

7-2022

Strategies for Sustaining Automotive Dealerships Beyond 5 Years

Lyndon Fitzgerald Taylor
Walden University

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Walden University

College of Management and Technology

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Lyndon Fitzgerald Taylor

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.

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Walden University
2022

Abstract

Strategies for Sustaining Automotive Dealerships Beyond 5 Years

by

Lyndon Fitzgerald Taylor I

MBA, Texas A & M University at Texarkana, 2016

BBA, University of Texas at El Paso, 2014

AAS, Central Texas College, 2002

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Business Administration

Walden University

July 2022

Abstract

Small businesses in the United States employ 48% of the workforce, and only 50% percent of small businesses survive beyond 5 years. Business leaders are concerned with strategies to retain and expand their customer base to mitigate business failure and enhance survivability. Grounded in the leader-member exchange theory, the purpose of my qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies automotive dealership business leaders used to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years. The participants comprised five business leaders in the automotive industry in the Central and Southwest U.S. State of Michigan. Data were collected using semistructured face-to-face interviews and a review of the organizational archival documents. Data analysis was conducted using Yin's 5-step data analysis process: five themes emerged: customer relationship management, leadership, culture, reputation, and change. A key recommendation is for business leaders to safeguard their reputation with their customers, employees, and external stakeholders as a survivability strategy. Positive social change may be affected by the contributions to improving small business leaders' acumen, survivability, employment prosperity, and increased revenues for the local, state, and federal governments.

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Dedication

I dedicate my body of work to my heavenly Father for sending His Son Jesus into the world so that I might have life more abundantly. Jesus' death on the cross, burial in the tomb, and resurrection from the grave atoned for my sins and restored my broken relationship with God. It was through the correlation of God's conceptual framework grounded in Love that I was able to fully appreciate the leader-member exchange theory as my primary lens used to explore the phenomenon under study. It is with genuine gratitude and warm regard that I dedicate my body of work to my late parents, John D., and Mary Louise Taylor, who always molded, encouraged, and nurtured my zeal for knowledge. Mom and Dad, I invite your presence from the bosom of my heart to vicariously share my momentous achievement of earning a doctorate, a feat that less than 2% of the world's population achieves. To my wife, Colonel (USA) Franyate Delana Taylor, I dedicate my research study to you for making room for the third entity (D.B.A. journey) in our relationship that limited the quantity of our time but never diminished the quality of our love. I dedicate my doctoral study to our children: Lyndon II, Whitney, Shaquita, Shean, and Quincy, as a source of inspiration to pursue all their dreams with vigor and passion to bring them to fruition. Last but not least, I dedicate my body of work to my maternal grandmother, Mrs. Eula Faye (Thomas) Brewster, who I affectionately called "Mother," who taught me the importance of having a strong work ethic. Mother often stated, "Complete every task you embark upon in this life in a manner that edifies the eternal glory of God."

Acknowledgments

To my committee chairperson Dr. Betsy J. Macht, affectionately referred to as Dr. B. within the cohort. I express my profound gratitude for your unrelenting devotion to teaching, coaching, and mentoring me during my rigorous academic pursuit of the Doctor of Business Administration (D.B.A.) degree. The 2017 Frank Dilley scholar recipient for outstanding doctoral study has enhanced Dr. B's uncanny ability to discern the appropriate time to challenge me as an independent scholar, cultivate me as a novice social science researcher, and counsel me through meticulous and rubric-centric time-sensitive feedback. My gratitude extends to Dr. Peter J. Anthony and Dr. Gregory N. Uche, the second committee chair and University Research Reviewer, respectively. Their expertise and encouragement were instrumental as I navigated and overcame numerous challenges during different stages of my D.B.A. journey. Special thanks and gratitude go out to the five automotive dealership business leaders who supported my doctoral study with their scarce time and shared their business acumen to help answer my overarching research question. I thank all the cohort members for their encouragement, invaluable feedback, and vigorous scholarly debate that made me a better independent scholar. Iron sharpeneth iron; so, a man sharpeneth the countenance of his friends (Proverbs 27:17, KJV).

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study

The U.S. economy significantly benefits from the revenue generated from the small business model. Calopa (2017) described small businesses as the backbone of the U.S. economy that made vital contributions to job creation and economic innovation. Small and medium-sized enterprises (SME) leaders' indispensable contributions are contingent on their sustainability and necessitate an urgency for research that explores the determinants of small business failure. According to the small business administration (SBA, 2018), small businesses employed 58 million employees representing 48% of the U.S. private workforce in 2014. Small businesses made up 99.9% of U.S. businesses, created 1.4 million net new jobs, and represented 97.7% of trade exports.

Background of the Problem

Despite the fiscal contributions detrimental to the U.S. economy, the SBA (2017) noted that most small businesses fail, and only 50% sustain their operations beyond 5 years. Some small business automotive dealership leaders lack the requisite strategies to achieve long-term viability. According to Williams (2014), SME failure is a consequential and intricate phenomenon requiring the consideration and engagement of social science researchers, policymakers, and community stakeholders. Researchers have noted some factors that affect the longevity of SMEs, including access to finance (Carbó-Valverde et al., 2016), the leader's business acumen, employee skills, knowledge, experience (Halberstadt et al., 2019), education (Andriyansah & Zahra, 2017), and strategic planning (Dole, 2013).

SME leaders have an inherent responsibility to formulate and implement strategies that mitigate business failure risks. The aim of this research study, grounded in the leader-member exchange (LMX) theory, was to explore strategies that business leaders used to sustain their operations beyond 5 years. Dansereau et al. (1975) posited that leaders who engaged in high-quality LMX relationships sanctioned followers to negotiate job autonomy in exchange for the followers' commitment to the long-term success and survival of the enterprise. For this reason, followers developed a sense of partnership in the organization with a vested interest in accomplishing the business leader's goal of achieving profitability and survivability. I delineated the four specific components of the *Problem Statement*: (a) the hook, (b) anchor, (c) general business problem, and (d) specific business problem.

Problem Statement

Fifty percent of all small businesses established in the United States fail to survive beyond 5 years of operation, and only one-third survive 10 years (SBA, 2018). SMEs account for 90% of all business activity in OCED (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) countries and generate 80% of their economic growth (Ramaswamy, 2020). The general business problem was that some small business leaders established automotive dealerships without the requisite training, resulting in business failure. The specific business problem was that some small business automotive dealership leaders lacked effective business strategies to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this multiple qualitative case study was to explore the business strategies implemented by small business leaders at five automotive dealerships to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years of operation. The target population consisted of five automobile dealerships and five small business leaders located in the U.S. State of Michigan. The small business leaders have continuously operated their automotive dealerships for at least 5 years. This study's data contributed to the knowledge, insights, and sustainability strategies small business leaders used in the automotive dealership industry. The implications for positive social change included developing small business leaders that provided continuous employment, which led to economic stability for the municipal, state, and federal governments.

Nature of the Study

Researchers may select the qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-method approach for conducting research (Chih-Pei & Yan-Yi, 2017). The qualitative method involves a research question that answers *what*, *how*, or *why* a phenomenon exists (Cruz & Tantia, 2017). The qualitative research design was appropriate for this study rather than a quantitative or mixed-method research design. Researchers use the quantitative research design to investigate the relationships among variables by measuring and analyzing numerical data through statistical techniques (Basias & Pollalis, 2018). The quantitative research method was not chosen because I did not need to establish a statistical conclusion about the relationships or differences within the targeted population.

Researchers use the mixed methods research design with quantitative and qualitative research techniques to address complicated research questions and develop a deeper theoretical understanding of the phenomenon (Molina-Azorin, 2016). The mixed-methods design did not fit this study because I chose not to use quantitative approaches unrelated to my central research question, which would not take participants' experiences or perceptions into consideration.

The qualitative research designs that I considered for this study were: (a) phenomenology, (b) ethnography, (c) narrative, and (d) case study. Researchers using the phenomenological design seek to gain a deeper understanding of the participants' lived experiences (Englander, 2016). The phenomenology research design was not chosen because I did not collect data regarding the meanings of participants' lived experiences. With an ethnography research design, researchers study the culture and geographical location of the participants, through which researchers become an embedded part of the research (Hammersley, 2018). I did not choose an ethnography design because I did not focus my proposed study on a particular cultural phenomenon. Researchers use the narrative research design to tell participants about their personal experiences as research data (Berry, 2016). The narrative design did not fit this study because I explored multiple strategies rather than a single personal event or experience. Yin (2018) noted that using a case study research design enables a researcher to collect data from real-life scenarios and ask questions about *how* and *what* in nature. Researchers use the multiple case study design to collect a wide array of data through cross-case comparisons to recognize

emergent patterns of relationships among complex constructs (Battistella et al., 2017).

The multiple case study design was most appropriate for this study because I collected data from five small business leaders in the automotive dealership industry that related to strategies that sustained their business operations beyond 5 years.

Research Question

The overarching research question for my study is: What business strategies do small business leaders in the automotive dealership industry implement that sustained their businesses beyond 5 years?

Interview Questions

Participants in this research study responded to open-ended interview questions in a semistructured process. I used the following interview questions in my research study:

1. What business strategies have you implemented that led to the sustainment of your enterprise beyond 5 years?
2. What key impediments did you encounter while implementing these sustainment strategies?
3. What steps did you take to mitigate these key impediments?
4. What, if any, types of formal education, business strategy or training did you undertake before establishing your business, and how did it prepare you as a small business leader?
5. Based on your experiences, what skills were most critical in developing and implementing a business strategy to survive beyond 5 years?

6. What key personnel was most critical when developing and implementing a business strategy to survive beyond 5 years?
7. How did your role as a leader, and employees' roles as followers, correlate into a business strategy that enabled your business to survive beyond 5 years?
8. What key business resources (land, labor, capital, IT, or entrepreneurial) were necessary when developing and implementing your organization's successful business strategies to survive beyond 5 years?
9. What additional information about the development and implementation of business survivability strategies would you like to add to enhance my understanding?

Conceptual Framework

The LMX theory of leadership served as the conceptual framework for this research study. Dansereau et al. (1975) developed the LMX theory in the 1970s. Before the inception of the LMX, researchers assumed leadership as something leaders universally only did toward their followers. The LMX theory would challenge this assumption by examining the differences in relationships between leaders and followers (Dansereau et al., 1975). The following key constructs underlie the LMX theory: (a) vertical dyads, (b) in-group and out-group, (c) role-making, (d) team making, and (e) high-quality relationships (Dansereau et al., 1975). Within LMX theory, two types of dyadic relationships exist high-quality and low-quality. In high-quality (in-group) LMX relationships, both parties reciprocated information, resources, time, and emotional effort,

giving subordinates more autonomy in decision-making (Arif et al., 2017). In contrast, subordinates in low-quality (out-group) LMX relationships had a low trust, less support, infrequent exchange, fewer rewards, and fewer benefits (Arif et al., 2017). The low-quality LMX members demonstrated less job satisfaction, leading to substantial job turnover. The LMX theory is transformational in that it enables leaders and followers to move beyond their self-interest to pursue the organization's greater good.

The LMX theory applies to my study because the high-quality relationship between leader and followers fosters trust that can lead to competitive advantage, customer satisfaction, and survivability. LMX affirmed the high-quality relationship typified by high levels of trust, increased communication channels, rewards, and favors that sustain both the follower and the organization (Li et al., 2018). The LMX theory provided an exploratory lens for understanding the sustainability strategies that automobile dealership business leaders used to survive beyond 5 years.

Operational Definitions

The following italicized definitions for industry-specific or unique words and phrases were used in this research study:

Customer churn: Customer churn occurs when a percentage of customers cancel their service with a firm in a given period; an organization must exceed the churn rate to grow (Adebiyi et al., 2016).

De novo: De novo enterprises describe fledgling firms founded by entrepreneurs without prior work experience in a chosen industry (Passaro et al., 2017).

Financial information asymmetry: Financial information asymmetry is a fundamental concept in economics that highlights the SMEs' inability to obtain capital because lending institutions cannot observe the organization's financial information (Back et al., 2018).

Human capital: Human capital is an economic category that delineates an individual's innate attributes such as a set of creative skills, personal qualities, and motivation whose reasonable use contributes to organizational profitability, psychological benefit, moral satisfaction, and social prestige (Bilan et al., 2020).

Human capital externalities: Human capital externalities are when workers benefit from being close to a dense, skilled labor market, where they learn from others. The productivity-enhancing benefits of labor markets are called human capital externalities, knowledge spillover effect, or learning externalities (Song et al., 2019).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

Assumptions

Assumptions are statements or ideas that a researcher perceives to be true; however, these assumptions are only tentative, as they are not scientifically verified (Brinkmann, 2016). In my research study, I have noted several assumptions. The first assumption was that a qualitative multiple case study approach was the most viable method to explore strategies that automotive dealership leaders employ to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years. Second, the target population of five automotive dealerships and five small business leaders in the U.S. State of Michigan provided sufficient data for

my research study. The third assumption was that the participants would be knowledgeable in their employment area and provide truthful responses to the interview questions, devoid of bias. The final assumption was that business leaders could use the results of this research study to comprehend multiple strategies to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years.

Limitations

Limitations are potential weaknesses beyond a researcher's control, affecting the findings associated with a research study (Bailey, 2018; Yin, 2018). In my research study, I have identified three potential limitations. The first limitation was the sample size. The sample size chosen for this study included five participants to compile adequate information to understand the phenomenon under study better. Second, the geographic location of participants may not be sufficient to achieve accurate and knowledgeable feedback in the data collection process, which leads to generalization. The participants' perceptions and beliefs may lead to biases while sharing their business strategies, experiences, and knowledge.

Delimitations

Qualitative researchers establish delimitations to delineate the boundaries of the study that demonstrate how findings may or may not add to the body of knowledge (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Yin (2018) noted that the researcher uses delimitations to narrow or control certain aspects of the research. The selected boundaries for this research study included the conceptual framework, the geographical location of the target

population, and the participant selection for interviews. The conceptual framework for this study was the LMX theory. The conceptual framework serves as a theoretical lens through which the researcher views the research question (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The geographic location of this study was the U.S. State of Michigan, which may have affected the generalizability of the findings. I purposively selected five participants for my study from a sample whose experience and knowledge may not be generalizable to the larger population.

Significance of the Study

The findings of my research study may have contributed to understanding how small business leaders in the automotive dealership industry developed business strategies that sustained their businesses beyond 5 years. My research study may provide business leaders with a model for increasing employee engagement. Business leaders employ engagement strategies to improve customer loyalty and affective commitment culminating in a competitive advantage that automotive dealership leaders gain over their competitors (Bhat & Darzi, 2016; Jena et al., 2017). Employees developed an affective commitment to the organization when they were involved in decision-making, and the organization was decentralized in its orientation (Jena et al., 2017). Small business leaders could benefit from this research study by learning business sustainability strategies.

Business leaders can use the results of my qualitative multiple case research study to influence positive social change. The business leaders' strategies used by

contemporary and future business leaders shared from interviews in my study may stimulate the local economy and increase tax revenue. The implications for positive social change include the potential for automotive dealership leaders to elevate the quality of life for employees and community stakeholders (Vazonienė & Kiaušienė, 2018). The results of this study may have provided business leaders with sustainability strategies that supported the growth of new enterprises, jobs, and capital investment that will benefit the local community.

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies that automotive business leaders used in the U.S. State of Michigan to sustain business beyond 5 years of operations. Effective leadership plays a vital role in the day-to-day operations of small business organizations (Murphy & Leonard, 2016). The dynamic global business environment has made it imperative for organizations to modify their policies, rules, and regulations through change management to survive and remain competitive (Arif et al., 2017). In the literature review, I analyzed and synthesized published research for strategies automotive business leaders used to sustain businesses beyond 5 years of operations. The literature included contemporary and seminal peer-reviewed research journals and books regarding the conceptual framework of leader-member exchange (LMX) theory. To retrieve the peer-reviewed and seminal journal articles for professional review, I used the Walden University library database, which allowed access to ABI/INFORM Complete, Business Complete, ProQuest Central,

Emerald Management, Sage Premier, Academic Search Complete, and Google Scholar as a primary source for research. The following keywords were used self-finance ability search for pertinent articles: *small business failure, business failure, business success, business longevity, small business owner, small business sustainability, business survival, and leader-member exchange (LMX) theory.*

I arranged the literature review according to strategies small business leaders used to sustain their automotive dealership operations beyond 5 years. I used 240 peer-reviewed journal articles in the literature review. Of the 240 peer-reviewed journals, 36(15%) were published before 2017, and 204(85%) were published between 2018 and 2022, within 5 years of the anticipated date of the Walden University chief academic officer's approval (see Table 1).

Table 1
Source of Data for the Literature Review

Type of sources	Total references	Total published before 2018	Total published in or after 2018	% Published in or after 2018
Books	6	3	3	50%
Peer-reviewed journals	240	36	204	85%
Non-peer-reviewed journals	4	0	4	100%
Total	250	39	211	84%

Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) Theory

The LMX theory of leadership served as the conceptual framework for this research study. LMX, at its inception, was known as the vertical dyad linkage theory,

which Dansereau et al. (1975) introduced as an alternative to the extant leadership styles. Before developing the LMX theory, leaders adopted a prevailing average leadership style that failed to recognize followers as individuals (Dansereau et al., 1975; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). The vertical dyad linkage was predicated on a time constraint and scarce resources that forced the leader to invest in a finite number of followers, creating a differentiated dyad between leader and follower (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Kahya & Sahin, 2018; Muzammal et al., 2017).

Leaders establish high-quality relationships (in-groups) with subordinates that offer the greatest returns (Munshi & Haque, 2017; Yu et al., 2018). Graen et al. (1982) explored the differentiated relationship of the dyad linkage theory and transitioned the name to the LMX theory. The primary focus of the vertical dyad linkage theory was describing the differentiated relationships between leader and follower, whereas the LMX focused on relationship quality and how they evolved (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Martin et al., 2018). Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995) expanded the classification system beyond the just-leader, utilizing leadership domains to include the follower or the dyadic relationship focused on the LMX.

Leader Domain

Small business leaders engaged followers in a vertical exchange relationship that transcended the employment contract. The leader's role was critical in facilitating follower performance; thus, they were considered the central players in the LMX that determined organizational effectiveness and individual outcomes (Kahya & Sahin, 2018;

Kong et al., 2019). Leaders used the LMX theory to emphasize the importance of establishing distinct relationships with each subordinate through a system of exchanges to develop organizational expectations that influence job performance (Kim et al., 2017; Naktiyok & Kula, 2018). A leader's confirming communicative style molds the ideas and values of followers that positively impact job satisfaction, productivity, and retention (Kim et al., 2017; Rezapour & Ardabili, 2017). Garg and Dhar (2017) and Kong et al. (2019) agreed that LMX was based on the social exchange theory (SET), which delineated the system of reciprocal exchanges between leader and follower that fostered organizational values.

