared to competitors within the same industry (Chakraborty, 2019; Porter, 1998). Small business

owners should develop cost leadership strategies that consider and balance the needs of price-sensitive consumers and business profitability.

Focus Strategy

E-commerce entrepreneurs may implement focus strategies to gain consumer loyalty and increase operational sustainability by narrowing their potential consumer base to a specific market segment with weakened competitive rivalry. *Focus strategy* refers to the narrowing of products and services offered to potential clients to create a specialized business that serves a unique market segment (Porter, 1998). Some business owners employ focus strategies by focusing on market segments with less competitive rivalry (Chakraborty, 2019). Many business owners use focus strategies to enhance the perception of the quality of products and services offered to potential clients within a niche (Porter, 1998; Zou & Chen, 2020). The use of focus strategies within a business may lead to increased consumer loyalty when coupled with cost leadership or differentiation strategies (Chakraborty, 2019). E-commerce entrepreneurs should remain cognizant of the product or service mixes within their business model that may enable and enhance consumer loyalty.

Entrepreneurship

Effective entrepreneurship is built through the implementation of strategies that lead to a new business's competitive advantage. Entrepreneurship refers to the active process of developing a business or strategy within an existing business to exploit or create profitable opportunities within an industry (Cantillon, 1931; Thompson et al., 2020). Cantillon (1931) developed the entrepreneurship theory and described

entrepreneurs as individuals who assume risk while investing in uncertain market conditions. Additionally, entrepreneurs identify or create needs within a target population by introducing innovative products or services within a market (Holmberg-Wright & Hribar, 2016; Malerba & McKelvey, 2019). The development and implementation of innovation within a market typically lead to improved sales and operational effectiveness (Thompson et al., 2020). Entrepreneurs should possess a thorough understanding of the concepts of supply and demand to adjust operational strategies in favor of increasing profitability (Cantillon, 1931). E-commerce entrepreneurs may face constant market uncertainty due to multiple factors that may include strong market rivalry, national or global financial crisis, and lack of supply access.

Some researchers argue that entrepreneurship is a byproduct of opportunity and the ability of the entrepreneur to react to such an opportunity (Berglund et al., 2020; Thompson et al., 2020). While innovation may improve entrepreneurial activities, market opportunities may also arise from applying an exploitative approach (Keyhani, 2019; Wójcik & Ciszewska-Mlinarič, 2020). The exploitative approach refers to the process by which the entrepreneur exploits an opportunity by either introducing new products or services or improving upon existing ones (Yang et al., 2021). However, the speed by which entrepreneurs react to opportunity also matters due to diminishing the opportunity's value over time (Keyhani, 2019). E-commerce entrepreneurs should remain vigilant for target market opportunities in a timely manner that allows for a minimal diminishment of the opportunity's value.

Sustainability

Effective understanding of business sustainability is an essential component to entrepreneurial success. The term sustainability refers to maintaining something long-term (Aragon-Correa et al., 2017). Some researchers and business owners use the term sustainability interchangeably for different concepts to include operational, corporate, development, and environmental sustainability (Svoboda, 2020). Sustaining long-term growth and profitability are among the greatest and most significant challenges faced by business owners (Chahal & Sharma, 2020). E-commerce business owners should understand the factors that affect both operational and financial sustainability within their business model.

Operational Sustainability

E-commerce entrepreneurs achieve operational sustainability through the effective implementation of strategies that lead to continuous competitive advantage. Operational or organizational sustainability refers to the business owner's ability to maintain a business operational through time despite existing external influences to include market threats and competition (Aragon-Correa et al., 2017). Business owners attain operational sustainability through continuous and long-term growth, profitability, competitive advantage, and creativity (Krauss, 2017). Some researchers credit Porter's differentiation strategy as an effective means to achieve operational sustainability (Hossain & Azmi, 2020). The use of Porter's differentiation strategy enables business owners to strengthen operational sustainability by satisfying shareholder needs (Hossain

& Azmi, 2020). Small business owners should understand the effects of Porter's differentiation strategy against the operational sustainability of a business.

E-commerce entrepreneurs may increase operational sustainability through the application of differentiation strategies that enable improved long-term financial performance. Through Porter's differentiation strategy, business owners benchmark competitors to develop products or services that will lead to consumer loyalty and competitive advantage (Hossain & Azmi, 2020). Benchmarking involves collecting competitors' performance data, monitoring competitor activities, and evaluating competitors' operational strategies (Behl et al., 2019; Uluskan & Godfrey, 2018). The use of benchmarking enables business owners to identify and understand how different operational approaches and strategies affect competitive advantage and profitability (Wang, 2018). Additionally, business owners may use benchmarking to evaluate external and internal performance (Sandhu et al., 2019). Competitors operate in the same industry, many times sharing highly similar operational activities, develop highly similar products, use the same or similar suppliers, and experience the same external forces amongst each other (Heath, 2018). The use of differentiation as an operational strategy enables business owners to better appeal to target niches, mitigate the effect of external forces as applied to direct competitors, and achieve competitive advantage (Hossain & Azmi, 2020). E-commerce entrepreneurs should understand how to effectively implement differentiation strategies to strengthen operational sustainability and competitive advantage.

Financial Sustainability

E-commerce entrepreneurs should possess a clear understanding of the tools necessary to achieve financial sustainability. Business owners may create and sustain profitability through increased revenue generation and cost-saving strategies (Maryanti & Meiliza, 2020). Additionally, business owners achieve greater revenue through increased sales (Machado & Fernandes, 2021; Rodriguez & Torres, 2020). To achieve greater sale volume, business owners may implement elements of Porter's 1980 competitive strategy theory based on differentiation, cost leadership, and focus. Business owners should consider operational expenses to include the cost to produce products or services, employee's pay and benefits, logistical expenses, and marketing to achieve business cost savings (Machado & Fernandes, 2021; Rodriguez & Torres, 2020). The use of cost-saving measures may strengthen the financial sustainability of businesses.

Business owners should also consider the availability of financial resources and funding as other factors which may affect financial sustainability. Small business owners must successfully convince investors of their ability to provide an attractive return on investment and that the business in question will mature and achieve sustainability (Herciu, 2017). Following a study to explore the relationship between financing and small business productivity, Arulraj and Annamalai (2020) concluded that increased financing availability provides small business owners increased ability to invest in projects with a higher return on investment and higher productivity potential. However, not all small business owners have access to traditional financing options. In place of conventional business loan options, small business owners may pursue non-traditional

financial sourcing options to include angel investors and crowdfunding (Herciu, 2017).

E-commerce entrepreneurs should consider all the financial sourcing options available to facilitate business startup or expansion costs.

Crowdfunding is another helpful tool available to e-commerce entrepreneurs to achieve financial sustainability when external funding is necessary. Crowdfunding refers to the process of acquiring external financing from investors around the globe in support of a cause or project through the internet (Cowden & Young, 2020). Whereas venture capitalists are more concerned with return on investment, angel investors are more concerned with effective passion towards the finance and the industry it represents (Herciu, 2017). Through crowdfunding platforms, individuals with little to no capital can raise funds to enable their ideas (Herciu, 2017). Conversely, angel investors refer to individuals with high capital that invest in young and potentially high growth startup companies or entrepreneurs (Drover et al., 2017). Many angel investors are former entrepreneurs who provide the young entrepreneur financial capital and guidance within a specific area of expertise (Drover et al., 2017). E-commerce entrepreneurs with limited knowledge within a distinctive industrial niche may benefit from the expertise of an angel investor who can guide the young entrepreneur through the early stages of the startup.

Small Business Entrepreneurial Failure

Small business entrepreneurship may fail for many reasons, including lack of access to external funds, business development experience, and poor financial planning. Small business entrepreneurs fail at high rates (Park et al., 2017). Forty-four percent of small business entrepreneurs fail to maintain successful business operations beyond 5

years (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). According to Cantamesa et al. (2018), many entrepreneurs primarily focus on sales or improvement of offered products and services and fail to design an effective business model that accounts for proper marketing and management of cash flow. Additionally, many entrepreneurs do not possess business development experience or knowledge and may lack awareness of the availability of business development external expertise (Cantamesa et al., 2018). Furthermore, many entrepreneurs fail due to limited access to external funds, including loans and credit cards, and poor financial management and accounting skills (Muñoz-Izquierdo et al., 2019). Many creditors deny credit to new small business owners due to the high risk of financial failure (Tchakoute Tchuigoua et al., 2020). E-commerce entrepreneurs should seek to understand the factors necessary to increase the odds of business success and the factors that may lead to potential business failure.

Multiple peer-reviewed research studies provide greater insight into the factors that may lead to small business entrepreneurial failure. In a study by Yasheng and Jermias (2016), the authors explored the relationship between business performance indicators and a businesses' sustainability. For the study, Yasheng and Jermias used bankruptcy as the means to identify failure to survive. Hence, the measures used to predict survivability correspond to the likelihood that the business will enter bankruptcy and cease operations. According to Yasheng and Jermias, the measures which most strongly affect and may contribute to effectively predicting business survivability or likely failure are (a) employee training, (b) employee productivity, (c) accounts receivable collection period, (d) export intensity, and (e) sales growth. Other researchers

attribute entrepreneurial failure to poor communication skills between team members, ineffective or toxic leadership, and poor time management (Dvorský et al., 2020). Most business failures result in bankruptcy and liquidation of any company assets due to the owner's inability to repay debt or maintain minimally desired profitability (Tchakoute Tchuigoua et al., 2020). E-commerce entrepreneurs should consider the potentially adverse effects of neglecting the key measures that may reduce operational sustainability and eventual potential business failure.

Small Business Entrepreneurial Success

Entrepreneurial success is the result of careful business planning and effective implementation of operational strategies. Many business owners interpret business success as a subjective term that depends on the most important factors to the business owner for continuing business operations (Staniewski & Awruk, 2021). Ohiomah et al. (2020) defined business success as a continuous positive financial achievement. Conversely and from an objective standpoint, business success depends on the ability of the business owner to continue operations as a result of effective financial performance (Liguori et al., 2020). Cantillon (1931), in the entrepreneurship theory, explained that a business owner's traits, knowledge, and skills affect overall business success and operational sustainability. Small business success requires effective organizational leadership by implementing a clear operational mission, goals, and strategies (Keiper & Barnes, 2021; Takwi et al., 2020). However, leadership alone does not account for business success and sustainability. From an operational perspective, other factors which may affect entrepreneurial success include employee staffing, financial flows, and

business partnerships (Liguori et al., 2020). Business owners should demonstrate the ability to effectively source and allocate financial and workforce resources (Jaboro Satore, 2020). Business owners cannot expect to succeed in highly competitive markets if they lack the vision of what they want and the understanding of how to get there.

E-commerce entrepreneurs may strengthen competitive advantage and experience higher likelihood of entrepreneurial success through effective implementation of cost leadership and differentiation strategies. Based on Porter's five forces model, entrepreneurs may increase competitive advantage by careful acquisition and analysis of target products, consumer demands, needs, preferences, and competitors (Sihite & Simanjuntak, 2015). Many successful business owners use cost leadership and differentiation to create and sustain competitive advantage (Narayanan, 2019). Entrepreneurs should also understand the value of fostering and maintaining positive relationships with internal and external stakeholders (Mbah Takwi, 2020). Business owners directly influence employee turnover, job satisfaction, and commitment, all of which are correlated with employee and business performance (Lee & Liu, 2021). E-commerce entrepreneurs should understand the value of implementing effective business operational strategies and maintaining a satisfied workforce if employing others.

Just as there are many real-life practical examples and peer-reviewed research studies that address factors that may lead to potential business failure, many studies address the strategies that may increase the potential for attaining business success. Among the examples available is that of Turner and Endres (2017) who identified networking, developing effective business plans, and marketing differentiation as

effective strategies used by business owners to achieve and maintain sustainability beyond the first 5 years of operations. Another example is that of Mazzei et al., (2016) who explored how high-performance work practices enable and promote employee innovation in small businesses. According to the Mazzei et al., organizations should encourage innovation through an atmosphere that allows employees to fail to pursue purposeful innovation. Additionally, Mazzei et al. mentioned that implementing public recognition programs for high-performing employees to incentivize continuous motivation may reduce the likelihood of stagnant performance and prevent high employee turnover. The last example used is that of Polman (2016) who studied the effects of business owner's employee engagement to create sustainable businesses. Among the recommendations by Polman are the alignment of personal and corporate values, defining company long-term purpose, development of sustainability knowledge and competence, enabling employees to become sustainability champions and cocreators, and encouraging healthy employee competition. The examples provided highlight the multitude of factors that e-commerce entrepreneurs should consider strengthening operational sustainability and potentially creating a competitive advantage.

E-Commerce Sustainability Strategies

Given the unique nature of e-commerce business operations, e-commerce entrepreneurs should carefully consider operational strategies tailored to the e-commerce business model in question. E-commerce entrepreneurs operate in a business environment that requires consideration of circumstances that are inherently different from traditional brick-and-mortar business owners without an e-commerce business component

(Pettersson et al., 2018). The development of effective business strategies requires detailed planning to identify the activities necessary to support a business owner's desired outcome (Kornberger, 2017). Among the strategies identified as potential key components of e-commerce operational sustainability are planning, goal monitoring, marketing, use of social media, pricing, and product return policies.

Strategic Planning in E-Commerce Firms

Just as with traditional business models, effective strategic planning is an essential component of e-commerce entrepreneurial success. Strategic planning refers to the process of identifying the specific actions necessary to meet the firm's objectives and enable competitive advantage (Kornberger, 2017). Whereas a traditional brick and mortar business owner plans for activities during specific business hours, an e-commerce entrepreneur must plan for activities and processes that may occur around the clock (Pettersson et al., 2018). E-commerce entrepreneurs should carefully develop strategic plans that include marketing, web-page development and maintenance, pricing, and product return policies (Chakraborty, 2019; Ismail, 2017; Saarijärvi et al., 2017). E-commerce entrepreneurs should identify and describe all steps required for each essential business function as part of the development of effective business strategic planning (Kornberger, 2017). Effective planning extends beyond the identification of activities required to achieve an established goal.

