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Strategies for Small-and Medium-Sized Business Growth and Survival

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Abstract

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by

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MS, New York University, 2008

BS, Federal University of Technology, 1992

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Abstract

In the United States, approximately 50% of small businesses fail within the first five years (Small Business Administration, 2018b). Small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) owners and managers would benefit from strategies to identify and mitigate constraints to sustain their business beyond the first five years of business operation. Grounded in the system theory framework, the purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies leaders of small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) in Austin, Texas, used to grow and sustain their business's operations beyond five years. The participants were five small and medium sized businesses owners in Austin, Texas. Data were collected via semistructured, virtual interviews, company documents, and member checking. Data were analyzed using Yin's five-step analysis process, resulting in three emergent themes: strong relationships lead to business sustainability, high quality of services is the best marketing tool, and challenges to business sustainability. The key recommendation is to implement or improve growth and survival strategies by improving service quality and ensuring good customer and staff relationships. The implications for positive social change include the potential for owners of small and medium sized businesses to enhance job creation, economic growth, and the promotion of sustainable communities.

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Dedication

I would first thank God the almighty for the strength and guidance throughout this journey of the doctoral program. I offer my most profound appreciation to my exceptional Chair Dr. Ify Diala-Nettles with whom I started the journey for her mentorship, encouragement, and guidance. I would also like to thank my insightful committee members, Dr. Alex Lazo and Dr.Deborah Nattress, for their valued and constructive feedback and support. My colleagues and classmates, I learned much from you all; thank you for all the support over the years. Much appreciation to my wife, Dr.lolade Ogunmuyiwa, and my children Sarah, Zecharia, and Dade, for their unwavering support and wishes. And to the blessed memory of my late Dad and Mom, my late brother Joseph and sister Joyce, may their soul continue to Rest in Peace.

Acknowledgments

I dedicate this study to the Almighty God, my Creator, and my Lord Jesus Christ, my Savior who has given me the grace to finish this program. To my wife, Dr. lolade Ogunmuyiwa, I appreciate your patience, understanding, and support. I dedicate this work to my children, Sarah, Zechariah, Dade, and all my family and friends who encouraged me to keep pressing forward.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study

Small business entrepreneurs are the architects of wealth creation, economic growth, and development worldwide (Blankson et al., 2017; Chien et al., 2021). Small businesses in the United States generated 8.4 million new jobs between 2002 and 2017, thus accounting for 65.9% of the net new job creation. However, many small businesses fail, resulting in the loss of jobs (Small Business Administration, 2018a).

Background of the Problem

Rasiah and Thangiah (2017) noted that this class of firms has historically been vulnerable to competition despite SMEs' significant role. As noted by Byun et al. (2020), prior research indicated that many businesses fail due to a lack of awareness of market competition and inaccurate anticipation of changing environments, which threaten their competitiveness and long-term sustainability. Dele-Ijagbulu et al. (2021). opined that the business environment at which SMEs operate could limit the exploitable operation opportunities, consequently threatening the business's survival. Business owners who fail to implement the necessary resource are at a disadvantage compared to the competitors who own the resource (Aydiner et al., 2019; Devece et al., 2017). Cepec and Grajzl (2020) noted that the dynamics and failure of SMEs, the driving force of nations' economies, has been a topic of interest to scholars and policymakers in economics, business, and management.

Problem Statement

In the United States, approximately 50% of small businesses fail within the first 5 years (Small Business Administration, 2018b). In the second quarter of 2020, Small businesses in the United States lost 7.7 million jobs due to business failures (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). The general business problem was the high rate of SMEs failure. The specific business problem was that leaders of SMEs often lack strategies to sustain their business beyond the first 5 years.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the strategies that leaders of SMEs in Austin, Texas, have used to grow and sustain their business's operations beyond 5 years. The target population consisted of small business owners in Austin, Texas, who have successfully developed strategies to sustain their businesses for at least 5 years. The study's findings may contribute to positive social change for small business owners and aspiring entrepreneurs seeking to start businesses. The implication of positive social change is that the survival of SMEs can result in lowering local unemployment rates, improving the standard of living of employees, and providing for and contributing to the local government's revenue for social development. Yuliarmi et al. (2021) opined that SMEs are the primary contributor to the economy of nations and are the central absorber of labor in times of economic crises.