Follower Domain

The quality of the LMX, whether high or low, determines which strategy a subordinate may use to influence a leader to observe how the leader reacts to a specific influence tactic. The tactics employed by subordinates to influence leaders were (a) assertiveness, (b) exchange, (c) ingratiation, (d) sanctions, (e) rationality, (f) upward appeal, (g) blocking, and (h) coalitions (Byun et al., 2017). Naktiyok and Kula (2018) defined a psychological contract as a follower's belief that an obligation exists between the leader and the follower. When there was a mutual fit between the anticipated psychological contract and the anticipated psychological contract, both the leader and follower experienced positive results (Naktiyok & Kula, 2018).

Organizational Culture (OC1)

SME business leaders create an organizational culture to cultivate employee behavior toward norms and values that support organizational innovativeness. Employees bring a portion of themselves into any group, and as they interact socially, their values intermingle and constantly integrate and create OC1 (Lee et al., 2018a; Meng & Berger, 2019). Organizational culture impacts employee recruitment, innovation, productivity, and retention. Every organization has a particular culture and subculture, consisting of assumptions, values, and norms that direct the activities within an organization (Kaul, 2018; Nikpour, 2017). In my professional experience, employees create a subculture to reinforce or deviate from their organization's core cultural ideologies. In 1979, Pettigrew was credited with being the first to launch the term *organizational culture*, as it became a dominant topic in the decades that followed.

Academic researchers have defined organizational culture in various ways without consensus on the term. In 1983, Schein defined OC1 as a pattern of basic assumptions adopted through internal integration by organizational groups to solve external and internal problem-solving. Organizational leaders are the standard-bearers of organizational culture, and they model the culture as an example for employees to emulate. Solutions that proved valid taught new members the correct way to perceive, think, and feel concerning problem-solving (Elsbach & Stigliana, 2018; Schein, 2010). The indoctrination of organizational culture at new employee orientation may facilitate a socially good fit between employer and employee. Schein (1983) stressed that OC1 was

not about visible organizational conduct and practices but invisible assumptions like truth, reality, and human nature. The leaders appeal to their employees' cognitive assumptions to obtain the desired behaviors aligned with the organizational culture. Those visible features included external buildings, clothing, stories, myths, languages, and rites. Scholars have failed to reach a consensus on the definition or concept of OC1 (Calciolari et al., 2018; Porter et al., 2018). SME leaders can use organizational culture as a resource to combat external threats within the business environment.

Only the top echelons of leaders uniquely positioned within the organization can effectuate organizational culture. Sheppard (1994) posited that when organizational leaders had protracted exposure to operating in a dynamic business environment, it threatened their firm's existence. Adapting to changing environmental threats such as technical innovation, increased competition, and continuous customer needs have long been a concern of organizational leaders (Farrell, 2018; Selzer & Foley, 2018). Leaders should account for these dynamic changes in the internal and external business environment by implementing a culture that incorporates integration and adaptability. One resource organizational leaders have at their disposal that might mitigate the challenges in dynamic environments is their OC1 (Denison & Mishra, 1995; Nikpour, 2017; Schein, 2010).

Small business leaders implement culture to align organizational values that emphasize productivity, customer satisfaction, and innovation. Leaders who implemented effective OC1 that functioned as an adaptation process enabled employees to discern

environmental threats, develop remedies, and make changes rapidly (Gorondutse & Hilman, 2019; Villaluz & Hechanova, 2019). SME leaders play a pivotal role in implementing the best-fit culture to sustain the organization by accomplishing its goals and objectives.

Significance of Leadership Influence on Organizational Culture (OC1)

The construction of OC1 is never instantaneous. Organizational founders and leaders are responsible for establishing, implementing, and instituting organizational culture. Schein (2010), a leading advocate in the establishment of OC1, explored the role played by the founder and leader in creating OC1. Organizational culture emanated from myriad sources, predominately from the beliefs, values, and assumptions of the enterprises' founders and leaders (Schein, 2010; Xie, 2019). Employees are intuitively focused on their leaders' priorities and how they reward those who adhere to the desired behavior. Organizational culture was also influenced by group members' learning experiences and the contemporary values, beliefs, and assumptions of the organization's new employees (Abu Arrah et al., 2018; Maamari & Saheb, 2018). The organization benefits from the values, beliefs, and behaviors of new employees that serve as a bulwark against organizational culture groupthink. Leaders influenced OC1 through strategy implementation, practices, values, leadership style, and leading-by-example (Rahil, 2019; Schein, 2010). The leader's leadership style is vital in implementing effective organizational culture. According to Fisher and Wilmoth (2018) and Schein (2010),

leaders influenced OC1 through their actions and behaviors that espoused their values, goals, and expectations.

The owner and small business leader can rapidly shape organizational culture with the flexibility to enact policies and strategies without going through a bureaucratic process. Leaders that inculcated their employees with OC1 and provided strategic directions during the fledgling stage of the organization had a positive impact on the enterprises' operations (Pawirosumarto et al., 2017; Vodonick, 2018). During the inception of an organization, employees share their experiences and best practices that homogenize organizational culture. When leaders cultivate a strong OC1, they can align the enterprise's members with its strategic initiatives and industrial market (Irwan, 2018; O'Reilly et al., 2014; Pawirosumarto et al., 2017). Strong organizational culture often reflects the leaders' organizational strategy, vision, and mission. Embedding refers to a cultural element that leaders use to get employees to solve a problem through explicit teachings and implicit messages that the leader may be unaware of (Schein, 1983, 2010). Leaders used *embedding* as a primary mechanism that reinforced and preserved the enculturating process (Schein, 1983, 2010). Leaders use the mechanisms listed below to embed a value or assumption they hold, which could be conflicted, ambiguous, explicit, or implicit:

- Formal statements of organizational philosophy, including charters, creeds, materials used for recruitment and selection, and socialization.
- Design of physical spaces, facades, and buildings.

- Deliberate role modeling, teaching, and coaching by leaders.
- Explicit reward and status system, promotion criteria.
- Stories, legends, myths, and parables about key people events.
- What leaders pay attention to, measure, and control.
- Leader reaction to critical incidents and organizational crisis (times when organizational survival is threatened, norms are unclear or are unchallenged, insubordination occurs).
- How the organization is designed and structured.
- Organizational systems and procedures.
- Criteria used for recruitment, selection, promotion, leveling off, retirement, and ex-communicating employees (Schein, 1983, 2010). When organizational members possessed a shared meaning of the organization's goal and values, they acted in the firm's best interest, responded appropriately to threats, and improved its chance of survival (Elsbach & Stigliana, 2018; Magsi et al., 2018).

Models of Organizational Culture

Leaders use organizational culture models to bolster their knowledge and evaluate their organizations' cultural complexities. Several divergent theoretical models and classifications were designed to analyze and interpret different cultures and cultural dimensions (Hofstede, 2011; Wahyuningsih et al., 2019). SME leaders should identify and implement the cultural dimension that compliments their worldview, business acumen, and organizational objectives. When Denison's (1990) model (DM) emerged, it

delineated the development of OC1 and addressed culture as the need for internal integration and external adaptation (Denison et al., 2004; Shehadeh et al., 2016). Business leaders should adopt an organizational culture that mitigates the internal and external fluctuations within the business environment. The DM identified four traits (employee involvement, internal consistency, strong mission, and adaptability) of OC1 dimensions that might impact an organization's capacity to be effective (Lee et al., 2018b; Schein, 2010). The employee involvement trait forms the foundation for the other three traits; without employee involvement, it would be impossible to gauge an organization's effective capacity. The trait of employee involvement of the DM demonstrated how the organization leaders encouraged employees to make decisions through empowerment and cohesion (Al-sada et al., 2017; Lee et al., 2018b).

Employee involvement is critical to building consensus in constructing new ideas, norms, and organizational values. When employees were allowed involvement in the organizational decision-making process, they were more apt to take responsibility and accountability for their actions (Ketprapakorn & Kantabutra, 2019; Lee et al., 2018b). Inclusion into the decision-making process gives employees a sense of ownership in the organization and its success. The consistency trait denoted the dissemination of clear and distinctive guidelines based on consistent values that members followed to reach consensus when disputes occurred (Lee et al., 2018b; O'Reilly et al., 2014).

Organizational members use the consistency trait to validate and interpret the organizational leaders' original guidelines. The adaptability trait, on the external

spectrum, refers to organizational flexibility to learn from its mistakes and respond to environmental change and stakeholder needs (O'Reilly et al., 2014; Pathirange et al., 2020). Organizational leaders do not use the adaptability trait to assign employee blame but rather as a teachable moment enabling employees to remain attentive to the needs of the internal and external stakeholders. Organizational members with the adaptability trait demonstrated the ability to translate the business environment's demands into realization (O'Reilly et al., 2014; Shehadeh et al., 2016). The mission trait refers to how organizational leaders delineate strategic objectives, directions, and long-term goals (Denison et al., 2004; Sadaf et al., 2019). Some business leaders may choose formal training, organizational policies, the intranet, and work retreats.

Business leaders may use many ways to disseminate their strategic objectives and short and long-term goals. According to Mohammadi (2020), the four dimensions of the model stressed divergent cultural utilities, where consistency and mission advocated stability, while involvement and adaptability endorsed change. In contrast, many researchers have questioned three of the four underlying DM dimensions of whether it created a theory or culture. With the exception of the adaptability trait, it is unclear what is distinctively cultural about the remaining three traits of the DM. For example, a firm's mission statement defines the purpose it exists, the need it satisfies, and the value it provides to shareholders (Wiśniewska, 2018; Zeb et al., 2018).

The business leader provides a synopsis of where the organization currently stands, its value proposition, where it is going, and the plan to get there. Many

researchers rejected the notion that DM's mission trait was subordinate to OC1 or a part of it (Magsi et al., 2018; Wahyuningsih et al., 2019). Similarly, DM's employee involvement trait refers to the organizational policies and procedures used to engage and motivate employees (Kokina & Ostrovska, 2014; Wahyuningsih et al., 2019). Written policies and procedures provide employees with tangible documents they can reference without their leadership being present. Again, it is theoretically possible for an organization to possess strong OC1 and leaders to fail to solicit their employees' involvement (Kokina & Ostrovska, 2014; Warrick, 2017). A small business leader may not realize organizational culture to its full potential devoid of employee involvement. DM's consistency trait assessed the amount of consent in existence among organizational members, not the substance of OC1 (Kokina & Ostrovska, 2014; Wahyuningsih et al., 2019). According to Magsi et al. (2018) and Pathirange et al. (2020), when compared to Schein's (2010) three layers of culture, the DM adaptability trait was the stand-alone trait that reflected norms and values of OC1.

Some business leaders have implemented the quantitative cultural model to develop their organizational culture. According to Hofstede (1993), the quantitative cultural dimensions model compared surveys of national culture dimensions instead of organizational culture. The macro approach to surveying only the national cultural dimensions may fail to incorporate the cultural dimensions or nuances at the organizational level. Hofstede (1993) argued that national differences in work-related values, beliefs, and norms could be interpreted according to their statistical association

with four major national culture dimensions. A mixed-method approach to national differences in cultural dimensions may exhibit a positive correlation between the individuals' lived experiences and the national statistical association. Hofstede (1993) proposed a culture framework that consisted of (a) a power distance index (PDI), (b) individualism (IDV) versus collectivism, (c) masculinity (MAS) versus femininity, (d) an uncertainty avoidance index (UAI), (e) a long-term and short-term orientation (LTO), and (f) indulgence versus restraint. With these six cultural dimensions, Hofstede provided business leaders a mechanism to analyze cultural values within their organizations. Power distance was how the perceived less powerful organizational members accepted the unequal power distribution within an organization (Hofstede, 2011; Pathirange et al., 2020). Rather than requiring employees to accept their role in the out-group, LMX leaders encourage employees to join the in-group with equal power distribution. Organizations with high-power distance cultures expect subordinates to display loyalty and respect toward superiors (Hofstede, 2011; Wahyuningsih et al., 2019). During my tenure in the U.S. Army, leaders used a hierarchical culture grounded in the subordinate's fealty to the U.S. Constitution, the President of the United States, and the officers appointed over them. Individualism referred to the degree of autonomy employees possessed over their work assignments compared to collectivism, where a group reached a consensus on shared tasks through a collaborative process (Hofstede, 2011; Warrick, 2017). A salesperson may possess more autonomy in their work assignments than employees in the marketing or research and design (R&D) departments based on the

organizational structure. Collectivism may be preferred by the salesperson or the employees in marketing, and R&D could prefer individualism.

Business leaders must be cognizant of the specific organizational culture type germane to their organization to respond appropriately in nurturing the culture climate. Leaders in organizations with individualistic cultures value individualistic expression, personal time, and autonomy (Khan & Knox, 2017; Vasile & Nicolescu, 2016). Leaders in collectivist cultures valued a sense of belonging, reciprocation, and respect for tradition (Minkov et al., 2017). In individualistic organizational cultures, leaders expect their employees to take care of themselves, performing only contractual duties, and collectivist organizational cultures breed in-groups and work outside the box. Masculinity versus its opposite, femininity, denoted the disposition of roles between the genders and how assertive values outweighed compassionate values (Hofstede, 2011; Vasile & Nicolescu, 2016). Hofstede (1993) noted that dominant values in masculinity-oriented cultures included assertiveness, ambition, and competition. Conversely, dominant values in femininity-oriented cultures included physical security, quality of life, and a harmonious environment (Minkov et al., 2017; Vasile & Nicolescu, 2016).

The terms masculinity and femininity seem to express Hofstede's biased belief that men possessed strong cultural values and women possessed weak cultural values. The terms nor the philosophy are appropriate for contemporary usage, and I cannot condone it. Substituting more gender-neutral or inclusive terms may render Hofstede's work historically inaccurate. Uncertainty avoidance involves how uncertain, ambiguous,

or unknown situations create perceptions of treatment among employees (Hofstede, 2011; Vasile & Nicolescu, 2016). Leaders in organizations with uncertainty-avoiding cultures mitigated the possibility of unusual or unknown situations by implementing strict behavioral codes and disapproval of deviant opinions (Hofstede, 2011; Minkov et al., 2017). Indulgence versus restraint cultures stands for organizations that allow employees to gratify basic human desires in pursuit of life enjoyment instead of an organization that does not (Hofstede, 2011; Khan & Knox, 2017; Minkov et al., 2017).

Determining which culture is dominant within the organization depends on the lived experience of its founder or leader. For example, in an indulged OC1, freedom of speech would be seen as a basic human desire, whereas in a restrained OC1, freedom of speech would not be a primary concern (Hofstede, 2011; Minkov et al., 2017). In indulgence cultures, employees elevate the sanctity of life above labor burdens. In contrast, in restraint cultures, employees believe work is preeminent to pursuing the amenities of life. Hofstede's data delineated that different organizations within the same national culture can be distinguished by their daily practices and not by values, contrary to Schein's (2010) work (O'Reilly et al., 2014; Tang et al., 2016). Leaders must identify and exploit the benefits of the symbiotic relationship between OC1 and organizational change (OCh). To effectuate organizational change, organizational leaders should delineate the firm's desired state in the future by expressing it in numerical terms to foster the desired behaviors and attitudes of the employees (Lumbers, 2018; Stouten et al., 2018).

Organizational Change (OCh)

In the modern economic climate, organizational leadership must respond expeditiously to changes in the domestic, global, and technology markets. The leader's successful management of OCh is a critical factor for the organization to survive and succeed in today's progressive and turbulent business arena (Bakari et al., 2017; Burnes et al., 2018). For this reason, business leaders should recognize organizational change as an inevitable undertaking that aligns their operations with contemporary business models. A myriad of business factors can necessitate OCh, such as sustaining a competitive advantage, innovation, technology, and globalization (Endrejat et al., 2017; Fattore et al., 2018). To achieve a competitive advantage, leaders must overcome the continuous changes in the domestic business and economic cycles that emanate from the global business environment. Organizational change was defined as a managed system, process, or behavioral response used to abrogate the status quo over time and create a new system to conduct business (Parsells, 2017; Thakur & Srivastava, 2018). By gradually implementing change in the organization, business leaders can help mitigate the shock of uncertainty that causes employee resistance to change. Organizational leaders assume change agents' role to promote a commitment to change while affording opportunities for employee involvement in decisions toward said change (Burnes et al., 2018; Parsells, 2017). To plan and implement change successfully, business leaders can use participative decision-making with employees to partner with them as change agents in the change initiative.

Business leaders should consider the impact on employees, customers, suppliers, and the community's needs concerning organizational culture. A myriad of stakeholder groups exists within the organizations' internal and external environment to consider when planning for OCh (Reed & Higgins, 2018; Vos & Rupert, 2018). The successful implementation of OCh relies on the leader's vision for change and the stakeholders' and employees' willingness to embrace it. Gaining the employees' collaboration was the most critical component that drove the organizational change initiative (Betancourt et al., 2017; Popa, 2017). Successful organizational change results from direct employee engagement in the process. The change management efforts toward designing new products or services were classified as technological, structural, and behavioral changes (Popa, 2017; Rodat, 2018).

Leaders should ensure adequate training is provided to employees to expand their knowledge of the new skills required for new products and services. The technological change included ways to revitalize resources into new products or services; structural change referred to modernizing the organizational structure to increase work efficiency; and behavioral change mitigation of resistance to OCh (Burnes & Bargal, 2017; Popa, 2017). Structural changes require organizational leaders to outline the synergistic efforts needed from every facet of the organization to succeed. Some researchers have argued that most change management initiatives fail to produce OCh 70% of the time (Lehmann, 2017; Sawitri & Wahyuni, 2018). Organizational leaders are likely to successfully

implement the change initiative by identifying the need for change and the potential benefits to employees and the enterprise.

Vision for Change

Business leaders use vision statements to articulate how the organization can be innovative in a future business environment. The leader's vision for change should communicate a compelling expression of the targeted organizational change end-state and a departure from the status quo (Betancourt et al., 2017; Stouten et al., 2018). When business leaders frequently communicate their goals, strategies, and tactics within the organization, it can reduce the anxiety that employees may exhibit during change implementation. Leaders must articulate the gaps between the organization's present state and the desired state for employees to appreciate the need for OCh (Petrou et al., 2018; Sawitri & Wahyuni, 2018). Using the transformational approach of the LMX, employees with high-quality relationships with their leaders accept organizational change due to established mutual trust and respect. Kotter (2012) and Stouten et al. (2018) argued that leaders used the OCh vision to convert organizational opportunities into actions and delineate how the change initiative was disseminated throughout the organization. Employees may be less resistant to change and positively believe when organizational leaders define and support their career progression. The preliminary OCh vision should be communicated as a proposal and not a permanent plan to ensure that the employees' concerns and opinions were a part of the process (Schulz-Knappe et al., 2019; Van den Heuvel et al., 2017). By giving the employees a voice in the organizational change

process, leaders demonstrate everyone's importance in achieving successful change. For example, if employees believed they fully envisioned the reason for organizational change and regarded it as meaningful, they had a more favorable attitude toward change (Betancourt et al., 2017; Oreg, 2017).

Open and candid dialogue is a vital aspect of communicating the OCh vision. Organizational leaders should not merely talk about the vision of change; they must also personify and model their future posture (By, 2020; Faupel & Süß, 2019). Organizational employees pay close attention to what their leaders say. The employees' willingness to adhere to change relies on their observance of the leader walking the talk.