Monitoring Goals for Operational Sustainability in E-Commerce Firms

E-commerce entrepreneurs use goal monitoring to gauge desired operational performance. The term goal refers to a statement that describes an achieved outcome

within a specified timeframe. Organizational leaders develop specific and measurable business goals to identify and enact operational activities aligned with the desired outcome (Tafvelin & Stenling, 2020). E-commerce business owners may adopt aspects of the management by objective style in which statements of each goal detail how each goal is evaluated, the steps required to attain the goal, and an expected timeframe to complete the desired outcome (Small Business Administration, 2019a). Among the tools available to e-commerce entrepreneurs to monitor business goals pertinent to marketing, online sales, and customer engagement are Google Analytics and Facebook insights. According to Goyal and Garg (2019), there is a clear correlation between effective implementation of marketing strategies on social media platforms and conversion of potential consumers into paying customers through the targeted main business website. The use of tools like Google Analytics and Facebook insights enables e-commerce business owners to monitor marketing campaign reach and the associated return on investment of each campaign (Goyal & Garg, 2019). E-commerce entrepreneurs should carefully consider using widely available digital tools to monitor business performance metrics and the progress made towards achieving established goals.

Marketing in E-Commerce Business-to-Consumer Firms

E-commerce entrepreneurs heavily rely on the use of social media campaigns to target potential consumers. The term *Business-to-consumer* (B2C) is used to describe a business model where business owners sell their products directly to consumers either by in-person or e-commerce transactions. Whereas storefront business models benefit from the potential traffic flow of individuals walking or driving around the business location,

e-commerce business models depend solely on the ability of the business owner to effectively market their product to create a strong web presence (Swani et al., 2017). Social media marketing is one of the tools used by e-commerce business owners to establish, develop, and sustain web traffic and consumer loyalty (Keikha & Sargolzaei, 2017; Swani et al., 2017). Additionally, the use of social media marketing within e-commerce businesses enables business owners to conduct data surveillance and analysis of consumer behaviors and feedback (Keikha & Sargolzaei, 2017). Swani et al. (2017) posited that business owners may increase brand awareness and revenue by proactively engaging and interacting with consumers through social media. Among the methods available to engage and interact with potential and existing consumers via social media platforms includes replying to customer feedback and creating a dialogue (Swani et al., 2017). Failure to engage in social media interactions with consumers to address negative feedback or provide new content as means to maintain consumer interest may lead to loss of consumer loyalty and profitability (Tussyadiah et al., 2018). Effective marketing within B2C business models is a key component towards achieving operational sustainability.

Marketing in E-Commerce Business-to-Business Firms

Just as with B2C marketing, e-commerce entrepreneurs heavily rely on the use of social media campaigns to target potential business-to-business (B2B) consumers. Business-to-Business refers to a business model where business owners sell their products to other businesses either by in-person or e-commerce transactions. Unlike the B2C model, where business owners use marketing to appeal to the consumer's emotions,

the B2B business owner uses marketing to appeal to other organizational leaders through logic and reason (Kim & Moon, 2021). The use of social media for marketing is essential to success for both B2B and B2C business owners (Sisson, 2017). Additionally, B2B business owners should ensure that marketing campaigns are consistently revised with up-to-date information as new or revised products and services become available (Rezaei et al., 2018). E-commerce entrepreneurs engaged in either B2B or B2C operations should operationalize effective marketing strategies tailored to meet the anticipated needs of the intended target audience.

Many of the same principles used to develop and apply traditional B2C and B2B marketing strategies apply to the successful implementation of e-commerce marketing campaigns. An example of cross applicability of principles between conventional and e-commerce-based marketing includes a study by Popvici and Muhcina (2018) where the authors analyzed how traditional marketing principles and philosophies apply to net-enabled B2B companies and translate into real-world e-commerce applications. Among the online and offline e-commerce tools mentioned by Popvici and Muhcina include the corporate website, social networking sites, corporate blogs, e-mail marketing, e-conferences, social engine optimization (SEO), and online advertising (pay per click). Whereas traditional marketing relies heavily on casting out a wide net of marketing campaigns, e-commerce B2B marketing is mostly tailored to the specific target audience with careful consideration to the informational needs of the B2B consumer and a specific intent to build trust (Popvici & Muhcina, 2018). Effective B2B and B2C business marketing require the continuous and expeditious update of information (Akbari &

Hakimpour, 2018; Rezaei et al., 2018). Additionally, both B2B and B2C business owners cultivate trust with consumers by understanding the emotional and cognitive concepts of potential and existing clients (Harrigan et al., 2017). Small business owners should understand how their marketing strategies affect operational sustainability and profitability.

Use of Social Media in E-Commerce-Based Businesses

The use of social media campaigns is an essential component of effective marketing in e-commerce businesses. Social media refers to web-based platforms used by individuals to interact with other individuals. Multiple social media sites to include (a) Twitter, (b) Facebook, (c) YouTube, (d) LinkedIn, (e) Pinterest, and (f) Reddit enable e-commerce business owners to directly engage with existing and potential consumers (Surma, 2016). The use of social media has become a standard across e-commerce businesses due to the ability to use social network data to adjust marketing campaigns and make changes to products or services (Braojos et al., 2017). Additionally, many e-commerce business owners also use social media to convert passive consumers into active participants of the firm's business model (Wang & Kim, 2017). Furthermore, some small e-commerce business owners lack sufficient knowledge of effective marketing strategies (Bhatnagar & Papatla, 2016; Rambe, 2017). However, small e-commerce business owners possess an advantage in their ability to conduct effective social media marketing campaigns for fractions of the cost of large e-commerce-based companies (Milan et al., 2015). The use of social media remains a key component of effective e-commerce marketing.

The use of social media campaigns enables e-commerce entrepreneurs to increase consumer reach and strengthen brand awareness. Globalization and stronger competition among industry leaders have made marketing an ever more essential aspect of business survivability through differentiation (Katsikeas, 2018). Use of effective social marketing campaigns may lead to increased customer reach, strengthen consumer loyalty, and competitive advantage (Yamamoto, 2021). Since 2008, social media platforms have enabled consumers and business owners with the ability to review and comment on products and services available to public marketplaces (Allan & Ali, 2017). Additionally, social media and other forms of direct customer relationship management campaigns positively influence profitability through a multiplier effect (Ascarza et al., 2017). Furthermore, social media serves as a means to enable relatively inexpensive advertising as compared to traditional business marketing methods (Allan & Ali, 2017). Business owners may enhance competitive advantage and consumer loyalty by engaging in meaningful social media interactions with existing and potential consumers (Wang & Kim, 2017). E-commerce business owners should capitalize on the use of social media to expand and retain their consumer base.

The use of social media campaigns generates and enhances business-to-consumer relationships. E-commerce business owners may benefit from incorporating social media into their business plan due to its value in collecting valuable consumer information and increasing the visibility of product and service experiences (Ismail, 2017). Whereas traditional marketing tools to include print, billboards, and radio ads fail to target specific audiences, social media marketing enables direct communication between a target

audience consumer and the business (Ismail, 2017). The use of social media marketing enables e-commerce business owners to cultivate emotional attachments between their consumers and the company's products, services, and brands (Venkatesan, 2017).

However, the development of emotional attachment between a consumer and an e-commerce business also depends on the consumer's trust towards the business's ability to securely handle consumer financial data during purchases (Harrigan et al., 2017; Islam & Rahman, 2016). Small business owners should leverage the beneficial effects of social media campaigns to gain consumer loyalty and strengthen consumer's perception of value towards the business.

Pricing for E-Commerce Firms

E-commerce entrepreneurs can implement cost leadership strategies to strengthen competitive advantage and reduce threat of competition. According to Porter's (1998) competitive strategy theory, many business owners employ product and service pricing strategies to broaden the businesses' potential client pool and attract price-sensitive customers. Small changes to product or service pricing can produce significant changes in consumer purchase behavior (Bauer & Jannach, 2018). Business owners who implement Porter's cost leadership strategies may experience increased profitability following price reductions which lead to increased product or service output (Chmielowiec-Lewczuk, 2019; Porter, 1998). Businesses may experience increased product demand and overall profitability through the reduction of price per individual unit sold as compared to competitors within the same industry (Chakraborty, 2019; Porter, 1998). However, business owners should not establish product or service pricing

strategies solely based on the prices established by direct competitors (Bauer & Jannach, 2018). Business owners should consider other factors to include production costs, consumer price sensitivity, and brand awareness as part of effective pricing strategies (Chakraborty, 2019). E-commerce entrepreneurs should understand how changes in product or service cost may affect profitability due to consumer price sensitivity.

The effective management of production costs may facilitate greater revenue per sale or enable the establishment of reduced product or service prices to appeal to existing and potential consumer price sensitive individuals. *Price sensitivity* refers to the disposition of a consumer to purchase a product or service based on perceived quality of the product or service and existing market competitor pricing (Lim, 2017). E-commerce entrepreneurs may achieve greater levels of profitability by effectively managing production costs (Porter, 1998). *Production costs* refer to the total expenses incurred to create a product or service. With the surge of increasingly stronger market competition, failure to implement effective pricing strategies may lead to the reduction of an e-commerce entrepreneur's ability to achieve and maintain operational sustainability beyond the first 5 years of operations (Chakraborty, 2019). Small business owners should carefully establish product and service prices that balance the needs of price sensitive consumers with that of business profitability.

Product Return Policies for E-Commerce Firms

The return of products is an unfortunate reality of e-commerce business operations within the retail industry. Many e-commerce companies have become increasingly more relaxed on their product return policies to reduce the negative

perception of customers towards the businesses' products and brand (Saarijärvi et al., 2017). Additionally, many e-commerce business owners offer consumers free returns as part of the company's return policy (Lu & Wang, 2021). Lesser-known retailers benefit from return policies that enable potential consumers to purchase with greater confidence (Jeng, 2017). However, relaxed return policies, to include free returns may lead to reduced profitability and operational sustainability (Lu & Wang, 2021; Saarijärvi et al., 2017). E-commerce business owners should exercise caution in implementing return policies that are either too strict or lead to reduced client conversion or so lax that the business experiences significantly reduced profitability. Online retailers may opt to establish a product keep reward strategy linked to future purchases as a way to decrease the likelihood of the consumer returning a product (Gelbrich et al., 2017). E-commerce entrepreneurs should strongly consider establishing return strategies that incentivize consumers to keep a product, all while still providing the flexibility for the consumer to return the product if wanted.

Transition

In Section 1, I explained the background of the problem, and developed the problem and purpose statements, nature of the study, research question, interview questions, conceptual framework, operational definitions, assumptions, limitations and delimitations, significance of the study, and the literature review. The purpose of explaining and developing Section 1 was to showcase there was a problem which merited further research. I expanded on existing research to explore and present strategies used by

e-commerce entrepreneurs to achieve and maintain operational sustainability beyond the first 5 years of operation.

Through Section 2, I detailed the role of the researcher, participants research method, research design, population and sampling, ethical research, data collection instruments, data collection technique, data organization techniques, data analysis, reliability, and validity of the findings. I also explained the use of ethical research practices used during the data collection process of the research study to ensure participant's right to confidentiality and protection. In Section 3, I will present data findings from the data collection and analysis processes. Additionally, I will bridge the findings to their potential use in real-world professional practice, identify implications for social change, and provide recommendations for practical use of findings, and future research opportunities.

Section 2: The Project

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the strategies used by e-commerce entrepreneurs to achieve and maintain sustainability beyond the first 5 years of operations. The targeted population included e-commerce entrepreneurs from five companies across San Angelo, Texas, who implemented successful strategies to achieve and maintain sustainability for more than 5 years of beginning operations. The implications for positive social change may include improved sustainability of businesses for existing and aspiring entrepreneurs. Additionally, increased e-commerce sustainability may benefit a wide range of stakeholders including individual business owners, potential employees, customers, and other local community members who may benefit from the added cash circulation resulting from entrepreneurs' improved business operations.

Role of the Researcher

Researchers are the primary instrument of data collection and analysis in qualitative research (Karagiozis, 2018). In this qualitative study, I screened and recruited potential participants through email and followed up by phone or video conference to those who demonstrated interest and willingness to participate. Screening potential participants involved a series of web searches for e-commerce businesses that have operated for over 5 years and demonstrated sustained revenue as reflected by company financial yearly statements. Knowledge and experience within the field of study enable participants to better comprehend participant perceptions (Sacks, 2018). My existing

experience as an e-commerce clothing brand co-owner enabled me to better understand perceptions and potential reactions experienced by the participants during the interview process.

Researchers adhere to the ethical principles of *The Belmont Report*, which include respect for others, beneficence, and justice (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects and Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). I adhered to all ethical principles of *The Belmont Report* to ensure participants would be comfortable with openly sharing any and all information that may provide additional clarity to the study. I also completed all required training and certification from the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative as part of the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) requirements prior to beginning data collection. *The Belmont Report* recommended that all researchers seeking IRB approval should undergo and complete ethical education and certification prior to attaining permission to commence data collection (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects and Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979).

Researchers should understand the negative effects of bias and use any available tools to mitigate the potential occurrence of bias within the study. *Bias* refers to any preconceived notion that influences the outcome of the study data, results, and conclusions (Galdas, 2017). I used bracketing and member checking to reduce research bias. *Bracketing* refers to the process of setting aside preconceptions, life experiences, and belief systems to gain an objective understanding a social reality in question (Gregory, 2019). The use of bracketing may represent a challenge to some researchers if

the researcher is emotionally attached to the study topic and the researcher holds strong beliefs toward the topic (Gregory, 2019). The use of bracketing may enable enhanced study trustworthiness due to the necessity of the researcher to sustain self-awareness throughout the study process (Sorsa et al., 2015).

Member checking refers to the process of attaining participant data validation to affirm the credibility of results (Birt et al., 2016). I submitted my interpretations of the interview responses to participants to ensure accuracy of information and reduce the likelihood of bias in the study. I also used an interview protocol (see Appendix) to reduce bias by asking each participant the same questions in the same order, thereby enhancing reliability and maintaining participants' focus (see Yin, 2018). Additionally, allowing participants to view questions prior to the interview enhanced their ability to provide more thoughtful answers. Finally, use of the protocol helped me manage my time and stay focused on the research topic during the interview process.

Participants

I recruited participants by conducting an online search for e-commerce businesses, including social media and e-commerce exclusive retail platforms, online search tools such as Google, and social media sites including Facebook, YouTube, and LinkedIn. The eligibility criteria for individuals in the targeted population included (a) implemented successful strategies to achieve and maintain sustainability of an e-commerce business for more than 5 years of beginning operations, (b) live and operate their business within San Angelo, Texas, and (c) be at least 18 years of age. Researchers use eligibility criteria to facilitate the selection of participants who may provide useful

and relevant information (Latiffi et al., 2016). Once my proposal was approved by the Walden University IRB, I began to contact participants through an initial email and followed up with a phone or video conference call to those willing to participate.

