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Strategies to Sustain Road Freight Small and Medium Enterprises in South Africa

Sitsabo Kuhlase
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Walden University

College of Management and Technology

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Sitsabo S. Kuhlase

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 to Sustain Road Freight Small and Medium Enterprises in South Africa

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Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Business Administration

Walden University

March 2022

Abstract

In 2019, 2.65 million small and medium enterprises (SMEs) were registered in South Africa, of which 70% are estimated to fail within the first 5 years due to inadequate sustainability strategies during slow economic growth. Anchored on the resource-based view (RBV) theory, the purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies that owners of road freight SMEs use to sustain their businesses during slow economic growth. Data collection included six semistructured face-to-face and virtual interviews and a review of their company documents. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, and four themes emerged: marketing and customer relationship, financial management and working capital, leadership and employer/employee relationship, and safety and vehicle maintenance. A recommendation for SME owners is to be actively involved in the day-to-day operations of their businesses, instill a culture of high performance, and develop effective marketing strategies to grow market share. The implications for positive social change include the potential to foster a culture of entrepreneurship, economic growth, and increase employment opportunities and reduce inequality and poverty within local communities.

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Dedication

First and foremost, I want to return all glory to the Almighty God for having guided me throughout my studies, and given me strength and wisdom to successfully accomplish my personal dream, doctoral degree. I dedicate this doctoral degree to my parents; father Mr. Samuel Siphon Kuhlase (late) and my mother Mrs. Thandie Portia Kuhlase. Even though my father is not around to celebrate this important milestone in my life, I take comfort in that he was there when I commenced this journey and always encouraged and urged me to complete the doctoral degree. I further dedicate this doctoral study to my immediate family. I thank my partner for having supported me throughout my doctoral study and provided emotional and spiritual support. I thank my children for the support and love they have shown me even when I did not spend enough time with them whilst pursuing my doctoral studies. I thank my siblings and the rest of my family for their support. Finally, I present this doctoral degree to my children, for it to serve as an inspiration, and invite each of them to strive to achieve better than me both academically and professionally.

Acknowledgement

I acknowledge my Study Chair Dr. John Bryan, who invested a significant amount of time mentoring and guiding me throughout this study. I further wish to acknowledge the Committee Members Dr. Olivia Herriford (Second Committee Member) and Dr. Judith Blando (University Research Reviewer) for their support and guidance throughout this study. Their collective effort offered me a rewarding learning experience that I will use into the future. I also acknowledge the many people who supported and encouraged me to successfully complete this study. On the successful completion of this study, I say To God be the Glory.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study

Since the economic recession in 2008, South Africa has struggled to attain the average annual economic growth rates of above 5% that it experienced between 2000 and 2008 (Idc, 2013). Instead, the annual growth rate has dropped to between 0.8% and 2% (Seda, 2018; The World Bank, 2018). The low economic growth rate is a significant constraint on the ability of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) to survive (Seda, 2018). Consequently, between 2017 and 2018, SMEs steadily declined at a rate of 1.4%, resulting in an employment reduction of 15.9% in the sector within that period (Seda, 2018).

Small business owners have been forced to devise strategies to cope with the adverse prevailing economic conditions. For this research, I explored specific strategies that owners of road freight businesses use to sustain their businesses during periods of slow economic growth. I gathered insight on sustainability strategies for SMEs by conducting semistructured interviews with owners of road freight SMEs who have operated and sustained their businesses for more than 5 years, reviewing academic literature, and studying company documents shared with me.

Background of the Problem

South Africa has a high failure rate in the SME sector, wherein approximately 70% of all ventures in the sector fail within the first 5 years (Bushe, 2019; DSBD, 2018). Data retrieved from tax records reveal that entry rates are lower than exit rates in the SME sector in South Africa, reinforcing the dominance of established large companies

(Tsebe et al., 2018). However, the SME sector in South Africa is a significant driver of employment in a country with one of the highest unemployment rates in the world (GEM, 2019). SMEs account for approximately 70% of total employment; and contribute between 42% and 45% to the national economic output (Gross Domestic Product [GDP]) valued at R4.69 trillion (PBO, 2018; SEDA, 2020). Therefore, a high failure rate in the sector results in a decreased contribution to GDP and employment (GEMSA, 2020; OECD, 2020).

Tangible interventions to reduce the failure rate and ensure that SMEs are self-sustaining are imperative for a thriving economy (Lose & Tengeh, 2015). A thriving business environment with higher rates of entrepreneurship and small business growth is ideal for job creation and investment and can result in inclusive growth (OECD, 2017). As observed by Wiid et al. (2016), global economies depend on the success of SMEs to create employment, consume local resources, decrease levels of poverty, and contribute positively to national revenue. Failure of new ventures in the SME sector can also be attributed to a lack of resources, support, and financial capital and environmental uncertainty, and weak institutional support (Anwar, 2018). This is notwithstanding the significant amount of support this sector receives from governments and their agencies (GEM, 2019).

Problem Statement

In 2019, 2.65 million SMEs were registered in South Africa, of which 70% are estimated to fail within the first 5 years (Bushe, 2019; DSBD, 2018; SEDA, 2020). SMEs

account for approximately 70% of total employment and contribute between 42% and 45% to the GDP of South Africa that is valued at R4.69 trillion; however, the high SME failure rate results in a decreased contribution to GDP and employment (GEMSA, 2020, OECD, 2020; PBO, 2018; SEDA, 2020). The general business problem is that inadequate SME sustainability strategies during slow economic growth result in a high failure rate. The specific business problem is that some owners of road freight SMEs lack adequate strategies to sustain their businesses during slow economic growth.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies that owners of road freight SMEs use to sustain their businesses during slow economic growth. The population will be owners of road freight industry SMEs in Gauteng Province, South Africa, who have sustained their businesses beyond 5 years in a period of slow economic growth. The study's findings may positively contribute to social change by reducing unemployment and increasing derivative tax revenues for communities' economic growth.

Nature of the Study

For this study, I used the qualitative research method. Qualitative researchers develop evidence for identifying and analyzing phenomena through careful observation, in-depth questioning, and detailed data gathering (Kozleski, 2017). Data were collected from research participants regarding their practical experiences; therefore, the qualitative method for this study was suitable. In the quantitative research method, the researcher

uses hypotheses to test variables' relationships to achieve the research goals in controlled and contrived studies (Park & Park, 2016). For this study, I did not include hypothesis testing; therefore, the quantitative method was not applicable. Mixed-method researchers combine qualitative and quantitative methods to address a specific research problem, requiring researchers to possess knowledge of both qualitative and quantitative methodology (McKim, 2017). In this study, practical experiences and hypothesis testing were not blended; therefore, the mixed method was not applicable to address the purpose of the proposed study.

The qualitative research design for the study was a multiple case study. Using a multiple case study design enables comparisons that clarify whether an emergent finding is simply peculiar to a single case or consistently replicated by several cases (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). The multiple case study population comprised companies operating in the road freight industry that service different markets but are exposed to the same slow economic growth conditions, hence the choice of a multiple case study design. Using the multiple case study allows researchers to analyze within each setting and across settings (De Massis & Kotlar, 2014). Given that I conducted interviews with owners of different SMEs in the road freight industry, reviewed company documents, and analyzed data within and across businesses, the multiple case study design was suitable to identify and compare the respective strategies owners of SMEs use to sustain their businesses.

Researchers use phenomenology design to understand participants' lived or primal experiences (van Manen, 2017). The data collection for this study was a combination of interviews and reviewing of business documents instead of exploring the personal meanings of participants' lived experiences; a phenomenology design was not suitable. Economic conditions that affect their businesses at the time of the study, as opposed to inherited societal or social experiences, were of interest and not the personal meanings of experiences of research participants, which made phenomenology design study not suitable. When using an ethnography design, the researcher focuses on the behavior, language, and interaction among members of an entire cultural-sharing group (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The focus of the study was not cultural dynamics; as such, an ethnography design was not applicable.

Research Question

What strategies do owners of road freight SMEs use to sustain their businesses during slow economic growth?

Interview Questions

1. What strategies have you used to successfully sustain your business in times of slow economic growth and increased competition in the road freight sector?
2. What external resources have you relied on that have aided in sustaining your business in times of slow economic growth?
3. Because the road freight industry is highly competitive, what strategies do you use to retain your customers during periods of slow economic growth?

4. Which key business processes do you manage strictly to ensure that the business remains profitable during periods of slow economic growth?
5. Please share any additional practices and principles that, based upon your experience, have contributed to the success of your business during the period of slow economic growth that may not have been covered in the earlier questions.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for the study was the resource-based view (RBV) theory. Wernerfelt (1984) conceptualized the RBV theory. Wernerfelt developed simple economic tools for analyzing a firm's resource position and identified strategic options recommended by the analysis, focusing specifically on the relationship between profitability and resources, including means to manage the firm's resource position over time. RBV explains how organizations can sustain competitive advantage through the acquisition and control of valuable, rare, inimitable, and nonsubstitutable (VRIN) resources (Barney, 1991). RBV focuses on the internal resources of a firm and leverages competencies to develop sustainable competitive advantage strategies (Campbell & Park, 2016). Business sustainability in the SME sector, specifically the road freight industry for my study, can be achieved through the ability of a firm to use internal resources in the development of unique business systems and processes that afford the firm a competitive advantage over competitors, which are core tenets of RBV.

The RBV theory was relevant to this study; SME owners in the road freight sector need to utilize or acquire internal resources that will yield a unique service offering by the business. The strategies suitable for road freight SMEs must be unique, value-adding, and inimitable to enable the business to gain a competitive advantage over its competitors. The business can grow or maintain market share and profits for sustainability, which aligns with the intended focus of this study. RBV theory was a conceptual framework to understand the strategic options that owners of road freight SMEs use to attain competitive advantage and business sustainability during periods of slow economic growth because the industry is characterized by unpredictable market and demand trends.

Operational Definitions

Business Sustainability: Organizational capacity to deliver competitive performance, endure social and economic difficulties and deliver societal benefits (Kantabutra, 2019).

Gross domestic product (GDP): Measures a country's economic activity based on the market value of goods produced in the country (Fraumeni, 2017).

Resource-based view (RBV): Predicts the relationship between the firm's resources and its performance (Arbelo et al., 2020).

Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs): Business ventures that employ between 1 and 250 employees and make a revenue of up to R50 million per year (Schmidt et al., 2017).

Slow economic growth: The decrease in the amount of goods and services produced in a country as measured by per capita value (Soylu et al., 2018).

The Small Enterprise Finance Agency (SEFA): An agency of government in South Africa responsible for providing financial products and services to qualifying SMEs through different lending mechanisms (SEFA, 2019).

The Small Enterprise Development Agency (SEDA): An agency of government in South Africa mandated to develop, support, and promote small businesses in the country through various initiatives executed in conjunction with local and international partners (SEDA, 2019).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

Assumptions

Assumptions are aspects of the study the researcher considers true without providing tangible evidence, without which the study may not proceed (Wolgemuth et al., 2017). In this study, I made three assumptions. The first assumption was that owners of SMEs in the road freight sector have developed strategies to sustain their businesses. The next assumption was that participants will provide an honest assessment of their companies during the interviews. The last assumption was that the interviews will reveal sufficient information to satisfy the research question.

Limitations

Limitations are elements of the study that relate to potential weaknesses that are out of the researcher's control and may influence the study outcome (Theofanidis &

Fountouki, 2018). For this study, there were two limitations. The first limitation was that the sustainability strategies developed by each SME owner might be unique to their individual business and not necessarily transferable to another SME operating within the same conditions in the road freight sector. The other limitation was that the results derived from this study could not be generalized across the road freight sector.

Delimitations

Delimitations refer to research boundaries set so that the aims and objectives of the study are possible to attain (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). In this study, there were two delimitations. The first was that the study sample was 6 SME owners in the road freight sector. Secondly, the findings were based on data collected from SME owners in the road freight sector that have sustained their business operations beyond 5 years.

Significance of the Study

Contribution to Business Practice

The study explored strategies that SME owners in the road freight sector have implemented to ensure the long-term sustainability of their businesses in a slowly growing economy while operating in an industry characterized by high competition and low profit margins. The desired outcome of the study was to contribute to the body of knowledge by identifying strategies that enable road freight SMEs to be competitive, resulting in potential business growth and sustainability, especially during difficult economic times. Successful businesses can provide a means for identifying useful strategies for review and potential adaption within the SME sector. The insights shared

by owners of road freight SMEs, information reviewed from company documents, and knowledge derived from literature review assisted in identifying business sustainability strategies that could be useful to SMEs in the road freight industry and may be of similar interest to other industries operating in the same market conditions.

Implications for Social Change

A high national success rate of SMEs boosts economic growth, contributes to reducing unemployment and poverty, and increases consumer spending on local goods and services (SEDA, 2018). The slow economic growth in South Africa has created insufficient employment opportunities for the growing population, thus increasing the unemployment rate to 34.4% (Statssa, 2021). The social implications of sustainable SMEs are increased business ventures into the sector, increased employment levels, and enhanced citizens' financial independence.

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

I explored strategies required by owners of SMEs to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years in South Africa, given the high failure rate in this sector. The literature review commences with defining and discussing SMEs in a South African context and the sector contribution to the economy, followed by discussions on the RBV, GDP, business strategy, business sustainability, slow economic growth, and small business/entrepreneurial leadership.

I undertook an extensive literature review on each theme (SME, RBV, GDP, business strategy, slow economic growth, small business leadership) and their requisite

importance on the long-term sustainability of SMEs. In each theme, I performed an analysis of strategies that may assist owners of SMEs in sustaining their business for a period beyond 5 years. The literature review gives insight into theories presented in various peer-reviewed articles related to the research study.

I used a variety of academic resources and tools to search for literature comprising academic journals, peer-reviewed articles, books, and government websites. As the researcher, I am required to cite references from peer-reviewed sources, and it is recommended that peer-reviewed sources be 85% of the total sources cited in the research. In this study, I cited 90% of peer-reviewed journals, of which 90% are within 5 years. The resources from which the literature material were retrieved included Google Scholar, ProQuest, SAGE Journals, Elsevier ABI/INFORM, and Business Source Complete. Search terms used included *small and medium enterprises*, *small business sustainability*, *strategic management*, *business sustainability*, *small business leadership*, *entrepreneurial leadership*, *slow economic growth*, *gross domestic product*, and *resource-based view*.

Table 1 illustrates the total count of academic and government sources cited in the literature review section of the research study and further provides information on the age analysis in each category of the literature type.

Table 1*Literature Review Source Count*

Literature type	Total	<5years	> 5years	%<5years
Peer-reviewed journals	160	147	13	92%
Government	12	12	0	100%
Books	13	9	4	69%
Non-peer-reviewed journals	0	0	0	0%
Total	185	168	17	91%

Table 2 illustrates the total count of academic and government sources cited in the overall manuscript (complete research), sections 1, 2, and 3, and further provides information on the age analysis in each category of the literature type.

Table 2*Manuscript Source Count*

Literature type	Total	<5years	> 5years	%<5years
Peer-reviewed journals	308	277	31	90%
Government	14	13	1	93%
Books and Institutional	19	10	9	52%
Non-peer-reviewed journals	1	1	0	100%
Total	342	301	41	88%

Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs)

SMEs' long-term sustainability impacts a country's economic development positively and fosters a culture of entrepreneurship amongst its citizens. This contributes to an increased availability of local products and services, which is an important aspect in attaining higher levels of economic output, increasing employment opportunities, and reducing poverty levels in a domestic economy. In South Africa, SMEs are business ventures who employ between 1 and 250 employees, generating revenues up to R50

million (van Scheers, 2018). The SME sector in South Africa accounts for 70% of total employment and contributes between 42% and 45% toward the GDP (OECD, 2017; SEDA, 2020).

To support the strategy to sustain SMEs, the South African government established the Small Enterprise Development Agency (SEDA) and Small Enterprise Finance Agency (SEFA) to focus on developing, supporting, and providing technical and financial support to this sector (SEDA, 2019; SEFA, 2019). In South Africa, the rate of early-stage entrepreneurial activity, either planning or starting a new business venture in the formal or informal economy, is low compared to other emerging economies (OECD, 2017). Industry experts recommend that South Africa should promote entrepreneurship as a viable career option. SMEs have been identified as productive drivers of inclusive growth and development, both locally and internationally (SEDA, 2018). The objective of SME owners/leaders in South Africa is to attain financial independence, specifically in relation to sustainability (Kemp et al., 2015), as they focus on high product quality, responsiveness to consumer needs, and flexibility (van Scheers, 2018).

SMEs have played an essential role in the economic development of every developing economy globally as they address economic imbalances that exist in these economies (Kaur, 2017). SMEs dominate the business sector in many countries; for instance, approximately 99% of all businesses in Europe are SMEs (Jansson et al., 2017). SMEs are more productive than large organizations, a factor attributed to the ability of their leadership to develop efficient systems and processes, aided by the business size

(Margaretha & Supartika, 2016). SMEs strategically contribute towards economic development and wealth creation commonly in traditionally underprivileged populations; as such, the SME sector is considered critical in developing nations (Masocha, 2019). Furthermore, given the ability of SME owners and leaders to easily form trusting relationships with their supply chain partners, they can establish formal or informal relationships with large companies resulting in their products or services reaching a broader market, mutually enhancing sales and profitability (Egels-Zanden, 2017).