Leaders must prefer to change interventions and implement designs that align with the organizational culture, identity, strategy, and resources (By, 2020; Syahmi et al., 2019). The organizational change affects all facets of the enterprise, and leaders must anticipate its impact on culture, resources, stakeholders, and strategy. SME leaders must delineate the contemporary roles and responsibilities of employees in the change process and avoid specifying organizational structures and systems to be changed (Busse & Doganer, 2018; Stouten et al., 2018).

Communicating the Change

Change leaders must communicate the necessity for organizational change to highlight their desired outcome. A successful change communication strategy orchestrated by organizational leaders should address the informational and emotional needs of the employees thoroughly (Royce, 2018; Varney, 2017). Morale is a critical

element of the change process; leaders should advance what the employees need and articulate it to them. Communicating the change directives and soliciting employee participation created positive synergy in the organization toward realizing change (Appelbaum et al., 2018; Busse & Doganer, 2018). Communicating change achieved two vital tasks; first, it disseminates information, and second, it integrates members of the organization in the process (Oreg et al., 2018; Schulz-Knappe et al., 2019).

Organizational change is more likely achieved when information is disseminated effectively, and the leader solicits employees' input in the change process. Employees were prone to reconsider their initial assumption of how fair the change would be when leaders were exemplars of the change (Oreg et al., 2018; Soenen et al., 2017). Business leaders must delineate the benefits of OCh on employee's salary, promotion (extrinsic motivators), job autonomy, and satisfaction (intrinsic motivators) (Appelbaum et al., 2018; Oreg et al., 2018).

Change agents (leaders) must make trust-building a core component at the inception of the change process. The key success factor in achieving organizational change was having organizational trust, encompassing dimensions like honesty, integrity, loyalty, and openness (Koprulu et al., 2017; Şahin et al., 2017; Thakur & Srivastava, 2018). Organizational leaders that have established trust with employees over an extended period before a change initiative are more likely to lead to a successful endeavor. Effective change communication by leadership fostered an infrastructure of mutual trust where employees voiced dissenting views, reached a compromise, and

ultimately achieved consensus (Appelbaum et al., 2018; Faupel & Süß, 2019). Business leaders are incapable of recognizing every detrimental obstacle to change. Leaders should negotiate in good faith with employees to remedy any dissent. Employees who relied upon and trusted their organizational leaders were more open to change and perceived their change communication as credible (Rafferty & Restubog, 2017; Schulz-Knappe et al., 2019). According to Asadi (2019) and Oreg et al. (2018), trust helped focus the employees' attention on what leaders articulated concerning change and reduced the sense of threat associated with it.

Resistance to Change

Employees are often slow to adopt organizational change for numerous reasons. Resistance to change is described as the act of opposing or coping with modifications that alter the workplace's status quo (Galli, 2018; Kotter, 1995). Often employees are reluctant to change because they have mastered their craft within the business's status quo. Employees resisted change when it was introduced poorly, affecting the quality of their work when they did not understand the reason for the change (Burnes & Bargal, 2017; Rosenbaum et al., 2018). Business leaders must recognize that employees aspire by not only logic but also a desire to contribute to something larger than themselves. The presence of opportunity seeking and resistance with employees in the workplace provided a more comprehensive picture of a span of strategic reactions available to organizational leaders facing institutional pressures (Dwyer, 2019; Rosenbaum et al., 2018). Davis and

Fifolt (2018) posited that two paradigms were involved in explaining organizational change resistance: the traditional paradigm and the modern paradigm.

Leaders used the traditional paradigm to manage the performance of change resistance to specific objectives or expectations. In contrast, leaders used the modern paradigm to manage losses and gains, including employee engagement at the beginning of the process change (Davis & Fifolt, 2018). Resistance to change occurred when leaders had not identified a balanced process so that the change would be viewed as useful to the organization and its employees (Amarantou et al., 2018; Shimoni, 2017). Sometimes business leaders feel that organizational change is at their discretion by virtue of ownership, and employees should simply conform to change. Organizational leaders that failed to designate a change agent to lead the implementation efforts encountered more resistance from employees than leaders in firms that appointed a change agent (Chinyerem et al., 2018; Rodat, 2018). When employees have no role model to emulate, the change initiative, failure is almost inevitable. Factors such as organizational climate and leadership style helped mitigate the potential negative effects that employees' resistance to change had on their performance (Niess & Duhamel, 2018; Shimoni, 2017). Several change models exist that organizational leaders can select and tailor to fit their organizational change initiatives.

Linear Organizational Change Models

The throughput of an organizational change system is composed of several processes that help to realize change. The concept of resistance to change was rooted in

Kurt Lewin's (1947) unfreezing, moving, and freezing organizational change model, which stated that driving forces sought to bring about change or resistance (Davis & Fifolt, 2018; Rosenbaum et al., 2018). Organizational leaders may use the step-wise approach to allow employees time to work toward the new change initiative incrementally. The unfreezing phase enabled leaders to establish a change vision, develop the change plan, and prepare the organization to transition to a new system (Amarantou et al., 2018; Stouten et al., 2018). Through the unfreezing step, employees are exposed to the change vision, participate in the change plan, and accept the change transition. During the moving phase, leaders implement the organization's contemporary changes, modifying extant systems, structures, and procedures to support change (Hussain et al., 2018; Stouten et al., 2018). Leaders in the freezing phase integrate the novel change to align with other organizational structures and procedures (Galli, 2018; Lewin, 1947). In the culminating freeze step, employees have accepted the alignment of contemporary changes and their integration with other organizational platforms. Lewin's (1947) force field theory concept of planned change provided many helpful methods for understanding what drove change (Axelrod & Axelrod, 2017). Change only succeeded if the perceptions and deeper underlying employees' values and standards within the organizations were invalidated (Kerber & Buono, 2018; Lehmann, 2017).

The good lives model (GLM) provides researchers with an alternative method to mitigate resistance to organizational change. Some researchers challenged the existing resistance paradigm to organizational change by offering a new perspective through the

good lives model and the concept of primary human goods (PHG) (Hughes, 2018; Oreg, 2017). The researchers demonstrated that existing literature was incorrect in asserting that resistance to change was just an individual problem that employees had to overcome. The extant literature described resistance as an anxious reaction to change that impedes an employee's capacity to cope or adapt (Schulz-Knappe et al., 2019; Schweiger et al., 2018). Resistance to change, as currently codified in contemporary literature, is an inherently negative phenomenon that must be ousted to usher in change. Some researchers argued that the premise was erroneous, noting that employees do not resist change but fail to fully embrace change due to many impediments (Baran et al., 2019; Schweiger et al., 2018).

Business leaders must be creative in mitigating impediments that hinder the change management process. When organizational leaders have poor reward mechanisms, personal investments in the existing status quo, and internal, employees are motivated to accept change more difficult (Allam, 2017; Burnes & Bargal, 2017). A structured approach to change is incumbent upon how business leaders effectuate organizational change. The impediments to embracing change were not the manifestations of resistance to change; rather, they were the reason for the so-called resistance (Oreg, 2017; Schweiger et al., 2018). The researchers rejected the current paradigm of resistance to change as an individual problem that was inherently negative (Burnes & Bargal, 2017; Schulz-Knappe et al., 2019). GLM is a humanistic framework that enables organizational change by explaining employees' resistance behaviors as an

outward manifestation of a disruption of their PHG (Allam, 2017; Hughes, 2018).

Organizational employees resist change when they feel it would prohibit their internal motivations from being realized. PHG was defined as actions or states of affairs viewed as intrinsically valuable to human beings and pursued for their own sake rather than as the means to some more fundamental ends (Hultman & Hultman, 2018; Oreg, 2017). It is prudent that leaders investigate how organizational change has impeded the pursuit and achievement of PHG to remove barriers and change implementation modifications.

Assessing Organizational Change

Organizational leaders constantly adopt new ideas, policies, and strategies consistent with the dynamic business environment. The organizational leader's routine assessment of the change initiative was invaluable in determining if the planned change produced anticipated outcomes, experiences, and behaviors (Oreg et al., 2018; Wang & Kebede, 2020). Through continuous monitoring, business leaders can measure and adjust the change initiative to ensure that the desired outcomes are realized. The change process assessment provided feedback from multiple stakeholders that leaders analyzed to understand the change's effect (Stouten et al., 2018; Wiedner et al., 2017). As a senior U.S. Army leader of subordinate soldiers, I was also a follower of superior leaders. First, I had to be a good follower to appreciate the change initiative at every echelon of leadership and its effect on the organization. Business leaders must audit and bolster the change process by making pertinent adjustments in change plans as appropriate (By, 2020; Pedersen & Dunne, 2020). A reliable metric for organizational leaders tracking

successful change is to monitor the change in employee commitment, competency, and efficacy over time (Amarantou et al., 2018; Wiedner et al., 2017). Leaders need to ensure that the changes implemented are incorporated into the organization's day-to-day operations. Leaders sustain organizational change by integrating OCh into the organizations' power structure, culture, HRM practices, and management systems (Hultman & Hultman, 2018; Stouten et al., 2018). The continued investment of organizational resources (leader's time, staffing, training, and finances) helps to institutionalize the contemporary change by continuing to deploy the enabling structures (Burnes & Bargal, 2017; Kotter, 2012).

Employee Engagement

The emergence of employee engagement has proven to be a critical driver of successful business operations in the contemporary marketplace. A study conducted by Kahn (1990) defined employee engagement as a psychological state in which individuals harnessed themselves to organizational work roles and expressed themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performance. Eldor and Vigoda-Gadot (2017) concurred with the forerunner Kahn's (1990) definition of employee engagement. In contrast, Shuck et al. (2017) believed it to be a motivational state that generated commitment and involvement levels of the employees toward their job, team, and organization. Engaged employees display a positive attitude towards their leaders and commit to other employees while completing organizational goals. Kahn (1990) argued that three psychological engagement conditions were vital for employee engagement, (a)

meaningfulness (work elements), (b) safety (social elements), and (c) availability (individual distractions). These three psychological components required for employee engagement serve as a baseline for employees' cognitive needs. Antony (2018) stated that employee engagement's core focus was aligning with organizational goals and performing beyond expectations. Business leaders create a competitive advantage when their employees are aligned with the organization's vision, mission, and objectives. Employees are considered the most valuable resource in an organization, and employee engagement is an excellent barometer to gauge organizational success (Albrecht et al., 2018; Bakker & Albrecht, 2018). Engaged employees performed exceptionally well as they projected a positive attitude toward the organization and were committed to achieving organizational objectives (Agarwal, 2018; Gautam & Sunita, 2017).

Employees want to feel valued, respected, and heard, knowing their contributions to the organization are meaningful. Engaged employees effectively committed to the organization when leaders sought their opinion in the decision-making process (Bhattacharyya & Pradhan, 2017). Engaged employees are mindful of the organizational situation and work with colleagues to improve their role performance for their welfare. The degree to which employees receive value from their work affects their engagement level (Kahn, 1990; Mackay et al., 2017; Martin, 2020). Empowered employees whose leaders give them a voice in the decision-making reward the organization through their commitment. The level of employee engagement correlated to the emotional safety

experienced by the employee and the availability of personal and work-related resources (Gautam & Sunita, 2017; Kahn, 1990).

Work Environment

Leaders must understand employees' need for a work environment conducive to job autonomy and challenging opportunities that promote employee engagement. Busse and Doganer (2018) found that the workplace was the most significant factor determining employee engagement. Business leaders must outline career progression for employees that lead to timely opportunities for growth and development. The quality of physical working environments led to improved performance and higher employee output levels (Kang & Sung, 2019; Yeh & Huan, 2017). SME leaders can use financial and non-financial rewards to facilitate employee engagement, such as compensation, bonuses, paid vacation, and personal recognition to improve employee performance. The work environment determines the social, psychological, and physical life in the organization (Lee et al., 2017; Soehari et al., 2019). Kang and Sung (2019) and Soehari et al. (2019) acknowledged that the work environment influenced the employee's comfort level and the ability to complete organizational tasks. Employment in an enterprise with a good name and reputation promotes a working environment that supports employees' comfort. A work environment positively affected job satisfaction, and organizational commitment motivated employees to become more productive (Kang & Sung, 2019; Soehari et al., 2019). A supportive environment inspired employees to undertake innovative approaches

to accomplish organizational objectives and even fail without fearing consequences (Busse & Doganer, 2018; Kahn, 1990).

Effective Leadership

Small business leaders can facilitate employee engagement and work performance in myriads ways. Popli and Rizvi (2017) and Wang et al. (2017) noted that leadership was the process of influencing individuals' activities in an organization towards goal setting and goal achievement. SME leaders communicate employee engagement to their managers and lower-level employees through brand selections, compensation and rewards, and performance goals. Howell (2017) and Ugaddan and Park (2017) agreed that leadership and the clear delineation of an employee's role indirectly affect engagement through empowerment, meaningfulness, and self-determination.

The business leader should choose a leadership style that aligns congruently with their axiological views. Leadership styles can facilitate employee engagement, including vulnerable and soft leadership (Herminingsih, 2017; Jiang & Men, 2017). For example, business leaders can employ the leader-member exchange (LMX) theory to create dyadic in-groups to facilitate employee engagement. Aydogmus et al. (2018) and Malik et al. (2017) concluded that a transformational leadership style was positively linked to employee engagement and the development of visionary and creative employees. Howell (2017) argued that employee engagement's core aspiration was to help business leaders achieve their organizational objectives with motivated employees. The immense diversity

and contrast in leadership styles and techniques may make it difficult to ascertain whether a specific style will be effective in an organization.

Leaders must implement strategies to mitigate job turnover, employee stress, and burnout. The leaders' leadership style affects employees' performance, which could positively or adversely affect the productivity and profitability of an organization (Bambale et al., 2017; Popli & Rizvi, 2017). In my professional experience, I have found that using the participative leadership style produced a higher contribution from subordinates. Business leaders implementing a value system within their organization obviate a toxic work environment that could facilitate employee disengagement from development (Miller & Hill, 2017; Rao, 2017).

Customer Relationship Management (CRM) in SMEs

Business leaders recognize that their organization's success in the contemporary business environment relies on managing customer relationships effectively. Customer relationship management (CRM) plays an essential role in the business leader meeting customer's expectations and achieving their primary organizational goals of customer excellence (Rafiki et al., 2019; Soltani et al., 2018). The business primarily exists to meet the needs of its customers along with the internal and external stakeholders. In general, there has been no uniform definition that exists for customer relationship management. Multiple authors have defined it in various ways. Dewnarain et al. (2019) defined CRM as a process of acquiring, retaining, and partnering with selective customers to create superior value for the organization and the customer. In contrast, Dalla et al. (2018)

defined CRM as recruiting and retaining an economically valuable consumer base by providing customer satisfaction and value-added products and services from the servicing organization.

Customer loyalty and retention are a by-product of an improved relationship with the organization that may be a competitive advantage over rival organizations.

Leaders that implemented CRM noted that it produced result-oriented dialogue that increased customer acquisitions, retention, profitability, and positive relationships among their firm and its customers (Soltani et al., 2018; Thakur & Workman, 2016).

Business leaders that create a dialogue with their customers proved instrumental in meeting their needs and being profitable to the organization. CRM systems typically fall into three distinct categories: operational, analytical, and collaborative systems used to interpret each customer life cycle stage (Al Homery et al., 2019; Li et al., 2019). First, operational systems are the systems that use automation to increase efficiency in the CRM process (Al Homery et al., 2019; Iriqat & Daqar, 2017; Zhang et al., 2020). Second, analytical systems are used to analyze customer data and knowledge (Dubey et al., 2020; Iriqat & Daqar, 2017; Zhang et al., 2020). Deciphering customer data using operational, analytical, and collaborative systems allowed business leaders to respond quickly and accurately to consumer needs.

The Historical Emergence of CRM

Customer relationship management (CRM) originated as a management idea focused on improving customer relationships and profitability. CRM's relatively terse

history as a management concept dates back to a little more than two decades from the 1990s (Al Homery et al., 2019; Galvão et al., 2018). The innovative origins and tenets of CRM can be linked back to its development within the field of marketing during the early 1990s (Gil-Gomez et al., 2020; Soltani et al., 2018). The inception of CRM is derived from the synthesis of multiple business disciplines such as strategy, information systems, supply chain management, and database management (Anshari et al., 2019; Soltani et al., 2018).

Business leaders use CRM software to integrate and organize the notes, activities, and metrics from multiple organizational departments into one cohesive system. CRM software systems expanded in the late 1990s and have been extensively used to facilitate information technology (IT) and relationship management (RM) solutions (Li et al., 2019; Ullah et al., 2020). By improving the customer relationship through mass customization of products and services, business leaders reduce the cost of retaining customers and increase organizational performance. The emergence of the Internet during the mid-1990s transformed the CRM market and allowed customers unfettered access to perform business transactions indefinitely, seven days a week (Charoesukmongkol & Sasatanum, 2017; Ullah et al., 2020). Business leaders began using this incipient technology to record customers' purchase information and link it with data from social media platforms, creating a CRM database to meet customer needs.

Technology such as the Internet has helped make CRM processes more efficient while lowering the cost of CRM initiatives. The Internet facilitated a new level of

connectivity to intranets, wide area networks (WAN), and databases through CRM software (Alshura, 2018; Kamboj et al., 2018). CRM has allowed business leaders to use large data sets to discern customer preferences and purchasing habits to realize long-term customer loyalty. The growth of the CRM software market remained moderate yet significant after several years of substantial investments; global revenues reached \$193.6 billion in 2018, a 12.5% increase from 2017 revenue of \$172.1 billion (Pohludka & Štverkova, 2019). Many organizations emerged to satisfy the demand for high-quality CRM software used worldwide. Prominent CRM software vendors such as Salesforce, SAP, Oracle, Oracle, Adobe, and Microsoft collectively represented 41% of the market share in 2018 (Pohludka & Štverkova, 2019). Oracle was the early leader in bringing off-the-self CRM software to the market, and Oracle would purchase Siebel through acquisition (Pohludka & Štverkova, 2019).

Customer Satisfaction

Customer satisfaction occurs when a product or service meets or exceeds the quality, performance, or expectation of the consumer. Small business leaders and managers appreciate the profitable effect satisfied customers have on the organization. Customer satisfaction was defined as a judgment that a product or service provided a pleasurable consumption-related fulfillment level (Rahimi & Kozak, 2017; Santouridis & Veraki, 2017). Business leaders that implemented CRM were able to address the expanding needs of their customers adequately, which led to customer loyalty, satisfaction, and long-term retention (Galvão et al., 2018; Wolter et al., 2019). Some of

the benefits that business leaders reap from CRM are lower advertising, marketing, and research and development costs. Galvão et al. (2018) and Rahimi and Kozak (2017) concluded that customer satisfaction depended on the difference between the customer's expectations and the organization's perceived performance.

Social CRM (S-CRM)

The accelerated expansion of technology motivated organizations to pursue digital platforms. Wang and Kim (2017) noted no generally accepted definition for social CRM. Organizations have different understandings of what CRM means. Social CRM was defined as integrating traditional customer-facing activities with emergent social media platforms to engage customers in collaborative conversations to improve relations (Kamboj et al., 2018; Kim & Wang, 2019). Researchers most commonly endorsed the definition of social CRM. Guha et al. (2018) and Kim and Wang (2019) posited that the main benefit of social CRM was building trust, customer retention, involving the customers in the new product or service development, and creating customer lifetime value.