I scheduled an interview date with each participant through a phone call at a time of their choosing to increase the likelihood of participant retention and cooperation. Additionally, I sent Google Calendar invites to study participants with the date and time of the interview and followed up with a reminder a week prior to ensure availability and alternate dates as necessary. Each participant received a copy of their signed consent form 7 days prior to the interview to ensure they fully understood what to expect and to reiterate how their data would be used and protected. Researchers may establish a working relationship with participants by providing as much detail of the study and providing an explanation of the potential risks and benefits of participating in the study (Blakeslee & Fleischer, 2019). I provided each participant with an explanation of the purpose of the study through an initial email and offered the opportunity to speak over the phone to address any concerns regarding how participant data would be used and protected.

Research Method and Design

The selection of an appropriate research method and design is paramount to a successful and relevant study (Ghezzi, 2020). I selected a qualitative method to explore strategies e-commerce entrepreneurs use to achieve and maintain sustainability beyond the first 5 years of operations. This qualitative multiple case study consisted of semistructured interviews including open-ended questions to attain the greatest level of

participant in-depth feedback and qualitative data. Additionally, I collected and examined company financial documents as a means of substantiating participant interview responses.

Research Method

Given the study's purpose statement and research question, I determined a qualitative approach would be the most appropriate method. Researchers use a qualitative approach to explore the context of a modern phenomenon from the perspective of study participants using open-ended questions (Yin, 2018). The collection and analysis of participants' responses may lead to a series of themes used to develop the study results (Manhas & Oberle, 2015). In the current study, analysis of interview data and company financial performance documents provided by participants enabled the exploration of strategies used by e-commerce entrepreneurs to achieve and maintain sustainability beyond the first 5 years of operation.

The selection and use of a qualitative method is preferable to a quantitative method because researchers may use open-ended questions to understand a phenomenon in richer detail and depth as compared to the strict analysis of variable data when using a quantitative method (Ghezzi, 2020). In a quantitative study, researchers compare variables and test hypotheses. Researchers use the mixed method to strengthen the meaning of an explored phenomenon through the inclusion of qualitative and quantitative data to develop and support findings (McKim, 2017). The use of a qualitative method was preferable to the quantitative or mixed method because I did not analyze numerical data or test theories using statistical methods.

Research Design

There are numerous qualitative designs available to researchers, including case study, phenomenological, and ethnographic (Gentles et al., 2015). Selection of the research method depends on the study's purpose and is narrowed further through the selection of the research design (Yin, 2018). For this study, I selected a multiple case study design to conduct an in-depth inquiry of a real-world complex phenomenon. The selection of a multiple case study design was preferred over a single case study given the limitations of single case studies to understand a complex phenomenon and the added ability to conduct data triangulation through multiple case studies.

Researchers use the phenomenological design to understand the business problem solely from the perspective of the participants' meanings of experiencing phenomena (Saunders et al., 2017). The phenomenological design was not suitable for my study because the focus was the strategies used by participants, not the participants' recollection of experiences' meanings. Researchers use an ethnographic design over an extended period of time to understand one or more groups' cultures (Abdulrehman, 2015; Saunders et al., 2017). The ethnographic design was not appropriate for my study because I was not concerned with assigning meaning to participants' behaviors or understanding one or more groups' cultures.

To ensure data saturation, I intended to interview between five and 16 participants. Researchers attain data saturation when additional participants do not contribute new information and existing information is repeated (Saunders et al., 2017). Failure to attain data saturation may result in reduced quality, validity, and reliability of

the study (Nelson, 2017). I ensured data saturation in the study by conducting interviews until participants did not provide any new information and additional data collected resulted in recurring themes.

Population and Sampling

Sampling refers to the selection of a representative portion of a target population to determine characteristics of the entire population (Emerson, 2015). Purposive sampling was selected as the sampling method for the current multiple case study. Researchers use purposive sampling to identify and select participants with greater knowledge of a studied phenomenon (Ames et al., 2019). The eligibility criteria for participants in the current study included (a) implemented successful strategies to achieve and maintain sustainability of an e-commerce business for more than 5 years of beginning operations, (b) live and operate their business within San Angelo, Texas, and (c) be at least 18 years of age. Purposive sampling is a common sampling strategy used in qualitative research and preferred by many researchers due to reduced cost and convenience (Gentles et al., 2015). Purposeful sampling was preferred because of the firsthand experience of the studied phenomenon by the selected participants for my study.

Researchers conducting a qualitative study should focus on attaining an appropriate sample size and not on the volume of data, as is the case when conducting quantitative research (Ghauri et al., 2020). Researchers should select a sample large enough to attain data saturation, which may range between three and 16 participants when conducting qualitative research (Hennink et al., 2017). To ensure data saturation, I interviewed five participants. Researchers attain data saturation when additional

participants do not contribute new information and existing information is repeated (Saunders et al., 2017). Additionally, researchers may identify a point of data saturation within the study when there are no additional themes or coding and the study is replicable (Fusch & Ness, 2015). I determined data saturation and the need to interview only five participants based on the emergence of no new information. Furthermore, I ensured data reliability by conducting member checking. Researchers should validate and clarify information collected through the interview process to ensure the information reflected is accurate and perceptions of the participants are effectively captured (Drabble et al., 2016). In alignment with research recommendations by Drabble et al. (2016), I emailed each participant a summary of their interview responses to ensure alignment with the intent of the participant.

The eligibility criteria for individuals within the targeted population included (a) implemented successful strategies to achieve and maintain sustainability of an e-commerce business for more than 5 years of beginning operations, (b) live and operate their business within San Angelo, Texas, and (c) be at least 18 years of age. As long as participants were e-commerce entrepreneurs, there were no requirements for a specific industrial background. Each interview took place by phone. Space and location are critical components of a successful interview process (Gagnon et al., 2015). The use of a phone call to conduct interviews enabled participants to select a location and time that was most convenient for them and reduced logistical burdens on participants. I used my work office to conduct the interviews because it eliminated distractions. I also asked participants to select a location that minimized interruptions and distractions for them;

these included a home or work office, a conference room, or a similar location that was not crowded or subject to traffic and distractions from other individuals.

Ethical Research

The first ethical consideration for a researcher conducting a study that includes human subjects is obtaining informed consent (Raj et al., 2018). Informed consent refers to the process of informing potential participants of the research parameters and obtaining the participant's written agreement to participate in the study (Kaye et al., 2015).

Researchers obtain informed consent through the use of a consent form that guarantees confidentiality to all participants (Raj et al., 2018). The consent form in the current study included (a) my contact information, (b) nature and purpose of the study, (c) my ethical responsibilities as primary researcher, (d) confidentiality guidelines, (e) participant expectations, and (f) participants' ability to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. I explained to the participants their ability to withdraw from the study before or during the interview process. There were no incentives offered to participants beyond receiving a copy of the published study.

Researchers must adhere to the principles of *The Belmont Report* when conducting a study; these include respect for persons, beneficence, and justice (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects and Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). The principle of respect for persons refers to treatment of individuals as autonomous and providing protection to those less autonomous (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects and Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). The current study did not pose any risk against the principle of respect for persons given

the recognized autonomy of participants and their ability to have suspended any and all communication throughout the process of data collection. The principle of beneficence refers to maximizing potential benefits associated with the research, while reducing potential harm (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects and Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979).

There were no known elements of the study that posed any type of threat toward participants. I mitigated any perceived threat by ensuring confidentiality throughout the process and redacting any information that may have detailed specific actions and activities taken by the participant to attain competitive advantage. I secured all participant data inside an external hard drive with encryption and password protection for up to 5 years after the date of study publication. After this period, I will destroy all participant data by performing a disk format of the external hard drive used to store the data. The Walden IRB approval number was 01-29-21-0730135.

Data Collection Instruments

Researchers are the primary data collection instruments when conducting qualitative research (Blakeslee & Fleischer, 2019). Additionally, researchers may use multiple data collection techniques to strengthen data reliability (Ghauri et al., 2020). As the primary data collection instrument, I collected data through semistructured interviews and used phone calls as the primary means of communication. I used the interview protocol (Appendix A) to guide the interview process, adhere to the research question, and enhance the richness of desired qualitative data. Additionally, use of the interview protocol facilitated time management through adherence to the same order and sequence

of questions for all participants and in turn, lead to keeping participants focused on the main research question. I recorded interviews through a digital recorder. I also conducted additional data collection by reviewing all company data collected through publicly available sources and provided directly by participants. Company data collected consisted of yearly financial statements. Researchers should possess thorough knowledge of the data collection instruments to ensure effective outcomes and reduce interruption of the data collection process (Blakeslee & Fleischer, 2019).

I conducted member checking with participants to ensure reliability and validity of study data and results. *Member checking* refers to the process of validating and clarifying information collected through the interview process with participants to ensure the information reflected is accurate and perceptions of the participants are effectively captured and reflected (Drabble et al., 2016). I conducted member checking with participants by emailing each participant a copy of a summary of my interpretation of all information collected through the interview process. Researchers should perform member checking before conducting data analysis to reduce the likelihood of reducing study results' reliability and validity (Drabble et al., 2016). I also validated interview response interpretations with each participant as part the member checking process. I conducted interviews until no new information emerged to ensure data saturation.

Data Collection Technique

Following IRB approval, I used semistructured interviews conducted by phone as the primary means of data collection technique. Researchers ask open-ended and follow up questions during semistructured interviews to gain an enhanced understanding of the

studied phenomenon (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Additionally, the use of semistructured interviews during the data collection process enables participants to effectively express their viewpoints and experiences pertinent to the research phenomenon (Sanders, 2018). Participants also received a copy of the interview response interpretation to ensure data reliability through the correction of any errors as needed. The process performed after data collection and analysis to ensure interpretations of interviewee responses are correct is referred to as member checking (Vance, 2015). I resent a copy of the interview's synthesized interview notes to the participant and asked if any changes were necessary to attain a final approval of the collected information by the participant.

Among the advantages of using semistructured interviews as a means to collect data is the immediate acquisition of the owner's perspective which is as easily attainable through observation alone. Additionally, the use of interviews facilitates the observation of social cues through body language (Bowden & Galindo-Gonzalez, 2015). Unlike the use of surveys, researchers may use follow up questions to gain greater and more in-depth insight into specific information (Magliano et al., 2018). However, the use of interviews may also limit the sample size due to the time investment required for setting up and conducting an interview with each participant. The use of other data collection methods to include text messaging and surveys may facilitate a researcher's ability to gather a greater sample size and with less time constraints (van Velthoven et al., 2018).

Another method for developing research study findings consists of conducting document reviews (Percy et al., 2015). One of the advantages of conducting document

reviews is the added value when used with other qualitative research methods as part of data triangulation. I conducted document reviews by requesting company yearly financial statements from each study participant. I conducted member checking of all interview interpretation summaries, collected data, and notes with each participant to identify potential errors and attain validation from each participant.

Data Organization Technique

Researchers prepare for the process of data analysis by effectively organizing and storing all collected data (Yin, 2018). Additionally, researchers may use a case study database to organize all data collected throughout each interview and other supporting documents (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Furthermore, researchers should ensure that all collected data are properly stored and protected by means that guarantee data security (Achinewhu-Nworgu et al., 2015). I recorded all interviews by using a handheld digital recorder. I also conducted an audio test prior to each interview using both recording devices to ensure optimal audio quality for subsequent transcription. Some of the advantages of using a handheld digital audio recorder include high accuracy of all collected data and increased participant engagement through the emergence of a natural conversation.

Researchers can resort to the use of various software programs to organize, catalog, track, and manage collected study data (Hashem et al., 2015). I organized collected study data in digital folders labeled by participant identification number beginning with P for participant and in the order they are interviewed; for example, I labeled the first interview participant as P01 and so forth in consecutive order. I kept

track of all study data through the use of a reflective journal to formally capture personal experiences, thoughts, and opinions of the research study process. I secured all participant data inside an external hard drive with encryption and password protection for up to 5 years after the date of study publication. I also organized and stored all study data in a secured and encrypted external hard drive. All raw data will be destroyed after 5 years from the time of study publication.

Data Analysis

Data analysis refers to the process by which a researcher thoroughly examines and interprets all collected data within a research study to produce the study results and answer the research question (Davidson et al., 2016). I used Yin's (2018) 5-step qualitative data analysis process as the main means of analyzing all study data. Part of Yin's 5-step qualitative data analysis process involves the use of a method referred to as triangulation used by researchers to establish research validity by capturing data from multiple sources of evidence. There are four types of triangulation for case study design, those being data, investigator, theory, and methodological triangulation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). I analyzed all collected data by conducting methodological triangulation. Additionally, I used methodological triangulation to verify and increase research study credibility. The use of methodological triangulation allows researchers to link data from different sources to interpret a research phenomenon under exploration (Fusch & Ness, 2015). I organized and analyzed all data by searching for patterns and interpreting patterns and their meanings; I did so through thematic analysis to identify themes. I used the data from interviews and company financial performance documents to triangulate

data, correlate and connect individual data source themes, and develop a series of study result themes with relevance specific to the research question.

I coded participants with a P for the participant and the numerical sequence based on the order of each interviewee. For example, I labeled the first interview participant as P01 and so forth consecutively. Researchers refer to the coding executed during the data disassembly phase as level 1 codes (Yin, 2018). I secured all coded data inside an external hard drive with encryption and password protection for up to 5 years after the date of study publication.

Yin's 5-Step Qualitative Data Analysis Process

Some researchers use Yin's 5-step qualitative data analysis process as a means of strengthening research data validity (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Yin, 2018). Yin's 5-step data analysis process consists of data compilation, disassembly, reassembly, interpretation, and conclusion (Yin, 2018). I used the NVivo 12 data analysis software as the means to conduct Yin's 5-step data analysis process. To do so, I transcribed all study participant interviews and uploaded the data into the NVivo 12 software for follow on codification, triangulation, thematic based organization, analysis, and conclusion.

Data Compilation

I began the data compilation process by recording and transcribing each participant's interview. Additionally, I confirmed the accuracy of all captured data transcribed from the interview responses with each participant and conducted member checking to ensure that my interpretation of the responses matched the intent of each study participant. Subsequently, I proceeded to organize, triangulate, and codify all data

through the NVivo 12 data analysis software based on the research study's main question and aligned the categorization of study data with Porter's five forces model. Researchers may use the NVivo software to interpret data, simplify keyword searches, and organize data (Woods et al., 2016).