SMEs contribute immensely to the financial improvement and destitution lessening in most domestic economies (Farran & Fawaz, 2018). Given the challenges experienced by SMEs and perceived weaknesses, the present era of globalization requires the leadership of SMEs to compete in marketing their businesses as this sector is strategic given its ability to mobilize economic activities of the community while synonymously being the source of income of citizens and improving their welfare (Hendrawan et al., 2018). SMEs play a vital role in sustainable development as they dominate the business sector in any country; therefore, their cumulative impact is significant (Malesios et al., 2018).

SMEs' owners and leaders are pivotal to developing a culture of entrepreneurship, stimulating competition, creating substantial employment opportunities, enhancing the quality of human capital, opening new business opportunities, and supporting large-scale industries (Tehseen et al., 2019). The development and implementation of innovative concepts yield success when undertaken by owners/leaders of SMEs given their ability to

quickly and efficiently integrate inventions created through internal research activities, including research study outcomes that show a strong correlation between innovation and SMEs operational sustainability (Ndesaulwa & Kikula, 2016). The dynamic decision-making ability of SME owners/leadership enables them to access and use external information and research collaboration to innovate and gain competitive advantage and also expand their operations to international markets (Martinez-Conesa et al., 2017). SMEs, through their leaders, are necessary in driving efficiency and competition in the economy given their ability to innovate new products and services and place them in the market without following onerous processes applicable in large companies, as they have a bigger risk-taking appetite (Ayandibu & Houghton, 2017).

Sustainable SMEs in developing economies reduce the flow of rural to urban migration, given that owners of SMEs can set up with minimal capital and managerial skills while contributing significantly to economic growth (Abeh, 2017). According to Ojha (2016), SMEs in developing economies transform dormant and idle resources like land, labor, and capital into value-adding goods and services, increasing the national income and wealth of the nation. The value-add of SMEs into an economy is that owners/leadership actively seek new market ventures and exploit them to their advantage to generate revenue and create employment opportunities (Muriithi, 2017).

SMEs in developing countries are ideal enablers of corporate social investment (CSI) initiatives within their local communities. Through partnerships between leaders within the sector and those of large companies, they can undertake various community

upliftment programs (Jamali et al., 2017). In emerging economies, citizens recognize the role of SMEs given their potential to improve income distribution, create new employment, reduce poverty, and facilitate export growth. There is always a direct correlation between the successful development of SMEs and the growth of a country's economy.

SMEs are a critical economic performance accelerator of a country as they constitute most businesses and employment. Their unlimited potential for innovation is an added benefit to the sustainability of a country (Agussalim et al., 2019; van Scheers, 2018). Owners/leaders of SMEs participate in international business through global value chains, which is a powerful force for productivity improvement through exposure to technology frontiers and best practices (OECD, 2016). To achieve and maintain a better competitive advantage, SME leaders can effectively develop the technological capability to respond to the dynamic and rapidly changing economic environment (Salisu & Abu Bakar, 2019).

Leaders of high-performing SMEs adopt long-term planning mechanisms and use strategic and annual marketing planning, focusing on comprehensive situational analysis to gain an advantage over their competitors (van Scheers & Makhitha, 2016). Successful SMEs reflect entrepreneurial activities supported by a healthy economy that enables sustainable growth to ensure the ability of the firms to finance their long-term future development (Yusoff et al., 2018). The SME sector creates most new employment opportunities and contributes to future economic growth in developed and emerging

economies. As a result, government leaders in these countries are consistently developing policies to strengthen the sector to enhance prospects of success and long-term sustainability (Ndiaye et al., 2018).

In developed economies where SMEs thrive, domestic leaders have established policies aimed at positioning local SMEs in the global value chain to enable the sector to participate in international markets through exports and imports, to drive economic growth, and enhance the sustainability of firms in the sector (Chong et al., 2019). SMEs provide employees with opportunities to develop problem-solving skills and use their knowledge to develop new products and processes through technological innovation capabilities, positively contributing to firm competitiveness, entry into new markets, and economic growth (Yoo et al., 2018). SMEs contribute positively to the growth of developing economies and are the backbone of an economy, as they exert a significant role in reducing poverty, foreign trade promotion, employment creation, and innovation (Gherghina et al., 2020).

To support business sustainability within the SME sector, external factors that need to be addressed jointly by the government and private sector leadership include access to finance, stringent measures on business subsidies, quality of infrastructure, industrial structure, and degree of corruption (Liu et al., 2019). SMEs operate in a harsh and ever-changing business environment; therefore, their leaders must remain abreast of market trends by ensuring their businesses' product/service offerings keep their target market interested and returning, which yields profitability and long-term sustainability of

the business (Cant et al., 2015). The marketing strategy developed by owners/leaders of SMEs needs to focus on improving marketing skills and application, to broaden their knowledge about other markets and enhance their ability to market their products or services to larger groups of customers and expand their business (Baporikar et al., 2016). Leaders of the government and private sector in South Africa need to partner and develop policies to create an economic environment that enables the long-term sustainability of SMEs across all sectors. The objective is to encourage a culture of entrepreneurship, increase employment opportunities, and reduce inequality and poverty.

The road freight sector in South Africa contributes 5% of total GDP, 2.5% of total employment and accounts for more than 70% of land freight income and payload (Merven et al., 2019). In the African continent, South African is the regional hub in the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) for the road freight and logistics industry due to its advanced infrastructure and geographical location (Arndt & Roberts, 2018). Owners and leaders of businesses within the road freight or logistics sector must continuously innovate due to the competitive nature of the industry and slim profit margins. For sustainability, the road freight sector depends on high demand for collections and deliveries to keep their operations flowing consistently (Goga et al., 2019). In their quest to sustain their businesses within the logistics/ transport sector, SME owners facilitate collaborative relationships with other owners of SMEs within the value chain to preserve their competitive position (Sadiku-Dushi et al., 2019).

Access to funding by owners of SMEs in the road freight sector through various government or private sector initiatives enhances the long-term sustainability of businesses in the road freight sector (Panagopoulos, 2020). Large and small enterprises' leaders in the transport sector use financial structure ratios to evaluate the company's business performance, emphasizing the functions of liquidity ratios, profitability indicators, long-term assets, turnover, and long-term assets (Wang, 2014). Cost reduction, improvement in transport performance, and continuous improvement are important sustainability requirements for SMEs in the road freight sector, as it is a highly competitive sector globally (Kovacs, 2017). A significant sustainability attribute for SMEs in the road freight sector is reliability, customer retention and consistent demand for services, which is realized by implementing an effective risk management strategy that focuses on internal control measures, driver's orientation, partnering with law enforcement agencies and collaboration with industry stakeholders (Ali et al., 2018).

The global trucking industry is continuously confronted with multiple challenges that threaten continued business sustainability in the sector, such as total cost of ownership, demand shift to growing markets, the validity of business models, outdated technologies, and inadequate marketing and brand strategy (Zhang et al., 2020). Business failures in the road freight industry can be attributed to failures in the supply/value chain, wherein operational and financial challenges experienced by partner organizations in the supply/value chain negatively impact the entire supply/value chain (Bhagwat, 2018). The intense market competition created by the high number of operators in road freight

transportation, as opposed to the number of available customers and their market concentration, is a significant contributor to business failures in the industry as limited business opportunities are shared amongst multiple trucking businesses (Parihar, 2019). In the road freight industry, there is a direct correlation between business sustainability and customer demand. Owners of road freight businesses must invest in marketing their businesses to ensure a consistent inflow of business opportunities through client demand. The sustainability of businesses in the road freight industry is sensitive to global economic trends; business owners can sustain and grow their businesses when operating in a thriving economy, and accordingly, the exit/closure rate is high in the sector during an economic downturn or other business failures in the value chain.

Resource-Based View (RBV)

In conceptualizing the firm's RBV, Wernerfelt (1984) developed simple economic tools for analyzing a firm's resource position and identifying strategic options recommended by the analysis. RBV focuses specifically on the relationship between profitability and resources, including the means to manage the firm's resource position over time (Wernerfelt, 1984). RBV explains how organizations can sustain competitive advantage by acquiring and controlling valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (VRIN) resources that are difficult for competitors to duplicate (Barney, 1991). Barney argued that resources are valuable when they enable a firm to conceive or implement strategies that improve efficiency and effectiveness and when they pursue opportunities or neutralize threats in a firm's environment. The resources are tangible or intangible,

wherein the distinction of these along with capabilities of the firm, serves as a base for the strategy and business ability to produce above-average returns, and the selection of such resources and capabilities is the source of competitive advantage (Hitt et al., 2016).

Adequate sustainability strategies need to enable business owners/leaders to identify internal resources and processes that will differentiate their businesses' service or product offering from that of competitors to gain a competitive advantage and grow market share. Business leaders use RBV to support the notion of unique resources and resource retention; resources and capabilities possessed by competing firms are uniquely deployed, whereas firm leaders retain resources and capabilities as a source of sustained competitive advantage, when inimitable by competitors for a sustained timeframe to grow market share (Popa et al., 2016). In implementing RBV, owners and leaders of SMEs consider the firm's resources as capabilities and assets that support organizational processes to achieve desired goals and emphasize the need to develop such resources consistently to ensure sustainable competitive advantage and superior performance (Salisu & Abu Bakar, 2019). When driving integration to derive benefits of RBV, firm leaders need to develop and use capabilities and resources to achieve sustained competitive advantage (Tate & Bals, 2018). RBV is an important factor that provides a guideline into determinants of a firm performance; hence the theory is often applied to address the utilization of the firm's resources to attain higher firm performance (Ali et al., 2018).

RBV focuses on the internal resources of a firm and leverages competencies to develop sustainable competitive advantage strategies (Campbell & Park, 2016). Strategies embedded on the principles of RBV identify the mixture of knowledge, skills, and experience available within the organization and develop systems to influence performance and competitiveness through innovative solutions. Owners and leaders of organizations use RBV to invest in developing their employees to equip them with skills and knowledge that improve their productivity to enable organizational competitiveness, growth, and long-term sustainability. In RBV, the knowledge possessed by leaders and employees is a critical resource that provides a solid basis for competitive advantage (van Rijnsoever et al., 2017). RBV draws attention to industry relevance regarding the distinctive knowledge, technological and competitive conditions it brings to firms, level of economic development on resource quality, and experience that support decision-makers knowledge of industry competitors (Child et al., 2017). According to Barney (1991), a central tenet of RBV is that causal ambiguity, or imperfect observability for both internal and external stakeholders, contributes to sustained competitive advantage.

RBV affirms the notion that intangible resources (capabilities) such as stakeholder relations, culture, and competencies, if utilized effectively, are sources of effective, sustainable competitive advantage than tangible resources such as products (Jones et al., 2018). Although impossible to develop a foolproof strategy that is valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable in the present economic era, RBV assists owners/leaders in initiating firm-specific investments (FSIs) by stakeholders to obtain resource-based

competitive advantage through new innovative solutions to position their firms as industry market leaders, gain competitive advantage and grow market share (Hoskisson et al., 2018). The sustainability of a firm depends on the ability of business leaders to develop new resources, leverage existing capabilities, and make the capabilities more inimitable, supporting the RBV theory that firms will have different and varying levels of capability with regards to resource utilization (Yu et al., 2018). Growth and competitive advantage are concomitant in RBV; business leaders that pursue opportunities based on VRIN resources are, therefore, able to gain competitive advantage in unique markets, enjoy sustained growth and business operation as the market develops (Nason & Wiklund, 2018). In RBV, a firm's competitive position depends on how specialized its assets and employee skill sets are, which determines a focus on the optimal use of such resources to yield competitive advantage (Arbelo et al., 2020).

The long-term sustainability of SMEs amidst intense competition and challenging economic environment in the sector and from large firms may be premised on RBV, wherein owners or managers focus on the firm's capability to build, integrate, and reconfigure internal and external competitiveness, and to keep abreast with changes in the market (Ogunyomi & Bruning, 2015). SME owners and leaders use RBV to focus on intangible resources, such as knowledge upliftment, interpersonal relationships, and goodwill, to enhance competitive advantage, considering that the value of intangible resources is not easily substitutable and the resources are more difficult to duplicate (Ali et al., 2018). RBV supports the perspective that strategic competency is the strongest

predictor of the competitive advantage of SMEs, given that unique sets of resources result in a competitive advantage for firms (Tehseen et al., 2019). The successful venture by SME owners/leaders into new markets, both domestically and internationally, need to be premised on the principles of RBV by designing relevant strategies and using available resources purposefully to achieve specific business targets (Dabic et al., 2019). For the long-term sustainability of SMEs, the RBV strategy to gain competitive advantage and long-term sustainability must focus on internal strengths and weaknesses, rather than external opportunities and threats, by creating a bundle of strategic resources and capabilities relevant to market/industry requirements (Shibin et al., 2017).

Gross Domestic Product (GDP)

GDP is a commonly used measure for economic growth globally. The use of standardized procedures when calculating GDP enables comparisons between countries to be made (Wesselink et al., 2007). GDP is a measure of economic output and an indicator of national income. National income is defined as the total output net of capital depreciation plus the net income of foreign sources (Piketty, 2014). GDP measures the monetary value of finished products or services consumed by the end user, produced in a country within a specific period (Kummu et al., 2018). GDP considers the cost index of goods and services resulting from the production activity of institutional units in the economic territory of a country and at a stage of production (Bryndin, 2018). GDP is the sum of the gross added cost of all market prices in all sectors of the economy, which includes taxes on products imported into a domestic economy (Bryndin, 2018). GDP

considers all personal consumption expenditure, government expenditure, net export, and capital formation (Hamzah et al., 2019).

GDP economic growth is determined by an increase in the market value of goods and services sold in the market and to households, organizations, governments, and foreign buyers (Feldstein, 2017; Majidi, 2017). GDP is an indicator of domestic economic growth or contraction; therefore, the publication of GDP statistics by relevant state institutions is of importance to the general public, analysts, politicians, mass media, and business community, as it measures the performance of economic policies undertaken (Luthfiana & Nasrudin, 2018). Periodic GDP statistics influence policymakers in setting economic objectives and enacting interventions meant to encourage heightened economic activities to grow the economy (Brynjolfsson et al., 2019). GDP's clear methodology and historical usage by economists and policymakers make it the widely exploited economic indicator of economic activity. Without this, policymakers would have to deal with unorganized economic data (Mitic et al., 2017). A period of sustained GDP growth leads to the sustained growth of small businesses and new entrepreneurial activity resulting in job creation and market stability (Meyer & Meyer, 2017).

SMEs are a critical sector and a significant contributor to a country's economic activity. The performance of the sector influences growth or decline of the domestic economy, which is measured in the GDP. As an indicator of material prosperity, development, well-being, and entrepreneurial opportunities, GDP is linked to domestic

competitiveness (Dima et al., 2018). In Sub-Saharan Africa, SMEs dominate the business sector, wherein they represent 90% of formal enterprises and contribute more than 50% for both employment and GDP (Douglas et al., 2017).

Irrespective of the local economic dynamics, SMEs contribute meaningfully toward innovation, regional development, and social cohesion, contributing to GDP, employment, and exports (Imran et al., 2017). The level of innovation in the SME sector is vital to sustaining competitive advantage, economic growth, and increasing the sectors' contribution to GDP. As such, government and business leaders in successful emerging economies embark on various methods to support innovation development and promote innovation culture in the SME sector (Noori et al., 2017). The innovative nature of personnel within SMEs positions this sector as central to wealth creation, as it ignites demand for unique goods and services. To maintain the role of SMEs in various sectors and their contribution toward GDP, there is a need to promote the concept and application of intellectual capital in SMEs (Khalique et al., 2018). Countries with developed economies and characterized by high GDP benefit from the presence of more local resources and talent and have a high proportion of patents owned by local companies or local citizens. In contrast, a country with an average GDP, where a high percentage of patents is predominantly owned by international companies or foreign individuals (Raghupathi & Raghupathi, 2017).

The economic impact of SMEs varies for respective economies between high- and low-income countries; wherein in high-income countries, SMEs contribute over 55% of

GDP and over 65% of total employment, while in middle-income countries, SMEs contribute over 70% of GDP and 95% total employment, and for low-income countries, SMEs contribute over 60% of GDP and above 70% of total employment (Akbar et al., 2017). While developed countries benefit significantly from SMEs, SMEs are more influential in developing countries by shaping their economies through their contribution to GDP and employment (Appiah et al., 2018). SMEs impact GDP through various initiatives, including the advancement of innovation, the establishment of local enterprises, creation of business opportunities, and supply of unique items, consequently increasing international demand for local merchandise, empowering mechanical advancement and development, and demonstrating the economy's ability to substitute imports successfully (Zafar & Mustafa, 2017). SME owners and leaders focus on exploring a niche market. The long-term objective is to establish an industry that will offer consumers unique products or services, locally and offshore, thereby increasing the sector's contribution to GDP.