Social CRM platforms support contemporary social media in concert with traditional channels that allow customers to interact via their preferred channel. Foltean et al. (2019), analogous to Kamboj et al. (2018), regarded Social CRM as a complementary extension of traditional CRM rather than its replacement. Business leaders should exploit the unique combinations of social media platforms and customer-centric management systems to facilitate customer retention, loyalty, and satisfaction. The rich customer

information generated through social media engagement allows business leaders to spur future marketing decisions (Cheng & Shiu, 2019; Kamboj et al., 2018). To mitigate the challenges associated with implementing social CRM, leaders pinpointed their business needs and selected the most appropriate technology that supported the endeavor (Charoesukmongkol & Sasatanum, 2017; Foltean et al., 2019).

Human Resource Management in SMEs

Human resource management (HRM) is a critical component of the success of the SME. The main objective of HRM in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) is to create and maintain an efficient workforce capable of meeting organizational needs (Lai et al., 2017; Wallo & Kock, 2018). Akoi and Yesiltas (2020) concurred with Chen et al. (2021) that adopting HRM practices might increase organizational productivity and the likelihood of survival. SME leaders must investigate their business failure beyond the traditional financial criteria and incorporate HRM practices as a subsequent measure (Davis & Davis, 2017; DiClaudio, 2019). Many small business leaders are reluctant to formalize their human resource management operations. Most SMEs often lacked formalized HRM practices and rarely employed HR professionals or experts (Nishii & Paluch, 2018). HRM practices remained in the SME leader's domain or were delegated to non-specialist staff as an additional duty (Leroy et al., 2018; Nishii & Paluch, 2018). Some SME leaders failed to view the responsibility of HRM as a critical aspect of business operations due to high cost per capita, bureaucracy, and time-constraint (Leroy

et al., 2018; Wallo & Kock, 2018). Many SME leaders were inclined to use informal HRM practices rather than formal HRM practices (Leroy et al., 2018).

The focus of small business leaders' centers on the lack of resources in terms of time, finances, and employees, with little effort given to HRM. Buengeler et al. (2018) and Russell et al. (2018) reinforced Heuvel and Bondarouk's (2017) position that most SMEs implement explicit written policies, procedures, and HRM practices are managed on an informal basis than similar practices in larger firms. One might conclude that informal HRM practices may eventually devolve into organizational chaos. Researchers have argued that the social and spatial proximity had engendered employee commitment, enabled agile decision-making, facilitated collaborative problem solving, and created a competitive advantage (Hamzah et al., 2019; Nishii & Paluch, 2018). Atkinson et al. (2021) and (Belsito and Reutzler (2019) found that SMEs rarely used formal employee appraisal systems. For example, owners of SMEs often perform a myriad of tasks within the organization that leaves insufficient time for the formal appraisal of their employees. In SMEs, a business leader can easily observe employee performance without formal management systems; formal appraisal could be perceived as monitoring and controlling mechanisms rather than motivating (Harney & Alkhalaf, 2021; Jardioui et al., 2019). One notable shortcoming SMEs face with the limitations of informality may become apparent in critical HRM areas, including employee training and development (Forth & Bryson, 2019; Heilmann et al., 2020; Russell et al., 2018).

Human Capital

SME leaders use human capital as a metric to measure the productivity of employees and the need to invest in their work experience, education, and training. Human capital represents the skill, knowledge, and experience employees attain through formal and informal training that aligns with an organization's objectives to create a competitive advantage (Bilan et al., 2020; Passaro et al., 2018). Human capital was defined as the resources embedded within people (Becker, 1964; Sardo & Serrasqueiro, 2019). Employees choose which productivity-enhancing activities to pursue that maximized future income and other benefits (Kucharčíková et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2018a). Knowledge spillover occurs when educated, and skilled employees make other employees more productive through human capital externalities (Andersen, 2017; Song et al., 2019; Stuetzer et al., 2018).

Entrepreneurial Education and Experience

The entrepreneur's competence and business acumen determine the competitiveness and survivability of the SME. Entrepreneurs with higher education and broad management experience positively impacted business performance than entrepreneurs who lacked those qualifications (Andriyansah & Zahra, 2017; Lee, 2019). In contrast, Jafari-Sadeghi et al. (2020), analogous to Machado et al. (2018), explained that higher education might have an inverse relationship with entrepreneurship in countries with strong economic opportunities.

Several factors exist that potential entrepreneurs must consider before creating their enterprise. Bilan et al. (2020) argued that higher education levels might offer higher-

paid wage employment that may nullify the risk or choice of undertaking entrepreneurship. Juric et al. (2019) and Lee (2019) postulated that many entrepreneurs preferred self-learning or on-the-job training (informal) as opposed to formal learning after starting a business venture. Entrepreneurs who are inclined to learn through informal training may have greater flexibility to focus on the knowledge and skills essential for survivability in the contemporary business environment. Deaconu and Rasca (2016) agreed with Supangco's (2015) definition of informal learning as those activities generating knowledge and skills that occurred outside of traditional educational institutions. Some theorists have argued that formal education is necessary to enhance entrepreneurial knowledge, skill, and competence (Halberstadt et al., 2019; Juric et al., 2019; Santos et al., 2017). Formal training is beneficial to entrepreneurs who learn better in a structured learning environment, comport to a scheduled plan, and possess the resources to fund the education.

Industry-specific knowledge, technical skills, and experience of an entrepreneur positively affect their performance. Work experience has proven to be an important component of human capital for nascent and novice entrepreneurs (Lee, 2019). The nascent entrepreneurs' intra-industry experience enabled the spinoff firm to survive longer than the startup or the *de novo* firm founded by entrepreneurs without industry experience (Dimov, 2017; Passaro et al., 2018). Khan et al. (2019) posited that nascent entrepreneurs could use their industry knowledge to exploit opportunities in the market and develop customer and supplier relationships. Abdul Mohsin et al. (2017) and Lacap

et al. (2018) noted that the novice entrepreneurs' lack of experience was manifested by inadequate planning or management decision-making that put the enterprise at risk.

Small business failure allows the entrepreneur to learn a plethora of sustainability strategies. Researchers used the attribution theory to explore the entrepreneurs' assessment of why their business failed and to understand the positive and negative decisions that may have precipitated that event (Heider, 1958; Weiner, 1985). Attributions can be categorized into three dimensions, locus of causality, controllability, and stability (Weiner, 1985). Locus of causality identified whether the failure was internal or external to the entrepreneur; controllability related to whether the entrepreneur believed they had control, or not over the cause of the failure; stability was concerned with whether or not the entrepreneur perceived the causes of failure to remain stable, as opposed to unstable, over time (Weiner, 1985).

Researchers attribute small business failure to a plethora of reasons. The locus of causality was the most important dimension to consider when exploring attributions for small business failure (Weiner, 1985; Yamakawa & Cardon, 2015). Cope (2011) and Minniti and Bygrave (2001) posited that the entrepreneurial learning theory proposed that discontinuous experiences during the entrepreneurial process stimulated higher forms of learning. Business failure is a discontinuous event merited as an important learning opportunity for the entrepreneur (Cope, 2011; Ucbasaran et al., 2010). Learning from business failure is a highly personal dimension tailored to the entrepreneurs' learning experience that cannot be taught or attained through practice (Amankwah-Amoah et al.,

2018; Jenkins & McKelvie, 2016). Business leaders who have experienced business failure can exploit that knowledge by implementing successful survivability strategies in a new business venture.

Identifying the cause of business failure is the first step business leaders take to prevent repeating the same mistakes in subsequent entrepreneurial endeavors. Attribution is when entrepreneurs assume responsibility for business failure, and internal attribution is when personal factors cause an event or behavior (Eggers & Song, 2015; Yamakawa & Cardon, 2015). Entrepreneurs that reflectively examined their mistakes and reframed the failure as the cost of learning can be more resilient in future business ventures (Jenkins & McKelvie, 2016; Mantere et al., 2013).

Financial Management in SMEs

Funding an entrepreneurial enterprise is one of the most important factors in becoming a business owner. A common pitfall among small business leaders is that they lack sufficient funding. Karadag (2017) postulated that financial management was critically important to any enterprise and regarded as the core management system in small businesses. New regulations in the financial services industry initiated after the financial crisis of 2008 led to small business leaders relying on their equity for start-up and business operations (Block et al., 2018; Wille et al., 2017). Small business leaders depend predominately on the entrepreneur's ability to self-finance or through their family resources (Rostamkalaei & Freel, 2017; Turner & Endres, 2017). Small business leaders must comprehensively understand business finances to generate operational capital to

sustain their business (Song et al., 2018). Dutta and Folta (2016) argued that inadequate capital funding perpetuated the risk of business failure.

Financial Constraints

Small business and novice entrepreneurs in the U.S. face daunting obstacles in raising capital. Larger organizations approached funding decisions significantly differently from small enterprises because financial information asymmetry on large firms was readily available to investors (Song et al., 2018; Xiang & Worthington, 2015). Many financial institutions were reluctant to lend to SMEs because of their inability to assess their risk due to the lack of collateral, creditability, and historical financial statements (Berger et al., 2014; Ibrahim & Shariff, 2017). Bankers produce valuable and unique information to capture the financial health of their customers; however, much of this information cannot be obtained from SMEs (Bauer & Esqueda, 2016). Karadag (2017) noted that commercial banks were the most common source of financial lending for SMEs. According to the Security Exchange Commission (SEC, 2019), small businesses had fewer opportunities to raise funds because of their inability to access capital markets.

Organizational Capital

Leadership, strategy, and organizational design directly influence organizational capital. Organizational capital consists of organizational structures, information technology (IT), procedures, processes, management systems, and brand creation (Pauli, 2016). SMEs use organizational capital as a competitive advantage because they cannot

compete with larger firms with more financial and tangible assets (Pauli, 2016). It is imperative that as an organization grows, leaders must implement changes to its organizational capital commensurate with the growth stage to maintain a competitive advantage (Pauli, 2016). The leader may delegate supervisory tasks, communication systems, decision-making, and organization structure (Pauli, 2016).

Strategic Planning in SMEs

Leaders of SMEs must make vital decisions to sustain their immediate management activities and bring long-term goals. Strategic planning has been defined as a set of concepts and procedures that organizations use when determining their overall strategic directions and the resources required to achieve strategic objectives (Bryson et al., 2018; Mensah, 2020). Strategic planning is a process whereby SME leaders make current and future decisions for their organizations that address internal and external Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) (Ajmera, 2017; Bryson et al., 2018). Ali (2018) and Wolf and Floyd (2017) postulated that the basis for strategy formulation was a SWOT analysis and, if executed correctly, identified distinctive organizational competencies that provided a competitive advantage. Leader strategy formulation refers to the process of selecting the most suitable course of action for the realization of organizational objectives and goals that achieve its mission and vision (Ajmera, 2017; Esfahani et al., 2018). Neis et al. (2017) posited that business leaders use strategic planning to delineate how the organization will transform and leverage its strengths to competitors more efficiently and effectively.

It is incumbent upon all small business leaders to think of how they can best formulate winning strategies for their organizations to mitigate business failure. SME leaders that used strategic planning determined how the organizations' future would be managed and provided clear management direction and actions to be taken toward intended goals (Howes, 2018; Musandiwa, 2019). Bushe (2019) and Siddique (2015) concurred that effective strategic planning assisted SMEs in developing clear assessments of their competitive environment, including current rivals, potential rivals, and resource scarcities. Business leaders used strategic planning to identify gaps in their limited resources, leading to new employee skills, organizational cultures, and structures (Ajmera, 2017; Egger & Hristova, 2018).

SME business leaders must remain vigilant in identifying the external pressures that may negatively impact their operations. SMEs face external pressures from emerging issues and trends related to globalization, technology, competition, and government policies (Ramírez & Selsky, 2016). Small business leaders have used strategic planning to analyze, interpret, and react to these issues to meet future organizational goals (Egger & Hristova, 2018; Ramírez & Selsky, 2016). In a contravening argument, Bryson et al. (2018) posited that strategic planning allowed SME leaders to be more proactive in molding their future, prioritizing activities, and exerting control over their destiny. The leaders' objectives stressed the organization's current state of being, whereas strategy stressed the process of reaching its imminent goals (Hauser et al., 2020; Valjevac et al., 2018).

Strategy

The role of a strategy is to specify the business structure and core functions of an organization. The word strategy is a derivative of the Greek word *stratēgós*, which loosely translates in the English language as *the art of the generals* (Box, 2011). One of the earliest books delineating the formulation and implementation of the strategy was the Chinese general Sun Tzu's classic, *The Art of War*, written in 500 B.C. (Chong, 2014; Pardhasaradhi, 2017). Military generals defined strategy as a deliberate plan of action in executing a combat mission in a theater of war (Abdalkrim, 2013; Chong, 2014). The commander of a combatant command employs techniques, tactics, and procedures (TTP) known as maneuvers on the battlefield to realize the commander-in-chief's national objective. Small business leaders use strategies to satisfy the needs of their internal and external stakeholders to ensure organizational survivability.

Mission and Vision Statements

The mission and vision statements are important tools SMEs may use to facilitate their strategic planning matrix. The starting point of a strategic plan is the mission statement, which delineates the organization's fundamental reason for existence (Zsigmond et al., 2021). In contrast, Box (2011) asserted that the genesis of an organization's strategic plan is articulating the vision statement. The leaders' vision statement defined where the organization leaders chose to exploit future markets, products, or services offered and targeted customers (Bouhali et al., 2015; Box, 2011).

Business leaders use the mission, vision, and strategy to delineate the overarching value proposition and disseminate it throughout the organization. Mission, vision, and strategy statements are the basic framework for describing an enterprise's administrative day-to-day operations (Box, 2011; Wiśniewska, 2018; Zsigmond et al., 2021). Abdalkrim (2013) and Wiśniewska (2018) concurred that the mission statement delineated the following purposes: (a) why the organization exists, (b) the needs it satisfies, (c) who is the beneficiary of its activities, and (d) what value makes it stand out from other entities. SME leaders that implemented their strategic planning using a precise mission and vision statement enabled them to focus their attention and resources in the right direction (Bouhali et al., 2015; Box, 2011).

The mission and vision statements are two distinct constructs that reflect different existential time frames. Hauser et al. (2020) and Zsigmond et al. (2021) noted that the vision statement articulated the business leader's idealistic projection of the organization's mature and successful position in an undefined future. The vision statement must be disseminated to committed employees, be fluid, sustainable, and constantly nurtured to be realized in the future (Abdalkrim, 2013; Hauser et al., 2020).

Transition

In Section 1, I presented the problem statement, purpose statement, nature of the study, overarching research question, interview questions, and the conceptual framework. I presented in Section 1 operational definitions, assumptions, limitations, and delimitations. In Section 1, I discussed the significance of the study and the review of the

professional and academic literature on strategies that automotive dealership organizational leaders can implement to remain solvent and sustain operations beyond 5 years.

In Section 2, I delineated the role of the researcher and participants by restating the purpose statement from Section 1. Section 2 included the research method, design, population, sampling, and ethical research. Furthermore, in Section 2, I presented the data collection instruments and techniques, data organization techniques, and data analysis. I finalized Section 2 with the reliability and validity of the study. In Section 3, I presented the study's findings, application to professional practice, the implication for positive social change, recommendations for actions and further study, and reflections on my research experience.

Section 2: The Project

In this section, I comprehensively describe my qualitative multiple case study. I include the purpose statement, the role of the researcher, participants, qualitative research method, case study research design, and population and sampling. Section 2 includes data collection techniques, data organization techniques, data analysis, and procedures for ensuring the reliability and validity of the proposed study.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this multiple qualitative case study was to explore the business strategies implemented by small business leaders at five automotive dealerships to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years of operation. The target population consisted of five automobile dealerships and five small business leaders in the U.S. State of Michigan. The small business leaders have continuously operated their automotive dealerships for at least 5 years. This study's data contributed to the knowledge, insights, and sustainability strategies small business leaders used in the automotive dealership industry. The implications for positive social change included developing small business leaders that provide continuous employment, which would lead to economic stability for the municipal, state, and federal governments.

Role of the Researcher

As the researcher, I was the primary data collection instrument for this qualitative multiple case study (Yin, 2018). A researcher's role is to devise the research question, choose an appropriate research method and design, collect the data, and analyze it

(Khankeh et al., 2015; Yin, 2018). I collected data from semistructured interviews, reflective journals, archival documents, and notes to conduct methodological triangulation, thematic analysis, and the development of conclusions. Patton (2015) noted that methodological triangulation is about collecting data from multiple sources to ensure the study's reliability. Qualitative researchers listen to participants and ask probing questions to gain in-depth knowledge of the phenomenon under study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Although I lack experience as a small business automotive dealership leader, I possess exhaustive automotive industry knowledge. In 2002, I earned an associate automotive technology degree in applied science. I have obtained certifications in engine repair, brakes, electronic-computer systems, and medium-heavy parts specialists from the National Institute for Automotive Service Excellence. During my 26-year tenure in the U.S. Army, I was responsible for repairs and services for a fleet of 120 tactical and combat vehicles. I oversaw the requisitioning, distributing, inventorying, and stocking of \$1.2M of repair parts.

I also managed the battle damage assessment and repair program to requisition and replenish combat and tactical vehicles destroyed in the combat theater of operation. As a master instructor-writer, I trained over 1,200 initial entry training soldiers annually on the basic knowledge and skills of automotive theory. I have gained a plethora of knowledge that lends credibility to my research study to explore strategies automotive dealership leaders used to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years. I did not contact

research participants before institutional review board (IRB) approval. I recruited research participants based on their knowledge, experience, and ability to answer the overarching research question using the interview protocol (see Appendix A).

To preserve academic integrity, along with the reliability and validity of the findings, researchers must maintain ethical standards of research (Greenwood, 2016). As the primary researcher for this study, I adhered to the ethical rules established in the Belmont Report protocol (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1979) and Walden University's institutional review board (Walden University, 2019b). The Belmont Report delineated how researchers should follow basic ethical principles when researching human subjects concerning respect for vulnerable populations, avoiding deception, and equal treatment of all research participants (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1979). Before collecting data, I completed the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative training module for Human Subjects Protection Training Module administered online certificate number: 39638203. The rights of the participants are not to be infringed upon, so they can decide what and how they share interview information in compliance with the Belmont Report (Tatebe, 2015). According to Zahle (2017), researchers must provide participants with a consent form outlining the interview process, the right to withdraw at any time without prejudice, a pledge of privacy and confidentiality, and the risks and rewards for participating in the study. I provided the five participants with a consent form.