Researchers conduct data analysis through a sequence of data compilation, disassembly, reassembly, interpretation, and conclusion (Yin, 2018). *Data compilation* refers to the process of transferring raw data into an organized database to gather and organize all study data (Rowlands et al., 2015). There are six major sources of evidence used for data compilation, as described in Yin's (2018) 5-step qualitative data analysis process, those being documentation, archival, records, interviews, direct observations, participant observation, and physical artifacts. The compilation of data used for this doctoral study consisted of participant's interview responses and company financial performance documents as made available by study participants.

Data Disassembly

Following data compilation, researchers disassemble data to reassemble all collected information into small groups used for developing study themes (Yin, 2018). Researchers should ensure the disassembly of data into logical and manageable groups (Tuapawa, 2017). Among the tools used by researchers to disassemble data is data coding, researchers may elect to conduct data coding to develop a logical, methodological data set (Yin, 2018). I used the NVivo 12 software to organize data into logical and manageable groups. The use of NVivo for the data disassembly phase enables researchers

to ease the burden of data manipulation by reducing the time required to reassign codes to either different categories or move them to higher conceptual levels (Yin, 2018).

Researchers codify and organize data into assigned categories to move collected data into higher conceptual levels (Yin, 2018). Some researchers use the NVivo software to facilitate effective data management and reduce the time required for identifying patterns within qualitative data (Cridland et al., 2015). Additionally, some researchers recommend the use of NVivo software to increase the likelihood of proper identification of redundancies within qualitative data and reduce errors in omission of potentially essential information to the quality of the conducted research (Woods et al., 2016). I used the NVivo software auto-coding feature to facilitate the process of identifying and examining patterns in participant responses and subsequently developed the doctoral study themes.

Data Reassembly

Following data disassembly, researchers reassemble data to organize, cluster, and categorize smaller data segments into larger groups used to develop study result themes (Kornbluh, 2015). Some researchers reassemble data into hierarchical groups to demonstrate possible associations between themes (Yin, 2018). The use of the NVivo data analysis software will enable verification of the identification of themes when used as part of a methodological triangulation process (Zamawe, 2015). I uploaded all collected data into the NVivo software and organized all data into larger segments, aiding in the identification of study themes. To do so, I grouped the participant's responses to

each question. Once all data was grouped, I attempted to identify and make sense of all grouped themes to interpret data and develop the study results narrative.

Data Interpretation

Yin's qualitative data analysis process describes three different methods for data interpretation, those being description, description plus a call for action, and explanation (Yin, 2018). For data interpretation I used a descriptive method and linked emerging themes using the literature pertaining to Porter's five forces model conceptual framework. Following the process of data disassembly, researchers interpret the data while avoiding the insertion of personal biases and remaining objective (Tuapawa, 2017). A researcher's interpretation of their study's data may differ from that of the reader (Yin, 2018). Researchers may elect to conduct member checking to strengthen the accuracy of the data attained from interviews with study participants (Birt et al., 2016). I explored all reassembled and grouped data to develop a thorough understanding of all study key emerging themes and answer the study's main question of the strategies used e-commerce entrepreneurs to achieve and maintain sustainability beyond the first 5 years of operation.

Conclusion

For the conclusion, I developed the study results narrative using all reassembled data in an objective manner that avoided subjective interpretation of collected information. Following the process of data interpretation, researchers present one or more conclusions regarding the study's empirical findings in a way that addresses the significance of the study and yields practical application to the overarching and specific business problem (Yin, 2018). Utilizing Yin's (2018) 5-step analysis approach facilitated

my ability to answer the research question and explain the applicability of study results to the development of actionable strategies that may facilitate e-commerce business survivability beyond the first 5 years of operations.

Reliability and Validity

Researchers should ensure reliability and validity throughout all phases of the research study. Reliability and validity within research refer to the precision and accuracy attained through the data collection, analysis, and subsequent study results (Olsen et al., 2016). Researchers use interview protocols to ensure consistent participant engagement and resulting in greater research reliability and validity (Yin, 2018). Additionally, researchers support the reliability and validity of study results through concepts that include confirmability, credibility, dependability, and transferability (Wamba et al., 2015).

Reliability

Researchers achieve reliability within the research study by producing consistent and dependable findings (Yin, 2018). Researchers also achieve dependability by providing transparency during the data collection and analysis, leading to the effective tracing of results by any reader and through the use of triangulation (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Wamba et al., 2015). To ensure I eliminated personal bias, I followed the same interview protocol (Appendix A) with each study participant to ensure results were both dependable and consistent. Additionally, I conducted member checking of all interview interpretation summaries, collected data, and notes with each participant to identify potential errors and attain validation from each participant. I expected to enhance the study's dependability

through the member checking process and validation from each participant. *Member checking* refers to the process of returning collected information to study participants to ensure accuracy, validity, and credibility of data (Fusch et al., 2016).

Validity

Researchers must ensure study validity to establish trust (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Researchers achieve validity when their research instrument accurately reflects the intended study phenomenon (Long, 2015). Researchers may also strengthen study validity using member checking and attaining data saturation (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Member checking also strengthens the study's transferability, accuracy, validity, confirmability, and credibility (Fusch et al., 2016). I conducted member checking with participants after each interview to ensure data collected is accurate and to correct any errors as needed.

Credibility

Credibility within a qualitative study refers to the truth value or internal validity of study data and results (Hammarberg et al., 2016). Researchers use data saturation and triangulation to strengthen credibility (Surucu & Maslakci, 2020). Data saturation occurs when no additional new themes emerge with the collection of new data and information is repeated (Saunders et al., 2017). I continued data collection through additional semistructured interviews until data saturation occurred and no new themes emerged from additional data collection efforts. Researchers should make use of all available strategies to improve the credibility of a study (Surucu & Maslakci, 2020). Among the strategies I employed to strengthen my qualitative research study's credibility included

member checking, methodological triangulation, transcript reviews, audit trails, and participant's direct quotes within the study results and theme review. Researchers should exercise caution against incongruent data or data interpretations, which may cast doubt of the study's credibility (Saunders et al., 2017).

Transferability

The transferability of this study's findings to explore the strategies used by e-commerce entrepreneurs to achieve and maintain sustainability beyond the first five years of operation may apply to entrepreneurs across a wide range of e-commerce industries, not just those represented during the interview process. I maintained detailed notes, developed and stored accurate interview transcripts, and used the NVivo 12 software to support data analysis. While transferability requires researchers to provide detailed explanations of the research process and context (Soares et al., 2015), the transferability of the study results is also dependent on the perception of the reader and the interpreted meaning of the study results as they pertain to the reader's needs.

Confirmability

Researchers strengthen the validity of their qualitative study by ensuring confirmability, which refers to how research data reflect participant responses and not the biased perspective of the researcher (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). I ensured the confirmability of study data by maintaining an audit trail for all data collection and analysis. Audit trails demonstrate the accuracy of confirmability and enable transparency within the study (Wamba, et al., 2015). I used quotes from each participant during the report of the research results to provide substance to each emerging theme and strengthen

the study's confirmability. In turn, the use of participant's direct quotes enables greater study credibility as well.

Transition and Summary

In Section 2, I explained the role of the researcher, participants research method, research design, population and sampling, ethical research, data collection instruments, data collection technique, data organization techniques, data analysis, reliability, and validity of the study. Through Section 3, I will present the findings from all data collected and analyzed. Following presentation of findings, I will apply the findings to potential professional practice, present implications for social change, and make recommendations for action and future research.

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the strategies used by e-commerce entrepreneurs to achieve and maintain sustainability beyond the first 5 years of operations. I performed data collection through semistructured interviews with participants to understand their experiences and answer the research question.

Participants were business owners across the health care, food, arts, and real estate industries. I used Yin's (2018) five-step data analysis process to identify themes from the interviews resulting in five recurring themes: best practices for consistency, relationship building with customers, networking, risk tolerance, and education. I found that three of the five themes used by study participants to enhance business survivability aligned with Porter's (1998) competitive strategy theory. I also identified an alignment of strategies used by participants with Edmonds and von Bertalanffy's (1977) systems theory.

Presentation of the Findings

The research question for this study was the following: What strategies do e-commerce entrepreneurs use to achieve and maintain sustainability beyond the first 5 years of operation? I conducted semistructured interviews with five small business owners and asked each participant six open-ended questions. Each interview was performed by phone and digitally recorded with the permission of each participant. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes. Yin's (2018) five-step qualitative data analysis process consists of (a) compilation, (b) disassembly, (c) reassembly, (d) interpretation, and (e) conclusion. I used the NVivo 12 qualitative data analysis software to organize, code, categorize, and analyze data using Yin's process. I achieved data

saturation when additional interviews failed to yield new themes. Analysis of the data revealed five main themes: (a) best practices for consistency, (b) relationship building with customers, (c) local networking, (d) risk tolerance, and (e) education.

Theme 1: Best Practices for Consistency

All participants referenced best practices for consistency during the interview process in varying contexts related to the operations of the business, including customer care, marketing, rendition of services performed, and goods sold. Previous research showed that operational consistency within a business facilitates greater levels of consumer trust (Su et al., 2020). By building this trust, business owners create organizational identity through the application of strategic and operational consistency in all business processes (Sato, 2017). Participants in my study affirmed this finding that consistency is key to business success. For example, P01 attributed consistency in both the technical application of services performed and customer experience provided to customers as the most important factor leading toward the survivability of their business. Likewise, P02 noted that consistency in the customer service experience provided by the business helped to create a sense of trust in many of his customers resulting in repeat business. P02 emphasized “you need consistency in how you provide customer care, when you get them in the door, you have to take care of them, and you have to be consistent in the way you take care of them.” P03 and P04 also reinforced consistency in the application of customer service experience as a key element toward the operational sustainability of their business. The comments made by all participants during the interview process emphasized the importance of consistency in varying aspects of

business activities and how consistency enables strengthening of operational sustainability. P04 commented on how consistency in digital marketing strengthened consumer engagement and sales:

For me, it's mostly trying to maintain a certain amount of consistency on posting, to using social media regularly, I've had an active Facebook and Instagram account for my pottery studio and shop since I started. I've received more interaction with the public through consistent postings than any other method attempted.

Table 1 presents the subthemes identified under the theme of consistency and includes the participant code, percentage of participants who contributed responses pertinent to the subtheme, and frequency of the subtheme referenced by participants.

Table 1

Best Practices for Consistency

Subtheme	Participant code	Frequency	Percentage (%; n=44)
Consistency in customer service	P1, P2, P3, P4	26	59.1%
Consistency of product or service rendered	P1, P2, P3, P4, P5	12	27.3%
Consistency in marketing	P3, P4	6	13.6%

The responses provided by participants related to the use of consistency as a strategy to generate operational sustainability did not align with the conceptual framework in this study. Although Porter's (1998) competitive strategy theory provided a means to understand the concept of consistency through the lens of the focus strategy,

Edmonds and von Bertalanffy's (1977) systems theory directly addressed the need for consistency within a business model. In Porter's competitive strategy theory, the component of focus relates to consistency of a business owner's product or service offering only. Based on system theory, changes to one component of a system influence the synergy of other components of the system and how the system functions overall (Flieger, 2017). The way current study participants used consistency as a strategic and operational business strategy aligned with Edmonds and von Bertalanffy's (1977) systems theory.

Theme 2: Relationship Building With Customers

Participants P01, P02, P03, and P04 attributed excellence in customer service as an essential factor toward business survivability and success. Previous research showed that focus on positive customer service experiences and involvement in the local community enables business survivability (Turner & Endres, 2017). Customer satisfaction can lead to increased profitability and reduced consumer price sensitivity (Pooser & Browne, 2018). As Khudhair et al. (2019) found, price-sensitive consumers respond more favorably to increased prices if the perceived quality of the product or service is high. Additionally, positive customer service experiences enable consumers' perceived trust of a business (Setiawan et al., 2019). Trust is an essential component of consumer retention and strengthens business branding (Zaefarian et al., 2017). Because customer satisfaction is so important to sustainability, business owners should consider real-time feedback provided by customers and tailor the service provided accordingly (Bi et al., 2019; Galvão et al., 2018).

P01 extensively commented on the importance of excellence in customer service and the need to develop meaningful and trusting relationships with their clients. P01 stated “in other industries, such as mine, some people feel like they’re an assembly line, they just come in, and they get some work done, and then they’re out. That’s not the way I chose to run my business.” Instead of the assembly line approach, P01 emphasized the importance of establishing relationships with clients: “establishing that personal relationship with them, I think it’s helped me get return customers and sustain my business, I still have some of my original customers and I have been doing this for over 15 years.” Likewise, P02 referenced the multiple ways they interacted with customers inside and outside his restaurant through involvement in community service and donations to the local military base, university, and school district. The actions mentioned by P02 reflected a strong emphasis on building positive customer service experiences. P03 stated that they include personal handwritten thank-you notes inside the pottery and artwork they sell to customers in person and online. Each note includes the name of all team members who contributed to the art piece sold. P03 expressed a strong passion for connecting with clients beyond a business transactional level, and emphasized their focus on customers:

If we sell one piece to one person, that’s great, but what we want is them to come back and buy more pieces. So, it goes back to that personable experience, when people come in, it’s not just a storefront for some big corporation. This is a business of family of artists of people who live here and work here, we are your neighbors, your art neighbors. This is all community based. If I have someone

come in, I want to make sure they have a good experience with us. If they have a good experience, whether or not they buy something that day, it's not going to upset me.

Echoing P02, P03 extensively referenced how focusing on building quality relationships with customers leads to greater consumer loyalty and increased profitability. P03 mentioned providing customers with the story behind each art piece purchased, and expressed that customers would return for more artwork related to themes due to the development of a connection to the story behind the artwork. Table 2 presents the subthemes identified under the theme of relationship building with customers and includes the participant code, percentage of participants who contributed responses pertinent to the subtheme, and the frequency of the subtheme referenced by participants.

Table 2

Relationship Building With Customers

Subtheme	Participant code	Frequency	Percentage (%; n=44)
Customer service	P1, P2, P3, P4	19	43.2%
Trust building	P1, P2, P3, P4	15	34.1%
Community involvement	P2, P3, P4	10	22.7%

Relationship building with customers as a business survivability strategy aligned with Porter's (1998) competitive strategy theory. The use of differentiation strategies improves competitive advantage and organizational performance (David, 2017; Islami, Mustafa, & Topuzovska Latkovikj, 2020). Business owners employ Porter's differentiation strategy through (a) product or service design, (b) company branding, (c)

networking, (d) technology, and (e) customer service (Islami, Mustafa, & Topuzovska Latkovikj, 2020; Porter, 1998). E-commerce entrepreneurs can apply Porter's differentiation strategy through positive relationship building with customers. In turn, positive relationship building with customers enhances consumer trust and strengthens business profitability through the generation of additional purchases by loyal customers. The identified theme of relationship building with customers and how participants use relationship building to enhance business survivability aligned with Porter's differentiation strategy.