Business Strategy

Strategy is the development of a unique and valuable position involving a different set of activities (Porter, 1996). A strategy is a combination of management decisions to align the organization to the operating environment, influence internal structures and processes, and consequently, the overall performance (Rao & Tilt, 2016). An effective strategy yields a set of decisions and actions that result in formulating and implementing plans designed to achieve set organizational goals and objectives (Taruk et

al., 2019). Business owners/leaders translate a strategy into specific business deliverables to enable focused execution to pursue predetermined business objectives. Strategy is an organization's long-term direction, consisting of both planned and developing elements (Neugebauer et al., 2016). In formulating a strategy, business owners/leaders select the most relevant scenarios from previous services, consistent with the latest business processes and new industry trends (Kamariotou & Kitsios, 2016).

For effective implementation of a strategy, business owners/leaders need to formulate a mission and a vision for the future, develop mechanisms to achieve the mission and vision, and design processes and structures to undertake the strategy successfully (de Oliveira et al., 2017). A business strategy is a vital resource that enhances the prospects of an organization attaining sustainable competitive advantage (Haseeb et al., 2019). Business owners and leaders develop short- to long-term strategies that outline actions to undertake at periodic intervals. The objective is to stay ahead of competitors, gain market share, and achieve business growth and sustainability. Business strategy is defined as an organizational plan developed to focus on a company's potential for achieving competitive advantage, taking into account internal and external resources that may be exploited to attain specific set objectives or goals (Gonzalez-Rodriguez et al., 2018). Organizational leadership must adopt a business strategy that is responsive to the evolving environment and market within which the firm operates, considering available resources (Gonzalez-Rodriguez et al., 2018). Business strategies define the long-term

goals of an enterprise, identify requisite deliverables, and allocate resources necessary to carry out set goals (Iamratanakul, 2018).

A good business strategy delivers stakeholder value, which is the business's ability to pursue future growth or provide value-adding services or products to the market (Serra & Kunc, 2015). Business strategies enhance business agility; the ability of business leaders to adjust and adapt strategic direction efficiently and effectively in core value-adding functions as dictated by changing dynamics in the internal and external operating business environment (Teece et al., 2016). Business strategies influence firm management decisions on product and market domain, technology, and organizational structure, to respond to market dynamics that may give rise to complexities, uncertainties, and information asymmetry (Lim et al., 2018). An effective business strategy creates an alignment across an organization's objectives and facilitates the integration of internal resources at all levels consistent with the overall strategy (Yuliansyah et al., 2016).

Periodic review is a prerequisite for an effective business strategy as it ensures that actionable deliverables respond to changing dynamics in the operating environment. An important attribute of business strategy is diversification, wherein firm leaders broaden product or service offering to multiple markets, including extending existing resources, responding to changing markets, and strengthening management teams to be an industry leader ahead of competitors (Mahmood et al., 2017). An organization's competitive advantage, informed by its business strategy, systematically directs the use of assets, resources, and competencies (Gumusluoglu & Acur, 2016). A business strategy is

a useful summary indicator when measuring the effectiveness of company internal controls, which is a critical function that ensures company resources are adequately used in pursuit of future business sustainability (Bentley-Goode et al., 2017). Focused management of a business strategy assists organizational leaders in making effective decisions and strategies by keeping abreast of threats and opportunities arising from an unstable economic environment (Abosedo et al., 2016).

For the business strategy to yield superior performance, there needs to be an alignment between strategy, structure, and employees. That enables the organization to develop the resources and capacity needed to be competitive and deliver products and services that meet customer expectations (Telukdarie et al., 2018). The effective implementation of a business strategy by leaders depends on how well they adapt organizational processes, products/services, and routines to the requirements of its operating environment (Gumusluoglu & Acur, 2016). A business strategy supports organizational sustainability by adopting activities that satisfy the firm's current needs and stakeholders while protecting, sustaining, and enhancing the human and natural resources required for the future (Ukko et al., 2019). An important attribute of business strategy is that it provides orientation in complex and dynamic operating conditions by identifying the starting position at present and target positions in the future and developing solutions to breach existing gaps between current and future state (Stefan & Branislav, 2016).

Business strategy is essential for SME success; it provides mechanisms that enable leaders in this sector to deal with changing economic conditions and sustain their operations. SME owners and leaders need to develop and implement effective business strategies that differentiate their product or service offering from competitors to enhance competitiveness and long-term sustainability (Zakaria et al., 2016). SMEs' owners and leaders are increasingly expected to develop business strategies addressing sustainability risks given the sector's vulnerability to persistent uncertainty in the global economy, which leads to high failure rates of SMEs in both developed and developing economies. A business strategy for SMEs should outline an alignment between the strategy and firm capabilities, resources, and set objectives. SME owners/leaders may pursue strategic alignment by exploring different paths depending on the firm's market position. Each path may lead to improved performance, resulting in business growth and sustainability (Street et al., 2017). The focus on business strategy is now the top corporate reason for addressing sustainability, slightly ahead of cost efficiencies and reputation effects (Shields & Shelleman, 2015). In developing a business strategy for SMEs, leaders need to understand the strategic management practices relevant to their organization and their implication to their operation in the industry. SMEs are susceptible to internal factors and external market conditions, and, as such, finding ways to have a competitive advantage is essential (Agwu, 2018).

Strategies developed by SME owners and leaders should be anchored on innovation and agility. Firms in the SME sector to consistently develop new and

advanced solutions to be industry leaders, gain competitive advantage, enhance prospects of future sustainability, and venture into new markets. Agility is one feature that distinguishes SMEs from large organizations and is the source of the sector's principal advantages such as response speed, ability to innovate, and capacity to adapt (Purnomo et al., 2018). High levels of innovation by SME owners and leaders provide a competitive advantage for firms through upgraded and differentiated customer value, enabling their businesses to grow their market reach both domestically and internationally in some instances (Azari et al., 2017). Owners and leaders of SMEs generally pursue strategies focused on differentiation to support innovation, given that this strategic approach has a greater impact on the market and yields competitiveness (Popescu et al., 2017). Through the effective collaboration of business leaders in the SME sector, SMEs gain access to numerous resources, skills, and techniques to overcome challenges affecting their innovativeness and performance, giving the sector an industry competitive advantage (Salisu & Abu Bakar, 2018).

Business Sustainability

Organizational leaders' ability to develop effective business sustainability strategies is central to businesses remaining sustainable amid uncertain economic conditions. Business sustainability is the sustained positive performance of a business such that it can continue operating irrespective of domestic/ global economic conditions (Golicic et al., 2017). Business sustainability is concerned with managing the triple bottom line, the processes adopted by organizational leadership to manage their financial,

social, and environmental risks, and obligations and opportunities (Dyllick & Muff, 2016). Business sustainability is adopting business strategies and activities that address the needs of the organization and its stakeholders presently while protecting, sustaining, and improving the human and natural resources that the future may require (Rauter et al., 2017). Business sustainability may be understood as addressing the needs of the organization's direct and indirect stakeholders, such as employees, clients, and shareholders, without also compromising its ability to meet future stakeholders' needs (Pedersen et al., 2018). The concept of business sustainability outlines how organizations, along with their usual goal of profit maximization, need to focus on their participation in social and environmental improvement to enhance the sustainability of their long-term business operations (Das & Rangarajan, 2017).

Business leaders pursue business sustainability by reducing costs and business risks, increasing reputation and attractiveness for new and existing human talent, and responding to new customer demands and segments, resulting in increased profits, competitiveness, and shareholder value (Dyllick & Muff, 2016). A business sustainability strategy creates shareholder value by pursuing opportunities and managing risks emerging from environmental, economic, and social development (Dyllick & Rost, 2017). To realize business sustainability, business owners and leaders develop operating models of organizations to secure the organization's long-term survival by consistently improving competitiveness through managerial and innovative capabilities while meeting the needs of customers and other stakeholders (Ludeke-Freund et al., 2017). Leaders of

an organization pursuing business sustainability as a strategy aim to achieve profitability and improve social development by instituting organizational changes and on key external stakeholders (Yusoff et al., 2019). A positive financial performance regarding gross and net profitability is an imperative aspect that supports an organization's long-term business sustainability strategy (Shen et al., 2017).

Business sustainability factors are confronted with the risk of negative business impact on society and the environment, including the challenge of surviving as an organization while operating in a constantly changing economic environment (Ludeke-Freund et al., 2017). Consistency among three elements in the company, mission, accountability, and governance, define an organization's sustainability (Del Baldo & Baldarelli, 2017). The leaders of a sustainable organization outline the purpose, vision, and mission in terms of economic, social, and environmental outcomes, consistent with established short- and long-term organizational objectives (Breuer et al., 2018). Business sustainability refers to the ability of owners/leaders to attract, retain, and motivate employees and external stakeholders to the extent of aligning stakeholder needs, business objectives, and sustainability goals as a basis for competitive advantage (Del Giudice et al., 2017). Business sustainability strategies are useful tools for organizational leaders. They contain plans and actionable deliverables that support business continuity given the frequently changing dynamics within the industry-specific operating environment in domestic and global economies. Business sustainability strategies incorporate proactive multi-stakeholder management, create monetary and non-monetary value for a wide

range of stakeholders, and provide a long-term business perspective (Geissdoerfer et al., 2018). Business owners and leaders who continuously pursue market opportunities with a specific focus on diversifying business offerings increase their business growth prospects and long-term sustainability (Tur-Porcar et al., 2018). According to Hockerts (2015), there are four main dimensions of business sustainability that contribute to competitive advantage, namely risk reduction, efficiency gains, social branding, and new market creation:

- Risk reduction: the management of different types of risks that have the prospect of disrupting business sustainability;
- Efficiency gains: places emphasis on the ability to attract, motivate and retain productive employees in the organization;
- Social branding: ability to offer the market differentiated products that are affordable or price competitive, and
- New market: being the leader in the creation of new market opportunities through innovative ideas (Hockerts, 2015).

Business owners/leaders achieve business sustainability through competitive intelligence and strong job satisfaction, pursued by a team of highly motivated employees who are confident of their abilities to perform tasks required to attain sustainable goals (Tur-Porcar et al., 2018). Business sustainability enables the integration of financial and economic sustainability performance and nonfinancial ethical, social, and governance performance and further enhances sustainability performance dimensions; supply chain

management, corporate culture, and business models in developing shared value for stakeholders (Rezaee, 2018). Business sustainability is achieved when leaders pursue a competitive strategy and customer relations, focusing on market penetration through the supply of existing products to an existing market, market development by reaching out to new markets with existing products, product development by introducing new products to an existing market and diversification by venturing into new markets with new products (Purba & Tan, 2018). Business sustainability strategies require organizational leaders to adopt a long-term view when making decisions, have a high tolerance of risk when pursuing their visions, and demonstrate a high degree of personal commitment to sustainability which is visible throughout the organization (Rauter et al., 2017). To create a sustainable business, organizational leaders need to balance the organization's social, environmental, and economic goals. The competitive environment puts pressure on business owners/leaders to meet customer needs and stakeholder interests (Zainuddin et al., 2018).

A business sustainability strategy requires organizational leaders to define strategic drivers to inform their decisions on how to satisfy the needs of internal and external stakeholders (Morioka & de Carvalho, 2016). Sustainability strategies should incorporate proposals on new products and markets and identify partners within the value chain to ensure the organization achieves its long-term objectives and business continuity goals. Effective business sustainability strategies improve overall organizational performance through the efficient use of resources, increased cost advantage, promotion

of social reputation, improved customer preference, and generation of new innovative capabilities (Wijethilake, 2017). Sustainable business refers to an organization that creates a competitive advantage by providing high-value products or services for customers while contributing to the sustainable development of the organization and society (Radulescu et al., 2018). To achieve business sustainability, small business owners/leaders need to develop strategies addressing commercial challenges and environmental and social goals to enhance sustained competitive advantage and long-term business survival (Haney et al., 2018).

SMEs are considered an integral sector of the economy. They generally account for the highest number of registered businesses in both emerging and advanced economies and contribute substantially toward GDP and employment in respective domestic economies. Given the sector's critical role toward economic growth, policymakers must design policies to increase the success rate of SMEs to encourage an increased entry rate into the sector and initiate support programs to enhance the long-term sustainability of SMEs. Sustainable SMEs improve organizational reputation, brand image, and financial value of the organization (Lopez-Perez et al., 2018). Economic growth, increased turnover, and reduction in operating costs and cash flow are critical factors positively impacting the overall performance of an SME and ensuring long-term sustainability (Malesios et al., 2018). An integral aspect supporting the long-term sustainability of SMEs is the sector's ability to adopt and adapt to the constantly changing economic conditions consistent with the pace of change. The uncomplicated

decision-making process within the SME sector allows owners or managers to make quick and informed decisions on the organization's position regarding changes in the operating environment. For SMEs to be sustainable and attain growth, owners and leaders should possess sound entrepreneurial knowledge of both the internal and external market in which they operate; well-defined target market, offer shorter credits to customers and secure financial assistance (loans), which are key success factors (Baporikar et al., 2016). Business sustainability and succession planning, paramount to business continuity, are functions of visionary leadership, team motivation, and development (Ajayi & Olaniyan, 2019).

Slow Economic Growth

Economic growth is a macroeconomic variable that measures the average income earned per individual or household in a country in a specific year, commonly referred to as per capita income. It includes variables such as inflation, imports, and exports as a percentage of GDP, unemployment rate, government debt to GDP, and more (Guru & Yadav, 2019). Economists' measure economic growth by observing changes in a country's GDP, which can be separated into its economic elements and population by expressing it as the population multiplied by per capita GDP (Peterson, 2017). Economic growth relies on transferring more industrial innovation outcomes into real industrial activities to establish and formalize new economic growth levers (Cheng & Gao, 2016). Economic growth is associated with improved economic fundamentals and sound policies and institutions rather than just the providence of favorable commodity prices and

increased international aid (Toh, 2016). Economic growth occurs when the economy's production at full employment level increases. The long-term or natural or potential growth rate of an economy is determined by the growth rate of labor and technology (Mert, 2018).

The performance of domestic and global economies is susceptible to economic shocks, which tends to slow down economic activities across most sectors, resulting in slow economic growth. Slow economic growth is when a country's GDP growth rate is less than 2% per year, which economists consider the bare minimum for a sustainable economic expansion (Saltman, 2018). Saltman contended that one of the key reasons for persistent slow economic growth globally might be a rising national debt level, which is exacerbated by the growing number of countries that continue to incur substantial annual budget deficits. In both developed and developing countries, a reduction by the government on major capital expenditure translates to a domestic economic slowdown. As a major consumer of both products and services, a reduction in expenditure translates to productivity slowdown across all sectors of the economy. Slow economic growth contributes to a general slowdown in investment capacity, consumer demand, business confidence, new employment opportunities, and startup businesses, among others (Friedman, 2017).

The Keynesian perspective emphasizes the role of government spending as a major factor that raises the average demand and stimulates prolonged economic growth (Sirag et al., 2016). Barro (1990) demonstrated through the endogenous growth model

that decreases in government expenditure reduce economic growth and savings rates. A slowdown in economic growth weakens the self-confidence of potential entrepreneurs to engage in business startups, given that business opportunities vanish or because of opportunities not being pursued (Gonzalez-Pernia et al., 2018). During an economic slowdown, both entrant and incumbent business owners and leaders face several challenges, including reduced access to loans and financial markets, a disruption of supply of goods and services, and heightened uncertainty about economic recovery (Gonzalez-Pernia et al., 2018).

High levels of government debt, usually more than 60% to GDP, in the instance of European Union (EU) countries is considered a major contributor to domestic slow economic growth, as it reduces government capacity to allocate sufficient investment funds for expenditure on infrastructure and service development, and negatively impact the sustainability of emerging firms given their dependency on government business (Buryk et al., 2019). Slow economic growth is caused by an increase in the size of government, the costs to finance such expansions and forces government to increase corporate taxes and borrow funds from capital markets to service its operational costs; financial resources are transferred from the private to the public sector, which results in reduced private investment, consequently causing an economic slowdown (Gholami & Sameei, 2019).

Developing economies tend to experience slow economic growth because of consistent encounters with more outbound capital flows resulting from interest payments

and dividends than new inbound capital inflows (Park, 2018). While foreign funding has a positive effect on the growth of a domestic economy, the servicing of such funding is a major contributor to slow economic growth given the need to repatriate profits generated in repayment of the loans (and applicable interest) exceeds the original value of funding received (Park, 2018). High levels of corruption, government instability, and an unstable political environment tend to reduce investment and economic development, resulting in slow economic growth (Bong & Premaratne, 2018).

Inflation above the threshold set as part of the monetary policy of a country is detrimental to economic growth (Behera & Mishra, 2017). In South Africa, the inflation target as per the monetary policy is between 3% and 6%; therefore, inflation above the 6% threshold is detrimental to the economy and poses a risk of future slow economic growth (SARB, 2019). Slow economic growth in any country poses both a short- and long-term risk in the ability of SME owners and leaders to sustain their business operations for an extended time; such economic conditions reduce demand for products and services across all sectors of the economy. The reduced demand for products and services intensifies competition among both established and emerging firms, all vying for the same business opportunities, a situation that tends to favor established firms over their smaller counterparts given their resource capacity and ability to be more responsive to customer requirements. The high failure rate of SMEs in South Africa is due to slow economic growth amongst other macroeconomic factors affecting the business sector in general in the country (van Scheers, 2016). The economic growth rate of South Africa

was 0.7% in 2018, down from 1.3% in 2017, a trend that has been consistent since the 2008 global economic recession, a situation that poses a risk on the long-term sustainability of SMEs and other business ventures (National Treasury, 2019).