In qualitative research, potential bias may arise because of the interplay between the researcher and the participant's knowledge of the phenomenon under study (Devotta et al., 2016). Researcher bias may adversely impact how data was solicited, recorded, and interpreted (Wadams & Park, 2018). To mitigate researcher bias, I used an interview protocol (Appendix A), conducted member-checking, and reached data saturation during the data collection. A researcher's bias and subjectivity are inherently present in the case study research design (Fusch et al., 2017; Yin, 2018). I used reflective journaling to mitigate bias identification and engage in activities and practices that remove those elements. Marshall and Rossman (2016) posited that researchers are human beings with beliefs, ideas, and perceptions that make it impossible to purge all bias from the qualitative research process. To limit my biases, I only conducted research with organizations with whom I had no professional or personal affiliations. According to Yin (2018), to conduct ethical research, researchers must mitigate their personal bias.

To ensure ethical research and mitigate researcher bias, I remained cognizant of my role as an impartial researcher. A researcher can mitigate research errors by identifying their bias and meeting ethical research parameters that lead to bias avoidance or resolution (Lachapelle et al., 2014; Yin, 2018). By bracketing personal opinions, prejudgments, and preconceived ideas, researchers can mitigate bias throughout the research process (Kruth, 2015). Bracketing means the suspension of the researchers' intrinsic assumptions about their worldview to interpret the phenomenon beyond personal prejudice (Moustakas, 1994; Sorsa et al., 2015). I bracketed my personal opinions,

prejudgments, and preconceived ideas during the data research process. Another bias mitigation technique I used was member checking to correctly interpret the data from participants' responses to interview questions. Morse (2015) noted that member checking is when researchers solicit clarification from participants to validate the accuracy of the interview summary.

Qualitative researchers use a research protocol to establish a reliable method of collecting impartial, trustworthy data and results in heightened quality (Dikko, 2016). I used an interview protocol (see Appendix A) to ensure I queried participants with the same questions to maintain a consistent, systematic data collection technique. The interview protocol helps researchers avoid harming participants' or institutions' confidentiality when publishing a doctoral manuscript (Cooper & McNair, 2017). Yin (2018) recommended several tactics to combat bias, such as using an interview protocol, reaching data saturation, and deliberately developing the interview questions. While conducting the interview, I was observant and cognizant of my verbal and nonverbal cues as I actively listened to the participants.

Participants

One of the most critical aspects of the doctoral study was the selection of potential participants. To select the most knowledgeable participants who yield rich data, qualitative researchers must establish eligibility criteria (Ghobakhloo & Sai, 2013; Yin, 2018). The eligibility criteria I used for selecting participants were: (a) must serve as an automotive dealership business leader in the Central and Southwest U.S. State of

Michigan, (b) must serve at least 5 years as a business owner or general manager within the automotive industry, (c) must be knowledgeable of strategies for sustaining their business beyond 5 years, (d) must be willing to participate in a face-to-face interview, and (e) must be willing to agree to the research study protocol (see Appendix A). Parker and Northcott (2016) defined purposeful sampling as the deliberate recruitment of participants with predetermined qualities that align with the aim of the research study. I used purposive sampling to select participants who possessed specific eligibility criteria. Before gaining access to potential participants, doctoral candidates must receive IRB approval (Morris & Morris, 2016). I obtained IRB approval (08-06-21-0737456) before seeking access to potential participants.

To gain access to potential participants, I used the small business listings from the U.S. State of Michigan Chamber of Commerce. Robson and McCartan (2016) noted that the Chamber of Commerce databases are available for public use and include small businesses' names, locations, email addresses, locations, and contact information. I contacted small business leaders via certified mail, email, and face-to-face to solicit their participation consent, interview, and member checking. Of the 24 invitations sent out to potential participants, five responded and agreed to participate in my research study. I mailed out the consent form and the letter of introduction and recruitment (see Appendix B) to participants who agreed to participate. The interviews were conducted at the time and location specified by the participants between August 17, 2021, and September 23, 2021. Details of the recruiting and participation process are illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2
Participant Recruitment Method, Consent to Participate, Interview, and Member-Checking Dates

Recruitment letters	Certified mail	Email	In-person	Consented	Interviewed	Member-checked
First batch	08/09/21 5ea	0	0	P1 08/12/21 P2 08/16/21	P1 08/17/21 P2 08/17/21	P1 08/26/21 P2 08/31/21
Second batch	08/14/21 5ea	0	0	0	0	0
Third batch	08/30/21 5ea	0	0	0	0	0
Fourth batch	09/03/21 4ea	0	0	P5 09/17/21	P5 09/23/21	P5 10/06/21
Fifth batch	0	09/05/21 09/10/21	09/12/21 09/15/21 09/17/21	P3 09/15/21 P4 09/20/21	P3 09/20/21 P4 09/21/21	P3 10/06/21 P4 10/09/21
Total	19	2	3	5	5	5

Note: P denotes the participant, and the number represents the interview order.

Gatekeepers are charged with controlling researchers' access to the organization's information (Gülmez et al., 2016). Researchers can use organizational gatekeepers as an appropriate and ethical means to access potential participants (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Marland and Esselment (2019) noted that organizations typically have receptionists or assistants who serve as gatekeepers to coordinate external requests for their business leaders' time. I established a relationship with the organizational gatekeepers to identify and coordinate access to suitable study participants for my research study.

One of the strategies that I used to build rapport and a sound working relationship with participants was to build trust. Bell (2013) postulated the importance of obtaining participants' trust is to extrapolate candid and valid answers to the overarching research question. Wallace and Sheldon (2015) posited that researchers could establish confidence with participants by being candid and transparent about the intended purpose and

outcome of the research study. I explained the purpose of this doctoral study, the procedures, the risks, the benefits of participating in the study, and the participants' confidentiality.

Research Method and Design

I used a qualitative multiple case study to explore the strategies small business leaders in the automobile dealership industry used to sustain their organizations beyond 5 years. A researcher selects a research method and design based on the nature of inquiry (Yin, 2018). After analyzing various research methods and designs, I concluded that the qualitative, multiple case study approach would be the most suitable to answer the research question. In this section, I delineate the justification for choosing the qualitative method and multiple case study design.

Research Method

A researcher must select a compatible method of inquiry to generate meaningful results that answer the overarching research question (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2013). The three methodological choices of research are qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods. Marshall and Rossman (2016) noted that researchers could extrapolate different forms of data from each of these methods. The qualitative research method allows the researcher to observe behaviors, explore documents, and interview participants to capture their perceptions of a phenomenon (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Bailey (2018) posited that the hallmark of qualitative research includes asking how, what, and why questions. Another benefit of a researcher choosing the qualitative

approach is asking open-ended questions to interpret a phenomenon rather than supporting or refuting a hypothesis (Taguchi, 2018). The qualitative method relates to interpreting some aspects of social life (McCusker & Gunaydin, 2015). I chose the qualitative approach to generate words rather than numbers for data analysis. For this research study, the qualitative method was most suitable for providing diverse insight from the participants' knowledge of the phenomenon.

The quantitative research method was insufficient to meet my objective of synthesizing business leaders' sustainability strategies for an inductive analysis. According to Watson (2015) and Yilmaz (2013), in quantitative research, a deductive analysis can generate statistical data allowing the researcher to accept or reject the null hypothesis. Frels and Onwuegbuzie (2013) postulated that the analytic objective of qualitative researchers is to articulate variations, whereas quantitative researchers quantify variations. I did not seek to test a hypothesis, measure, or compare variables to satisfy the objectives of this study, so a quantitative method was not appropriate.

The mixed-methods approach is practical for researchers who intend to integrate quantitative statistical data with qualitative non-numerical data to achieve their research objectives. The mixed-methods approach is useful when neither the qualitative nor the quantitative approach can independently provide researchers with a rich and thick interpretation of the phenomenon (Halcomb & Hickman, 2015). Yilmaz (2013) posited that the quantitative research method is most suitable for numerical data and theory

testing. The mixed methodology was inappropriate for this research study because I did not analyze numerical data or test theory.

Research Design

Researchers use a research design to guide their efforts in collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data (Yin, 2014). Qualitative researchers use various research designs, such as case studies, ethnography, narrative, or phenomenology, for conducting research (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Baškarada (2014) and Turner and Endres (2017) concluded that a case study allowed researchers to choose a single or multiple-case design strategy. The single-case design is justifiable where it represents a critical case, unique case, or rare phenomenon that few researchers observe or analyze (Yin, 2018). Exploring strategies that small business leaders used to sustain their enterprises beyond 5 years is not critical, unique, or rare. The single case was not a good fit for my research study. A researcher selects a multiple case study strategy to integrate a minute number of cases selected to achieve literal replication (Yin, 2014). The multiple case study design was most suitable because I could focus on whether similar findings would replicate across cases, which was the objective of my research study.

A researcher uses the ethnographic research design to observe, interact, and interview participants to interpret the group's culture over time (Marion et al., 2015). Because I did not interpret the shared beliefs or observe significant group culture events, I did not use the ethnographic research design. According to Wexler et al. (2014), the narrative design is defined as a narrator's sequential account of an event that conveys

meaning to the researcher. Narrative researchers rely on storytelling to establish a chronological account of the story participants share (Young, 2016). The narrative design was not appropriate for this research study because I did not rely on a narrator's storytelling to explore the strategies business leaders used to sustain their enterprise. The phenomenological design facilitates a researcher's ability to understand the meanings of participants' lived experiences, which was not the goal of this research study.

Data saturation was a critical component of the multiple case study design that enhanced the rigor of the research study. According to Fusch and Ness (2015), researchers use data saturation as an invaluable tool to strengthen the research study's validity and reliability. Data saturation occurs when the researcher could not extrapolate any new information, themes, or codes during the data collection process (Roy et al., 2015). Bernard (2013) posited that an agreed-upon number of interviews required to achieve data saturation is not reachable. Some researchers believed that data saturation might be achieved with as few as six interviews relevant to the sample size of the population (Fusch & Ness, 2015). I used face-to-face interviews in a semistructured format as a primary data source. I continued to solicit additional participants until the data set was complete or data replication was reached.

Population and Sampling

According to Yin (2018), a sample size ranging from three to five is suitable for conducting a qualitative case study. The targeted population consisted of five small business leaders who have sustained their automotive dealerships in the U.S. State of

Michigan beyond 5 years of operation. Yin (2014) noted that case studies could rely on minute samples as long as the interviewer prompts the participants for in-depth insight into each research question. I selected business leaders who possessed the requisite knowledge to answer the overarching research question. Gaus (2017) posited that purposeful or judgmental sampling is undertaken with a minute sample size to select suitable participants who best answer the research question. Hancock et al. (2016) argued that no correlation exists between the sample size and achieving data saturation. The overarching research question and the research design are requisites for selecting qualified participants for a research study (Dasgupta, 2015). For my qualitative multiple case study, the target population consisted of five small business leaders established (for 5 years) in the automotive dealership industry in the U.S. State of Michigan.

Qualitative researchers use data saturation to ensure accurate data collection and validity (Benoot et al., 2016). The purpose was to find and select participants that contributed rich data to investigate what strategies small business leaders in the automotive dealership industry used to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years. According to Fusch et al. (2018), data saturation is the most frequently employed concept for estimating and assessing sample sizes in qualitative research. Data saturation refers to the point during data analysis at which the inflow of data sets produces diminishing returns relative to the aim of the research study (Tran et al., 2017). Purposive sampling is a nonrandom technique encompassing the deliberate selection of participants based on their knowledge of specific phenomena (Etikan et al., 2016). I used the purposive

sampling technique and recruited five participants for my research study to answer the overarching research question. The fifth interview I conducted was sufficient enough to reach data saturation.

I used a protocol for face-to-face interviews (see Appendix A) that delineated the stepwise process of engaging participants in the interview setting. Researchers use semistructured interviews to give participants the latitude to answer open-ended questions with autonomy. According to Yin (2018), this format yields a plethora of rich data for a qualitative research study. Researchers use the open-ended face-to-face semistructured interview to capture data from participants concerning their opinions, knowledge, and judgments to answer the overarching research question (Elsawah et al., 2015). I chose the semistructured, open-ended face-to-face interviews for my research study. I asked my study participants to choose the appropriate time and a location that was free from noise and other distractions that was appropriate to conduct an interview.

Ethical Research

Adhering to ethical protocols during the research process is essential for conducting a robust research study. According to the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research (1979), researchers maintain ethical protocol by complying with three principles: (a) respect for persons, (b) beneficence, and (c) justice. Researchers follow a guiding principle not to harm participants while interviewing, interpreting findings, or constructing the final reporting (Yazan, 2015). Obtaining informed consent played a vital role in the participant

vetting and recruiting process. Participants are more inclined to cooperate in a research study when they are cognizant of their rights (Yin, 2018). The informed consent process explains the aim of the research and delineates the risks and benefits associated with participation in the study (Roulet et al., 2017). I disclosed the participants' rights and stored their consent in writing. Participants' decision to engage in a research study must be voluntary, and their right to withdraw without compulsion at any time (Roulet et al., 2017; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1979).

I did not offer incentives such as gifts or compensation to participants for their voluntary cooperation in my research study. According to Hidi (2016), social science researchers should refrain from offering monetary or other incentives to entice respondents to participate in a research study. The drawback of providing financial incentives to participants leads to their propensity to manipulate information given in the interview for monetary gain (Robinson, 2014). I provided participants with a summary of my completed doctoral study upon the chief academic officer's (CAO) approval.

I stored the semistructured interviews and other organizational information on my password-protected external hard drive. I used the NVivo 12 computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software to process and code the collected data. Zamawe (2015) posited that qualitative research researchers use NVivo 12 software to enhance and expedite the coding and analysis of the data collected.

The ethical protection of collected data was my highest priority. Researchers are responsible for safeguarding all research (hard copy) notes, files, and recorded material

that contains participants' information from public exposure (Rothwell et al., 2015). I maintained participants' confidentiality and privacy throughout my research study. Saunders and Townsend (2016) noted that electronic files comprising respondents' data should require a password to safeguard access. I stored all research notes, files, and recorded material on a password-protected external hard drive locked in a fire-proof safe at my residence for 5 years. After 5 years, I will delete all electronic data and physically destroy files and notes by shredding them. Qualitative researchers code the names of participants and organizations to conceal personal and organizational identifiers for confidentiality purposes (Elger et al., 2015). I used the letter-number synthesis to cloak the identities of participants such as P1, P2, P3, P4, and P5, where P denoted participants, and the number indicated the order participants were interviewed.

Data Collection Instruments

For my qualitative multiple case study, I was the primary instrument for data collection and analysis. Cope (2014) and Devotta et al. (2016) agreed that the phrase primary instrument described the researcher as an active component in the research process. The central research question is: What business strategies do small business leaders in the automotive dealership industry implement to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years? I used semistructured interviews with open-ended questions to answer the overarching research question. Interviews are critical in explaining a phenomenon through events, comprehension of a participant's perspective, and as a source of evidence in a case study (Yin, 2018).

I used an interview protocol (see Appendix A) to align the research topic, semistructured, open-ended interview questions (see Appendix A), and a step-by-step guide through the interview process. I addressed all questions posed to me by participants about my research study. The face-to-face semistructured interviews were conducted in the office of the business leaders at their specified location and time, typically lasting 45 to 50 minutes. I asked all participants the same nine interview questions to gain their insights into the phenomenon under study. The data I collected during the interview process was strategies that automotive dealership leaders might use to sustain their organizations beyond 5 years.

I chose a multiple case research design for my study. Yin (2014, 2018) noted that using multiple data collection instruments was the most appropriate for the case study design. The transcribed interviews, archival documents, field notes, and reflective journal notes made up the sources used in data collection for my study. Methodological triangulation refers to the process of using multiple sources of data collection to buttress the validity and reliability of a study (Abdalla et al., 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). I used the data triangulation process to assess the information gathered through face-to-face interviews, non-verbal observations, reflective notes, and internal and external organizational documents.

I incorporated member checking to enhance the reliability and validity of this study. Member checking serves as a quality control process for qualitative researchers to achieve the accuracy, credibility, and validity of an interview protocol (Caretta, 2015;

Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Researchers have described member checking as performing the interview, recording participants' responses, and asking the participants to confirm the veracity of the researcher's interpretation of the data (Houghton et al., 2013; Taylor & Thomas-Gregory, 2015). In the member checking process, the participants read a summary transcription of the interviews to ensure the credibility and accuracy of the data (Houghton et al., 2013). The participants confirmed the accuracy and the credibility of the summary (paragraph) transcription of interviews via email. I did not deviate from the interview protocol (see Appendix A). I used probing questions to gain a rich and thick interpretation of the phenomenon under study.

I audio-recorded data collected during the interview process using the Dictopro X100 digital voice recorder. I summarized the interview text into paragraphs for participants' review to ensure I accurately captured the essence of their words through member checking. I received an email from P1, P2, P4, and P5 indicating that I had accurately reflected their views in the interview synthesis. Participant (P3) signed the consent from the Word document of the summary interview paragraphs on (10/06/2021) to confirm its accuracy.

Data Collection Technique

The primary data collection technique for my study was the participants' semistructured interviews. Interviews represent the most frequently used data collection method in qualitative research to facilitate a conversational exchange of information (Casey et al., 2015; Doody & Bailey, 2016). I audio-recorded the interviewees' responses

in real-time using the Dictopro 100 digital voice-activated recorder for completeness, accuracy, and clarity of the interview. To transcribe the digital audio into text, I used WavePad audio editor NCH software. According to Arsel (2017), semistructured, open-ended interviews enable the interviewee to expand responses and researchers to ask probing questions about the research topic. Contemporaneous field notes were taken during and immediately after each interview session to capture my initial impressions of the conversation. I requested and was granted permission to analyze organizational documents such as internal policy letters, standing operating procedures, and monthly newsletters as a part of my research study. Yin (2018) noted the advantage of reviewing and analyzing organizational archival documents is the ability to review the information continuously.

Desouza and Jacob (2017) argued the importance of the researcher's knowledge of collecting, organizing, and storing data ethically. I collected electronic and hard copy (research notes) data for my study. I stored the digital data, including semistructured interviews and all other organizational information, on my password-protected external hard drive. The password-protected external hard drive was locked in a fire-proof safe located at my residence for 5 years. After 5 years, I will delete all electronic data and physically destroy files and notes by shredding them. Qualitative researchers code the names of participants and organizations to conceal personal and organizational identifiers for confidentiality purposes (Elger et al., 2015). I used codes to cloak participants'

identities, such as P1, P2, P3, P4, and P5, where P denoted participant, and the number indicated the order in which the interviews were conducted.

Data Organization Technique

In the qualitative research study, data organization was a critical component that provided the primary researcher with a cursory means to retrieve collected data. The data organization technique is necessary for the researcher to analyze, review, and report data accurately while addressing participants' privacy, information security, and data retention (Reed et al., 2016; Watkins, 2017). For my study, I used digital and hard copy documents to include semistructured interviews, archival documents, field notes, and reflective journal notes in the data organization process. Researchers employ data organization techniques to create an audit trail to cross-reference against all data collected (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Soares et al., 2015).