Nature of the Study

Research methods are the general techniques that researchers follow when conducting a study. The three major research methodologies are quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods (Kankam, 2020). Qualitative research is based on naturalistic inquiry principles. As noted by_Turale (2020), qualitative research is the practical or pragmatic method that researchers use to uncover the “who, what or where” of certain events or experiences. I used the qualitative research method to explore strategies for SME's business growth and survival through open dialog with the participants to gain a good knowledge of their experiences, business practices, and strategies.

Quantitative data, compared to qualitative data, can be quantified, and the relationship between the variables can be analyzed (Harjoto et al., 2019). A quantitative researcher uses numerical data and statistics to interpret and understand the research data or test a hypothesis to achieve the research goal (Henson et al., 2020; Morgan, 2018). I neither tested a hypothesis nor measured variables; hence, the quantitative approach is not suitable for this study. Researchers use mixed methods to incorporate techniques from the qualitative and quantitative research methodologies to investigate complex questions and collect more in-depth data (Yin, 2018). I neither tested a hypothesis nor measured the variables; hence, the quantitative approach was not suitable for this study. A researcher may consider one of several research designs, including phenomenological, ethnographic, and case study. I elected not to use the phenomenological design for this study because such a design limits the exploration to only the meanings of participants' lived experiences (Sylvan, 2018). I also did not select the ethnographic design for this study because researchers use ethnographic design to study human lives in organizations focusing on the social culture underlying the organizing processes (Côté-Boileau et al., 2020).

The case study approach is a qualitative approach in which the researcher explores a real-life, contemporary bounded system or multiple bounded systems over time by applying detailed, in-depth data collection from multiple sources of information and reports a case description and case themes (Alpi & Evans, 2019). Researchers adopt the case study design to investigate a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, and the researcher can collect data from multiple sources (Alpi & Evans, 2019; Schoch, 2020). I used the multiple case study design method because a researcher can use a multi-case study to explore a specific, real-world problem within a bounded setting. Researchers adopt the multi-case design method to understand the differences and the similarities between the cases. Johnson (2019) noted that researchers adopt multiple-case study in preference to a single-case study to have a more in-depth understanding of the cases as a unit through comparison of similarities and differences of the individual cases

Research Question

What strategies do SMEs owners use to grow their business operations beyond 5 years?

Interview Questions

1. What strategies did you use to sustain your business operations beyond the first 5 years of the business start-up?

2. How did you communicate your business strategies to your employees?
3. How does your organization assess the effectiveness of its strategies for growth and sustainability?
4. What are the challenges you faced to implement strategies to increase business sustainability?
5. What skills as an entrepreneur were needed to create and sustain your business successfully beyond 5 years?
6. Could you describe the types of systems used in your business to help, you succeed in the long term?
7. What other information concerning achieving the growth of your small business would you like to share?.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study was systems theory. von Bertalanffy (1950), a biologist developed systems theory, and Ashby (1958) later advanced the theory by creating a general theory of adaptive systems. General systems theory is a universal principle that can be applied to different disciplines (Rousseau, 2015). A system is a set of interrelated entities of which no subset is unrelated to any other subset (De Boer & Andersen, 2016). Researchers have applied the systems theory principle in various business strategy and decision-making studies (Araujo et al., 2016). The combined utilization of the case study method and systems theory enables using the specifics of the case to consider the influence of broader systems, offering in-depth exploration as well as a comparative analysis between cases in the context of the system (Anaf et al., 2007).

Small businesses are systems that may have developed from organizational hierarchies and the funding systems of business management. The owner of a small business can use systems theory to explore the technological strategies in the context of a case study approach.

When using systems theory, researchers consider organizations to be a natural system for integrating all aspects and interests of the system's components (Gabriel et al., 2016). The components of the organizational system include the stakeholders, the interdisciplinary and cross-linked perspectives, and economic issues like profit maximization. Gabriel et al. (2016) demonstrated that researchers use systems theory to obtain an overview of the behavioral characteristics, structural patterns, and structural changes of systems to explain a phenomenon in the real world. Johnson (2019) noted that systems theory is an organized, whole system that incorporates the concept of holism as Aristotle defined and commonly expressed as "the whole is more than the sum of its parts." The systems theory model can align closely with the factors for exploring the framework and understanding the strategies that small business owners in Austin, Texas, have used to grow and sustain their business operations beyond 5 years.