Small Business/Entrepreneurial Leadership

Leadership is the human ability to influence people to achieve a specific vision and goals (Lee et al., 2019). Effective leadership by managers is required to progress an organization in a changing competitive landscape by imagining, managing, organizing, motivating, and leading employees to an advanced level of performance (Madanchian & Taherdoost, 2017). Different classifications of leadership are effective in different spheres of life. The business environment requires managers to possess certain leadership characteristics to accomplish specific goals and objectives. Common business leadership styles include coercive, authoritative, affiliated, democratic, pacesetter, coaching, transactional, and transformational (Jardon & Martinez-Cobas, 2019). Transactional and transformational leadership styles are more common amongst owners of SMEs (Leitch & Volery, 2017). Transactional leadership is where the leader motivates followers through rewards, wherein employees are rewarded with incentives as benefits for performance deemed acceptable to the owner (Lee et al., 2019). Lee et al. suggested that leaders who possess a transactional leadership style emphasize the establishment of smooth operational performance with requisite efficiency and effectiveness, where employees have to perform their tasks consistent with predefined rules and procedures. The oversight and controlling function of the transactional paradigm requires a hierarchical

structure with stipulated work practices and clear lines of responsibility and accountability (Jing, 2018). Transformational leadership is where a leader motivates his followers through communicating an inspiring vision and facilitating their growth and development. Such leadership attributes have a significant and positive effect on the performance of SMEs (Leitch & Volery, 2017). Transformational leaders can transform organizations through their vision for the future, and through regular communication, they empower the employees to take responsibility for achieving that vision (Buil et al., 2018).

Leadership is important in enhancing organizational performance as leaders are responsible for the strategic goals of the business (Hashim et al., 2018). Effective leadership attributes in managers can influence small businesses to perform above expectation and obtain a strong competitive advantage, especially in the SME sector with intense competition and excellent technical revolution (Madanchian & Taherdoost, 2019). Lee et al. (2019) suggested that leadership skills are imperative for the future of any organization. It is featured as one of the top priorities, as it is the driving force for operational growth and sustainability.

Business leadership is the process by which leaders influence others to understand and agree about what needs to be done and facilitate individual and collective efforts to accomplish shared objectives (Leitch & Volery, 2017). Individual leadership attributes directly impact the overall performance of an organization (Paudel, 2020). Effective business leadership and business value are realized through consistent employee

development and talent management programs at all levels of the organization (Madanchian et al., 2017). Business leadership is a demanding endeavor for organizational leaders. It involves regular trade-offs between the needs of various stakeholders, each applying pressure to achieve diverse, often incompatible end objectives (O'Toole, 2019). The current trend of performing tasks in teams requires business leaders/managers to create a culture that contributes to business success by fairly allocating tasks amongst respective teams, providing fair credit for tasks successfully done in teams and consistently managing tensions arising from personality differences amongst team members (Vogel, 2017).

Small business and entrepreneurial leadership has emerged as a distinctive leadership style that considers specific attributes required of managers to exercise oversight on new and small businesses, rather than large businesses, specifically given that the small business sector has intense competition, which requires leaders to implement changes promptly to keep abreast with market needs (Harrison et al., 2015). The main objective of entrepreneurial leadership amongst business leaders is to influence and inspire employees' creative attitudes and behaviors by encouraging them to explore and exploit opportunities for the organization (Bagheri, 2017). Entrepreneurial leadership is a dynamic process, where leaders outline a vision, obligating followers and risk acceptance when pursuing opportunities that utilize available resources (Henry et al., 2015). A leader's positive attitude is considered a core leadership trait that is highly

effective in promoting a positive work environment, one of the key factors in leading a small business toward long-term success (Howard et al., 2019).

A small business and entrepreneurial leadership style encourages and fosters innovation and opportunity recognition in highly challenging, turbulent, and competitive environments (Fontana & Musa, 2017). Entrepreneurial leadership is important for driving organizational performance and inspiring owners of SMEs to equip themselves with adequate resources to be more competitive (Hashim et al., 2018). The entrepreneurial leader must combine team performance with team building, team effectiveness with team efficiency, and doing the right thing at the right time (Ajayi & Olaniyan, 2019). Entrepreneurial leadership plays an important role in determining the success of business ventures, as SME owners may not successfully develop their businesses without displaying effective leadership traits (Al Mamun et al., 2018).

Transition

Section 1 includes a background to the problem that prompted me to explore strategies that owners of road freight SMEs may use to sustain their businesses during slow economic growth. Topics covered include the problem statement, purpose statement, nature of the study, research question, interview questions, conceptual framework, operations definition, assumptions, limitations and delimitations, the significance of the study, review of professional and academic literature. In the literature review, themes discussed included SMEs, the RBV, GDP, business strategy, business sustainability, slow economic growth, and small business/entrepreneurial leadership.

Section 2 includes an introduction, purpose statement, role of the researcher, research participants, research method and design, population sampling, ethical research, data collection instruments, data collection technique, data organization technique, data analysis, and study reliability and validity. Section 3 will include an introduction, presentation of the findings, application to practice, implication for social change, recommendations for action, recommendations for further research, reflections, and research conclusion.

Section 2: The Project

The objective of the study was to explore business sustainability strategies that owners of SMEs in the road freight industry use to sustain their business operation beyond 5 years during slow economic growth. At 70% failure of SMEs in South Africa within the first 5 years of operation, there is a need to develop strategies to extend the sustainability of SMEs beyond 5 years (Bushe, 2019; DSBD, 2018). This section discusses the role of the researcher, identifies research participants, and deliberates the research method and design. There is further discussion on population sampling, ethical research requirements, data collection instruments, data analysis techniques applied, and reliability and validity of the study.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies that owners of road freight SMEs use to sustain their businesses during slow economic growth. The population was owners of road freight industry SMEs in Gauteng Province, South Africa, who have sustained their businesses beyond 5 years in a period of slow economic growth. The study's findings may positively contribute to social change by reducing unemployment and increasing derivative tax revenues for communities' economic growth.

Role of the Researcher

The qualitative researcher requires the ability to acclimatize to the changing circumstances of a situation and the capacity to combine knowledge, judgment,

understanding, emotion, and intuition to act appropriately (Bispo, 2017). In qualitative research, the researcher is involved in all stages of the study, from defining the concept to design, interviews, transcription, verification, analysis, and developing the concepts and themes (Sanjari et al., 2014). The researcher in qualitative research is the primary instrument for data generation, and interview questions are at the thrust of interviewing (Majid et al., 2017). As the researcher in this qualitative study, I was actively and solely involved in all aspects of the research. I collected data using semistructured interviews based on open-ended questions that allowed research participants to provide responses based on their experiences and were not channeled toward giving predetermined answers.

A carefully designed study is unlikely to have bias; however, the complete elimination of bias cannot be guaranteed (Siddiqi, 2011). The researcher's awareness of potential bias at all stages of the research study increases the probability of implementing considered strategies to minimize bias and enhance reliability (repeatability), generalizability and validity (accuracy) of qualitative evidence (Malone et al., 2014). As the researcher in this qualitative study, I assumed an unbiased position throughout the study by observing protocols outlined in the Belmont Report (1979). The Belmont Report contains three ethical principles and guidelines for research involving human subjects: (a) boundaries between practice and research; (b) basic ethical principles, addressing respect for persons, beneficence and justice, and (c) applications, addressing informed consent, assessment of risk, and benefits and selection of subjects.

I have 20 years of work experience accumulated in the manufacturing and the transportation and logistics sectors occupying junior to senior management roles. I have interacted with owners of small and large businesses. To ensure objectivity and transparency, I did not interview any successful SME owners of road freight businesses with whom I have had a business relationship or direct interaction. I was careful to ensure that I was not influenced by preconceived notions informed by my personal experience in the industry when undertaking the study and predominantly relied on data collected from research participants to make findings and recommendations. When I added information based on my own experiences, I made such a declaration by clearly stating that it is “my” assertion.

Researchers are obliged to protect participants in a study from potential harmful consequences that might affect them as a result of their participation (Sanjari et al., 2014). In protecting research participants, the researcher must ensure anonymity by code numbering tapes and transcripts and remove any identifying information from the transcripts (Korstjens & Moser, 2017). During interviews, the researcher depends on the participant’s willingness to share their experiences and thoughts on the topics in question (Raheim et al., 2016). It is imperative to establish an interview protocol in qualitative research as it can help identify potential pitfalls or limitations within the interview design and allow for necessary modifications (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). Data collection notes and interview prescripts need to be anonymized before dissemination to conform with prevailing legal and ethical guidelines (Tsai et al., 2016). The researcher should ensure

not to reveal details about the identity of research participants, which would result in the disclosure of their identities (Dongre & Sankaran, 2016). I protected and concealed the identity of research participants and information shared by using unique codes to identify research participants in adherence to the guidelines of Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB; Walden University, 2020).

Participants

Establishing the inclusion and exclusion criteria of research participants is a standard practice in research, which is necessary when designing high-quality research protocols (Patino & Ferreira, 2018). Eligible study participants for this research were owners of SMEs who have implemented successful strategies that have sustained their businesses for over 5 years during the period of slow economic growth in South Africa. The research participants provided data that was useful in advancing the research objectives and addressed the research question.

To identify and select research participants, I approached the Road Freight Association (RFA), which is an affiliate organization made up of road freight businesses in South Africa. The RFA published my invitation letter on their SME portal so that qualifying SME owners (their business address is in Gauteng and have operated their business for over 5 years) interested in participating in the study may contact me to discuss details on the research. From those qualifying SME owners in the road freight industry, which was my sampling frame, who contacted me and those that I was referred to by research participants upon my request for assistance, I solicited participants via

email and telephone until seven SME owners of road freight businesses agreed to participate in the research study. However, only 6 SME consented to participate. The other prospective participant did not respond within the requested time frame. I proceeded with those who indicated “I consent” in their email reply.

Attributes of successful small business owners include the ability to set goals and objectives, prioritize set goals, diversify products, reinvest profits, make a periodic evaluation of the enterprise, and carefully manage business transactions (Iwara et al., 2018). Strategies premised on business sustainability are important for organizations. There is a demand in the market for organizations that operate sustainably and conform to product/service excellence (Matinaro et al., 2019). A sustainable business strategy for SMEs is a key success factor for competitive advantage, positioning in the markets, and improving the organization’s brand image (Weissbrod & Bocken, 2017). Successful SMEs foster employment and address social exclusion and the development of both individuals and the community.

Eligible research participants were SME owners of road freight businesses in Gauteng Province, who had operated their businesses for more than 5 years, which was my sampling frame. From SME owners who contacted me and those referred to by research participants upon my request for assistance, I solicited participants via email and telephone until 6 SME owners of road freight businesses, who are part of my target population, agreed to participate in the research study. Once an owner agreed to participate in the study, I phoned them to provide a brief outline of the purpose of the

study. I used the discussion to establish a relationship with each research participant. After the discussion, I scheduled an appointment for an interview, where I conducted one face-to-face interview and five virtual interviews on Zoom and MS Teams. Before the interviews, I emailed participants a copy of the interview protocol (Appendix A) and participant consent form, which all participants responded with “I consent” on email before setting up the interview appointments.

Research Method and Design

Using a qualitative multiple case study, I explored strategies that owners of road freight SMEs have used to sustain their businesses during slow economic growth. The focus was on owners of SMEs in the road freight industry who have been operating their businesses for more than 5 years, have an annual turnover of less than R50 million per annum, employ fewer than 250 employees, and are based in Gauteng Province of South Africa. A multiple case study design allowed me as the researcher to gain insight into strategies used by SME owners to sustain their business amid slow economic growth, wherein I compared and contrasted such strategies to identify strategic approaches that contribute to business sustainability.

Research Method

The qualitative research method was used for this study. Qualitative researchers develop evidence for identifying and analyzing phenomena through careful observation, in-depth questioning, and detailed data gathering (Kozleski, 2017). The qualitative method focuses on applied and theoretical findings and discoveries based on research

questions and through a field study in natural settings (Park & Park, 2016). Qualitative researchers incorporate the studied use and gathering of a variety of empirical materials through personal experiences, life stories, visual texts, interviews, observation, historical data, and case studies (Aspers & Corte, 2019). Qualitative methods enable researchers to describe a phenomenon more fully, which, if rendered with nuance and detail, provide important information about lived experiences and insight into participants' private experiences and their subjectivities (Allen, 2015). I collected data from research participants concerning their practical experiences; therefore, this study's qualitative method was suitable.

Quantitative research focuses on objectivity and is especially relevant when there is the likelihood of gathering quantifiable measures of variables and hypotheses from samples of a population (Queiros et al., 2017). Quantitative research encompasses the development of a hypothesis that may include a description of the expected result, relationship, and the anticipated outcome from the question being researched (Rutberg & Bouikidis, 2018). In the quantitative research method, the researcher uses hypotheses to test variables' relationships to achieve the research goals in controlled and contrived studies (Park & Park, 2016). This study did not include hypothesis testing; therefore, the quantitative method was not applicable.

Mixed-method researchers combine qualitative and quantitative methods to address a specific research problem, requiring researchers to possess knowledge of both qualitative and quantitative methodology (McKim, 2017). Mixed method research

involves combining theoretical and practical knowledge, both quantitative and qualitative, to achieve research objectives while considering multiple perspectives (Almeida, 2018). In mixed-method research, the researcher gathers and analyzes data, integrates the findings, and draws conclusions using both quantitative and qualitative approaches in a single study (Rutberg & Bouikidis, 2018). For addressing this study's purpose, I only considered practical experiences and did not blend practical experiences and hypothesis testing, therefore the mixed method was not applicable.

Research Design

The qualitative research design for the study was a multiple case study. Using a multiple case study design enables comparisons that clarify whether an emergent finding is simply peculiar to a single case or is consistently replicated by several cases (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). The multiple case study population were owners of SME companies operating in the road freight industry that service different markets but are exposed to the same slow economic growth conditions, thus choosing a multiple case study design. A multiple case study approach is selected to explore similarities and differences between cases and replicate findings across cases; hence, a careful selection of cases is vital to compare similar or contrasting results across cases (Lashgari et al., 2018). The advantage of using multiple case studies is that evidence generated through the research is compelling, reliable, and robust (Ghosh, 2018). In a multiple case study design, the researcher studies multiple cases to understand the differences and the similarities between cases (Gustafsson, 2017). I conducted interviews with owners of

different SMEs in the road freight industry, reviewed company documents, and analyzed data within and across the businesses. Consequently, the multiple case study design was suitable for identifying and comparing strategies that SMEs use to sustain their businesses.

Phenomenology design is a qualitative research methodology concerned with investigating phenomena as they unfold through lived experiences (Valentine et al., 2018). Phenomenology design aims to acquire a deep understanding of lived daily experiences and their natures. It investigates how the related phenomenon is experienced and attempts to describe the participants' experience about such phenomenon (Patton, 2014). Researchers use phenomenology design to understand participants' lived or primal experiences (van Manen, 2017). In the study, I explored strategies used by owners of SMEs to sustain their businesses during slow economic growth, which included semistructured interviews and reviewing of business documents as opposed to exploring the personal meanings of participants' lived experiences; therefore, a phenomenology design was not suitable. Economic conditions that affect owners of SMEs in the road freight sector at the time of the study, as opposed to inherited societal or social experiences, were of interest and not the personal meanings of experiences to the research participants, which rendered phenomenology design unsuitable.

Ethnography research design is the study of people in the setting where they exist, live, and work (Charani et al., 2019). When using an ethnography design, the researcher focuses on the behavior, language, and interaction among members of an entire cultural-

sharing group (Creswell & Poth, 2018). An ethnography design enables the researcher to explore a distinct issue or shared experience within a specific location or culture (Hales et al., 2018). The focus of the study was not cultural or community dynamics; therefore, an ethnography design was not applicable.

Data saturation is a technique used in research to determine sample size (Sawatsky et al., 2019). According to Sawatsky et al., during data collection and analysis, the researcher must determine at some juncture that newly collected data does not yield additional insights into the data analysis process. In research, saturation refers to collecting data until no new information and concepts are obtained (Aktas & Aydin, 2018). Data saturation is achieved when no new information is forthcoming through changes to themes and subthemes during research interviews (Holman et al., 2019). For this research study, I considered data saturation to be achieved once data shared by research participants did not yield new information and emerging concepts or themes. The reason I opted to interview all 6 participants who agreed to participate in the study was that the number was within my target population parameters (4 to 7 participants), my assumption that sufficient and consistent information and themes will emerge from the interviews to allow me to perform data analysis to inform findings of the research study which will be representative of the sampling frame, most of whom did not have to participate in the study. I further anticipated that if I interview 6 participants, I am likely to achieve data saturation. In hindsight, I am satisfied that I did achieve data saturation on emerging themes that have enhanced the research findings. My objective was to ensure

that the study findings were useful to the study sample frame and useful to the broader sector in the road freight industry in South Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa region.