I used a reflective journal to self-analyze and delineate my ideological views not aligned with the research data to mitigate any adverse effect on my study. Researchers use reflective journals as a pedagogical instrument that promotes their ability to reflect, criticize, and self-analyze (Anderson, 2012; Bashan & Holsblat, 2017). I used a reflective journal to chronicle my thoughts and hone critical thinking skills to construct a deeper meaning of the data organization process. Researchers use a reflective journal to transcribe raw data because it provides them with an effortless means of accessing, locating, organizing, and analyzing data (Almutairi et al., 2013; Palinkas et al., 2015). The burden to collect, store, organize, analyze, and safeguard raw data resides with the

researcher, which is critical to ensuring validity and trustworthiness (Elo et al., 2014).

Before conducting the interviews, I informed the participants that I would be transcribing my reflections, questions, and thoughts in a reflective journal.

I safeguarded digital files, data recordings, and other materials for my research study secured on a password-protected computer and a USB flash drive. Qualitative researchers are obligated to store participants' confidential data and protect the research data's veracity (Reed et al., 2016; Yin, 2014). Following the Walden University IRB's policy, I will maintain all data from this study for 5 years in a locked safe. As the researcher, I will maintain the keys to the safe as the sole custodian. Five years after completing this study, I will destroy all data by deleting digital files and shredding paper copies of the research data.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process commences with the qualitative researcher selecting an appropriate research strategy to test validity and reliability. Qualitative researchers analyze the collected data to gain a robust understanding of the phenomenon studied using methodological triangulation (Joslin & Müller, 2016; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). I used the thematic analysis of methodological triangulation to understand strategies that business leaders use to sustain their operations beyond 5 years. Researchers use methodological triangulation to integrate multiple data collected from distinct sources about the same phenomenon to cross-check that data to evaluate the validity and reliability of the data analysis. (Barnham, 2015; Fusch & Ness, 2015). For my study, I

used semistructured interviews, field notes, and archival records collected from the targeted organizations for methodological triangulation. Qualitative researchers using multiple sources of evidence to analyze a case study were rated more highly, in terms of quality, than researchers who relied on a single source of information (Yin, 2018). Turner and Endres (2017) noted that methodological triangulation is a critical qualitative research tool that strengthens the validity and enhances the study's credibility.

Qualitative researchers should be transparent in delineating the data analysis process by guiding readers through a coherent and sequential process. For my research study, I began by describing the sequential process of analyzing primary data from semistructured interviews, archival organizational records, and field notes. Yin (2014) proposed a five-phased cycle for data analysis that included: (a) compiling the data, (b) disassembling the data, (c) reassembling the data, (d) interpreting the data, and (e) developing a conclusion. I used the five-phased cycle for data analysis for my study. Qualitative researchers use thematic analysis to identify themes and organize codes to analyze data to answer the overarching research question (Crowe et al., 2015; Vaismoradi et al., 2016). I adopted thematic analysis to identify, organize, and analyze themes for my research study.

For my research study, I used the NVivo 12 data analysis software to code emerging themes and analyzed the data sets. Researchers use NVivo 12 to identify redundancies and import, analyze, and study code data (Atkins et al., 2016; Boddy & Croft, 2016). I used NVivo 12 to satisfy ethical compliance by properly safeguarding data

for my study. NVivo 12 enabled researchers to organize and store qualitative research data in a single location (Atkins et al., 2016; Bishop & Kuula-Luumi, 2017). In my study, I used NVivo 12 to analyze themes from the transcribed data to aid my interpretation of the data sets.

I outlined the process of correlating the key themes with the literature review and the leader-member exchange (LMX) theory as the conceptual framework for my study. Borrego et al. (2014) posited that the conceptual framework was the critical link connecting the literature review, the research method, and the study's findings. I focused on the key themes related to successful strategies small business leaders used to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years in the coding process. I identified the alignment of the key themes and LMX within the presentation of the findings.

Reliability and Validity

The gold standard for evaluating the caliber of a qualitative research design are reliability and validity. In qualitative research, reliability is a measure of research consistency and replicability across researchers and time; whereas validity reflects the research findings and the accuracy to which it measures the intended phenomenon (Assarroudi et al., 2018; Fikkers et al., 2017; Hays et al., 2016; Yin, 2018). Establishing rigor in the qualitative research process is indispensable for researchers to construct quality studies that readers can trust.

Qualitative researchers follow rigor-specific strategies during data collection, analysis, and interpretation (Elo et al., 2014; Kern, 2016). Reliability and validity in

qualitative inquiry are analogous to quantitative inquiry and are attained differently.

Researchers judge qualitative studies' quality by modifying quantitative research criteria to produce criteria fit for the qualitative research context (Ali & Yusof, 2011).

Reliability

For qualitative research data to be considered reliable, it must first be proven dependable. To ensure dependability, qualitative researchers accurately transcribe interviews, engage participants in member checking, use methodological triangulation, and reach data saturation (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). In my research study, I employed member checking, methodological triangulation, and data saturation as rigor-specific strategies to achieve reliability and validity. Researchers use methodological triangulation to align outcomes and bolster the validity of a research study (Nichols, 2016).

Reflexivity is a qualitative technique that researchers, as the instrument of data collection and analysis, consider how their subjective experiences shape their interpretation of participants' realities and their own (Abrica, 2019; Darawsheh, 2014; Gaus, 2017). In other words, the concept of reflexivity challenges the view of knowledge production as independent of the researcher that produced it and their knowledge as being objective. For my research study, I remained cognizant of the importance of being self-aware and reflexive in my role in collecting, analyzing, and interpreting research data.

Member checking played an intricate role in enhancing dependability in my qualitative research study. Researchers use member checking to enhance the findings'

credibility by soliciting participants' feedback on the transcribed interview to corroborate their experiences accurately (Hays et al., 2016; Houghton et al., 2013). Member checking mitigates the researchers' misinterpretation of the data, which could jeopardize the validity of the research. I used member checking to ensure that the transcribed accounts of the participants' interviews were commensurate with what I synthesized and interpreted.

Validity

For qualitative researchers, validity is an essential component used to justify the quality of the research. Qualitative researchers demonstrate that a study has validity when the research findings are credible, transferable, confirmable, and dependable (Chowdhury, 2015; Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1982). Qualitative researchers adopted several techniques to address validity that include: (a) persistent engagement, (b) triangulation, (c) peer review, (d) case analysis, (e) identifying researcher bias, (f) rich and thick description, and (g) member checking (Hays et al., 2016; Schaik et al., 2014). Peers, experts in the field, reviewers, and readers will ultimately judge the worth and merit of a qualitative research study. Selecting an appropriate methodology for data collection and analysis enables researchers to obtain credible results that validate the research (Leung, 2015; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). I used a multiple case study, qualitative research design, and purposive sampling technique to obtain credible findings to validate this research study.

Credibility

In qualitative research, credibility is the first determinant of validity. The credibility criteria start with the researcher establishing the credible qualitative research findings from the participants' perspective (Colorafi & Evans, 2016; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The basis of truth or credibility in qualitative research is premised on the social accord between the researcher and participant. I enhanced the credibility of my research study by using a research protocol and member checking.

Transferability

Transferability in qualitative research refers to how a researcher conducts research findings in a context meaningful to readers. In qualitative studies, transferability occurs when researchers describe the research method and how they can transfer it across different settings (Connelly, 2016; Morse, 2015). I ensured the transferability of my qualitative study by using a purposive sampling method and providing a thick description of the research data. I strictly adhered to the interview protocol (Appendix A), data saturation, data collection, and analysis techniques to enhance transferability.

Confirmability

Researchers confirm the validity of their qualitative research study through the lens of the participants. In qualitative research, confirmability refers to how the findings can be confirmed or corroborated by others (Hays et al., 2016; Leung, 2015).

Confirmability is the ability to demonstrate how the study findings represent the participants' responses and not the biased opinions or perceptions of the researcher

(Kallio et al., 2016; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Confirmability relates to the accuracy of the participants' viewpoint of the findings compared to the researcher's viewpoint. I used member checking to ensure the confirmability of my research study.

Dependability

Dependability is a critical element of qualitative research that enable researchers to construct a reliable study. Qualitative researchers ensure dependability based on how well the research design is delineated so that subsequent researchers can replicate the findings with similar results (Kern, 2016; Maher et al., 2018). Qualitative researchers are responsible for describing the research setting changes and how these changes affected their approach to the research (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Soares et al., 2015). I used an audit trail, research journal, and reflexivity to ensure the study's dependability.

Data Saturation

The assessment of qualitative research quality relies on the researcher's ability to gauge the saturation of the data set and ensure it is sufficient to answer the research question. Data saturation is when the research data ceases to produce additional themes or ideas from the data collected (Constantinou et al., 2017; Hennink et al., 2017). I ensured data saturation by interviewing additional participants until no new themes or ideas emerged. I stated in the proposal that I would conduct my research with three automotive leaders to participate in the research study. After conducting three face-to-face semistructured interviews, I could not reach data saturation. To ensure data saturation, Malterud et al. (2016) suggested that researchers continually reevaluate their sample size

throughout the research process. I conducted a fourth and then a fifth interview. After the fifth interview, I reached data saturation when no additional themes or ideas emerged.

Transition and Summary

In Section 2 of my manuscript, I restate the purpose statement of my qualitative multiple case research study. I delineated my role as the researcher and justified using a qualitative research method and multiple case study design. I describe the criteria used to construct the population and a sampling protocol. In subsequent headings, I explain how I preserved the ethical standards of research and outlined the data collection instrument, technique, organization, and data analysis processes. I explain in narrative detail the steps I took to ensure the reliability and validity requirements were met for my research study. Section 3 is about presenting the study results and findings.

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implementation for Change

Introduction

In Section 3, I restate that the overarching research question for my study was: What business strategies do small business leaders in the automotive dealership industry implement to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years? I obtained the data from participants during semistructured face-to-face interviews. In this section, I pinpoint emerging themes to analyze and provide a thick and rich description of my findings relative to those themes. I illustrate how the analysis of my findings validated, invalidated, or generated contemporary knowledge compared to refereed studies, the literature review, the conceptual framework, and novel studies after the Proposal.

Further, in this section, I explore the relationship between my research findings and the conceptual framework, the LMX theory. I discuss the potential applications to professional practice, implications for social change, recommendations for action, and further research for this study. I chronicle my maturation process during the DBA journey to highlight any personal biases, preconceived ideas, or values that may negatively impact research participants. I conclude with a robust statement that reiterates the premise and findings of my research study that may leave an indelible impression on the readers.

Presentation of the Findings

The objective of this qualitative multiple case study was to answer the overarching research question: What business strategies do small business leaders in the

automotive dealership industry implement to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years? To elicit sustainability strategies from automotive dealership leaders, I used a qualitative exploratory multiple case study for the research method and design to answer the research question. After receiving IRB approval, I obtained the participants' consent form to participate in the research study via email voluntarily. I scheduled the interviews at an appropriate time and place at the convenience of the interviewee. I conducted five semistructured face-to-face interviews and audio-recorded each participant's verbatim responses to the nine interview questions (see Appendix A).

Asking participants open-ended questions in a natural setting during a semistructured face-to-face interview allows researchers to gain in-depth knowledge of participants' experiences (Fusch et al., 2017). Nordstrom (2015) posited that audio-recording qualitative face-to-face interviews allowed researchers to compile more information than relying solely on notetaking. During the interview process, I took written notes to record the participants' responses, body language, nonverbal cues, and tone. All five interviews consisted of nine questions (see Appendix A) that lasted approximately 45 minutes.

I used member checking to enhance the reliability and validity of the transcribed interview transcript. Member checking serves as a quality control process for qualitative researchers to achieve the accuracy, credibility, and validity of an interview protocol (Caretta, 2015; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Participants received a summarized copy of the interview paragraphs via email to verify the veracity of my interpretation of the data.

All participants responded by email that the transcribed interviews accurately captured their sentiments.

I stated in the proposal that I would conduct my research with three participants. To ensure data saturation, Malterud et al. (2016) suggested that researchers continually reevaluate their sample size throughout the research process. I used this reevaluation process, increasing the sample size to five to achieve data saturation. Denzin and Lincoln (2017) posited that data saturation occurs when the researcher no longer receives repetitive data from respondents. After the fourth interview, I achieved data saturation, and I conducted the fifth interview to ensure the accuracy of the data saturation.

To maintain the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants, I assigned letter-number codes to cloak the identities of participants, such as P1, P2, P3, P4, and P5. The letter P denoted participants, and the number indicated the sequential order of the interviews. I used methodological triangulation to collect data from multiple sources (i.e., interviews, field notes, organizational policy letters, standing operating procedures, and monthly newsletters). Methodological triangulation refers to the process of using multiple sources of data collection to buttress the validity and reliability of a study (Abdalla et al., 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

I used NVivo 12 to analyze the summarized interviews to code emerging themes from the data sets. Researchers use NVivo 12 to identify redundancies and import, analyze, and study code data (Boddy & Croft, 2016). The five themes generated from the data set represent strategies that small business leaders in the automotive dealership can

use to sustain their business beyond 5 years. As illustrated in Table 3, the five themes that emerged from the data included: (a) customer relationship management, (b) organizational leadership, (c) organizational culture, (d) organizational reputation, and (e) organizational change. In Table 3, I identified the emergent themes by the number of responses and times the participants addressed the theme. I delineated how the findings were commensurate with the data found in the literature review, conceptual framework, and other peer-reviewed journal articles.

Table 3

Emergent Themes

Themes	Number of respondents	Number of times the theme was addressed
Customer relationship management (CRM)	5	31
Organizational leadership	5	20
Organizational culture	4	35
Organizational reputation	4	08
Organizational change	4	07

Theme 1: Customer Relationship Management (CRM)

The first theme from the participants' interviews was customer relationship management, which aligns with the extant literature. Five participants in this study articulated that customer service investment helps them acquire new customers, retain current customers, and recoup former customers to keep their businesses profitable. The findings of my research study indicated that business leaders recognize that their organization's success in the contemporary business environment relies on managing customer relationships effectively. Rafiki et al. (2019) and Soltani et al. (2018) concluded that customer relationship management (CRM) plays an essential role in the business

leader meeting customer's expectations and achieving their primary organizational goals of customer excellence. A business primarily exists to meet the needs of its customers and internal and external stakeholders. I hand-coded the data and entered it into the NVivo 12 program to verify Theme 1 CRM, which affirmed five data sources, reinforced by 31 references as indicated in Table 4.

Table 4

Theme 1: Customer Relationship Management (CRM)

Node/theme	Sources	References
Customer relationship management (CRM)	5	31

P1 stated:

Our customer relationship management process starts with my general manager and me making ourselves accessible (face-to-face) to employees and customers when they have complaints. The premise of our leadership strategy means being present and accessible to our employees at all times. To help facilitate a rapid response to our customers' needs, we contracted Digital Airstrike (A customer engagement technology company). Digital Airstrike provides us with a custom analysis of our customer online presence, including social media, Google, Edmunds.com, and other review sites. Digital Airstrike also shares tips and strategies for fixing problems they find in the analysis of our platforms. I receive a copy of all positive and negative customer feedback from all organizational departments. We use customer feedback to reinforce and encourage our core values and culture. Another strategy we use during the

morning nine o'clock sales meeting is highlighting customer feedback with employees.

P2 stated:

We provide customer service that is greater than what we get in return. And if we provide great customer service, we can retain our customers, and we will always have equity in those customers, and we can build an ecosystem that supports our business during profitable and less profitable times.

P3 stated:

Car sales are based on the relationship between the seller and buyer. When I create an honest relationship with my customers, they will continue to purchase with the organization. If something goes wrong with an automobile that I sold within 3 or 4 days, I will work with the customer to remedy the situation to take care of the problem.

P4 stated that customer service is their number one strategy in their organization.

P5 stated:

Our customers' time is very important to them. We implemented text messages, emails, and a phone call verification protocol to let customers know where their vehicle was in the service process. The leadership in this organization ensures that customers receive timely and accurate information by holding one another accountable top down.

Correlation to the Literature

One of the most critical strategies business leaders use to sustain their businesses is customer relationship management, which contemporary literature supports. My research study is consistent with the findings of Cummings and Seitchik (2020), who posited that service failure recovery is a strategy that business leaders use to resolve a problem attributable to a service failure. P1 noted that leaders in the organization make themselves accessible (face-to-face) to customers when they have complaints and agreed with P5 to help facilitate a rapid response to the customer's needs during the complaint process. Tsao and Su (2021), who proposed three types of response methods: (a) accommodative strategy, (b) defensive strategy, and (c) no strategy that business organizations use when responding to customer complaints caused by a service failure. Business leaders employ the accommodative strategy to explain themselves to the customer for the service failure, apologize, or make a commitment to compensate the customer (Tkalac Verčič et al., 2019; Tsao & Su. 2021). Business leaders that adopt an accommodative strategy are more likely to retain their customers than organizations with no customer complaint strategy or take a defensive posture.

P2 stated that customer retention and equity are great customer service products and build an ecosystem supporting the organization's long-term profitability. Customer orientation is defined as a strategy business leaders use when they prioritize the customer's interest first, without excluding the interest of all other organizational stakeholders in creating long-term profitability (Lee et al., 2019). P3 stated that car sales are based on the relationship between the seller and buyer, and when an honest

relationship is established, customers will remain loyal. Distributive justice is how customers feel honestly about the treatment in relation to the outcome of a business transaction (Cummings & Seitchik, 2020). P4 stated that customer service is their number one strategy in their organization. Customer loyalty and retention are a by-product of an improved relationship with the organization that may be a competitive advantage over rival organizations.

Business leaders use CRM software to integrate and organize the notes, activities, and metrics from multiple organizational departments into a cohesive system. P1 stated that we contracted Digital Airstrike to provide a custom analysis of our customer online presence, including social media, Google, Edmunds.com, and other review sites. My research study is aligned with the finding of Kim and Wang (2019) and Kamboj et al. (2018), who posited that social CRM was defined as integrating traditional customer-facing activities with emergent social media platforms to engage customers in collaborative conversations to improve relations. The main benefit of social CRM was building trust, customer retention, involving the customers in the new product or service development, and creating customer lifetime value (Guha et al., 2018). Social CRM platforms support contemporary social media in concert with traditional channels that allow customers to interact via their preferred platform.

Correlation to the Conceptual Framework

Customer relationship management is the business leader's foundational competitive strategy that emanates from all other strategies. My research findings align

with DeConinck's (2011) empirical study of 365 salespeople engaged in the manufacturing and service industries and found that LMX can increase employees' sales performance. P1 used customer feedback in the daily sales meetings to reinforce organizational core values, culture, and customer service strategies to employees. Employees in high-quality LMX relationships pay back their leaders by engaging in discretionary (CRM) behaviors that can potentially benefit leaders, co-workers, and customers (Yoon & Yoon, 2019). High-quality LMX employees that are satisfied with the social exchanges with their leaders strive to behave in a manner consistent with the leaders' customer-centric strategies.

To business leaders in the automotive dealership industry, building customer relationships is paramount to the longevity of their organization. P3 stated that car sales are based on the positive relationship between a seller and buyer. Business leaders use high-quality LMX relationships to motivate their followers to accomplish the organizational goal of retaining customers through service excellence (Martin et al., 2018). Automotive sales and services are products of the positive customer relationships established at the automotive dealership between buyer and seller.