Theme 3: Networking

All participants referenced networking as an important factor leading to the survivability of their businesses. The use of networking as a business strategy enhances business performance and survivability (Semrau & Werner, 2017). Business owners who fail to implement effective networking strategies experience losses in potential profitability (Pollack et al., 2017). The use of networking as a business strategy also increases brand awareness and strengthens partnership opportunities between business owners (Hernández-Carrión et al., 2017). Furthermore, networking facilitates the ease of resource acquisition for new business owners (Sullivan & Ford, 2017). Business owners should continue to seek networking opportunities beyond the business startup phase. Continuous networking beyond the business startup phase enables business owners to adapt against changing market demands and expand with greater ease (Semrau & Werner, 2017).

P01 commented on how they use networking to help clients with additional needs not addressed through the services offered in their business. P01 stated that they keep business cards of other health care related businesses in the local area and offers them to customers. In turn, business owners referred to by P01 also provide referrals to P01. P02 mentioned that they provide coupons to other businesses for either a discount or free item at their restaurant. P02 also keeps business cards or promotional material for other local businesses. P02 attributed B2B networking as a key strategy to the survival of their business. P02, P03, and P04 also mentioned keeping business cards and promotional materials for other businesses and providing the materials along with personal recommendations regarding the services and products offered by businesses promoted. P05 commented on how they developed a list of businesses that he uses to subcontract work on homes that require renovations prior to resale or renting. Table 3 presents the subthemes identified under the theme of networking and includes the participant code, percentage of participants who contributed responses pertinent to the subtheme, and the frequency of the subtheme referenced by participants.

Table 3

Networking

Subtheme	Participant code	Frequency	Percentage (%; n=30)
Intra industry networking	P1, P2, P3, P4, P5	13	43.3%
Professional associations	P1, P2, P3, P4	12	40.0%
Online networking	P3, P4	5	16.7%

The use of networking as an operational sustainability strategy aligned with

Porter's (1998) competitive strategy theory when considered through Porter's differentiation strategy. Business owners can use Porter's differentiation strategy to enhance competitive advantage, increase profitability, and strengthen consumer loyalty (Islami, Topuzovska Latkovikj, et al., 2020; Porter, 1998). P01 and P02 generate increased public visibility and profitability through the use of networking activities, which demonstrated an alignment of networking with Porter's differentiation strategy. Each of the participants expressed an association between networking activities and increased business survivability. The responses provided by participants regarding networking aligned with the conceptual framework of this study.

Theme 4: Risk Tolerance

Exercising entrepreneurship and owning a business requires a certain level of risk tolerance. Entrepreneurs devote considerable time in the pursuit of business activities dependent on self-perceived entrepreneurial and technical competence (Petrova, 2018). P04 transitioned from devoting a few hours per week to the business toward a more active role in their art studio as they became more comfortable with their ability to increase revenue through the sale of their artwork and effectively market online. Whereas individuals with low risk tolerance are more likely to approach self-employment cautiously and slowly transition toward full-time entrepreneurship, individuals with higher levels of risk tolerance are more likely to devote full-time hours to self-employment (Petrova, 2018). An entrepreneur's perception and attitudes toward risk directly influence investment decisions (Nofsinger, 2018). Risk tolerance facilitates greater returns on investment (Zakharkina et al., 2020). Conversely, overconfidence may

lead to excessive risk tolerance and loss of revenue (Nur Aini & Lutfi, 2019).

Entrepreneurs should strive to maintain a balance between risk aversion and overconfidence by seeking to understand the risks and benefits to all potential financial investments and business decisions.

Participants P02 and P04 mentioned risk tolerance and how an appropriate level of risk tolerance enables increased productivity and profitability, ultimately leading to improved business survivability. P02 mentioned that willingness to expand beyond the mental comfort zone of a small convenience store to a large restaurant enabled significantly greater levels of profitability. P02 increased an initial business model of one employee to over 40 employees. Additionally, P02 expressed that expansion of business operations beyond the initial comfort zone significantly increased the risk of failure. However, P02 attributed self-confidence as an essential component towards maintaining adequate levels of risk tolerance. P02 also commented that trusting in the ability of staff and themselves enabled them to take risks and not become paralyzed with the fear of failure. P04 commented on how possessing greater levels of self-confidence enabled them to transition from being a full-time employee with a side business to taking a significantly greater active role in their business, all leading towards increased sales. Table 4 presents the subthemes identified under the theme of risk tolerance and includes the participant code, percentage of participants who contributed responses pertinent to the subtheme, and frequency of the subtheme referenced by participants.

Table 4*Risk Tolerance*

Subtheme	Participant code	Frequency	Percentage (%; n=24)
Self confidence	P1, P2, P3, P4, P5	8	33.3%
Fear of failure	P1, P2, P3, P4, P5	10	41.7%
Trust	P2, P3, P5	6	25.0%

Risk tolerance as a strategy for achieving and maintaining operational sustainability aligns with Porter's (1998) five forces model and Porter's competitive strategy theory. Porter's five forces model includes (a) buyer power, (b) supplier power, (c) threat of substitutes, (d) threat of new entrants, and (e) competitive rivalry. Porter's competitive strategy theory includes differentiation, cost leadership, and focus strategies. Although Porter's strategies do not directly correlate to an entrepreneur's level of risk tolerance, business owners may accept greater levels of risk tolerance to enhance business differentiation.

Theme 5: Education

Entrepreneurs use education to develop the foundational knowledge necessary to develop a product or service that meets the needs of a specific target audience. Many small business owners prefer informal education to formal education to gain business knowledge (Bacon & Schneider, 2019). Higher level education is not a proven determinant towards a business owner's ability to maintain operational sustainability beyond the first five years of operations (Kozak, 2018). However, most successful small business owners possess formal higher-level education (Sharafizad, 2018). Aspiring

business owners are best suited to attain formal higher-level education related to the specific industry to which the individual will compete in instead of solely pursuing a business degree. Company chief executive officers with business degrees do not outperform those with non-business-related degrees (Nakavachara, 2019). Aspiring business owners should maximize educational opportunities that enable knowledge acquisition for both business-related concepts and increased technical expertise in the industry to which the aspiring business seeks to compete in.

Participants P01, P02, P04, and P05 commented on how they considered education an important factor towards the survivability of their respective businesses. P01 stated that they strive to remain up to date on ongoing research and best practices within the massage therapy industry. P02 commented on the usefulness of formal college level academic education towards the effective administration of the business and attributed the education of their spouse as a key element towards the success of their business. Conversely, P04 expressed that most of their business-related growth was a result of on-the-job training and the process of trial and error within their business. Although P04 attained an undergraduate degree, P04 expressed that they were not well prepared to become a business owner soon after graduation. P04 recommended that individuals contemplating to pursue self-employment and enrolled in an undergraduate degree should undertake business courses to facilitate the learning curve into the process of business ownership. P05 attained a graduate degree in public administration and worked over 20 years as a city public administrator before owning a business. P05 commented that their formal graduate level academic education and previous career in public administration

enabled a basic level of experience on the nuances of business ownership. However, P05 stated that continuous education on the technical aspects of whichever business an individual decides to undertake is an essential component towards business survivability. P05 expressed that they continuously seek to undergo informal learning from experts in the field of real estate business to enhance their potential for higher levels of profitability. Table 5 presents the subthemes identified under the theme of education and includes the participant code, percentage of participants who contributed responses pertinent to the subtheme, and frequency of the subtheme referenced by participants.

Table 5

Education

Subtheme	Participant code	Frequency	Percentage (%; n=23)
Continuous learning	P1, P2, P3, P4, P5	11	47.8%
Self-guided learning	P3, P4, P5	7	30.4%
Formal academic training	P1, P3, P4, P5	5	21.7%

Education as a theme does not align with any of the specific strategies within Porter's five forces model. However, education as a theme directly aligns with Porter's five forces model as a whole. Business owners should have a working understanding of Porter's five forces model to enable the development of strategies that lead to enhanced business survivability (Baronina, 2020; Jamza et al., 2020). Porter's (1998) five forces model does not directly address the use of education as a strategy to enhance business survivability. However, identification of education as a theme also aligns with the situational leadership theory (Murphy, 1941). Murphy (1941) argued that leaders develop

traits in response to the needs and changes within an environment. Modern situational theorists argue that leadership is a learnt behavioral skill and leaders develop new skills to meet the needs of followers (Thompson & Glasø, 2018). The responses provided by study participants regarding the usefulness of education towards business survivability demonstrate a need for e-commerce entrepreneurs to remain up to date on emerging information within their field of practice. In turn, by remaining knowledgeable in emerging information within an industry, business owners can avoid stagnation of product or service offering and increase the potential for business survivability.

Applications to Professional Practice

The objective of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the strategies used by e-commerce entrepreneurs to achieve and maintain sustainability beyond the first 5 years of operations. The study findings yielded five themes: (a) best practices for consistency, (b) relationship building with customers, (c) local networking, (d) risk tolerance, and (e) education. Prospective and existing e-commerce entrepreneurs can apply the findings of this study to establish strategies that enable business survivability and profitability beyond 5 years. Application of consistency in all aspects of business operations builds and strengthens trust between business owners and customers (Sato, 2017). Additionally, business owners can enhance the quality of relationships with customers by building on the foundation of trust between the business owner and the consumer (Setiawan et al., 2019). Business owners who focus on customer satisfaction experience increased profitability and reduced consumer price sensitivity (Pooser & Browne, 2018). The results of this study may help e-commerce entrepreneurs understand

the value of positive relationship building with customers and its effects on business survivability.

E-commerce entrepreneurs can benefit from networking with other business owners by joining local small business chamber associations or other professional associations for business owners. The use of networking as a business strategy leads to enhanced partnership opportunities, increased brand awareness, and greater ease of resource acquisition (Hernández-Carrión et al., 2017; Sullivan & Ford, 2017). Ultimately, professional networking among business owners enhances business profitability and survivability (Semrau & Werner, 2017). E-commerce entrepreneurs should leverage networking with other local and remote business owners to enhance performance.

Risk tolerance is an essential component of business survivability. Business owners apply risk tolerance to attain competitive advantage through the application of strategies that other business owners may not adopt due to the risk of failure. While risk tolerance may lead to greater returns on investment, overconfidence may also lead to reduced business performance (Nur Aini & Lutfi, 2019; Zakharkina et al., 2020). Entrepreneurs should maintain a balance between risk aversion and overconfidence by carefully performing an analysis of the risks and benefits to all business activities and strategies.

The pursuit of formal and nonformal modalities of education by entrepreneurs enables the development of knowledge necessary to meet the need of consumers and attain competitive advantage. Most successful business owners undergo specialized education in either business or the academic degree directly correlated to the business

model (Sharafizad, 2018). However, post-secondary education alone does not directly correlate to increased business survivability (Kozak, 2018). E-commerce entrepreneurs should strive to continuously learn about the newest developments in effective business practice within their industry by joining industry specific professional associations and individual academic research when possible.

Implications for Social Change

Implementation of the strategies identified through interviews with study participants may enable existing and prospective e-commerce entrepreneurs to achieve and maintain sustainability beyond the first 5 years of operations. Small businesses provide 99% of all employment in the United States and account for 64% of all jobs generated from 1993 to 2011 (Small Business Administration, Office of Advocacy, 2019). Increased e-commerce sustainability benefits a wide range of stakeholders, including the individual business owners, potential employees, customers, and other local community members who benefit from the added cash circulation resulting from entrepreneurs' improved business operations. Furthermore, improved local cash circulation may improve quality of life through added taxes that help to improve programs and infrastructure for local schools and other public facilities enjoyed by members of the community. While individual study findings and identified themes do not directly correlate to positive social change, e-commerce entrepreneurs can indirectly affect local communities through the application of the business strategies identified in this study that ultimately lead to improved business performance and survivability.

Recommendations for Action

Based on the five themes identified in this study, I recommend e-commerce entrepreneurs to seek ways to create processes that enable replicability of results and customer experiences. E-commerce entrepreneurs can generate and enhance trust with existing consumers through the application of consistency within a business. E-commerce entrepreneurs operate across a wide variety of industries; results from this study may be applicable to any individual who owns a small business with at least some component of e-commerce within the business model. Individuals interested in pursuing e-commerce entrepreneurship can benefit from networking with existing and successful e-commerce entrepreneurs through local small business association chapters or other local business non-profit agencies. Additional entities to include local, state level, and federal government bodies may benefit and use the findings of this study to fund additional research opportunities and form legislation and training programs that benefit the business owners and local communities affected by improved business survivability.

There are multiple opportunities for sharing study business findings with prospective and existing business owners. I will share my findings with the small business development center located in San Angelo, Texas, in hopes that prospective and existing e-commerce entrepreneurs benefit from the findings identified through this study. I will also share my study findings through academic journals publication, conferences, and local small business seminars.

Recommendations for Further Research

I conducted a qualitative multiple case study on the strategies used by e-commerce entrepreneurs to achieve and maintain sustainability beyond the first 5 years of operations. The study population consisted of five business owners across San Angelo, TX, who demonstrated successful business ownership beyond the first 5 years. The most significant limitation of this study was the lack of a large sample population to develop a series of generalizable trends in findings. The study sample size does not represent the perspectives or experiences beyond those locally collected in San Angelo, Texas, or those across a specific industry. Researchers may explore strategies used by e-commerce entrepreneurs who do not possess a storefront. Research of strategies used by online only businesses may enable a deeper understanding of the nuances faced by entrepreneurs that solely operate and serve their customer base within online platforms. Finally, subsequent quantitative correlational research may prove useful to test the existence and strength of a correlation of (a) best practices for consistency, (b) relationship building with customers, (c) local networking, (d) risk tolerance, and (e) education and achieving and maintaining sustainability beyond the first 5 years of operations. Future quantitative correlational research pertinent may indicate if a relationship exists between the use of strategies used by study participants and business sustainability.

Reflections

Embarking on this doctoral study journey was a rigorous and highly time-consuming process to navigate through. The level of appreciation I have gained towards the accomplishment of a doctoral degree has significantly increased. I began the

doctorate with the mentality of delaying student loan payments and imagined the process as simply time consuming and not necessarily challenging. My assumptions of the supposed ease of successfully crafting and developing a doctoral study were far from the reality, each page written reflects an abundance of research, planning, implementation, and many edits. Continuous conversations with my doctoral chair and peers throughout this journey enabled me to remain motivated and push through countless personal, professional, and academic hurdles along the way. The insights gained through the interviews with study participants helped to solidify my understanding of the importance of placing customer satisfaction as top priority within a business.

Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the strategies used by e-commerce entrepreneurs to achieve and maintain sustainability beyond the first 5 years of operations. Participants were business owners across the health care, food, arts, and real estate industries located in San Angelo, Texas. I collected participant's experiences through semistructured interviews. Development and establishment of operational strategies significantly impacts e-commerce entrepreneurial success. Some entrepreneurs start small business operations without effective sustainability strategies. E-commerce entrepreneurs can benefit from the results of this study through practical application of the strategies mentioned by study participants that included: (a) best practices for consistency, (b) relationship building with customers, (c) local networking, (d) risk tolerance, and (e) education. The establishment of consistency within all aspects of business operations enables greater levels of consumer trust towards a business and

enhances consumer to business relationships (Sato, 2017). Positive relationship building with customers is the foundation of business survivability beyond the first 5 years of operations. Additionally, successful entrepreneurs stay up to date on the development of new information and emerging technology that may enable increased competitive advantage. E-commerce entrepreneurs across any industry may benefit from the strategies revealed through the interview responses from this study's participants and enhance the odds of business survivability beyond the first 5 years of operations.

References

- Abdulrehman, M. S. (2015). Reflections on native ethnography by a nurse researcher. *Journal of Transcultural Nursing, 28*(2), 152–158.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1043659615620658>
- Achinewhu-Nworgu, E. F., Nworgu, Q. C., Azaiki, S. A., & Dikeh, C. C. (2015). Doctoral students understanding of legal and ethical obligations in conducting education research. *BCES Conference Proceedings, 13*(1), 381–388.
<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED568920.pdf>
- Ahmadinia, H., & Karim, M. (2016). Competitive intelligence: A case study on Qoros automotive manufacturing. *Journal of Intelligence Studies in Business, 6*(2), 121–126. <https://doi.org/10.37380/jisib.v6i2.173>
- Akbari, M., & Hakimpour, H. (2018). Branding in B2B marketing. *International Journal of Industrial Marketing, 3*(1), 1. <https://doi.org/10.5296/ijim.v3i1.13321>
- Allan, M., & Ali, N. N. (2017). Employing social media websites and its role in determining the target audience for marketing within cloth manufacturing in Jordan. *Innovative Marketing, 13*(2), 47–55.
[https://doi.org/10.21511/m.13\(2\).2017.05](https://doi.org/10.21511/m.13(2).2017.05)
- Ames, H., Glenton, C., & Lewin, S. (2019). Purposive sampling in a qualitative evidence synthesis: A worked example from a synthesis on parental perceptions of vaccination communication. *BMC Medical Research Methodology, 19*(1), 19–26.
<https://doi.org/10.1186/s12874-019-0665-4>
- Anand, D., & Mantrala, M. (2019). Responding to disruptive business model innovations:

- The case of traditional banks facing fintech entrants. *Journal of Banking and Financial Technology*, 3(1), 19–31. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42786-018-00004-4>
- Aragon-Correa, A. J., Marcus, A. A., Rivera, E. J., & Kenworthy, A. L. (2017). Sustainability management teaching resources and the challenge of balancing planet, people, and profits. *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, 16, 469–483. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amle.2017.0180>
- Ascarza, E., Ebbes, P., Netzer, O., & Danielson, M. (2017). Beyond the target customer: Social effects of customer relationship management campaigns. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 54(3), 347–363. <https://doi.org/10.1509/jmr.15.0442>
- Bacon, D. R., & Schneider, A. B. (2019). Exploring sources of marketing knowledge for small business decision makers. *Journal for Advancement of Marketing Education*, 27, 1–12. <http://www.mmaglobal.org/publications/JAME/JAME-Issues/JAME-2019-Vol27-Issue1/JAME-2019-Vol27-Issue1-Bacon-Schneider-pp1-12.pdf>
- Baronina, Y. A. (2020). Analysis of competitive forces acting on European automotive industry (by M. Porter). *Russian Economic Journal*, 4, 103–112. <https://doi.org/10.33983/0130-9757-2020-4-103-112>
- Bauer, J., & Jannach, D. (2018). Optimal pricing in e-commerce based on sparse and noisy data. *Decision Support Systems*, 106, 53–63. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dss.2017.12.002>
- Baumann, O. (2015). Models of complex adaptive systems in strategy and organization research. *Mind & Society*, 14, 169–183. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11299-015-0168->

x

- Behl, A., Chavan, M., Dutta, P., & Sheorey, P. A. (2019). Benchmarking publication metrics for Indian business researchers. *Benchmarking: An International Journal*, 27(2), 571–591. <https://doi.org/10.1108/bij-04-2019-0184>
- Berglund, K., Hytti, U., & Verduijn, K. (2020). Unsettling entrepreneurship education. *Entrepreneurship Education and Pedagogy*, 3(3), 208–213. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2515127420921480>
- Bhatnagar, A., & Papatla, P. (2016). Increasing online sales by facilitating spillover shopping. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 29, 58–69. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2015.11.009>
- Bi, J.-W., Liu, Y., Fan, Z.-P., & Cambria, E. (2019). Modelling customer satisfaction from online reviews using ensemble neural network and effect-based Kano model. *International Journal of Production Research*, 57, 7068–7088. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00207543.2019.1574989>
- Birt, L., Scott, S., Cavers, D., Campbell, C., & Walter, F. (2016). Member checking: A tool to enhance trustworthiness or merely a nod to validation? *Qualitative Health Research*, 26, 1802–1811. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732316654870>
- Blakeslee, A., & Fleischer, C. (2019). *Becoming a writing researcher* (2nd ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351121224>
- Blankson, C., Cowan, K., & Darley, W. K. (2017). Marketing practices of rural micro and small businesses in Ghana: The role of public policy. *Journal of Macromarketing*, 38(1), 29–56. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0276146717741067>

- Bowden, C., & Galindo-Gonzalez, S. (2015). Interviewing when you're not face-to-face: The use of email interviews in a phenomenological study. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, 10, 79–92. <https://doi.org/10.28945/2104>
- Braojos, J., Benitez, J., & Llorens-Montes, F. J. (2017). Contemporary micro-IT capabilities and organizational performance: The role of online customer engagement. *IT Capabilities, Customer Engagement, and Performance: Twenty-third Americas Conference on Information Systems, Boston, 2017*.
- Brenes, E. R., Ciravegna, L., & Acuña, J. (2020). Differentiation strategies in agribusiness – A configurational approach. *Journal of Business Research*, 119, 522–539. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2020.07.048>
- Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2016). *Entrepreneurship and the U.S. economy*. <https://www.bls.gov/bdm/entrepreneurship/entrepreneurship.htm>
- Cantamesa, M., Gatteschi, V., Perboli, G., & Rosano, M. (2018). Startups' roads to failure. *Sustainability*, 10, 2346–2365. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su10072346>
- Cantillon, R. (1931). *Essay on the nature of trade in general*. Frank Cass & Company, Ltd.
- Chahal, H., & Sharma, A. K. (2020). Family business in India: Performance, challenges and improvement measures. *Journal of New Business Ventures*, 1(1-2), 9–30. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2632962x20960824>
- Chakraborty, S. (2019). Cost-consciousness culture and cost-reduction strategies to carry on business sustainability. *Management Accountant Journal*, 54(9), 64. <https://doi.org/10.33516/maj.v54i9.64-67p>

- Chmielowiec-Lewczuk, M. (2019). Cost strategies possible to implement in insurance company. *Journal of WEI Business and Economics*, 8, 91–97.
<https://doi.org/10.36739/jweibe.2019.v8.i1.7>
- Choi, T. R., Choi, J. H., & Sung, Y. (2019). I hope to protect myself from the threat: The impact of self-threat on prevention-versus promotion-focused hope. *Journal of Business Research*, 99, 481–489. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2018.03.010>
- Cowden, B. J., & Young, S. L. (2020). The copycat conundrum: The double-edged sword of crowdfunding. *Business Horizons*, 63(4), 541–551.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2020.03.012>
- Cridland, E. K., Jones, S. C., Caputi, P., & Magee, C. A. (2015). Qualitative research with families living with autism spectrum disorder: Recommendations for conducting semistructured interviews. *Journal of Intellectual and Developmental Disability*, 40(1), 78–91. <https://doi.org/10.3109/13668250.2014.964191>
- David, F. R. (2017). *Strategic management: Concepts and cases: A competitive advantage approach*. Pearson Education Limited.
- Davidson, J., Paulus, T., & Jackson, K. (2016). Speculating on the future of digital tools for qualitative research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 22, 606–610.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800415622505>
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2017). *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (5th ed.). Sage Publications.
- Drabble, L., Trocki, K. F., Salcedo, B., Walker, P. C., & Korcha, R. A. (2016). Conducting qualitative interviews by telephone. Lessons learned from a study of

alcohol use among sexual minority and heterosexual women. *Qualitative Social Work*, 15(1), 118–133. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1473325015585613>

Drover, W., Busenitz, L., Matusik, S., Townsend, D., Anglin, A., & Dushnitsky, A. (2017). A review and road map of entrepreneurial equity financing research: Venture capital, corporate venture capital, angel investment, crowdfunding, and accelerators. *Journal of Management*, 43, 1820–1853. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206317690584>

Dvorský, J., Petráková, Z., & Fialová, V. (2020). Perception of business risk by entrepreneurs according to experience with the business failure. *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Knowledge*, 8(1), 76–88. <https://doi.org/10.37335/ijek.v8i1.104>

Edmonds, E. A., & von Bertalanffy, L. (1977). General system theory: Foundations, development, applications. *Leonardo*, 10(3), 248. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1573450>

Emerson, R. W. (2015). Convenience sampling, random sampling, and snowball sampling: How does sampling affect the validity of research? *Journal of Visual Impairment & Blindness*, 109(2), 164–168. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0145482X1510900215>

Ferreira, J. J. M., Fernandes, C. I., & Ferreira, F. A. F. (2020). Wearing failure as a path to innovation. *Journal of Business Research*, 120, 195–202. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2020.08.006>

Flieger, M. (2017). Innovative consistency in organizations – Business process management perspective. *International Journal of Contemporary Management*,

16, 125–138. <https://doi.org/10.4467/24498939ijcm.17.025.7545>

Fusch, P. I., Fusch, G. E., & Ness, L. R. (2016). How to conduct a mini-ethnographic case study: A guide for novice researchers. *Qualitative Report*, 22, 923–941. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2017.2580>

Fusch, P. I., & Ness, L. R. (2015). Are we there yet? Data saturation in qualitative research. *Qualitative Report*, 20, 1408–1416. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2015.2281>

Gagnon, M., Jacob, J. D., & McCabe, J. (2015). Locating the qualitative interview: Reflecting on space and place in nursing research. *Journal of Research in Nursing*, 20, 203–215. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1744987114536571>

Galdas, P. (2017). Revisiting bias in qualitative research: Reflections on its relationship with funding and impact. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 16(1), 1–2. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917748992>

Galvão, M. B., de Carvalho, R. C., de Oliveira, L. A. B., & de Medeiros, D. D. (2018). Customer loyalty approach based on CRM for SMEs. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, 33, 706–716. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JBIM-07-2017-0166>

Gelbrich, K., Gäthke, J., & Hübner, A. (2017). Rewarding customers who keep a product: How reinforcement affects customers' product return decision in online retailing. *Psychology & Marketing*, 34, 853–867. <https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.21027>

Gentles, S. J., Charles, C., Ploeg, J., & McKibbin, K. (2015). Sampling in qualitative research: Insights from an overview of the methods literature. *Qualitative Report*, 20, 1772–1789. <http://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol20/iss11/5>

- Ghauri, P., Grønhaug, K., & Strange, R. (2020). *Research methods in business studies* (5th ed.). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108762427>
- Ghezzi, C. (2020). *Being a researcher*. Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-45157-8>
- Goyal, D. P., & Garg, A. (2019). Sustained business competitive advantage with data analytics. *International Journal of Business and Data Analytics*, 1(1), 4–15. <https://doi.org/10.1504/ijbda.2019.10020198>
- Gregory, K. (2019). Lessons of a failed study: Lone research, media analysis, and the limitations of bracketing. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 18, 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406919842450>
- Hammarberg, K., Kirman, M., & de Lace, S. (2016). Qualitative research methods: When to use them and how to judge them. *Human Reproduction*, 31, 498–501. <https://doi.org/10.1093/humrep/dev334>
- Harrigan, P., Evers, U., Miles, M., & Daly, T. (2017). Customer engagement with tourism social media brands. *Tourism Management*, 59, 597–609. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2016.09.015>
- Hashem, I. A. T., Yaqoob, I., Anuar, N. B., Mokhtar, S., Gani, A., & Khan, S. U. (2015). The rise of big data on cloud computing: Review and open research issues. *Information Systems*, 47, 98–115. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.is.2014.07.006>
- Heath, J. (2018). “But everyone else is doing it”: Competition and business self-regulation. *Journal of Social Philosophy*, 49(4), 516–535. <https://doi.org/10.1111/josp.12259>

- Hennink, M. M., Kaiser, B. N., & Marconi, V. C. (2017). Code saturation versus meaning saturation: How many interviews are enough? *Qualitative Health Research*, 27, 591–608. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732316665344>
- Herciu, M. (2017). Financing small businesses: From venture capital to crowdfunding. *Studies in Business and Economics*, 12(2), 63–69. <https://doi.org/10.1515/sbe-2017-0022>
- Hernández-Carrión, C., Camarero-Izquierdo, C., & Gutiérrez-Cillán, J. (2017). Entrepreneurs' social capital and the economic performance of small businesses: The moderating role of competitive intensity and entrepreneurs' experience. *Strategic Entrepreneurship Journal*, 11(1), 61–89. <https://doi.org/10.1002/sej.1228>
- Holmberg-Wright, K., & Hribar, T. (2016). Soft skills: The missing piece of entrepreneurs to grow a business. *American Journal of Management*, 16(1), 11–18. http://www.na-businesspress.com/AJM/Holmberg-WrightK_Web16_1_.pdf
- Hossain, K., & Azmi, I. B. A. G. (2020). Linking entrepreneurial orientation dimensions with multidimensional differentiation strategy. *Management Science Letters*, 10, 1881–1886. <https://doi.org/10.5267/j.msl.2019.12.031>
- Islam, J., & Rahman, Z. (2016). The transpiring journey of customer engagement research in marketing: A systematic review of the past decade. *Management Decision*, 54, 2008–2034. <https://doi.org/10.1108/MD-01-2016-0028>
- Islami, X., Mustafa, N., & Topuzovska Latkovikj, M. (2020). Linking Porter's generic strategies to firm performance. *Future Business Journal*, 6(1), 3.