Population and Sampling

To gather data, researchers use probability or nonprobability sampling methods (Sarstedt et al., 2017). In this research, I used nonprobability or purposive sampling method. Nonprobability sampling is a sampling method where the samples are collected in a process that does not give all participants in the population equal chances of being included (Etikan et al., 2016). Rather than a random process, personal judgment and convenience determine whether an item will be sampled from the population in nonprobability sampling (Sarstedt et al., 2017). In nonprobability sampling, the commonly used sampling method is purposive sampling (Sawatsky et al., 2019). Purposive sampling is selecting participants or data sources to be used in a study based on the anticipated richness and relevance of the information to the study's research question (Yin, 2017). In purposive sampling, the researcher identifies and selects proficient and experienced individuals on the subject or case being studied (Etikan et al., 2016). The relevance and strength of purposive sampling depend on selecting information-rich cases for in-depth study, those from which the researcher can learn about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry (Patton, 2015). I specifically selected owners of SMEs in the road freight sector whose business address is in Gauteng Province and who have operated their businesses for more than 5 years, hence not all owners of SMEs in the road freight sector in Gauteng Province had an equal

chance to participate in the study; therefore, nonprobability or purposive sampling is the applicable sampling method. I assumed that owners who have operated their businesses for more than 5 years will share in-depth insight into the industry dynamics and how they have sustained their business operations.

Probability sampling provides an equal opportunity for all participants in the target population to be included in the sample (Quatember, 2019). Probability sampling is a method in which the probability of including any individual within a target population in a study sample is equal (Stratton, 2019). Probability sampling implies that each participant in the population has an equal possibility of being incorporated into a sample (Sivasakthi, 2018). The commonly used probability sampling method is simple random sampling (Sarstedt et al., 2017). Simple random sampling is preferred for research designed to describe a target population (Stratton, 2019). In simple random sampling, individual population members have equal and freely chosen opportunities as sample members to be selected to participate in the research study (Walmia et al., 2019). Simple random sampling is purely a random selection of samples and directly estimates the population parameters (Ramezan et al., 2019). The sampling frame for the study were owners of SMEs in the road freight sector whose business address is in the Gauteng Province, for whose attention the partner organization (RFA) placed on the SME portal to be accessed by all operators in the sector. Individuals who met the criteria to be part of the study population on the sample were SME owners in the road freight sector who have operated their businesses for more than 5 years. The research sample was not be

randomly selected; therefore, probability or simple random sampling was not a suitable sampling method for this research study.

In this qualitative multiple case study, research participants from whom I collected data were owners of road freight SMEs who have operated their businesses for more than 5 years. Their business address is in Gauteng Province, South Africa. The criteria for eligible participants in this study were: (a) owners of SMEs in the road freight sector whose business address is in Gauteng Province; (b) owners who have operated their businesses for more than 5 years; (c) have a business turnover of less than R50 million per annum; and (d) employ less than 250 employees. The research sample was SME owners of road freight businesses in the Gauteng Province who received my invitation to participate in the research study through RFA and those I was referred to by participants following my request to them for references to achieve my target population. Having identified qualifying participants who have operated their businesses for a period above 5 years, I solicited and received 6 consents from SME owners expressing interest in participating in the multiple case study research. Once an owner agreed to participate in the study, I phoned them to provide a brief outline of the purpose of the study. I used the discussion to establish a relationship with each research participant. After the discussion, I scheduled an appointment for an interview, where I conducted one face-to-face interview and five virtual interviews on Zoom and MS Teams. Before the interviews, I emailed participants a copy of the interview protocol (Appendix A) and

participant consent form, to which all participants responded with “I consent” on email before setting up the interview appointments.

The research study participants selected their preferred venue or platform, which was convenient and they were comfortable with for the interviews. While the preferred interview setting is audio recorded face-to-face interviews in an office environment equipped with a meeting table that allows for 1.5 meters for social distancing and which is suitable to have an uninterrupted interview for 60 minutes, given the COVID-19 precautions, other participants nominated to have recorded virtual interviews on MS Teams and Zoom.

The benefits of multiple case studies will be limited if fewer than four cases or more than 10 are selected (Gentles et al., 2015). In a qualitative multiple case study, the study population must be between four and 10 cases; methodologists argue that additional cases beyond the recommended number can dilute important case details (Davis et al., 2018). A purposive sample of four to 10 participants in a multiple case study with diverse experiences may provide adequate information and useful lessons on the study outcome (Malterud et al., 2015). Ghosh (2018) noted that, in multiple case studies, there is no set number of cases to be researched; however, a number between four and 10 cases could be sufficient to validate a theory, while more than 10 could make the study complex.

I achieved data saturation once data collection from participants yielded no new information and emerging concepts or themes. The reason I opted to interview all six participants who agreed to participate in the study was that the number was within my

target population parameters (four to seven participants), my assumption that sufficient and consistent information and themes would emerge from the interviews to allow me to perform data analysis to inform findings of the research study. The findings are likely representative of the sampling frame, most of whom did not have to participate in the study and broader road freight industry locally and regionally.

Ethical Research

Ethics in qualitative research entails a process that ensures research participants feel safe, respected, and heard when participating in research. I will treat the outcome of the research with confidentiality. The outcome of the research study will be shared with research participants on aspects related to them (Shaw et al., 2019). Qualitative data collection and analysis is not premised on the technicalities of building close relationships with research participants in natural settings and seeking the quality of knowledge; the issue of ethics is important in ensuring that the study is undertaken ethically and participants are protected (Gaus, 2017). Researchers commonly identify probable ethical issues in their proposed research and introduce strategies to mitigate possible risks on participants (Lenette et al., 2018). I communicated the objective of the study through a written Letter of Introductory/Invitation, which outlined the purpose of the study, criteria for selection, rights of participants, risks and benefits, among others. I advised participants that I would send a Consent Form before participating in the research, which SME owners were requested to review and reply on email; "I consent." I further advised the SME owners that I would share with them the interview protocol

(Appendix A) so that they could proactively familiarize themselves with the research process and the research questions.

The objective in this qualitative multiple case study was to identify, outline and recommend strategies that will be useful to owners of road freight SMEs in sustaining their businesses during slow economic growth. In pursuing the objective of the research study, I conducted interviews with 6 owners of SMEs in the road freight industry, reviewed company documents, and analyzed data within and across the businesses to identify, compare, and contrast strategies participants use to sustain their respective businesses. The identity of research participants is treated with utmost confidentiality, wherein I have used a coding system to identify individual research participants. At the successful completion of the research, I will destroy all information that may reveal the identity of the research participants. The confidential and anonymous handling of participants' data is considered a prerequisite for the conduct of ethical research (Thackray, 2018). In qualitative research, confidentiality mandates that no details about the identity of research participants should be revealed, which may result in the disclosure of their identity (Dongre & Sankaran, 2016). Confidentiality is the act of not disclosing what participants said or did during research unless they consent to do so only in ways they agreed and concealing the identity of the participants (Surmiak, 2018). To protect the names of participants and organizations, I used unique random identifiers (codes; i.e., SK11A, SK21A, SK31A, SK41A, SK51A, and SK61A), which were not in any way linked to participants or their businesses to maintain confidentiality.

The qualitative researcher's clear and unambiguous communication to prospective research participants of the study risks and benefits is a key feature of an effective informed consent process (Nusbaum et al., 2017). Nusbaum et al. (2017) suggested that ineffective communication of risks and benefits to potential participants jeopardizes obtaining ethically appropriate consent, which compromises reaching an informed decision on their participation in the research study. Informed consent discussions exist within the broader framework of shared decision-making. Shared decision-making is an approach that supports the researcher's ethical obligations by recognizing participants' independence and empowering participants with the necessary information to enable them to make choices on whether or not they agree to participate in the research study (Zhong et al., 2019). According to ethical literature and guidelines, the presence of undue influence on research participants' decision-making compromises voluntary informed consent for research (Dekking et al., 2016). The informed consent form explains the study's objective, risks and benefits of participating and clarifies that participation is voluntary. Participants were advised that there are no incentives for participating and that they could withdraw from the study at any time by sending an email/text message/telephone call to me (researcher), and I would not force or coerce them to participate in the study.

In adherence to the guidelines of Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) and protocols of the Belmont Report (1979), I protected and concealed the identity of research participants, information shared and will retain and store all records in a

secure safe at home where I will restrict access for 5 years after the study completion and then destroy all information in my possession, physically or electronically. The final doctoral study report approval number issued by Walden University IRB is 07-14-21-0624413, and it expires on July 13, 2022.

Data Collection Instruments

The qualitative researcher functions as the data collection instrument and has the dominant opinion in generating findings from the data (Haven & van Grootel, 2019). In qualitative research, the researcher becomes the instrument for collecting data (Arriaza et al., 2015). As the instrument in data collection, the researcher needs to ensure that data are collected appropriately, and that data collection is systematic and well organized (Twining et al., 2017). In this study, I served as the primary instrument for data collection, as outlined in the interview protocol (Appendix A).

Qualitative research interviews are conducted either as structured or unstructured (Jamshed, 2014). Structured interviews are based on an interview process where questions are designed based on the research topic, and participants respond specifically to questions asked (Basias & Pollalis, 2018). In structured interviews, the participants are expected to answer specific questions either during a face-to-face interview or by responding to questionnaires (Kadotani et al., 2017). A structured interview involves several components: asking questions consistently, asking sophisticated questions, taking descriptive notes, limiting probing or relationship-building questions, and standardizing the evaluation (Roulin et al., 2019). Structured interviewing was not suitable for this study as it does not allow for building a rapport with participants and asking probing

questions, notwithstanding that structured interviews are based on a question-answer approach. As the interviewer, I cannot deviate from the scripted questions.

Semistructured interviews are premised on open questions and a conversation approach where the interviewer (researcher) and interviewee (participant) are engaged in a flowing dialogue and not a strict question-answer interview (Moser & Korstjens, 2018).

Semistructured interviews yield quality data as they are not conducted with a transactional question-answer approach, but are rather unfolding, iterative interactions between the researcher and participant (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). Semistructured interviews are open-ended in nature, and questions allow creativity and flexibility, wherein participants may introduce new ideas during the interview (Dadzie et al., 2018). In this qualitative multiple case study research, I used semistructured interviews during the data collection process. As a researcher, it allowed me to establish a relationship with participants, create an environment to have purposeful interaction with participants, ask probing questions, and afford participants an opportunity to introduce or share new ideas on the study topic.

Additional to interview and observation as qualitative data collection methods, it is also possible to collect data through document analysis (Abdalla et al., 2018). Methods used in case study research to generate data during the interaction between participants and the researcher include document analysis and interviews and observations (Harrison et al., 2017). As part of data collection and analysis, in addition to the interviews, I reviewed company documents to gain more insight into the business operation to

substantiate data received from the interview sessions. Three participants declined to grant me access to any of their company documents citing confidentiality and that it was against their business policy to share internal documents with external parties. One participant of the three that shared documentation for review declined to share their financial documents citing confidentiality. The documents shared included, business strategy, employee development and training plans, operational plans, audited financial statements and safety plans. Qualitative research methods of collecting data from each participant may include documentation review (Johnson et al., 2017).

Reliability and validity of data collected was ensured through member checking. Member checking is a process of returning a summarized interview transcript or debriefing the analytical results with participants for consent (McGrath et al., 2019). Member checking acts as verification and a method of checking that the researcher has understood the reported responses of the respondents (Birt et al., 2016; McGrath et al., 2016). Member checking procedures are other expected attributes of qualitative research to authenticate the fair representation and confirmability of participant voices and feedback to provide evidence of internal validity (Choi & Roulston, 2015). In qualitative research, data verification, interpretations, analytic categories, and conclusions with research participants from whom data are collected are considered essential for establishing credibility (Anderson, 2017). To ensure reliability and validity of data collected, I conducted member checking by sending interview briefs to research participants for them to validate the content and certify that it was a true reflection of our

discussion. The brief contained a summary of the interview and reflected emerging themes relevant to a participant interview.

Data Collection Technique

The data collection techniques I used were audio-recorded face-to-face interviews and recorded virtual audio interviews on Zoom and MS Teams, a result of Covid-19 precautions and regulations, took notes during the interviews to inform follow-up questions, and reviewed company documents shared with me by research participants. Interviews are considered the primary data collection method in qualitative research (Oltmann, 2016). Interviews are another data collection method wherein a researcher asks the participant questions face-to-face, by telephone, or online (Bonevski et al., 2014). Qualitative research interviews are preferable when the researcher seeks to understand the participant/interviewee's subjective perspective of a topic or subject rather than developing a general understanding of large groups of people (McGrath et al., 2019).

The qualitative researcher's interview protocol (see Appendix A) must allow the participant to schedule a convenient venue, date, and time for the interview (Hoover et al., 2018). The preferred interview setting with each participant was audio recorded face-to-face; however because of COVID-19 precautions and regulations in South Africa at the time of data collection, only one participant agreed to having a face-to-face interview, and the five other participants preferred to have the interviews virtually, three participants on Zoom and two participants on MS Teams. I solicited seven qualifying participants (SME owners) initially via a telephone call, upon which I sent them a letter of introduction. Of

the seven qualifying participants that I communicated with via telephone, six SME owners who met the participant criteria expressed interest in participating in the multiple case study research. To obtain research participants, I requested the RFA to publish my invitation letter on their SME portal so that qualifying SME owners interested in participating in the study may contact me to discuss details of the research. I was initially contacted by two qualifying SME owners via telephone and email expressing interest in participating in my research study. For further assistance in obtaining more participants, I requested those SME owners whom I was already in contact with to assist me with contact details of other SME business owners in the road freight industry whom I could contact and request to participate in my research study. I managed to solicit an additional five participants via telephone and email, at which point I had solicited seven participants. I then sent each participant a consent form, and received email responses from six SME owners who consented to participate by replying "I consent". There was one SME owner who did not respond to me based on my email. I proceeded with the six SME owners as research participants with whom I conducted semistructured interviews. On receipt of the consent response, I scheduled an appointment for the interview based on the participant's date, time, and setting. The qualitative researcher's interview protocol must allow the participant to schedule a convenient venue, date, and time for the interview (Hoover et al., 2018). I achieved data saturation once data collection from participants yielded no new information and emerging concepts or themes.

Face-to-face interviews are advantageous as they allow the qualitative researcher to obtain substantial data (Adhabi & Anonzie, 2017). Face-to-face interviews allow the researcher to observe the participant's verbal and non-verbal cues, which are revealed through the voice tone, body language, and stressors; they may signal to the interviewer about the interview process (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). For this study, in view of having conducted one face-to-face interview (all the others were virtual voice interviews on Zoom and MS Teams), I recorded body language cues for that participant, and I was able to record body language on instances where the participant was making a point of emphasis on a specific point. Though I retained this information in my notebook, I did not include it as part of the data analysis process and findings sections as I considered it negligible and that it would not contribute any substance to the research findings. The non-verbal cues only demonstrated passion by the participant during the interview.

Starting with the two SME owners who contacted me, I thanked them for contacting me and expressing interest in participating in my research study. I then emailed them consent forms which provided them with an outline of the research purpose and objectives. For those I contacted via phone call and email on referral, I introduced myself and explained that the purpose of my call and email was to request them to participate in the research study I was conducting and briefly outlined the purpose and objective of the research study. I informed them of the individual who referred me to them and shared with me their contact details. I further clarified that the reason for the referral was that their business profile satisfies the criteria for the selection of prospective

participants of the research study, should they agree to my request. In all the above instances, I then outlined that I would email them a consent form to review. If they still agreed to participate in the study, they replied on email with, “I consent,” upon which I scheduled an interview appointment at a date, time, and setting of their convenience. On the consent form I indicated that there would be no incentives offered for participating in the research study. Given that this is an academic research study with no monetary benefits, I informed participants that I will share the research study findings as it may assist them in identifying further strategies to sustain their businesses in the long term.

My introduction to the business owner during the interview was consistent with the interview protocol (see Appendix A), and I verified critical information with the participant(s) on record (i.e., that they consent to participate in the study and understand that participation is voluntary), I informed the participants that the interview is being audio recorded. In research, informed consent refers to an individual’s agreement before generating data on the study topic to form part of the study (Zahle, 2016). For the consent to be valid, it must meet three conditions: (a) the individual must be competent, (b) informed about the research study, and (c) be in a position to freely decide whether to take part in the study or not (Zahle, 2017). During the meeting between me and owners of SMEs, I provided the following clarification about the research: (a) the research purpose and objectives, (b) why it was helpful for them as small business owners to participate in the study, (c) the ethical procedures that I observed during the study to protect, observe confidentiality of information shared and conceal their identity, and (d) the benefits of the

study outcome to their businesses and the SME sector. During the meeting, I allowed each SME owner to accept or decline to participate in the study and further informed the owners that they may withdraw their participation at any point during the study. Even after consenting, research participants should be given the latitude to refuse to answer uncomfortable and sensitive questions during the interview process. They may indicate such occurrence if they experience discomfort during the interview and may elect to withdraw their participation at any point (Dongre & Sankaran, 2016). For this research, no participant refused to answer any questions during interview(s) process.