Garg and Dhar (2017) noted that LMX is a particularly strong predictor of service outcomes such as employee extra-role service behaviors. Leader and follower high-quality LMX relationships are based on loyalty. My research study is supported by the findings of Cha and Borchgrevink (2018), who stated that employees in high-quality LMX relationships perceive a higher level of job ambiguity because leaders require them

to meet customer needs and job performance concurrently. LMX business leaders' customer-centric strategy is based on a standard of behavior expected from every employee for the organization's survival. Customer relationship management can be viewed as the product of a high-quality LMX relationship between the leader and followers for organizational survivability.

Theme 2: Organizational Leadership

The second theme that emerged during the interviews was the importance of organizational leadership in the workplace. All five participants expressed the importance of business leaders demonstrating genuine concern for employees as a sustainability strategy. Organizational leadership starts with the most important asset (the employees) and permeates outwardly to all stakeholders. Leadership is one of the most critical and arduous aspects of human endeavor that no organization or country can grow to prominence without the vision of its leadership (Bambale et al., 2017). Strong business leaders sustain the organization by providing their internal and external stakeholders with direction, motivation, and purpose. Effective organizational leadership is the foundation for myriad sustainment strategies business leaders use. I hand-coded the data and entered it into the NVivo 12 program to verify Theme 2 (organizational leadership), which affirmed five data sources, reinforced by 20 references as indicated in Table 5.

Table 5

Theme 2: Organizational Leadership

Node/theme	Sources	References
Organizational leadership	5	20

Employee well-being negatively impacts an employee's production, motivation, and satisfaction levels in the organization. My research study is supported by the findings of Guest (2017), who emphasized employee well-being encompassed a broad concept, which delineated how an employee experiences and functions in the work environment. The principal dimensions of employee well-being include psychological, physical, and social well-being. It is incumbent upon business leaders to be cognizant of the well-being needs of their employees and meet those needs. All five participants stated that one of the primary functions of business leaders was to demonstrate genuine concern for their employees.

P1 stated:

Leadership is everything in this organization; we feel like our success starts with strong leadership. We spend a tremendous amount of time building relationships throughout the organization to demonstrate our genuine concern for employees. The HRM team in our organization takes care of the employees' needs which allows them to focus on creating a better experience for our customers. One of the most notable ways we demonstrated strong leadership to our employees was last year during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. In compliance with the In the State of Michigan, we had to cease our business operations temporarily. When our employees were not able to work, we continued to provide them with Regular compensation for a short period. I will reiterate that when leadership

Demonstrates genuine concern for the employees' well-being, which translates into a better customer experience.

P2 stated:

I think that leadership is extremely important to the organization. The vision and mission statements exemplify the importance of leadership, providing a roadmap to highlight the organization's present posture and future destination. In our organization, leaders lead by their feet and not by their seats. Leadership is important because it allowed me to create relationships with top executives down to entry-level employees. Leadership in the organization is the determining factor in our success or failure.

P3 stated:

As a small business leader, the most important thing to have in an organization is trust. I must have employees that I can trust and who can trust me. Then the reciprocal trust between my employees and me translates into our customers trusting us. If I cannot trust an employee, I will terminate them immediately.

P4 summed up the value of organizational leadership and its positive impact on employees by stating:

I naturally try to build a personal relationship with all my employees and demonstrate that I care. Employees know that our organization cares more than just their work performance. We care about our employees in all facets of their life. Employees need to know that I care about their well-being. We talk about a

myriad of issues related to the job and the employees' personal lives.

P5 added:

In any small business, it is important to show your employees that you care for them. I cannot be successful in this organization without the employees that make the difference, in my opinion. I never lie to my employees; if they (employees) are doing a lousy job, I will use tact when telling them they (employees) are doing a lousy job. I do it constructively to ensure that they (employees) understand that I have their best interest at heart.

Correlation to the Literature

The organizational leadership strategies that business leaders articulated in my research study align with Albrecht et al. (2018) and Bakker and Albrecht (2018). Employees are considered the most valuable resource within the organization, and employee engagement is an excellent barometer for business leaders to gauge organizational success (Albrecht et al., 2018; Bakker & Albrecht, 2018). Empowered employees whose leaders give them a voice in the decision-making reward the organization through their commitment. The level of employee engagement provided by the business leader correlates to the level of emotional safety experienced by the employee and the availability of personal and work-related resources (Gautam & Sunita, 2017; Kahn, 1990).

P2 stated that the vision and mission statements exemplify the importance of leadership, providing a roadmap to highlight the organization's present posture and future

destination. The findings of my research study are aligned with the findings of Ajmera (2017) and Esfahani et al. (2018), who stated that leader strategy formulation refers to the process of selecting the most suitable course of action for the realization of organizational objectives and goals that achieve its mission and vision. Business leaders create a competitive advantage when their employees align with their vision, mission, and objectives. The mission and vision statements are important tools business leaders may use to facilitate their strategic planning matrix.

My research study findings also align with the findings of Antony (2018), who stated the core focus of meeting the needs of the employees was to align them with organizational goals and perform above expectations. Business leaders create a competitive advantage when their employees align with their vision, mission, and objectives. Popli and Rizvi (2017) and Wang et al. (2017) noted that leadership was the process of influencing individuals' activities in an organization towards goal setting and goal achievement.

Correlation to the Conceptual Framework

I explored the phenomenon through the lens of the leader-member exchange (LMX) theory as my conceptual framework. Theme 2 focused on the importance of organizational leadership meeting employees' needs was consistent with LMX. P3 stated that as a small business leader, the most important thing to have in an organization is trust. My research findings are supported by Uhl-Bien and Arena (2018), who expressed the importance of developing and nurturing trust in high-quality LMX relationships.

Business leaders use the trust they have established with employees as a foundation for all social exchanges to accomplish organizational goals. LMX leadership provides organizational adaptability and builds trust in dynamic relationships (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018) based on social influence (Thompson & Glasø, 2018), which results in social benefits for leaders and followers (Bauer & Erdogan, 2016). Business leaders understand that building trust is a tedious process that may take time before realization.

P4 stated that I naturally try to build a personal relationship with all my employees to demonstrate my concern for them and not just their work performance. My research study findings are aligned with the findings of Arghode et al. (2021), who argued that empathic LMX leaders focus on both in-group and out-group members; by creating strong rational networks, leaders mitigate the perceptions of unfairness often associated with being in the out-group. The central tenet of the LMX theory is that leaders do not have the same relationship with all their followers due to constraints on the leader's time and resources. A prescriptive approach to LMX emphasizes that leaders should develop a high-quality relationship with all their followers rather than a few (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Business leaders using this LMX approach to make every follower feel like a part of the in-group mitigates the inequalities associated with out-groups.

Theme 3: Organizational Culture

The third theme that emerged from the interview data was organizational culture. Five participants noted the importance of building a strong culture that transcends inside

and outside the organization. Business leaders create an organizational culture to cultivate employee behavior toward norms and values that support organizational innovativeness. The participants noted that organizational culture was not just the shared principles, values, and beliefs that were not just related to the workplace but extended to social activities outside the organization. Every organization has a particular culture and subculture, consisting of assumptions, values, and norms that direct the activities within an organization (Barbars, 2015; Nikpour, 2017). I hand-coded the data and entered it into the NVivo 12 program to verify Theme 3 (organizational culture), which affirmed four data sources, reinforced by 35 references as indicated in Table 5.

Table 6

Theme 3: Organizational Culture

Node/theme	Sources	References
Organizational culture	4	35

P1 stated:

We hold our employees accountable to the culture, and it is non-negotiable in our view. The critical value in our culture is holding one another accountable by closely monitoring employees, starting at the top of the organization down to the bottom.

P2 stated:

We feel like the best opportunity to foster cultural relationships with our employees happen during social events outside the workplace. Over the years, we have realized that we learn about employees on different levels when we

engage them in a relaxed environment like a community event wearing street clothes (jeans and shirts).

Similarly, P4 stated:

Culture is everything in the organization and the foundation of all our sustainment strategies. How do we build a culture in the organization? The grassroots way of building a culture is sharing a meal, bowling, and golfing with our employees. We learn a lot about one another when we fraternize outside the workplace. Our culture is reinforced through this process of bonding in a non-work environment.

P5 stated:

The embodiment of the culture starts with me as the organization's leader.

Culture in an organization is very important, and it is probably the most important strategy (ingredient) to organizational success in any business. Everything starts with having the right culture. The indoctrination of our culture reflects the way we train our employees to understand and commit to our customer-centric approach strategy. I hire and fire for culture. I hire employees that align with our culture, and I fire employees that breach our culture.

P2 stated:

We speak about our culture daily, customer experience, employees, and a commitment to care for one another. Consistency in preaching our culture culminated in a family atmosphere that customers can visibly see when they walk through our doors. Yes, I am referring to the leadership within the

organization and disseminating the culture to the newest employees. We are consistent with teaching and refining our culture to meet the needs of our customers and employees. When an employee fails over time to adhere to our culture, eventually they get exposed; either they quit, or we terminate them.

Correlation to the Literature

The organizational culture strategies used by the business leaders in my study aligned with the extant literature. The findings of my study were supported by the research findings of Hofstede (2011), who postulated that affective empathy contributes more toward fostering a supportive organizational culture. Organizational culture emanated from myriad sources, predominately from the beliefs, values, and assumptions of the enterprises' founders and leaders (Schein, 2010; Warrick, 2017). Organizational leaders are the standard-bearers of organizational culture, and they model the culture as an example for employees to emulate.

The organization benefits from the values, beliefs, and behaviors of new employees that serve as a bulwark against organizational culture groupthink. Organizational culture is also influenced by group members' learning experiences and the contemporary values, beliefs, and assumptions of the organization's new employees (Calciolari et al., 2018; Chong et al., 2018). When organizational members possess a shared meaning of the organization's goal and values, they act in the firm's best interest, respond appropriately to threats, and improve its chance of survival (Chong et al., 2018; Costanza et al., 2016). Organizational culture is the criteria used for recruitment,

selection, promotion, leveling off, retirement, and ex-communication of employees (Schein, 1983, 2010). The participants of my study associated their organizational culture with the clan-oriented culture. The clan-oriented culture is family-like, emphasizing mentoring, nurturing, and accomplishing tasks together (Xie, 2019).

Correlation to the Conceptual Framework

Theme 3, organizational culture, is a vital strategy uniquely aligned with the leader-member exchange theory. My research study findings were supported by Anand et al. (2018), who stated that LMX business leaders who maintain a culture of trust are more likely to engage and satisfy followers, leading to improved wellbeing and work-life balance. Employees in high-quality LMX relationships focus intuitively on their leaders' behaviors who reward employees who emulate the desired behaviors of the organizational culture. For LMX business leaders to succeed, they must recognize and use the influence of the organizational culture in which they operate (Thompson & Glasø, 2018). P2 stated consistency in reiterating our culture to our employees produces a family-like atmosphere visible to our customers walking through our doors. Business leaders use consistent communication to build trust in organizational culture to nurture and validate it, as described by the LMX model (Seo et al., 2018).

Business leaders use LMX exchange to create a psychological contract with employees that aligns them with the organizational culture. The culture of an organization, as expressed by its values, norms, and unofficial practices (Pettigrew, 1979), may also influence which dimensions are emphasized within an LMX

relationship. The findings of my research study are aligned with Ost et al. (2020), who argued that transformational LMX leaders use organizational culture as a reference that provides meaning and control that guides and molds employee behaviors and motivates them to achieve organizational goals.

Small business leaders engage followers in a vertical exchange relationship that transcends the employment contract. High-level LMX is indicated by the leader and subordinates' mutual obligations (culture), meaning that employees appreciate the relationship with the leader and perform extraordinary work (Rurkkum, 2018). Business leaders should realize that the organizational culture plays a vital role in achieving their goals. LMX leaders support their subordinates by soliciting their advice before making decisions regarding their job and dynamic changes to the organizational culture. In-group relationships in LMX develop over a lengthy period that leads to trust, loyalty, reciprocity, and friendship (Kuvass & Buch, 2019). My research study finding was supported by Asrar-ul-Haq and Kuchinke (2016), who posited that organizational culture could enhance employee productivity and production in an organization.

Theme 4: Organizational Reputation

The fourth theme of the participants' interviews was organizational reputation. A strong organizational reputation is vital to the consumer as it reduces their risk of doing business with incompetent or incapable enterprises. An organization's reputation is a critical factor in business leaders creating valuable stakeholder relationships and gaining public trust (Sageder et al., 2018). Four participants agreed that organizational reputation

was an easy strategy to maintain but extremely difficult to regain after a service failure. I hand-coded the data and entered it into the NVivo 12 program to verify Theme 4 (organizational reputation), which affirmed four data sources, reinforced by eight references as indicated in Table 7.

Table 7

Theme 4: Organizational Reputation

Node/theme	Sources	References
Organizational reputation	4	8

P2 added:

And when you have a reputation for serving, understand that you make mistakes, but when you do make mistakes, how you handle that word-of-mouth is still the greatest advertisement. And you have to address your reputation day in and day out with employees and make sure that it does not slip away because it is fragile and vulnerable. And so, you must maintain your reputation in the organization more than in any relationship within your community.

P3 stated:

Well, the key to surviving is to make trust and honesty the foundation of your business. If customers cannot trust you, you will not be in business long. Suppose you sell a customer a bad automobile; that customer will tell twenty people about that negative ordeal. Suppose you sell a customer a good automobile; that customer will tell five people about the positive experience at your business. Being honest and building trust with customers leads to business

longevity that ultimately produces business growth. The strategy that I have implemented to sustain my business is through personal contact referrals. What I mean is my associate contacts, my potential customers. I no longer do conventional advertising because of the high costs, so my strategy has become word-of-mouth advertising.

P4 stated:

We have implemented a very basic routine; when a customer walks on the lot, we run out the door to greet them. As customers walk through the front door, we greet them by saying hello and how may I help you? We are cognizant of the power of the customer's first impression, and we want it to be a positive experience.

P5 stated:

Safeguarding the reputation of our culture is extremely important. Our associates (employees) are cognizant that everything we do as individuals on or off the job can positively or adversely affect the organization. One strategy that we have implemented to remind us of our reputation, we all carry a domino in our pocket to symbolize the domino effect of good or bad behavior that will ultimately get back to our customers.

Correlation to the Literature

The first line of defense of an organization's reputation starts with dedicated employees. My research study findings are aligned consistent with the findings of

Sageder et al. (2018), who stated that of the internal stakeholders, employees play a vital role in shaping an organization's reputation by influencing other stakeholders. P4 stated the organization is cognizant of the customer's first impression as a measure of an organizational reputation as we greet them walking through the front door. In service organizations, employees with close and direct interaction with the customers are cognizant of their role as ambassadors communicating about the organization (Salehi et al., 2020). Business leaders can achieve their goals more readily if they are grounded on a solid reputation with their internal and external stakeholders.

P2 stated that organizations make mistakes that tarnish their image and the responsibility to handle it. The findings of my research study are consistent with Schoofs and Claeys (2021), who stated business leaders use crisis communication to mitigate reputational damage, allowing the organization to reset the service failure in a way that reshapes stakeholders' perception. Talented employees seek employment with organizations that possess a good reputation. Business leaders use a good firm reputation to align their organization with market demands, attract investments, motivate employees, and work to differentiate products and services (Ansong & Agyemang, 2016).

Correlation to the Conceptual Framework

Business leaders need to have a crisis management strategy disseminated to employees used to restore an organization's reputation after a service failure. My research study findings align with the findings of Martin et al. (2018), who posited that in high-quality LMX relationships, employees with a strong sense of empowerment are

likely to take an active orientation toward their work and perform above and beyond what is expected. Business leaders can exploit this high-quality relationship to focus their employees' efforts on safeguarding and preserving the organization's reputation. P2 added that when you have a reputation for serving, understand that you will make mistakes, and taking swift ownership leads to word-of-mouth advertisement. LMX high-quality relationships are based on social exchanges like integrity, dignity, and respect (Frieder, 2018), so when honest organizational mistakes are quickly remedied, it improves customer service.

P5 stated that one organizational strategy to remind us of our responsibility is to uphold our positive reputation by carrying a domino in our pocket as a reminder. The domino symbolizes a domino effect of how good or bad behavior will ultimately impact our reputation when it gets back to our customers. My research study findings are supported by the findings of Foster and Botscharow (2019), who stated that transformational leaders develop positive alignment to mission, values, and vision statements to create symbols that are manifestations of culture. Applying different crisis management strategies can control and reduce the possible effects of a crisis disruption, particularly on organizational reputation and potential financial outcomes (Lussak, 2017). After a customer service failure, business leaders should: (a) own the failure, (b) explain the failure, (c) remedy the failure, and (d) identify any impact the failure may or may not have on future business transactions.

Theme 5: Organizational Change

The final theme of the participants' interviews was an organizational change, and my research findings align with the extant literature. In the modern economic climate, organizational leadership must respond expeditiously to changes in the domestic, global, and technology markets. Many business factors can necessitate organizational change, such as sustaining a competitive advantage, innovation, technology, and globalization (Endrejat et al., 2017; Fattore et al., 2018). I hand-coded the data and entered it into the NVivo 12 program to verify Theme 5 (organizational change), which affirmed four data sources, reinforced by seven references as indicated in Table 8.

Table 8

Theme 5: Organizational Change

Node/theme	Sources	References
Organizational change	4	7

P1 stated:

We implement culture change by constantly communicating it throughout the organization. The reason we must continue to disseminate our culture is so that new employees and customers understand our core values. If we do not continue to talk about our culture, we can rapidly lose traction on the subject. Our strategic planning ability was fully displayed during the COVID-19 pandemic when we had to find new ways to communicate on platforms like Zoom.

P2 stated:

One of the key impediments we encountered while implementing sustainment

strategy was the counterintuitive environment created by having commissioned-based salespersons. We found that paying commissions tainted the sales process and ultimately added ingredients that led to undue stress in the symbiotic relationship between salespeople and customers. We deliberately changed our compensation plan to reflect our culture and core values. We started to implement culture change by putting customers first.

P4 stated:

Everyone in the organization must embrace change to remain competitive and profitable. For example, when the pandemic hit, we could not work at the store. We had to learn on the fly and work remotely. If we had not mastered this new business model, our doors would not be open today. Being versatile and adapting to change was crucial to the sustainability of our business.

P5 stated:

The biggest impediment was getting the commitment to accept company changes from some of the associates (employees) on the team. That was one of the hardest things to do. We wanted every associate (employee) to sing from the same hymn book. Our goal was not only to obtain acceptance to change from all our underlings (subordinate employees), but it had to begin with the management.

Correlation to the Literature

The most important step in the change process is for leaders to articulate the necessity for organizational change and its desired outcome. Business leaders should consider multiple components that may affect organizational change implementation, such as cultural environment, resistance to change, readiness to change, and trust in the leader. My research study findings align with Appelbaum et al. (2018) and Schulz-Knappe et al. (2019), who concluded that communicating change achieved two vital tasks; first, it disseminates information, and second, it integrates members of the organization in the process. Employees are often reluctant to adopt change organizational change for many reasons.