<https://doi.org/10.1186/s43093-020-0009-1>

Islami, X., Topuzovska Latkovikj, M., Drakulevski, L., & Borota Popovska, M. (2020).

Does differentiation strategy model matter? Designation of organizational performance using differentiation strategy instruments – An empirical analysis.

Business: Theory and Practice, 21(1), 158–177.

<https://doi.org/10.3846/btp.2020.11648>

Ismail, A. R. (2017). The influence of perceived social media marketing activities on

brand loyalty: The mediation effect of brand and value consciousness. *Asia*

Pacific Journal of Marketing and Logistics, 29(1), 129–144.

<https://doi.org/10.1108/APJML-10-2015-0154>

Jaboro Satore, L. (2020). Factors affecting success of micro and small business

enterprises: In case of some selected woredas of Hadiya Zone, Snnpr, Ethiopia.

(2020). *European Journal of Business and Management*, 12(34), 1–11.

<https://doi.org/10.7176/ejbm/12-34-01>

Jamza, R., Achsani, N. A., & Indrawan, D. (2020). Online business operational strategies

(Glory online store case study). *Business Review and Case Studies*, 1(2), 60–68.

<https://doi.org/10.17358/brcs.1.2.60>

Jeng, S.-P. (2017). Increasing customer purchase intention through product return

policies: The pivotal impacts of retailer brand familiarity and product categories.

Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services, 39(1), 182–189.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2017.08.013>

Karagiozis, N. (2018). The complexities of the researcher's role in qualitative research:

- The power of reflexivity. *International Journal of Interdisciplinary Educational Studies*, 13(1), 19–31. <https://doi.org/10.18848/2327-011X/CGP/v13i01/19-31>
- Katsikeas, C. S. (2018). Special issue on the future of international marketing: Trends, developments, and directions. *Journal of International Marketing*, 26(1), 1–3. <https://doi.org/10.1509/jim.2611>
- Kaye, J., Whitley, E. A., Lund, D., Morrison, M., Teare, H., & Melham, K. (2015). Dynamic consent: A patient interface for twenty-first century research networks. *European Journal of Human Genetics*, 23(2), 141–146. <https://doi.org/10.1038/ejhg.2014.71>
- Keikha, F., & Sargolzaei, E. (2017). Designing two-dimensional electronic business-to-consumer models' map by fuzzy Delphi panel. *Journal of Theoretical & Applied Electronic Commerce Research*, 12(2), 21–36. <https://doi.org/10.4067/s0718-18762017000200003>
- Keiper, M. C., & Barnes, J. (2021). Small business success: factors influencing the NBA's D-league. *Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development*, 28, 85–101. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JSBED-12-2018-0375>
- Keyhani, M. (2019). Computational modeling of entrepreneurship grounded in Austrian economics: Insights for strategic entrepreneurship and the opportunity debate. *Strategic Entrepreneurship Journal*, 13(2), 221–240. <https://doi.org/10.1002/sej.1311>
- Khudhair, H. Y., Jusoh, A., Mardani, A., Nor, K. M., & Streimikiene, D. (2019). Review of scoping studies on service quality, customer satisfaction and customer loyalty

in the airline industry. *Contemporary Economics*, 13(4), 375–387.

<https://doi.org/10.5709/ce.1897-9254.320>

Khurram, A. (2020). Revisiting Porter five forces model: Influence of non-governmental organizations on competitive rivalry in various economic sectors. *Pakistan Social Sciences Review*, 4(1), 1–15. [https://doi.org/10.35484/pssr.2020\(4-i\)01](https://doi.org/10.35484/pssr.2020(4-i)01)

Kim, K. H., & Moon, H. (2021). Innovative digital marketing management in B2B markets. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 95, 1–4.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.indmarman.2021.01.016>

Kornberger, M. (2017). The values of strategy: Valuation practices, rivalry and strategic agency. *Organization Studies*, 38, 1753–1773.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840616685365>

Kornbluh, M. (2015). Combatting challenges to establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 12, 397–414.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2015.1021941>

Kozak, M. (2018). Determinants of business survivability: Literature review.

International Journal of Synergy and Research, 6, 183.

<https://doi.org/10.17951/ijsr.2017.0.6.183>

Krauss, J. (2017). What is cocoa sustainability? Mapping stakeholders' socio-economic, environmental, and commercial constellations of priorities. *Enterprise*

Development and Microfinance, 28, 220–249. <https://doi.org/10.3362/1755->

[1986.17-000JK](https://doi.org/10.3362/1755-1986.17-000JK)

Latiffi, A. A., Brahim, J., & Fathi, M. S. (2016). Transformation of Malaysian

construction industry with building information modelling (BIM). *MATEC Web of Conferences*, 66(22), 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.1051/mateconf/20166600022>

Lee, Y. S., & Liu, W. K. (2021). The moderating effects of employee benefits and job burnout among the employee loyalty, corporate culture and employee turnover. *Universal Journal of Management*, 9(2), 62–69.

<https://doi.org/10.13189/ujm.2021.090205>

Liguori, E. W., El Tarabishy, A., & Passerini, K. (2020). Publishing entrepreneurship research: Strategies for success distilled from a review of over 3,500 submissions. *Journal of Small Business Management*, 59(1), 1–12.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/00472778.2020.1824530>

Lim, W. M. (2017). Untangling the relationships between consumer characteristics, shopping values, and behavioral intention in online group buying. *Journal of Strategic Marketing*, 25, 547–566.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/0965254x.2016.1148767>

Long, H. (2015). Validity in mixed methods research in education: The application of Habermas' critical theory. *International Journal of Research & Method in Education*, 40, 201–213 Advance online publication.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/1743727X.2015.1088518>

Lu, F., & Wang, S. (2021). Product of return and lagged shock, representativeness, dynamic overconfidence and return predictability. *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 1(1), 1–40. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3773368>

Machado, D., & Fernandes, R. (2021). The use of pricing tools to leverage the business

partners' profitability. *Applied Finance and Accounting*, 7, 44.

<https://doi.org/10.11114/afa.v7i1.5176>

Magliano, C., Monteiro, A., Tura, B., Oliveira, C., Robelo, A., & Periera, C. (2018).

Feasibility of visual aids for risk evaluation by hospitalized patients with coronary artery disease: Results from face-to-face interviews. *Patient Preference and Adherence*, 12, 749–755.

<https://doi.org/10.2147/PPA.S164385>

Malerba, F., & McKelvey, M. (2019). Knowledge-intensive innovative entrepreneurship.

Foundations and Trends in Entrepreneurship, 14(6), 555–681.

<https://doi.org/10.1561/03000000075>

Manhas, K. P., & Oberle, K. (2015). The ethics of metaphor as a research tool. *Research Ethics*, 11(1), 42–51.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1747016114523421>

Mappangara, D., & Kartini, D. (2019). The competitive determinants strategy and its

impact on competitive advantage (Study of solar panel industry in Indonesia).

International Review of Management and Marketing, 9(3), 117–126.

<https://doi.org/10.32479/irmm.8115>

Marshall, C., & Rossman, G. B. (2016). *Designing qualitative research* (6th ed.). Sage Publications.

Mazzei, M. J., Flynn, C. B., & Haynie, J. J. (2016). Moving beyond initial success:

Promoting innovation in small businesses through high-performance work practices. *Business Horizons*, 59, 51–60.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2015.08.004>

Mbah Takwi, F. (2020). Business management and innovation: A critical analysis of

- small business success. *American Journal of Operations Management and Information Systems*, 5(3), 62–73. <https://doi.org/10.11648/j.ajomis.20200503.15>
- McKim, C. (2017). The value of mixed methods research: A mixed methods study. *Journal of Mixed Methods Study*, 11(2), 202–222. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1558689815607096>
- Milan, G. S., Eberle, L., & Bebbler, S. (2015). Perceived value, reputation, trust, and switching costs as determinants of customer retention. *Journal of Relationship Marketing*, 14(2), 109–123. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15332667.2015.1041353>
- Momsen, K. (2021). Recommendations in credence goods markets with horizontal product differentiation. *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization*, 183, 19–38. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jebo.2020.12.018>
- Mou, J., Cui, Y., & Kurcz, K. (2020). Trust, risk and alternative website quality in buyer acceptance of cross-border e-commerce. *Journal of Global Information Management*, 28(1), 167–188. <https://doi.org/10.4018/jgim.2020010109>
- Muñoz-Izquierdo, N., Segovia-Vargas, M. J., Camacho-Miñano, M.-M., & Pascual-Ezama, D. (2019). Explaining the causes of business failure using audit report disclosures. *Journal of Business Research*, 98, 403–414. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2018.07.024>
- Murphy, A. J. (1941). A study of the leadership process. *American Sociological Review*, 6, 674–687. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2085506>
- Nakamura, S. (2019). Competitive Marketing Strategy. *Japan Marketing Journal*, 39(1), 97–105. <https://doi.org/10.7222/marketing.2019.028>

- Nakavachara, V. (2019). CEOs and graduate business education. *Journal of Education for Business*, 95, 73–80. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08832323.2019.1606770>
- Narayanan, V. K. (2019). Radical cost innovation. *Strategy & Leadership*, 47(5), 53–54. <https://doi.org/10.1108/sl-09-2019-177>
- Nasser Al-Yasiri, H. M., Mahdi Al-Yasiry, A. G., & Habib Nehme, A. (2020). The role of strategic vigilance in applying the Porter Model of the Five Forces in a sample of private hospitals. *International Journal of Research in Social Sciences and Humanities*, 10(4), 237–250. <https://doi.org/10.37648/ijrssh.v10i04.022>
- National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects and Biomedical and Behavioral Research. (1979). *The Belmont Report: Ethical principles and guidelines for the protection of human subjects of research*. <https://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/humansubjects/guidance/Belmont.html>
- Nelson, J. (2017). Using conceptual depth criteria: Addressing the challenge of reaching 150 saturation in qualitative research. *Qualitative Research*, 17, 554–570. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794116679873>
- Nofsinger, J. R. (2018). *The psychology of investing*. Routledge Taylor & Francis Group.
- Nur Aini, N. S., & Lutfi, L. (2019). The influence of risk perception, risk tolerance, overconfidence, and loss aversion towards investment decision making. *Journal of Economics, Business & Accountancy Ventura*, 21, 401. <https://doi.org/10.14414/jebav.v21i3.1663>
- Ohiomah, A., Benyoucef, M., & Andreev, P. (2020). A multidimensional perspective of business-to-business sales success: A meta-analytic review. *Industrial Marketing*

Management, 90, 435–452. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.indmarman.2020.08.011>

Olsen, J. D., McAllister, C., Grinnell, L. D., Walters, K. G., & Appunn, F. (2016).

Applying constant comparative method with multiple investigators and inter-coder reliability. *Qualitative Report*, 21(1), 26–42. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2016.2447>

Park, M., Park, J., & Kim, J. (2017). The effect of SME CEO's entrepreneurial experience on corporate performance. *Academy of Entrepreneurship Journal*, 23(2), 1–30. <https://doi.org/10.1504/JIBED.2015.070797>

Pattinson, S. (2016). Strategic thinking: Intelligent opportunism and emergent strategy the case of strategic engineering services. *Entrepreneurship and Innovation*, 17(1), 65–70. <https://doi.org/10.5367/ije.2015.0212>

Percy, W. H., Kostere, K., & Kostere, S. (2015). Generic qualitative research in psychology. *Qualitative Report*, 20(2), 76–85. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2015.2097>

Petrova, K. (2018). Part-time entrepreneurship and risk tolerance. *Journal of Applied Business and Economics*, 20(1), 120–131. <https://doi.org/10.33423/jabe.v20i1.321>

Pettersson, F., Winslott Hiselius, L., & Koglin, T. (2018). E-commerce and urban planning – comparing knowledge claims in research and planning practice. *Urban Planning and Transport Research*, 6(1), 1–21.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/21650020.2018.1428114>

Pollack, J. M., Coy, A. E., Green, J. D., & Davis, J. L. (2017). Satisfaction, investment, and alternatives predict entrepreneurs' networking group commitment and

- subsequent revenue generation. *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice*, 39, 817–837. <https://doi.org/10.1111/etap.12075>
- Polman, P. (2016). Re-establishing trust: Making business with purpose the purpose of business. In D. Barton, D. Horvath, & M. Kipping, M. (Eds.), *Re-imagining capitalism*. Oxford University Press.
- Pooser, D. M., & Browne, M. J. (2018). The effects of customer satisfaction on company profitability: Evidence from the property and casualty insurance industry. *Risk Management & Insurance Review*, 21(2), 289–308. <https://doi.org/10.1111/rmir.12105>
- Popvici, V., & Muhcina, S. (2018). Traditional versus online marketing for B2B organizations: Where the line blurs. “Ovidius” *University Annals, Economic Sciences Series*, 18(1), 382–387. <http://stec.univ-ovidius.ro/html/anale/RO/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/20-1.pdf>
- Porter, M. (2008). The five competitive forces that shape strategy. *Harvard Business Review*, 86(1), 78–93. <https://hbr.org/2008/01/the-five-competitive-forces-that-shape-strategy>
- Porter, M. E. (1998). *Competitive strategy: Techniques for analyzing industries and competitors: With a new introduction*. Free Press.
- Prasad, A., & Warriar, L. (2016). Mr. Porter and the new world of increasing returns to scale. *Journal of Management Research*, 16(1), 3–15. <http://www.i-scholar.in/index.php/jmr/article/view/111695>
- Pyrzczak, F., & Bruce, R. R. (2017). *Writing empirical research reports: A basic guide for*

students of the social and behavioral sciences (8th ed.). Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

Raj, M., Choi, S. W., Gurtekin, T. S., & Platt, J. (2018). Improving the informed consent process in hematopoietic cell transplantation: Patient, caregiver, and provider perspectives. *Biology of Blood and Marrow Transplantation*, *24*, 156–162.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bbmt.2017.08.037>

Rambe, P. (2017). Social media marketing and business competitiveness: Evidence from South African tourism. *Problems and Perspectives in Management*, *15*, 411–423.