The individual interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accurate transcription. Audio recording interviews, with the consent of the research participant, are important because they enable accurate transcription and converting the audio into a word-for-word transcript (Gill & Baillie, 2018). Audio-recorded interviews are transcribed into words using available computer programs, wherein the content is analyzed, classified into different categories or themes (Turabian et al., 2017). Audio-recorded interviews are assigned unique identification based on the participant's identification code to ensure that the file is easy to locate and retrieve whenever the file is required for transcription (Nair et al., 2017). I used a Phillips® digital voice recorder (DVT4110) to record face-to-face physical interviews (and backed up with a cellphone voice recorder) upon consent and approval of the participant on the consent form. When the interviews were conducted on a virtual platform on Zoom or MS Team, I recorded on the actual platform and backed up with the digital voice recorder and cellphone voice recorder. All audio recorded files,

transcripts, and business documents have been backed up in an external hard drive, which is password-protected, and only I have access to it. If any of the electronic devices experience technical problems, I will retrieve the file backed up on the external hard drive. To supplement the audio recordings, I wrote notes during the interviews, noted follow-up questions, recorded themes emerging from each participant's interview, highlighted points of emphasis, and described the participants' personal conduct and body language (where practical).

To transcribe the interview, I hired the services of Transcribus CC; a professional transcription service provider based in Pretoria, South Africa, to transcribe the interviews verbatim as the speech recognition software for Phillip and transcription options for both Zoom and MS Teams were costly to purchase, especially given that the costs are in a foreign currency. Transcribus CC is a reputable transcription service provider with extensive experience in this industry and provides such services to government departments, state-owned institutions, large and small private companies, academic institutions, and private persons. Upon transcribing all interviews, the Director of Transcribus CC issued me with a Transcriber Certificate to validate that the content in the transcripts is accurate.

To ensure the reliability and validity of the data collection process, I performed member checking. Member checking is a process whereby the researcher returns an interview transcript or debriefs the analytical results with participants for consent (McGrath et al., 2019). A member checking acts as verification and a way of checking

that the researcher has understood the participant's responses (Birt et al., 2016; McGrath et al., 2016). I emailed a copy of the summarized transcripts to respective research participants for them to validate the accuracy of the content and confirm that it is a true reflection of our interview. I requested participants to provide me with feedback within 7 days of receiving the summarized transcript as outlined in the consent form and informed participants that I would consider the transcript acceptable if no response was received on the transcripts within the requested time frame. For this research, one participant, SK31A responded and affirmed that the summarized transcript was a true reflection of the interview conducted. The balance of five participants did not respond at all to their individual summarized transcripts.

Data Organization Technique

A key data organizing technique in qualitative research is coding (Williams & Moser, 2019). Researchers need to identify mechanisms for secure storage of data (Perrier & Barnes, 2018). Data collected from research participants must be anonymized and securely stored (Dixon-Woods et al., 2017). Research data must be stored in a physically lockable room or safe that is preferably secured with an alarm, wherein a password-protected hard drive or computer (not connected to a data network) may be used to store electronic files (Czechowski & Sylvester, 2019). I have stored all data and records collected from research participants in a secure safe at home, where only I have access, for 5 years after the study completion. Electronic interview data files and links have also been stored on NVivo 2020 and have been saved in a password-protected

laptop and further backed up in a password-protected external hard drive and memory stick. After 5 years, I will permanently destroy all data and records in my possession, both hardcopy and electronically (using data cleaning software). To identify data, electronically and physically, I named them using unique codes, which are a combination of letters and digits, understood only by me (i.e., SK11A, SK21A, SK31A, SK41A, SK51A, and SK61A). After the unique identifier “SK,” the first digit indicates the research participant in the order the interviews were conducted; the second digit is common across all participants without a specific meaning. To identify company documents shared by participants, I named them using unique codes, i.e. SK31A_D1, SK31A_D2, SK31A_D3, SK51A_D1, SK51A_D2, SK51A_D3, SK61A_D1, SK61A_D2, SK61A_D3 and SK61A_D4. For the documents I maintained the unique identifiers similar to the ones I used identify interviewed participants, except that for the documents I added “D” to distinguish the documents from interview transcripts and audio recordings. The digit after the “D” is the number of documents shared by participants.

The confidential and anonymous handling of participants’ data is considered a prerequisite for the conduct of ethical research (Thackray, 2018). In qualitative research, confidentiality mandates that no details about the identity of research participants should be revealed, which may result in the disclosure of their identity (Dongre & Sankaran, 2016). To maintain confidentiality, the setting and research participants should not be identifiable in the reporting (Ngozwana, 2018). To adhere to the guidelines of Walden University’s IRB and protocols of the Belmont Report (1979), I protected and concealed

the identity of research participants, information shared by using unique random identifiers (codes), which are not in any way linked to the participant or organization to maintain confidentiality.

Data Analysis

In qualitative data analysis, the common requirement is the collection of relevant data and its organization into themes that reveal emerging patterns and lead to a theoretical understanding of the phenomenon under study (Lowe et al., 2018). Qualitative data analysis is useful to develop theories, themes, codes, schematic models, or conceptual models deriving from interviews with research participants (Assarroudi et al., 2018). Qualitative data analysis approaches are principally relevant for analyzing interview data (Sechelski & Onwuegbuzie, 2019).

In qualitative research, data analysis consists of a five-step procedure for proper analysis, namely, (a) data logging, (b) anecdotes, (c) vignettes, (d) data coding, and (e) thematic network (Akinyobe, 2018). According to Akinyobe, data logging is the process of using a sheet to record raw data obtained from personal interviews, focus group discussions, observation, or other forms of qualitative data collection. The researcher writes anecdotes by summarizing the chronological sequence of the narrative explanation articulated by research participants on the subject matter (Akinyobe, 2018). Vignettes represent the process of establishing the credibility of a qualitative study through an in-depth investigation of the setting, participants, and themes emerging from the research (Khan, 2014). For this research study, I did not use vignettes as I had no intention to

perform background checks on participants, their settings, and themes that may emerge from the interviews. I adopted a non-preemptive approach to the interview process. Data coding is the process of converting raw qualitative data into a communicative and credible narrative/story (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). According to Linneberg and Korsgaard (2019), researchers use coding to reduce large amounts of empirical material to make data readily accessible for analysis, enhancing the quality of the analysis and findings. Thematic networks are used to analyze qualitative data across a set of data to identify, analyze and report repeated patterns to select codes and develop themes (Akinyobe, 2018; Kiger & Varpio, 2020).

In this qualitative multiple case study research, to conduct data analysis, I used triangulation and NVivo 2020, a computer-assisted data analysis software package (CAQDAS). I achieved triangulation by analyzing interview transcripts and physical business documents (i.e. business strategy, employee development and training plans, operational plans, audited financial statements and safety plans), to which the SME owners granted access, which assisted me in developing accurate findings that are unbiased and based on data sourced from research participants. The information shared by the SME owners outlined their business models and how such models enabled business sustainability over the years. In instances where documented information was shared, it corresponded to the SME owners' expectations during the interview. Denzin (1989) conceptualized triangulation and suggested that the ability to look at data from multiple perspectives and consider a phenomenon in more than one way assists in

mitigating the potential to see the data from just one perspective. Triangulation refers to the process of analyzing the same phenomenon or research topic through multiple sources of data (Abdalla et al., 2018). According to Vergara (2015), triangulation can be viewed from two different perspectives; as a strategy that contributes to construct validity and as an alternative approach to obtain new knowledge through new perspectives. In qualitative research, triangulation mitigates bias, enhances reaching data saturation, and adds depth to the collected data (Fusch et al., 2018).

Computer-assisted data analysis software packages (CAQDAS) available to qualitative researchers include NVivo, Atlas.ti, and MAXQDA. For this research study, to organize and analyze the transcribed qualitative data that has been packaged into themes and codes, I used NVivo 2020. NVivo 2020 software is a package that imports and stores data relating to qualitative studies such as audio recordings, relevant literature, and transcripts and is used by researchers working with very rich text-based or multi-media information where deep levels of analysis on small or large volumes of data are required (Paulus et al., 2017). NVivo 2020 can accommodate different types of data—PDFs, spreadsheets, images, word documents, web pages, social media data—and can organize information using codes and themes and import articles from different references (Dollah et al., 2017). NVivo 2020 software allows qualitative researchers to complete multiple analysis functions, including sorting and filtering raw data, assigning and defining themes and categories of data, visualizing data analysis results and creating reports, discovering and building relationships among data (Phillips & Lu, 2018). NVivo

2020 is more effective when using interviews, open-ended questionnaires and survey responses, research articles, social media, and web content (QSR International, 2020). I analyzed audio recordings and transcript data derived from open-ended interviews (MS Word) and business documents packaged either as MS Word or PDF documents; therefore, NVivo 2020 software was suitable for data analysis.

Atlas.ti is a qualitative data analysis tool used to support the organization and coding of interview data (Salci et al., 2017). Atlas.ti was conceptualized from the grounded theory tradition, building hypothesis inductively from the data, and was developed specifically to analyze concepts (Schebesta, 2018). Atlas.ti is commonly used when performing structured data analysis following the principles of grounded theory (Huscava et al., 2020). In grounded theory, data analysis does not start only when data collection is completed; instead, the two activities occur simultaneously, which means collection leads to analysis and analysis leading to further collection (Nie, 2017). The data analysis in this study was conducted once all data had been collected from participants of the research study; therefore, Atlas.ti was not a suitable data analysis tool.

MAXQDA is used to collate, store and assist with qualitative data coding and analysis (Dauncey et al. 2019). MAXQDA has an interface that integrates multiple features such as searching qualitative data, updating, fast coding, and recording the data (MAXQDA, 2020). For MAXQDA to accurately analyze data, the names of the documents must be the same. If the document name is not the same, the data analysis tool displays a warning regarding the place in which documents are different (Sevilmis &

Yildiz, 2021). MAXQDA is a qualitative software that analyzes data and quantitative findings in all fields, which are suitable for explaining, and theoretical analysis in the social and cultural phenomena (Marjaei et al., 2019). I did not analyze data to understand social and cultural phenomena. Furthermore, the documents I analyzed did not share the same names, given that I received them from different sources. MAXQDA was, therefore, not a suitable data analysis tool for this study.

The study findings recommend and provide a framework to understand the strategies that SME owners of road freight companies use to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years of operation during slow economic growth. The organization of data into themes requires the interpretation of the meaning of the data (Yin, 2017). The interview questions were designed to produce data that will reveal strategies that owners of road freight SMEs have used to sustain their businesses during slow economic growth. The themes that emerged from the qualitative data were merged with the literature reviewed and conceptual framework. The conceptual framework for the study was the RBV theory by Wernerfelt (1984). The RBV conceptual framework is premised on the principle that organizations can sustain competitive advantage by acquiring and controlling valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (VRIN) resources that are difficult for competitors to duplicate (Barney, 1991). The concepts and themes emerging from the data analysis and theory in the conceptual framework provided a basis for answering the research question for the study.

Reliability and Validity

Reliability and validity occur when there is increased transparency and limited opportunities to include researcher bias in qualitative research (Mohajan, 2017). Reliability and validity are two important features in evaluating any measurement instrument or tool for good research (Mohajan, 2017). Reliability and validity occur when the data is accurate and truthful, when the conclusions have a reasonable probability for actually occurring and can be linked back to the conceptual framework of the study, and the ability of a study's conclusions to be transferred to other studies irrespective of time, population or settings (Fusch et al., 2018). Appropriate selection of the data sources and samples ensures the reliability and validity of the findings (Gaur & Kumar, 2018).

Reliability

Reliability refers to the thoroughness of the research, focusing on the appropriate methods chosen and how those methods were applied and implemented in a qualitative research study (Rose & Johnson, 2020). Reliability in qualitative research is achieved when more than one research method for collecting data yield the same data and same conclusions (Laumann, 2020). Reliability measures the consistency, repeatability, precision, and trustworthiness of research (Chakrabartty, 2013).

To ensure the dependability of the study findings, I maintained consistency with the research design, interview protocol, and data analysis throughout the study by conducting the research following the processes I outlined in the approved research proposal. Dependability refers to the aspect of consistency, where the researcher is

required to ensure that the analysis process is consistent with accepted standards for a particular design (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Haven and van Grootel (2019) suggested that dependability refers to the process of validating that process of collecting the qualitative data was acceptable. Dependability indicates the degree to which the researcher has been non-biased and the extent to which the study's findings are consistent with the participants' responses and not influenced by the researcher's bias or interest (Soroush et al., 2018).

Dependability was also ensured through member checking. Member checking is a process of returning an interview transcript or debriefing the analytical results with participants for consent (McGrath et al., 2019). Member checking acts as verification and a way of checking that one has understood the reported responses of the respondents (Birt et al., 2016; McGrath et al., 2016). As discussed in the consent form, copy of the interview debrief was emailed to respective research participants to validate that I accurately interpreted the interview and affirm that the context was captured accurately. Research participants were afforded 7 days to return the interview briefs with their comments. In the event that the participant did not return their interview brief within 7 days, I considered the interview transcript an accurate reflection on the interview and proceeded to use the data in the next phases of the research study (data analysis). For this research study, only one (1) participant returned and concurred that the interview brief was a true reflection of the interview, and five (5) participants did not provide a response within the requested 7 days.

Validity

Validity is the process of determining the accuracy of research findings from the researcher's perspective, the participants, and the consumers of the research (Rose & Johnson, 2020). Validity is the degree to which research results are truthful (Mohajan, 2017). Qualitative research validity is achieved by ensuring objectivity or authentication of findings (McGannon et al., 2019). I ensured validity and credibility by undertaking member checking. A copy of the interview debrief script was returned to research participants to review and confirm the accuracy of content and context of their respective interviews. For member checking, validation is performed by first returning the interview transcript to the research participant and asking them to provide input on whether the data are accurate and the results reflect their interviews (Smith & McGannon, 2018). The credibility of a study is the extent to which the findings are true and reflect the purpose of the research (Soroush et al., 2018). Haven and van Grootel (2019) postulated that credibility is strengthened when the analysis forms a solid basis for the presented findings. Credibility establishes whether research findings represent accurate information drawn from the participant's original data and a correct interpretation of the participant's original views (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

Confirmability is the degree of agreement between several independent individuals, mainly those specializing in qualitative research, about the accuracy and relevance of data meanings (Soroush et al., 2018). Confirmability is the extent to which the study's findings can be confirmed by other researchers (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

Confirmable research is objective or neutral in terms of researcher interface with the study context, wherein an independent observer should expect to reach similar conclusions on the findings (Bass et al., 2018). To achieve confirmability regarding the research findings, I shared the study's findings with research participants and requested them to perform member checking. In essence, the participants conducted a confirmability audit of the research findings.

Transferability is the applicability of study findings to other contexts and is achieved by properly describing the study context and assumptions (Nyirenda et al., 2020). Transferability relates to the expectation that results from one study apply to another (Bass et al., 2018). Transferability refers to the prospect of research findings applying to different contexts (Hintz et al., 2017). I have ensured transferability by recommending that the sustainability strategies identified in this study for SMEs in the road freight sector be used by SMEs in other sectors and be refined to address challenges in their respective industry during this period of slow economic growth and beyond.

Data saturation was achieved once no new information or theme that contributed to the research study emerged from the interviews with participants. Data saturation is the lack of new and obvious emergent themes during interviews with research participants (Al-Moghrabi et al., 2019). Data saturation is the extent to which sufficient codes or themes are adequately represented during interviews with individuals or focus groups to the extent they support content validity (Saunders et al., 2018). In qualitative research, the researcher needs to continue to probe until they feel they understand the individual

experiences, wherein data saturation is reached when no new information emerges from the interview (Bryksa et al., 2019). During the interviews, I complied with the outlined interview protocol (see Appendix A). The interviews were semistructured, wherein I asked open-ended interview questions contained in the interview protocol (see Appendix A) and consent form only. During the interview, I made followup questions on each question until I obtained all the necessary data. When I realized that no new information or theme was emerging on that specific question, I concluded that data saturation had been reached and proceeded to the next question until the interview was completed.

Transition and Summary

The objective of the study was to explore the strategies used by owners of road freight SMEs to sustain their businesses during slow economic growth. Section 2 included an introduction brief, purpose statement, role of the researcher, research participants. I further discussed research method and design, population sampling, ethical research, data collection instruments, data collection technique, data organization technique, data analysis, and study reliability and validity.

Section 3 includes an introduction, presentation of the findings, application to practice. The research findings and application to practice will assist owners of SMEs in the road freight sector in developing strategies to sustain their businesses for more than 5 years. Implications for social change may include reducing unemployment and increasing derivative tax revenues for communities' economic growth. Recommendations for action,

recommendations for further research, reflections, and research conclusion are also discussed in Section 3.

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

Introduction

The objective of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies that owners of road freight SMEs use to sustain their businesses during slow economic growth. The research sought to respond to the research question; “What strategies do owners of road freight SMEs use to sustain their businesses during slow economic growth?” My target population was SME owners of road freight businesses in Gauteng Province, South Africa, who had sustained their businesses beyond 5 years in a period of slow economic growth. For this study, six owners of SMEs in the road freight sector who met the criteria for selection from my sample framework participated in the study.