P5 stated that the biggest impediment was getting the commitment to accept organizational changes from some of the associates (employees) on the team. My research study findings are supported by the findings of Davis and Fifolt (2018) and Rosenbaum et al. (2018), who stated that driving forces sought to bring about change or resistance (Davis & Fifolt, 2018; Rosenbaum et al., 2018). Souten (2018) noted that the unfreezing phase enables leaders to establish a change vision, develop a change plan, and prepare the organization to transition to a new system. The unfreezing step exposes employees to the change vision and allows employees to participate in the change plan and accept the change transition.

Through continuous monitoring, business leaders can measure and adjust the change initiative to ensure that the desired outcomes are realized. My research study findings are aligned with Wang and Kebede (2020), who postulated that the

organizational leader's routine assessment of the change initiative was invaluable in determining if the planned change produced anticipated outcomes, experiences, and behaviors. Business leaders should ensure that organizational changes are incorporated into the organization's day-to-day operations. Leaders codify organizational change by integrating OCh into the organizations' power structure, culture, HRM practices, and management systems (Hultman & Hultman, 2018; Stouten et al., 2018). Flexibility refers to the organizational ability to change according to the dynamic external business environment. A competitive advantage is achieved when a small business leader's organizational changes provide quality products and services according to the expectations of its consumers (Çetinkaya et al., 2019).

Correlation to the Conceptual Framework

Organizational leadership is a fundamental element of the organizational change process. My research study findings are consistent with the findings of Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995), who noted strong leader-member relationships significantly influence outcomes such as job performance, satisfaction, commitment, and trust in the leader (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). The LMX social exchanges are based on long-term trust, which involves favors that create diffuse future obligations from the employee, with the nature of the return subject to the leader's discretion. Employees might feel obligated to adopt the leader's organizational change process to symbolize the trust established in their high-quality relationship.

In high-quality LMX relationships, employees might offer motivation, competencies, and skills and can reciprocate the resources provided by the leader with their attitudes, behaviors, and job performance (Arif et al., 2017). Organizational leaders that have established trust with employees over an extended period before a change initiative are more likely to lead to a successful change endeavor. Effective change communication by leadership fostered an infrastructure of mutual trust where employees voiced dissenting views, reached a compromise, and ultimately achieved consensus (Appelbaum et al., 2018; Faupel & Süß, 2019). Organizational change is more likely to be achieved when information is disseminated effectively, and the leader solicits employees' input in the change process. Employees were prone to reconsider their initial assumption of how fair the change would be when leaders were exemplars of the change (Oreg et al., 2018; Soenen et al., 2017).

Applications to Professional Practice

The findings of my research study may prove advantageous to contemporary and future business leaders' survivability in the automotive dealership industry. Business leaders in the automotive dealership industry may improve their business performance by applying the survivability strategies from my research study. The specific business problem was that some small business automotive dealership leaders lacked effective business strategies to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years. The five themes that emerged from my research study were:

- Customer relationship management (CRM)

- Organizational leadership
- Organizational culture
- Organizational reputation
- Organizational change

Based on the findings of my study, business leaders use customer relationship management to differentiate their organizations from other automotive dealerships in the industry. All the participants stated that customer service was the foundation of survivability and competitive advantage in their organizations. Business leaders acquire sustainable competitive advantage by developing competence such as customer service that they can provide better than their competitors (Kuncoro & Suriani, 2018).

Implications for Social Change

The results of my research study may help enhance the chances of survival for new and existing automobile dealerships beyond 5 years in the U.S. State of Michigan. The significance of my qualitative multiple case study is to generate positive social change by providing strategies that might mitigate automobile dealership failure and help business leaders retain customers. As the national economy's lifeblood, small businesses create two-thirds of new jobs and drive market innovation and competitiveness (SBA, 2019a). Since the beginning of the 21st century, small businesses have made 10.5 million new jobs available, while large businesses have opened up 5.6 million new jobs (SBA, 2020).

Small businesses provided 65.1% of new job creation throughout the 21st century (SBA, 2020). The survival of small businesses in the automotive industry promotes employment stability that fosters social change. Deller and Conroy (2017) advocated that new small business ventures lead to social change by establishing a community that is economically strong and vibrant. Automotive dealership business leaders that apply the knowledge and strategies that emerged from my research study may redirect their scarce resources to critical areas of the organization to survive. The implications for social change include the potential for automotive dealership business leaders to mitigate business failure and increase the economic condition of their employees and local community, state, and federal governments.

Recommendations for Action

My research findings resulted in five key themes, which were customer relationship management (CRM) strategy, organizational leadership strategy, organizational culture strategy, organizational reputation strategy, and an organizational change strategy that the participants used to survive beyond 5 years. Automotive dealership business leaders could benefit from using a CRM strategy to improve their long-term survival. I recommend business leaders in the automotive dealership industry implement customer-centric strategies that focus on customer retention, satisfaction, and loyalty. Small business leaders implement customer-centered strategies emphasizing customer satisfaction and high service quality to increase customer retention, loyalty, and

profitability (Gera et al., 2017). Customer retention and equity are products of great customer service and build an ecosystem supporting the organization's long-term profitability. Business leaders should consistently reiterate customer feedback to employees daily throughout the organization.

My second recommendation to business leaders in the automotive industry is to ensure a strong leadership strategy that starts with a genuine concern for the employees and expands outwardly toward external stakeholders. Leadership is one of the most critical and arduous aspects of human endeavor that no organization or country can grow to prominence without the vision of its leadership (Bambale et al., 2017).

Employees must know that leaders in their organization care about their well-being as much as their work performance. Employees are considered the most valuable resource within the organization, and employee engagement is an excellent barometer for business leaders to gauge organizational success (Albrecht et al., 2018; Bakker & Albrecht, 2018). Business leaders should use the vision and mission statements to exemplify leadership's importance and provide a roadmap to highlight the organization's present posture and future destination. Ajmera (2017) and Esfahani et al. (2018) posited that leader strategy formulation refers to business leaders selecting the most suitable course of action to realize their organizational objectives, goals, mission, and vision.

The third recommendation to business leaders in the automotive industry is to implement a culture that supports their core values, beliefs, and behaviors toward accomplishing organizational objectives. Business leaders should hold themselves and

their employees accountable to the organizational culture through close monitoring, starting at the top. Organizational culture emanates from myriad sources, predominately from the beliefs, values, and assumptions of the enterprise's founder or leader (Warrick, 2017). Organizational business leaders are the standard-bearers of organizational culture, and they should model the culture as an example for employees to emulate. When organizational members possess a shared meaning of the organization's goal and values, they act in the firm's best interest, respond appropriately to threats, and improve its chance of survival (Costanza et al., 2016). The organization benefits from the values, beliefs, and behaviors of new employees that serve as a bulwark against organizational culture groupthink.

Fourth, I would recommend that business leaders in the automotive industry remain cognizant of the benefits of having a good reputation and how quickly it can be tarnished. A strong organizational reputation is vital to the consumer as it reduces their risk of doing business with incompetent or incapable enterprises. An organization's reputation is a critical factor in business leaders creating valuable stakeholder relationships and gaining public trust (Sageder et al., 2018). Business leaders should ensure that employees are cognizant that the customers' first impression measures an organizational reputation as they greet them walking through the front door. The findings of my research study are consistent with Schoofs and Claeys (2021), who stated business leaders use crisis communication to mitigate reputational damage, allowing the organization to reset the service failure in a way that reshapes stakeholders' perception.

After a customer service failure, business leaders should: (a) own the failure, (b) explain the failure, (c) remedy the failure, and (d) identify any impact the failure may or may not have on future business transactions.

The last recommendation would be for business leaders in the automotive dealership industry to understand that organizational change is a fundamental component of leadership. Many business factors can necessitate organizational change, such as sustaining a competitive advantage, innovation, technology, and globalization (Endrejat et al., 2017; Fattore et al., 2018). Business leaders must know that the first and most important step in organizational change is to articulate the necessity for change and identify its desired outcome. Organizational change is more likely to be achieved when information is disseminated effectively, and the leader solicits employees' input in the change process. Employees were prone to reconsider their initial assumption of how fair the change would be when leaders were exemplars of the change (Oreg et al., 2018; Soenen et al., 2017).

I aim to publish my research study findings in peer-reviewed journals, such as the *American Journal of Small Business*, *Journal of Small Business Strategy*, *Journal of Small Business & Entrepreneurship*, and *Journal of Research in Business, Economics, & Management*. I also intend to present my research findings at automotive conferences, like the Detroit Auto Dealers Association (DADA) conference, National Automobile Dealers Association (NADA) conference, and the Digital Dealer conference and

exposition. I will conclude the presentation of my research study findings at local automotive dealership business leaders' networking events and meetings.

Recommendations for Further Research

The qualitative multiple case study explored survivability strategies business leaders use in the automotive dealership industry. My research study helped broaden my knowledge about survivability strategies used in the automotive dealership industry. Even creating new knowledge from my study does not imply an exhaustive knowledge of survivability strategies. In my research study, I noted several assumptions. Researchers may use my research study as a foundation for future studies to explore survivability strategies that did not emerge from my study. The first assumption was that a qualitative multiple case study approach was the most viable method to explore strategies automotive dealership leaders employ to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years. Future researchers may wish to conduct a similar study using an alternative research design. Another limitation was that all participants were located in the Central and Southwest regions of the U.S. State of Michigan. While it is conceivable that my research findings are likely transferable across geographically dispersed locations. The specific demographics and the unique market with the largest automotive manufacturing base in the U.S. researchers' future studies should be conducted in different geographical locations in the United States with a similar methodology to expand knowledge on automotive dealerships' survivability strategies.

Reflections

Pursuing the Doctor of Business Administration degree was the most challenging endeavor I have ever embarked on. The first step was formulating a research topic suitable for solving a business phenomenon that piqued my interest. The researcher's previous experience supports the chosen methodological considerations (Yin, 2014). The automotive industry was a research topic in which I possessed exhaustive knowledge. In 2002, I earned an associate automotive technology degree in applied science. I have obtained certifications in engine repair, brakes, electronic-computer systems, and medium-heavy parts from the National Institute for Automotive Service Excellence. During my 26-year tenure in the U.S. Army, I was responsible for repairs and services for a fleet of tactical and combat vehicles. I oversaw the requisitioning, distributing, inventorying, and stocking of \$1.2M of repair parts.

I had to understand myself through personal reflexivity before engaging in the phenomenon under study. Denzin and Lincoln (2011) defined reflexivity as the process of critical reflection on self as a researcher that determines the choice of research strategy and how to engage with participants. I chose a cross-sectional (time horizon), case study (strategy), multi-method qualitative (methodological choice), induction (approach to theory development), and interpretivism (philosophy). Yin (2014) posited that researchers should be astute in selecting the appropriate methods to ensure accurate findings. The choices aligned congruently with my ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions.

I chose the qualitative multiple case study design to collect a wide array of data through cross-case comparisons to recognize emergent patterns of relationships among complex constructs. In the qualitative research arena, semi-structured interviews provide the researcher with deep, rich, individualized, and contextualized data that answer the overarching research question (Dikko, 2016). The open-ended face-to-face semistructured interviews allowed me to capture data from participants regarding their opinions, knowledge, and judgments. Selecting the most suitable sampling technique that best answered the research question was vital. According to Yin (2014), case studies can rely on minute samples as long as the interviewer prompts the participants for in-depth insight into each question. I chose the purposive sampling technique because of its usefulness when working with small samples with adequate information regarding the phenomenon under investigation.

As I pursued the D.B.A., I had no idea what to expect or if I had the academic acumen to bring my dream to fruition. During my first residency, I interacted with my peers and got answers to the many questions I had from some of Walden University's most prominent professors and staff. The iterative process of the doctoral study allowed me to grasp the concepts and constructs of the social science research process. I was able to form a network with independent scholars from the residencies that I used throughout my doctoral journey. It was critically important to understand, bracket, and mitigate my research biases. I learned to carefully consider the evidence from multiple sources to

avoid an unbiased assessment of what I believed was true. My academic writing improved as I developed my scholarly voice.

Conclusion

The purposes of my qualitative multiple case study aimed to explore successful survivability strategies used by business leaders in the automotive industry. All the participants in my research study were seasoned automotive dealership business leaders with over 1500 years of collective experience. The overarching research question for my study was: What business strategies do small business leaders in the automotive dealership industry implement that sustain their businesses beyond 5 years? The targeted population comprised a purposeful sample of five business leaders in the automotive dealership industry in the Central and Southwest U.S. State of Michigan. I used the leader-member exchange theory as the conceptual framework for my research study.

The five themes that emerged from my research study included: (a) customer relationship management, (b) organizational leadership, (c) organizational culture, (d) organizational reputation, and (e) organizational change. I correlated the findings of my study to the extant literature and the conceptual framework related to survivability strategies for business leaders in the automotive dealership industry. I recommend that current and future business leaders in the automotive dealership industry use the strategies delineated in my research study to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years of operation.

In conclusion, the doctoral research process has broadened my knowledge of the automotive dealership industry. My multiple case research study revealed that automotive dealership business leaders survived beyond 5 years by building long-term relationships with customers, leading-by-example leadership, implementing a dynamic culture, safeguarding their reputation, and adapting to change. Small business leaders in the automotive dealership industry should review, analyze, and implement the strategies that emerged from the successful participants in my research study. The contribution of my research study will provide business leaders in the automotive dealership industry with the knowledge to sustain their organizations during periods of boom or bust.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Interview: Strategies for Sustaining Automotive Dealerships Beyond 5 Years	
Things to do	Things to say-script
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction and staging 	<p>Greetings, Ma'am/Sir. My name is Lyndon Taylor, and I greatly appreciate your support in finding time to participate in this research study.</p> <p>Contemporary research has shown that 50% of all small businesses established in the United States fail to survive beyond 5 years.</p> <p>My research study explores sustainability strategies that automotive dealership leaders use to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years.</p> <p>During this interview, I will ask nine interview questions that align with the overarching purpose of my research study. The duration of this interview will last approximately 45 minutes.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Researcher's introduction 	<p>Currently, I am a doctoral candidate (business) at Walden University, where I have attended for about 3.5 years. During my 26-year tenure in the U.S. Army, I was responsible for managing a fleet of tactical and combat vehicles that included the repair and service in conjunction with requisitioning, distributing, inventorying, and stocking \$1.2M of repair parts.</p> <p>Your signature on the informed consent form indicates your willful participation in this research study as an interviewee.</p> <p>Your participation in this research study is strictly voluntary. At any time before the interview, during the interview, or</p>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have Walden's consent form, privacy, and confidentiality requirements readily available 	<p>after the data analysis phase, you may withdraw your voluntary participation without prejudice.</p> <p>Do you have any questions about the informed consent form?</p> <p>I will be recording this interview for further data analysis. Also, I will be taking reflective journal notes. Your participation and the responses you make during the interview will remain private and confidential.</p> <p>Do you have any questions related to privacy and confidentiality?</p> <p>Are there any questions related to anything that I have stated thus far?</p> <p>I will now begin the interview questions.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monitor both verbal and nonverbal cues 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What business strategies have you implemented that led to the sustainment of your enterprise beyond 5 years?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clarify or paraphrase responses when required 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. What key impediments did you encounter while implementing these sustainment strategies?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Probe using follow-up questions to gain a robust knowledge of the phenomenon 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. What steps did you take to mitigate the key impediments?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Probe using follow-up questions to gain a robust knowledge of the phenomenon 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. What, if any, types of formal education, business strategy or training did you undertake before establishing your business, and how did it prepare you as a small business leader?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Probe using follow-up questions to gain a robust knowledge of the phenomenon 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. Based on your experiences, what skills were most critical in developing and implementing a business strategy to survive beyond 5 years.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Probe using follow-up questions to gain a robust knowledge of the phenomenon 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 6. What key personnel were most critical when developing and implementing a business strategy to survive beyond 5 years?
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 7. How does your role as a leader in the organization, and your employees' role as followers in the organization, correlate into a business strategy to survive beyond 5 years?

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The interview concludes with thanking the participant • Schedule follow-up for member-checking interview if necessary 	<p>8. What key business resources (land, labor, capital, IT, or entrepreneurial) were necessary when developing and implementing business strategies to survive beyond 5 years?</p>
	<p>9. What additional information about the development and implementation of business survivability strategies would you like to add to enhance my understanding further?</p>
	<p>This concludes the interview.</p> <p>I will transcribe the interview session and send you a synthesized interpretation of your responses via email within 3 days. I would ask that you validate that my transcribed synthesis accurately reflects the true spirit of your responses to the interview questions.</p> <p>A follow-up would be required for clarification if I misconstrued the essence of your interview responses.</p> <p>Again, I would like to thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule to participate in this research. Please enjoy the remainder of your day.</p>

Appendix B: Letter of Introduction and Recruitment

<Date>

<Address Block>

Greetings, business leader (Owner or General Manager), my name is Lyndon F. Taylor. I am a doctoral candidate attending Walden University to pursue a Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) degree with a concentration in Leadership. As partial fulfillment of the requirements of the DBA degree, I am conducting a research study entitled *Strategies for Sustaining Automotive Dealerships Beyond 5 Years*. I would like to respectfully request your participation in this research study because you and your organization meet the following eligibility criteria:

- Your small and medium-sized (SME) business has been serving customers for more than 5 years by implementing successful strategies to remain profitable well beyond 5 years of operation.
- I believe that your knowledge, experience, and exceptional business acumen would lend credibility to the research study by answering the overarching the research question of *what strategies do automotive dealership leaders use to sustain their operations beyond 5 years?*
- I believe that you will provide candid and unbiased information for the research study. Your strong ties to the community and active support of a

plethora of local organizations are congruent with Walden University's commitment to positive social change. Walden University defines positive social change as a deliberate process of creating and applying ideas, strategies, and actions to promote the worth, dignity, and development of individuals, communities, organizations, institutions, cultures, and societies. Positive social change results in the improvement of human and social conditions.

Attached is an informed consent form to provide additional information about the study. The 45-minute face-to-face semistructured interview will be audio-recorded and transcribed. To ensure the accuracy of the information after I have synthesized it, I will need a second meeting (30 minutes) to allow you to review the transcribed interview in a member-checking process. Member-checking is a process whereby the study participants review and adjust their recoded responses before research analysis. I will mask your personal and organizational identities by using a pseudonym. Your participation in this research study is voluntary and will be confidential.

Upon conclusion of the study, I will reach out to you to determine if you are interested in receiving an official copy of the final study. If so, I will send a copy via your email address as soon as the final study is complete. I will provide a summary of the study that will be sent to each participant.

You will not receive any gifts or financial compensation for participating in the study. The findings of my study could contribute to positive social change by influencing strategies that business leaders can use to sustain their business operations beyond 5

years. My research study results may influence positive social change that stimulates the local economy with increased tax revenues generated from successful automotive dealerships. The implications for positive social change may include the potential for automotive dealership leaders to elevate the quality of life for employees and community stakeholders. The results of my proposed study may provide business sustainability strategies that support the growth of new enterprises, jobs, and capital investment, benefiting communities.

Please feel free to contact me with any questions or additional information.

I look forward to speaking with you, and I thank you in advance for your consideration and future cooperation in this research study.

Very, respectfully

Lyndon F. Taylor