[https://doi.org/10.21511/ppm.15\(2-2\).2017.10](https://doi.org/10.21511/ppm.15(2-2).2017.10)

Rezaei, S., Chandran, R., & Oh, Y. M. (2018). Pre-purchase user perceptions of attributes and post-purchase attitudes in building successful online retail promotional strategies. *Digital Marketing and Consumer Engagement: Concepts, Methodologies, Tools, and Applications*, *19*, 368–382.

<https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-5225-5187-4.ch019>

Rodriguez, C., & Torres, J. (2020). Central coordination and profitability in large Latin American business groups. *Journal of Business Research*, *119*, 599–609.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2020.07.007>

Rowlands, T., Waddell, N., & McKenna, B. (2015). Are we there yet? A technique to determine theoretical saturation. *Journal of Computer Information Systems*, *56*(1),

40–47. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08874417.2015.11645799>

Saarijärvi, H., Sutinen, U.-M., & Harris, L. C. (2017). Uncovering consumers' returning behavior: A study of fashion e-commerce. *International Review of Retail*,

Distribution and Consumer Research, 27, 284–299.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/09593969.2017.1314863>

Sacks, J. (2018). On militancy, self-reflection, and the role of the researcher. *Politikon*, 45(3), 438–455. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02589346.2018.1523349>

Sanders, K. (2018). Media review: Research design: Quantitative, qualitative, mixed methods, arts-based, and community-based participatory research approaches. *Journal of Mixed Methods Research*, 13(2), 263–265.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1558689817751775>

Sandhu, M. A., Al Ameri, T. Z., & Wikström, K. (2019). Benchmarking the strategic roles of the project management office (PMO) when developing business ecosystems. *Benchmarking: An International Journal*, 26(2), 452–469.

<https://doi.org/10.1108/bij-03-2018-0058>

Sato, H. (2017). Strategic consistency revisited. *Annals of Business Administrative Science*, 16, 265–273. <https://doi.org/10.7880/abas.0170921a>

Saunders, B., Sim, J., Kingstone, T., Baker, S., Waterfield, J., Bartlam, B., & Jinks, C. (2017). Saturation in qualitative research: Exploring its conceptualization and operationalization. *Quality & Quantity*, 52, 1893–1907.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-017-0574-8>

Semrau, T., & Werner, A. (2017). How exactly do network relationships pay off? The effects of network size and relationship quality on access to start-up resources. *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice*, 38, 501–525.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/etap.12011>

- Setiawan, R., Wati, S., Wardana, A., & Ikhsan, R. (2019). Building trust through customer satisfaction in the airline industry in Indonesia: Service quality and price fairness contribution. *Management Science Letters*, *5*, 1095–1102.
<https://doi.org/10.5267/j.msl.2019.10.033>
- Sharafizad, J. (2018). Informal learning of women small business owners. *Education + Training*, *60*, 82–103. <https://doi.org/10.1108/ET-01-2017-0006>
- Shields, J., & Shelleman, J. M. (2016). Management accounting systems in micro-SMEs. *Journal of Applied Management and Entrepreneurship*, *21*(1), 19–31.
<https://doi.org/10.9774/gleaf.3709.2016.ja.00004>
- Sihite, M., & Simanjuntak, M. A. (2015). The competitive strategy in green building for Indonesian stakeholders. *International Journal of Innovation, Management, and Technology*, *6*(1), 8–15. <https://doi.org/10.7763/IJIMT.2015.V6.565>
- Sisson, D. (2017). Control mutuality, social media, and organization–public relationships: A study of local animal welfare organizations’ donors. *Public Relations Review*, *43*, 179–189. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2016.10.007>
- Small Business & Entrepreneurship Council. (2018). *Facts & data on small business and entrepreneurship*. <http://sbecouncil.org/about-us/facts-and-data/>
- Small Business Administration. (2018). *2018 Small business profile* [PDF document].
<https://www.sba.gov/sites/default/files/advocacy/2018-Small-Business-Profiles-US.pdf>
- Small Business Administration. (2019a). *FY 2020 goaling guidelines*.
<https://www.sba.gov/sites/default/files/2020->

[05/FY20_Small_Business_Goaling_Guidelines_Draft_2020.pdf](#)

Small Business Administration. (2019b). *SBA table size of standards*.

https://www.sba.gov/sites/default/files/2019-08/SBA%20Table%20of%20Size%20Standards_Effective%20Aug%2019%2C%202019_Rev.pdf

Small Business Administration, Office of Advocacy. (2019). *Frequently asked questions*.

<https://cdn.advocacy.sba.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/24153946/Frequently-Asked-Questions-Small-Business-2019-1.pdf>

Snipes, R. L., & Pitts, J. (2015). Running with the Big Dogs (part A): A competitive forces and strategic analysis of the running specialty store industry. *Journal of the International Academy for Case Studies*, 21(1), 37–42.

<https://www.proquest.com/openview/311e6a3f762df3eba1e63b1599067adb/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=38869>

Soares, D., Bastos, J., Rodrigues, D., Pereira, J., & Baptista, A. (2015). Lean management methods in product development-a case study based on human respect with productivity focus. *International Journal of Lean Enterprise Research*, 1, 393–411. <https://doi.org/10.1504/IJLER.2015.076659>

Sorsa, M., Kiikkala, I., & Astedt-Kurki, P. (2015). Bracketing as a skill in conducting unstructured qualitative interviews. *Nurse Researcher*, 22(1), 8–12.

<https://doi.org/10.7748/nr.22.4.8.e1317>

Staniewski, M. W., & Awruk, K. (2021). Parental attitudes and entrepreneurial success. *Journal of Business Research*, 123, 538–546.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2020.10.039>

Stef, N., & Jabeur, S. B. (2018). The bankruptcy prediction power of new entrants.

International Journal of the Economics of Business, 25(3), 421–440.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/13571516.2018.1455389>

Su, T. S., Chen, C., Cui, X., Yang, C., & Ma, W. (2020). Consistency at different levels.

Nankai Business Review International, 11, 537–567. <https://doi.org/10.1108/nbri-01-2020-0005>

Sullivan, D. M., & Ford, C. M. (2017). How entrepreneurs use networks to address changing resource requirements during early venture development.

Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice, 38, 551–574.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/etap.12009>

Surma, J. (2016). Social exchange in online social networks: The reciprocity phenomenon on Facebook. *Computer Communications*, 73, 342–346.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/comcom.215.06.017>

Surucu, L., & Maslakci, A. (2020). Validity and reliability in quantitative research.

Business & Management Studies: An International Journal, 8(3), 2694–2726.

<https://doi.org/10.15295/bmij.v8i3.1540>

Svoboda, P. (2020). Family business - Sustainability model. *Acta Oeconomica*

Pragensia, 27(3-4), 45–60. <https://doi.org/10.18267/j.aop.627>

Swani, K., Milne, G. R., Brown, B. P., Assaf, A. G., & Donthu, N. (2017). What

messages to post? Evaluating the popularity of social media communications in

business versus consumer markets. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 62, 77–87.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.indmarman.2016.07.006>

- Tafvelin, S., & Stenling, A. (2020). A self-determination theory perspective on transfer of leadership training: The role of leader motivation. *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies*, 28, 60–75. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1548051820962504>
- Takwi, F., Enow Bate, B., Neba Akosso, V., & Sharon, B. (2020). Entrepreneurship and small business management: Critical success factors of entrepreneurs and small business managers. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 10(10), 488–503. <https://doi.org/10.6007/ijarbss/v10-i10/7650>
- Tchakoute Tchuigoua, H., Soumaré, I., & Hessou, H. T. S. (2020). Lending and business cycle: Evidence from microfinance institutions. *Journal of Business Research*, 119, 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2020.07.022>
- Thompson, G., & Glasø, L. (2018). Situational leadership theory: A test from a leader-follower congruence approach. *Leadership & Organization Development Journal*, 39, 574–591. Retrieved from <https://www.emeraldinsight.com>
- Thompson, N. A., Verduijn, K., & Gartner, W. B. (2020). Entrepreneurship-as-practice: grounding contemporary theories of practice into entrepreneurship studies. *Entrepreneurship & Regional Development*, 32(3), 247–256. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08985626.2019.1641978>
- Tuapawa, K. (2017). Interpreting experiences of students using educational online technologies to interact with teachers in blended tertiary environments: A phenomenological study. *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology*, 33(1), 163–175. <https://doi.org/10.14742/ajet.2964>

- Turner, S., & Endres, A. (2017). Strategies for enhancing small-business owners' success rates. *International Journal of Applied Management & Technology*, 16(1), 34–49. <https://doi.org/10.5590/IJAMT.2017.16.1.03>
- Tussyadiah, S. P., Kausar, D. R., & Soesilo, P. K. (2018). The effect of engagement in online social network on susceptibility to influence. *Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Research*, 42, 201–223. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1096348015584441>
- Uluskan, M., & Godfrey, A. B. (2018). Business environment-supply chain framework and benchmarking supply chain structures. *Benchmarking: An International Journal*, 25(8), 3021–3044. <https://doi.org/10.1108/bij-11-2017-0293>
- U.S. Department of Commerce. (2019). *Quarterly retail e-commerce sales 3rd quarter 2019*. https://www.census.gov/retail/mrts/www/data/pdf/ec_current.pdf
- Vance, C. D. (2015). Decision-making considerations for mid-career army officers to pursue master's degrees. *Adult Learning*, 26(3), 109–115. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1045159515583260>
- van Velthoven, M., Wang, W., Wu, Q., Li, Y., Scherpbier, R., Du, X., Chen, L., Zhang, Y., Car, J., & Rudan, I. (2018). Comparison of text messaging data collection vs face-to-face interviews for public health surveys: A cluster randomized crossover study of care-seeking for childhood pneumonia and diarrhea in rural China. *Journal of Global Health*, 8(1), 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.7189/jogh.08.010802>
- Venkatesan, R. (2017). Executing on a customer engagement strategy. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 45, 289–293. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11747-016-0513-6>

- Wamba, S. F., Akter, S., Edwards, A., Chopin, G., & Gnanzou, D. (2015). How big data can make big impact: Findings from a systematic review and a longitudinal case study. *International Journal of Production Economics*, *165*, 234–246.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijpe.2014.12.031>
- Wang, T.-C. (2018). Performance measurement and benchmarking of large-scale tourist hotels. *International Journal of Business and Economics Research*, *7*(4), 97–101.
<https://doi.org/10.11648/j.ijber.20180704.13>
- Wang, Z., & Kim, H. G. (2017). Can social media marketing improve customer relationship capabilities and firm performance? Dynamic capability perspective. *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, *39*, 15–26. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.intmar.2017.02.004>
- Wójcik, P., & Ciszewska-Mlinarič, M. (2020). Explorative and exploitative choices in response to initiative failure: Study of entrepreneurs and managers. *Entrepreneurial Business and Economics Review*, *8*(3), 83–99.
<https://doi.org/10.15678/eber.2020.080305>
- Woods, M., Paulus, T., Atkins, D. P., & Macklin, R. (2016). Advancing qualitative research using qualitative data analysis software (QDAS)? Reviewing potential versus practice in published studies using ATLAS.ti and NVivo, 1994–2013. *Social Science Computer Review*, *34*, 597–617.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0894439315596311>
- Yamamoto, H. (2021). Social media and marketing. *Japan Marketing Journal*, *40*(4), 3–5. <https://doi.org/10.7222/marketing.2021.014>

- Yang, M., Wang, J., & Zhang, X. (2021). Boundary-spanning search and sustainable competitive advantage: The mediating roles of exploratory and exploitative innovations. *Journal of Business Research*, *127*, 290–299.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2021.01.032>
- Yasheng, Y., & Jermias, J. (2016). Linking key performance indicators to new international venture survival. *Journal of International Accounting Research*, *15*(3), 31–48. <https://doi.org/10.2308/jiar-51604>
- Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods* (6th ed.). Sage Publications.
- Yoon, D.-J. (2020). Five forces model on the lodging industry of Jeju Island and its profitability determinants. *Society for Jeju Studies*, *53*, 103–129.
<https://doi.org/10.47520/jjs.2020.53.103>
- Zaefarian, G., Thiesbrummel, C., Henneberg, S. C., & Naude, P. (2017). Different recipes for success in business relationships. *Industrial Marketing Management*, *63*, 69–81. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.indmarman.2016.12.006>
- Zakharkina, L., Perets, I., & Hrybinichenko, R. (2020). Ensuring risk tolerance of business entities in conditions of innovative development. *Efektivna Ekonomika*, (7), 1519. <https://doi.org/10.32702/2307-2105-2020.7.62>
- Zamawe, F. C. (2015). The implication of using NVivo software in qualitative data analysis: Evidence-based reflections. *Malawi Medical Journal*, *27*(1), 13–15.
<https://doi.org/10.4314/mmj.v27i1.4>
- Zou, Y., & Chen, T.-L. (2020). Quality differentiation and product innovation licensing.

Economic Modelling, 87, 372–382.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econmod.2019.08.010>

Appendix: Interview Protocol

1. Introduction:

Thank you for providing your time to participate in this research study, the purpose of this qualitative multiple case study is to explore the strategies used by e-commerce entrepreneurs to achieve and maintain sustainability beyond the first 5 years of operations. Your participation in this study will aide to fill existing gaps in academic knowledge pertinent to the study's topic. Please take your time in answering each of the following questions in the greatest level of detail possible. I will not present any of your personal information in the doctoral study paper.

2. Provide the participant a copy of consent form. Ensure the participant fully understands the consent form by addressing any questions prior to signing.

3. Questions: Provide the participant ample time to answer each question, do not interrupt, and avoid any distractions. Ask probing questions as needed after each question is answered. Remind the participant that the video conference will be recorded, offer audio recording if the participant is not fully comfortable with recording of the video call.

- a) What strategies have proven successful to achieve and maintain sustainability beyond the first 5 years of operations?
- b) What strategies do you attribute the most to facilitating sustainability beyond the first 5 years of operations?
- c) How do you measure effectiveness of strategies to achieve and maintain sustainability beyond the first 5 years of operations?

- d) What were the greatest challenges in implementing effective strategies to achieve and maintain sustainability beyond the first 5 years of operations?
 - e) How did your organization address the key challenges to implement effective strategies to achieve and maintain sustainability beyond the first 5 years of operations?
 - f) What additional information can you share to enhance my understanding of the strategies you developed and implemented for achieving and maintaining your business' sustainability beyond the first 5 years of operations?
4. Collect all relevant organizational documents to include profit and loss statements, cash flow statements, and written business plan, if available.
 5. Discuss follow up member checking process.
 6. Thank the participant again, remind them that their participation is entirely voluntary, and that they can withdraw consent for use of collected information for study purposes.
 7. End of interview protocol.