Data collection included semistructured face-to-face and virtual (Zoom and MS Team due to COVID restrictions) interviews and a review of company documents. The findings revealed four themes: marketing and customer relationship, financial management and working capital, leadership and employer/employee relationship, and safety and vehicle maintenance, which are core business sustainability strategies. To ensure the anonymity of participants, I assigned them unique identifiers: SK11A, SK21A, SK31A, SK41A, SK51A, and SK61A. The findings of the research align with the RBV conceptual framework and literature review.

Presentation of the Findings

The overarching research question for this research study was; “What strategies do owners of road freight SMEs use to sustain their businesses during slow economic

growth?” From the interview transcripts, I identified four categories of emergent themes for this research, namely, marketing and customer relationship, financial management and working capital, leadership and employer/employee relationship, and safety and vehicle maintenance. The four emergent themes best represent the strategies that owners of SMEs in the road freight sector in South Africa use to sustain their business during a period of slow economic growth.

Theme 1: Marketing and Customer Relationship

Marketing and customer relationship emerged as a priority focus area for the six research participants. Each of the participants identified marketing and customer relationship as a success factor to sustain a small business in the road freight industry, considering that established and reputable businesses dominate the industry. Participants commenced their business operation with one or two road freight vehicles (trucks) and performed either directly for their customers or as subcontractors to other companies. As start-ups or new entrants in the industry, all participants (SK11A, SK21A, SK31A, SK41A, SK51A, and SK61A) expressly indicated that they invested a substantial amount of effort marketing their business to multiple prospective customers and where they were awarded an opportunity to perform work, the participants focused on delivering a service that either satisfied or exceeded the customer expectation. The participants indicated that, even though they had managed to sustain their businesses for more than 5 years in a challenging economic environment, they continued marketing their businesses and product offering to existing and prospective customers to ensure sufficient opportunities

to grow and sustain their businesses. SK51A indicated, “Marketing is one of the biggest strategies that you need to always knock on doors in order for growth. So marketing is a strong point in order for you as a small business to grow.” Small business/entrepreneurial marketing assist SME owners to proactively identify opportunities, deal with change and equip employees with relevant skills set to augment business performance and growth (Sadiku-Dushi et al., 2019).

Each participant emphasized the importance of establishing a good relationship with the customer. The participants identified regular communication as an important trait to establishing a good customer relationship. All participants indicated that “communicating all the time” with a customer is important and creates an impression that the business owner values the relationship with their customers and is determined to offer a satisfactory service or product that meets or exceeds customer expectations. When they execute a task in the road freight business, the participants indicated that numerous unplanned occurrences impede on-time performance, such as traffic delays, road accidents, road maintenance, wheel puncture, or vehicle breakdown. As such, it was noted as important to regularly communicate with the customer to provide an update on the in-transit freight, especially when unforeseen delays have been encountered. Participant SK41A stated, "You have also got to keep communication with your customer, so you have got to give them what we call tracking, keeping the customer informed on progress of their load while enroute throughout the journey.”

Five participants indicated that customization is an important competitive advantage in the road freight industry. Customization refers to offering a product or service specifically designed according to the customer's requirements and accommodates their input in the final product/ service specification (Sousa & da Silveira, 2019). Participants SK11A, SK31A, SK41A, SK51A, and SK61A indicated that their customers prefer a service that is configured uniquely to their needs (customized). As such, they always respond to what the customer wants and how they want it, many are willing to pay higher rates for customized services. Participant SK61A said, "The second thing is that one of the reasons why our customers support us is simply because we are very reactive to their requirements, and we offer them their personalized (customized) service." Providing a customized service enables the owners of the road freight SME an opportunity to offer a customer unique service/product that competitors cannot duplicate. Customization of service or product offering is consistent with the characteristics of RBV, in that SME owners offer a service that is valuable, rare, inimitable, and nonsubstitutable (VRIN). In essence, product/service customization heightens the barriers to entry for prospective competitors, therefore increasing the prospects of long-term business sustainability.

All participants emphasized the importance of customer satisfaction. Participant SK31A indicated that they conduct frequent customer satisfaction surveys, wherein they use the feedback to ascertain the level of customer satisfaction and further identify areas of improvement to consistently maintain a service offering that meets or exceeds

customer expectations. The participants indicated that retaining customers is important for business sustainability, and that can only be achieved if the customer is happy with the service they receive. SK41A indicated that “a satisfied customer is willing to any reasonable amount for a good service” and further indicated, “in the road freight business, you cannot offer a good service and still charge low prices, the two do not complement each other,” insinuating that customers are prepared to pay higher prices for freight transportation in circumstances where they receive unmatched service. In a study to explore determinants that influence customer loyalty of freight forwarders on freight transportation services providers, Gil-Saura et al. (2018) concluded that customer satisfaction is influenced by service quality and perceived value derived.

Five of the participants highlighted the importance of being responsive to the needs of the customer. By “responsive,” they were referring to the need for an owner of a road freight business to be readily available to provide a service to the customer, specifically in circumstances where such services are required on an urgent basis and could not be proactively planned for, commonly referred to as “urgent loads.” The participants indicated that being responsive to the customer's needs at any given time of the day assists in establishing a trust relationship and depicts the owner and their business as a dependable service provider. According to Participant SK51A,

The service quality is very important to clients, and we run an operation where a client will phone me any part of night or phone my team any part of the night,

requesting that we collect and transport an urgent load; we will make sure that we provide that service.

Theme 1, marketing and customer relationship/communication is consistent with the attributes of RBV conceptual framework for developing competitive attributes to achieve long-term business sustainability, specifically for SMEs. SME owners of road freight businesses that focus on marketing their business are flexible to customer requirements, maintain good customer relationships, and improve the prospects of attracting more business opportunities, thereby augmenting long-term business sustainability in the industry. Marketing communication in road freight businesses is a “voice” of the organization that persuades, inform and remind customers about the service offering; therefore, an effective marketing communication strategy will attract an increased customer base and enable business growth (Vilkaite-Vaitone & Sologubas, 2019). When discussing Theme 1, Table 3 illustrates the frequency with which each code was mentioned or shared as physical documents by participants during the interviews.

Table 3

Theme: *Marketing and customer relationship/communication*

Code	Number of participants	Percentage (%)
Marketing	6	100
Customer Relationship/communication	6	100
Customization	5	83
Customer Satisfaction	6	100
Responsiveness	5	83

Theme 2: Financial Management and Working Capital

Operating a financially sustainable and profitable business is an integral requirement in the road freight industry. Each participant emphasized the importance of operating a profitable business, wherein revenues generated exceed direct and indirect business costs, both fixed and variable. SK41A indicated,

The most important point of sustaining business in the road freight industry is to know your true bottom-line, what is your true costs at the end of the day, whether it be the end of the month, the end of the year or whatever it is.

Financial management is the foundation for the long-term sustainability of SMEs, especially in periods of slow economic growth, when business opportunities are limited. According to Folajinmi and Peter (2020), for SMEs operating in a dynamic competitive market to achieve development, profitability, and growth, it is a prerequisite to exercise sound financial management as a condition for long-term business sustainability. Each participant indicated that they have direct control of all financial matters in their business. To this effect, the participants implied that they are directly responsible for the business bank account and thus have sight of incoming revenues and outgoing costs/payments. Participant SK41A was emphatic that, “as an owner of an SME, you have to take charge of business finances given that it is the “lifeblood” of the business and is an immediate measure of business sustainability (liquidity).”

The management of costs is an important focus area for business owners, to the extent, all participants highlighted the importance of eliminating unnecessary costs when

operating a road freight business. The major cost driver in a road freight business is fuel (diesel) costs; wherein participants pointed out that fuel cost management is critical to operating a profitable road freight business, though it requires the business owner to be attentive to detail and well informed on the daily business operations and industry dynamics. Participants emphasized that regular monitoring of fuel usage and other variable costs, such as employee overtime costs, are essential in operating a successful SME. Participants SK11A, SK41A, and SK61A indicated that they consistently undertake cost savings initiatives which they consider to be a proactive approach in ensuring the business does not incur unnecessary cost overruns, thus preventing a profitable financial position. Specifically, participant SK21A stated, “our accountants consistently check our financial position and how they can assist us and tell us where we should cut down on cost, and what we should do to basically keep the business profitable.”

Pricing appropriately and competitively is an important characteristic for the long-term business sustainability of road freight businesses. Five participants specified that appropriate and competitive pricing does not necessarily translate to low pricing; however, pricing directly correlates with the value-added service provided to the customer. Participant SK61A postulated, “as a business, we focus on being competitive in terms of pricing to attract more business opportunities for continued business survival.” Pricing in the road freight industry is informed by shipping/transport regulations, service delivery characteristics, commodity, model horizons, and vehicle

characteristics (Izadi et al., 2020). Fundamentally in the road freight industry (and any other business sector), pricing must yield profitability for each task undertaken to ensure overall business profitability. Participant SK61A further indicated, “for every trip, a vehicle profitability file is prepared to account for all direct costs against the revenue generated to determine trip profitability.”

The management of incoming and outgoing cash in a business is a vital activity, which in small businesses is wholly controlled by the owner of the business. Participants SK21A, SK31A, SK41A, SK51A, and SK61A accentuated the importance of having direct and sole control of cash movement in their business, indicating that cash balance(s) is an important indicator of the business performance and sustainability. The participants indicated that the importance of managing cash flow in a road freight business is that, for some of their major costs items such as fuel (diesel), the suppliers of bulk fuel require upfront payment prior to delivery of the commodity. SME owners in the road freight industry focus on collecting all due payments from customers to maintain sufficient cash balances to service daily operational costs and pay suppliers. Participant SK41A emphasizes the point,

Another aspect is the management of cash flow. So your biggest barometer of that is bank account, you have got to watch your bank account, because that is what is going to tell you the true story. Cashflow is king and that is it in a nutshell.

Cash flow management is an imperative determining factor on the short or long-term existence of SME businesses and includes cash payments, current asset management and

debt collection, buying and disposal of assets, and making profitable investments (Palanimally et al., 2020).

Participants indicated that their business philosophy is to service multiple customers in the transportation industry and further operate businesses in other industries to guarantee diverse sources of revenue to enhance long-term sustainability. Participants asserted that a decentralized service offering model is the only business approach that increases long-term sustainability prospects in the road freight sector during slow economic growth. Given the competition size in the road freight industry and slow economic growth in South Africa, all participants argued that it is major a business risk to focus on a single customer. Focusing on a single customer creates a dependency on the sole customer and deprives or restricts business owners of the opportunity to explore other entrepreneurial ventures that will augment current income, increase profitability, enable business growth and long-term sustainability, specifically given the uncertain economic conditions. Participant SK31A stated,

Do not be dependent on just one or two of the customers for your income, we learned this the hard way because we were actually working for one company all the time and when the contract expired, and we had to stop operations for between 2 to 3 months. That actually taught us to work with more customers and give special attention to your customers.

Notwithstanding the limited resources, it is common for SMEs to diversify into new business ventures to seek growth opportunities and long-term sustainability (Chen et al., 2020).

All participants appreciate and implement profit retention from business operations, funds they retain as emergency financial reserves used to sustain their businesses when there is a decline in demand or when new business opportunities are limited. Participant SK51A articulates the importance of profit retention, saying, “we will always keep a reserve away set it aside because I always think of ‘rainy days.’” All participants indicated that they use financial reserves to finance business operational requirements when opportunities are not forthcoming at the usual or adequate rate to yield sufficient revenue. Participants highlighted challenges experienced by small businesses in obtaining funding from financial institutions as the main factor that motivates them to retain part profits as reserves while the remaining profit(s) is used towards investing in business growth. Participants cited financial self-sustenance as an important business sustainability strategy for SMEs, as external funding is difficult to solicit. In narrating their own experience, when a business seeks funding, they state, “when you are a new start-up company, banks won’t lend to you at all, you won’t get any funding from any formal institutions.” The limitation of access to funding by SMEs is attributed to numerous factors, such as an inadequate business case, a lack of collateral, high borrowing/lending interest rate, and lack of appropriate infrastructure and resources,

which financial institutions require to consider funding requests (Makdissi & Tannous, 2020).

Based on the participants' feedback, it is evident that SME owners in South Africa experience challenges with securing funding from financial institutions, notably because of the stringent requirements by financial institutions to qualify for funding, which most small businesses cannot satisfy. Notwithstanding the challenges faced by SMEs to solicit funding from financial institutions, participants SK41A and SK61A indicated that they qualify and have access to funding from financial institutions. These participants (SK41A and SK61A) indicated that they have occasionally had to apply for funding as working capital when their businesses are not generating sufficient revenue to finance daily operational and monthly fixed costs or if they need funds to invest toward business growth. In the framework of SME funding, the RBV theory postulates that financial capital is a crucial source of competitive advantage when finances are dearth (Zarrouk et al., 2020). When discussing Theme 2, Table 4 illustrates the frequency with which each code was mentioned or shared as physical documents by participants during the interviews.

Table 4

Theme: Financial Management and working capital

Code	Number of participants	Percentage (%)
Financial Management	6	100
Cost management (fuel, overtime)	6	100
Pricing	5	83
Cashflow management	5	83
Business diversification	6	100
Profits retention	6	100
Funding	6	100

Theme 3: Leadership and Employer/Employee Relationship

Owners or leaders of SME require a combination of leadership characteristics to succeed in their entrepreneurial venture that is more effective in the small business sector than in large organizations. The leadership qualities of an owner/leader of an SME are central to establishing an organizational culture that will inspire employees to support and work toward achieving the business vision as outlined by the owner. All participants underscored the importance of being “hands-on” in every function of the business. According to the participants, owning and operating a road freight business is a significant financial investment. Therefore it is important to understand the operations more than any other employee, after which you can guide the strategic direction of the business. Participant SK31A said, “you have to be hands-on. You have to consistently speak to clients, employees and always be positive and passionate about what you do.” Transformational and entrepreneurial leadership were discussed in the literature review as essential characteristics for owners or leaders of SMEs. The research findings align with

the abovementioned leadership characteristic, though an additional leadership characteristic emerges following the interviews with participants that I have termed *compassionate leadership*.

Compassionate leadership is a combination of supportive attitudes anchored on support, understanding, empathizing, and helping employees in an organization (James & Bennett, 2020). In the context of information gathered during interviews with research participants, I define compassionate leadership as a leadership characteristic that describes a business owner/leader whose relationship with their employees extends beyond work. Compassionate leaders occasionally concern themselves about the general wellbeing of their employees and their families. They are always readily available to offer/provide additional support to their employees and family members whenever needed. Compassionate leaders earn the trust of their employees, who in turn perform their work with dedication and loyalty, and take ownership of their work output. Each participant spoke passionately about how much they valued their employees and were unambiguous in emphasizing that employees are the most critical stakeholders. A compassionate leadership trait is more effective in small business operations given that the employee size is smaller than in large organizations; consequently, the business owner knows all employees, has a close relationship, and interacts with them on a regular basis if not daily. Participant SK31A underscored the importance of being a compassionate leader, stating,

I check on the drivers at least twice a week, speak to my drivers and check; ‘How are you guys, are you okay?’ When my drivers hear it is me on the phone, they are just like, ‘Madam, you are phoning, are you okay? I mean, we are so happy to speak to you.’ You know, it also motivates the employees.

A leader with a compassionate leadership attribute has a positive impact on stakeholders, staff morale, communication, and organizational performance (Papadopoulos et al., 2021).

Five participants advocated for an exceptional employer-employee relationship, citing the importance of having a harmonious working relationship with employees. It was evident that participants understood and prioritized establishing good relationships with their employees, which they recognize as core to continued business sustainability. While each participant recognized the contribution of the respective teams in their organization, specific mention was made of the truck drivers. Participant SK21A stated, “drivers are key to the business; without them, we would not be operating. They are a very important part of our business.” Truck drivers are critical stakeholders to the sustainability and competitiveness of road freight businesses, notwithstanding that the road freight industry is a major contributor to the GDP of an economy (Dubey & Gunasekaran, 2015; LeMay & Keller, 2019).

The interviews with participants revealed the importance of a small business owner consistently maintaining high employee morale to remain competitive and deliver a quality service to customers. Participants mentioned the importance of remunerating

employees appropriately, consistent with the industry recommended salary scales, demonstrating honesty and sincerity, and not creating a perception that employees are being exploited for the owners' financial gains. The participants indicated that remunerations—monthly salary and other benefits—for employees at the bargaining level in the road freight industry in South Africa are negotiated and determined through the road freight industry bargaining council who facilitates “salary negotiations” at mutually agreed upon periodic intervals, where the main stakeholders are employer(s) and employee(s) representatives (Trade Unions). Participant SK41A specified, “the first thing is always to employ the right people at the right salaries, do not overpay and do not underpay.” To create and sustain a high-performance culture within the business, some participants indicated that they offer performance incentives to their employees. This form of rewarding good performance is an established practice across all sectors and industries. Business leaders and owners mainly use it to demonstrate appreciation to employees for outstanding performance and encourage a culture of excellence within the business or organization. Participant SK51A indicated,

I always pushed my staff. My staff is the most important people at the company, even the marketing team themselves. If the business grows, they grow as well. I offer them shares in the company, which pays them a percentage on a monthly basis as incentive of whatever additional revenue that they bring in.

In SMEs, incentive systems and informal rewards are implemented to encourage a high-performance culture among employees as they are aware of how their performance links to their incentives and rewards (Wuen et al., 2020).

Participants SK41A, SK51A, and SK61A acknowledged the importance of equipping their employees with skills to enhance their competencies through a robust training and development (T&D) program. The participants highlighted that employing highly skilled employees improves the quality of service and business competitiveness, an important attribute for an SME in the road freight sector to stay ahead of competitors. Each of the abovementioned participants indicated that their businesses have T&D plan used to develop individual development plans (IDPs) for employees. Participant SK61A indicated,

There is a lot of attention spent on the employees, to the extent that I probably have one of the largest training budgets of any small business in the country. To train the six employees, I have a budgeted cost of R600 000. So we do a lot of training and development that makes us unique.

T&D strengthens business competitiveness and accordingly complements the RBV theory of developing internal capabilities that are valuable, rare, inimitable, and nonsubstitutable (VRIN; Chumphong et al., 2020). According to Chumphong et al., SME owners that implement VRIN are best placed to achieve higher growth and position their businesses to realize performance benefits and long-term sustainability. SME owners

who want to achieve exceptional performance should promote and invest in developing unique abilities and skills for their employees (Eikelenboom & de Jong, 2019).

During the interviews, no participant mentioned business strategy; however, in the documents shared by participants SK31A, SK51A, SK61A, there was a business strategy document where the common themes were vision, mission, business growth ambitions, customer satisfaction, and competitive/value-adding services. While the participants may not have mentioned a business strategy, it was evident that most participants understood the importance of having a scripted business strategy for their businesses that is accessible to employees to foster a common understanding of the business goals and objectives with the SME owner. In the literature review, the importance of business strategy in SMEs was explored extensively. An essential success factor of competitiveness for SMEs depends on the effective implementation of a business strategy (Lestari et al., 2020). A fundamental principle of RBV is a business successfully executing a valuable strategy that yields a competitive advantage that cannot easily be duplicated by competitors (Sukaatmadja et al., 2021). When discussing Theme 3, Table 5 illustrates the frequency with which each code was mentioned or shared as physical documents by participants during the interviews.

Table 5

Theme: Leadership and employer/employee relationship

Code	Number of participants	Percentage (%)
Leadership (hands-on/participative)	6	100
Employer/employee relationship	5	83
Compassionate leadership	5	83
Employee morale	5	83
Employee remuneration (incentives)	6	100
Training and development	3	50
Business Strategy	3	50

Theme 4: Safety and Vehicle Maintenance

According to all research participants, enforcing and upholding high safety standards is essential in the road freight sector. The participants emphasized the importance of adhering to all applicable safety standards, primarily to protect employees from safety-related incidents while performing their duties. Participant SK11A said, “we make sure that we do not compromise on safety. Safety comes first in all of the aspects of what we do.” All participants’ compile and retain physical safety plans and safety files in their businesses that are unique to individual customers as per their requirement. In the road freight industry, adherence to safety practices is a legal prerequisite such as; fit-for-duty medical checkups, vehicle roadworthiness, driver behavior requirements (i.e., fasten seatbelt, observe speed, no answering of a cellphone with your hand when driving, and regular rests during trips), and regular route assessments. To improve safety in the road freight sector in South Africa, the performance-based standard (PBS) is recommended for implementation to specify minimum safety performance measures for heavy vehicles

(Nordengen et al., 2018). PBS is a recognized method for improving heavy vehicle safety (reducing accidents) and productivity (lower operational costs) (Nordengen et al., 2018).

Vehicle safety is a direct outcome of diligent and proactive vehicle maintenance or integrity. Five participants indicated that vehicle maintenance is none negotiable requirement in the road freight sector. SK41A stated, “You have got to maintain a healthy fleet; otherwise, your maintenance costs will become unbearable because you will just end up spending all your money on maintenance.” The emphasis made by the participants on the importance of performing routine maintenance on vehicles demonstrates that owners of road freight businesses appreciate the importance of vehicle integrity as a competitive advantage enabler in an industry that is highly competitive.

Adequately maintained road freight vehicles have minimal on-route breakdowns, the foundation of a reliable and quality road transportation service. Five participants concurred that providing reliable and quality service to customers differentiates their business offering from competitors and amplifies their reputation, strengthening their competitive advantage in the industry. Owners of road freight businesses whose core business competencies are offering a reliable and quality service retain their customers for long periods, and through references or informal marketing by satisfied customers, acquire new opportunities, and grow market share. In RBV, the competitiveness of any business is established on the resources and its proficient core competencies (Govindaraju et al., 2019). Participant SK41A specified that he had a fleet (vehicle)

replacement formula to maintain a consistent, reliable, and good quality service to their customers.

Well-maintained vehicles comply with road traffic regulations and related legislation. Five participants (SK11A, SK21A, SK31A, SK41A, and SK61A) stressed the importance of compliance to regulations that govern the road freight industry as a mitigation to the risk of vehicles being impounded by law enforcement officials due to noncompliances. Participant SK61A stressed the importance of complying with government laws when operating a road freight business and said, “you can lose a certificate/permit just by ignoring some regulations.” When discussing Theme 4, Table 6 illustrates the frequency with which each code was mentioned or shared as physical documents by participants during the interviews.

Table 6

Theme: Safety and vehicle maintenance

Code	Number of participants	Percentage (%)
Safety	6	100
Vehicle Maintenance/Integrity	5	83
Reliable/quality service	5	83
Compliance/Regulations	5	83

Applications to Professional Practice

The purpose of this research study was to identify specific strategies used by owners of SMEs in the road freight sector to sustain their businesses during slow economic growth. The identified strategies may be applied by SME owners in other industries to enhance the long-term sustainability of their businesses. SMEs make a

positive contribution to the economic growth of emerging economies, given that they are significant contributors to gross GDP (Surya et al., 2021).

The findings of the study revealed that SME owners in the road freight industry should place emphasis on marketing and customer relationship, financial management and working capital, leadership and employer/employee relationship, and safety and vehicle maintenance as critical success factors to gain competitive advantage, grow market share and sustain their businesses during slow economic growth. The information obtained from the study participants could assist owners of road freight SMEs in South Africa in developing effective strategies to operate profitable and sustainable businesses. The study's findings would correspondingly apply to SMEs in other industries to improve prospects of long-term business sustainability, profitability, and growth in a subdued economy.

During discussion with SME owners it was evident that they place emphasis on exceptional performance amongst their employees and incentivized exceptional performance in a variety of ways as acknowledgement and recognition; characteristic of transformational and entrepreneurial leadership. Deriving from data analysis and findings of this research study, small business/entrepreneurial leadership emerged as a requisite characteristic adopted by SME owners in South Africa to operate successful and sustainable businesses in a highly competitive yet vulnerable sector.

Entrepreneurial/small business leaders influence the output of their employees toward generating initiatives and mobilization of resources to create value and realization of

business goals (Musara & Nieuwenhuizen, 2020). The high failure rate of SMEs in South Africa motivated me to undertake this study, the aim being to explore strategies that SME owners use to sustain their businesses. Even though the study focused on exploring sustainability strategies in the road freight industry, the findings and recommendations identified in this study may be used by SME owners operating in other industries but exposed to similar economic conditions to address sustainability challenges in their respective businesses. The findings of this study may further be useful to SME sector researchers and consultants to identify possible business sustainability strategies for SMEs across all industries.

Implications for Social Change

The road freight sector in South Africa contributes 5% to total GDP, 2.5% of total employment in a country with a 34.4% unemployment rate, and accounts for more than 70% of land freight income and payload (Merven et al., 2019, Statssa, 2021). The road freight industry in South Africa employs thousands of persons whose remuneration supports their families; owners of SMEs in the road freight sector who sustain their business operations offer long-term employment. Owners and leaders who operate sustainable SMEs positively contribute to employment, poverty alleviation, and reduction in societal inequality. A sustainable SME further contributes to increased tax derivatives used by the government to finance various social initiatives to support and uplift the living standards of disadvantaged persons and communities in South Africa. The findings of this study could assist owners and leaders of SMEs in all industries to conceptualize

strategies to sustain their businesses long term and contribute directly to the social uplifting of communities within their geographical location and the broader South African economy, which is experiencing slow economic growth and record-high unemployment, a trend that has been on a steady increase. The findings of this study could further assist government leaders in developing appropriate SME support programs for start-up businesses to aid them to sustain their operations long term. Given that SMEs mostly consume local products and service local communities, the success of businesses in this sector will enable them to contribute resources toward community development initiatives aimed at improving the livelihoods of locals and other societies affected by their business operations. The literature shows that when an economy creates sustainable employment opportunities, there is increased consumer spending on local products and services, resulting in GDP and economic growth.

Recommendations for Action

Several recommended actions for SME owners in the road freight industry flowing from the study findings are suggested. The first recommendation is that SME owners in the road freight industry must spend sufficient time and resources marketing their products/services by creating awareness in current and prospective customers about their differentiated service offerings. Relationship building with existing and new customers must be a priority for business owners and leaders to ensure long-term supplier-customer relationships. The second recommendation is that they practice prudent financial management to ensure that the business is profitable and has sufficient cash

flow to cover daily and periodic operating expenses. SME owners/leaders must reinvest profits to grow business operations, broaden the customer base, and increase market share. A further recommendation is that SME owners should communicate clear and unambiguous business goals and objectives to employees and exhibit a leadership style that influences employees to understand, support, pursue and own such goals and objectives. SME owners should create a conducive working environment where the employees feel valued, appreciated, and motivated to perform at their best. Paying competitive remunerations and incentivizing exceptional performance inspire employees to maintain high performance standards.

Finally, SME owners in the road freight industry must instill a high safety culture in their businesses. The findings indicate that adherence to safety regulations and standards is a prerequisite in the road freight industry. Owners must ensure employees are medically fit for duty, vehicle maintenance is undertaken at appropriate intervals to ensure roadworthiness, and customer safety requirements are adhered to without compromise. I recommend that owners/leaders in the road freight industry, both SMEs and large businesses, review this study's findings and identify components that they may applicable within their business strategies to heighten long-term sustainability prospects. Some business principles and strategies contained in the findings are recommended for consideration by SMEs in other industries.

The study may be disseminated through publishing in professional/academic journals, contributing an article about the study in a road freight/logistics industry

magazine in South Africa, and presenting the study at transport conferences locally and regionally. I will share a summary of the published study findings with the six participants and the partner organization. Additionally, I plan to use the knowledge and exposure gained whilst conducting this research study in pursuing consultancy opportunities to mentor and coach SME owners and managers in developing strategies to sustain their businesses for long term.

Recommendations for Further Research

The findings contained in this study provide a basis for further research that may be conducted on each individual theme's impact on long-term sustainability strategies of SMEs in the road freight industry and broader SME sector in South Africa, precisely in this period of slow economic growth. In earlier sections of the study, two limitations were presented, the first being that sustainability strategies developed by each SME owner might be unique to their individual businesses and not necessarily transferable to other SMEs operating within the same conditions in the road freight sector, and the other being that the results derived from this study may not be generalized across the road freight sector. Recommendations for future research that may address this limitation are to conduct multiple case studies using any of the emerging themes from this research on a larger sample size within Gauteng Province or within other Provinces such as KwaZulu-Natal or Western Cape to ascertain if the findings in this study are transferable and applicable for the broader road freight sector. The themes that future researchers may select from to explore their effectiveness as business sustainability strategies for SMEs in

the road freight sector are; (a) marketing and customer satisfaction, (b) cost management and business diversification, (c) small business/entrepreneurial leadership, and (d) safety and vehicle maintenance. The road freight industry is cardinal for the functioning of the South African economy, in view of it being the preferred mode of transport domestically, and its competitive nature necessitates business owners to develop effective sustainability strategies. Future qualitative multiple case study research may reveal if these strategies are beneficial for SMEs specifically or are equally effective for large businesses in the road freight industry in South Africa. Future research in these areas could assist government and private sector leaders in developing suitable programs and allocate resources to support owners of SMEs in South Africa.

Reflections

My experiences during my doctoral studies and the research phase have been rewarding learning experiences. There is an unforgettable tragedy that struck in my family in February 2019, when my tenacity to proceed with my doctoral studies was tested; however, I gathered myself and remained focused on acquiring my Doctor of Business Administration degree. The research journey broadened my perception and understanding of how to address problems in my professional and personal life. I have simultaneously transferred the knowledge gained in problem solving to my professional life. I have sought to define the business problem before developing a strategy to ensure that the strategy deliverables satisfactorily resolve the business problem.

The interviews with the participants provided me with a clear and concise understanding that being an owner/entrepreneur (SME) in the road freight industry provides different experiences to that of employed to leader/manage a road freight division/department as part of a large organization. Being an owner of an SME requires a hands-on approach; being involved in and knowing all aspects of the business ensures business sustainability (i.e., from marketing to vehicle maintenance, while a manager or leader in a large organization is not necessarily involved in all aspects of the business and relies on managerial and supervisory teams to deliver on business sustainability strategies). During my interaction with research participants, their responses demonstrated that they are passionate about the road freight industry, value the resources they invested in establishing their businesses, and are keen on growing and sustaining their businesses into the future.

When conducting the study, I minimized bias by relying on the information shared by participants to generate findings of the research study. I was careful not to allow my experience and exposure in the transportation and logistics industry to influence my line of questions to participants. I contained my follow-up questions to seek clarity on the responses provided. In the findings, at the one instance where I included my personal opinion, I declared such occurrence(s). When discussing compassionate leadership, I provided my own definition of the term, based on information derived during data collection, additional to the definition obtained from scholarly literature. The research study experience has armed me with invaluable knowledge in developing strategies to

sustain SMEs for the long term, which I will also use in my professional career. My objective was to ensure that the study's findings are useful to the study sample frame and the broader SME sector in the road freight industry in South Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa region.

Conclusion

The objective of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies that owners of road freight SMEs in South Africa use to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years of operation in a period of slow economic growth. In responding to the research question, I discussed several topics in the literature review relevant to the research topic. I was able to compare and contrast the literature review with information obtained from interviews conducted with owners of SMEs in the road freight industry who met the criteria for selection as participants for this research. For this study, the 6 participants were all owners of an SME in the road freight industry based in Gauteng Province and having operated for longer than 5 years. I used the RBV as the conceptual framework for the study and the literature review discussed topics, including SMEs, the RBV, GDP, business strategy, business sustainability, slow economic growth, and small business/entrepreneurial leadership, which I considered relevant to the research study.

Deriving from the research study findings, it is apparent that the road freight industry is highly saturated and competitive. To gain market share, owners of SME businesses in this industry need to design strategies and invest in resources that will differentiate their business offering from that of competitors to support long-term

sustainability objectives, especially given the dominance of large businesses in the industry. Transformational and compassionate leadership styles are critical for owners to instill a high-performance culture and maintain a motivated workforce, fundamentals for long-term business sustainability. SME owners should focus on improving their employees' skills and competencies by designing effective training and development programs to equip employees with advanced industry knowledge and boost future prospects of business competitiveness. Operating in a highly competitive industry, an SME owner ought to adopt a hands-on leadership style in leading daily business operations to yield success and long-term sustainability; an SME owner in this industry cannot be partially active and expect the business to succeed and be sustainable. The hands-on leadership style is likely transferable and applicable to SMEs in all industries. For SME owners in the road freight industry to sustain their businesses in a period of slow economic growth, their strategies must be anchored on effective small business leadership, marketing, financial and safety management.

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Appendix A: Research Interview Protocol

The following research protocol will be applicable:

1. I will initially introduce myself to the research participant and inform them that I am a doctoral student at Walden University, USA, studying towards a Doctor of Business Administration (DBA);
2. I will further inform the participant that as part of the degree, I am required to successfully undertake and complete a doctoral research;
3. I will re-confirm with the research participant that they are willing to participate in the study, and remind them that it is voluntary;
4. I will give the participant the Consent Form and give them an opportunity to read its content and if satisfied, sign 2 copies, one which they will retain and I will retain the other;
5. I will inform the participant that the interview will be audio recorded; and
6. As an introduction to the interview I will ask the participant to provide a brief background about their business experiences in the road freight sector:
 - 6.1. What year did you start your business operation?
 - 6.2. How many personnel are employed by your business?
 - 6.3. Does your business generate revenue less than R50m per annum?
7. I will then proceed to ask the Interview Questions:

- 7.1. What strategies have you used to successfully sustain your business in times of slow economic growth and increased competition in the road freight sector?
 - 7.2. What external resources have you relied on that have aided in sustaining your business in times of slow economic growth?
 - 7.3. Given that the road freight industry is highly competitive, what strategies do you use to retain your customers during periods of slow economic growth?
 - 7.4. Which key business processes do you manage strictly to ensure that the business remains profitable during periods of slow economic growth?
 - 7.5. Please share any additional practices and principles that, based upon your experience, have contributed to the success of your business during the period of slow economic growth that I may not have covered in the earlier questions.
8. I will request the participant for permission to review relevant company documents that will provide additional information in support of the interview;
 9. I will thank the participant for agreeing to participate in the research interview;
 10. I will advise the participant that a copy of the summarized transcript will be emailed to them so that they may validate the accuracy of the content and confirm that it is a true reflection of our interview;
 11. I will request the participant to provide me with feedback within 7 days of receiving the summarized transcript; and
 12. I will turn off the audio recorder and complete the interview.