Operational Definitions

Some terms used in this study are defined as follows:

Business failure: A business fails when a company closes down, terminates operations, or files for bankruptcy due to its inability to make a profit or bring in enough revenue to cover its expenses. Business failure occurs when the business is unable to meet the minimum threshold for economic viability as specified by the entrepreneur, sometimes leading to discontinuance to prevent further losses (Amankwah-Amoah et al., 2022; Kücher et al., 2020)

.*Small business firm:* The United States Office of Advocacy defines a small business as an independent business having fewer than 500 employees (Small Business Administration, 2018c).

Entrepreneur: A person who assumes the risk associated with uncertainty (Hamdan, 2019).

Technology innovation: An iterative process started by the recognition of a new market or a new service opportunity that leads to development, production, and marketing tasks to catch commercial success (Ravari et al., 2016).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

Assumptions

Assumptions are the researchers' interpretations of theories, designs, relationships, results, and conclusions which invariably influence the research outcomes (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2019). Assumptions are researcher convictions without further verifying the information (Mir, 2018). The first assumption was that the selected participants for this study will answer all questions truthfully and accurately. The second assumption was that a qualitative multiple case study is the appropriate methodology for the study.

Limitations

As noted by Morgado et al. (2018), limitations are the elements encountered by researchers in a study that is beyond the researchers' control and may affect the trustworthiness of the study. The first limitation of this study was that the validity of interview data collected relied on the participant business owners' experience and opinion selected in Austin, Texas. The second limitation was the potential participants ’biases and abilities to recall events and experiences that occurred in the first 5 years of their business operations.

Delimitations

Delimitations are mainly concerned with the study’s theoretical background, objectives, research questions, variables in a study, and study sample (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2019). Delimitations are the limitations set by a researcher or a set of boundaries that limits the researcher’s work so that the aims and objectives for the study do not become impossible to achieve (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2019).

The first delimitation of this study was the geographic location, which involves small business ventures located in Austin, Texas. The second delimitation was the expectation that the time allotted by Walden University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for conducting the research is adequate for the study.

Significance of the Study

The findings, conclusions, and recommendations stemming from this study are of potential value to businesses in general. The Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) (2019) reported that in the second quarter of 2018, small businesses contributed 7.6 million new jobs to the labor force in the United States. Learning from successful business owners about different business strategies they have implemented may help other small business owners to succeed beyond 5 years.

This study's results can have implications for positive social change by sharing knowledge about managing business growth, survival strategies and providing additional knowledge to small business leaders regarding maximizing business performance and profitability. Hence helps the communities progress and improve their local economies through tax revenue contribution to the local government.

Contribution to Business Practice

The findings of this study provide valuable information to the small business owner about participants' experiences in achieving sustainability beyond the first 5 years of operation. Understanding and potentially adapting the findings from this study can help small business owners in the U.S and Austin, Texas, particularly to identify strategies that can increase their success rates beyond 5 years. Stakeholders, entrepreneurs, and educators can benefit from this study's findings by creating curricula to train small business leaders for the future. The experiences documented in this study can guide small business owners about various strategies that can help in operations and empower them to strengthen their business capabilities and survivability.

Implications for Social Change

The implication for positive social change from this study is the potential to improve the standard of living of the local residents and provide greater economic stability for the local government and the nations as a whole. Business failure leads to jobs lost, causing reduction in revenue to local, state, and national economies. Business owners and managers who can sustain their businesses contribute to the local communities by providing employment opportunities, employee benefits, new services, and products to the community. An increased rate of success for small business owners can stimulate the growth of their business and employees' economic well-being, local government, and the Austin, Texas area, and the U.S in general by increasing employment rates, improved employee benefits, providing new services, and products to the community.

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

The purpose of this proposed qualitative multiple case study was to explore the strategies that small business owners in Austin, Texas, have used to grow and sustain their business operations beyond 5 years. This study's overarching research question was What strategies do SME owners use to grow their business operations beyond 5 years?

The literature review includes constructive and critical analysis of the systems theory and alternative theories and the business problem. The resources used for the literature review include journal articles, dissertations, books, and reference sources from the Walden University electronic library.

Other resources included Google Scholar and government reports. Business Source Complete, ABI/INFORM Complete, Emerald Management, ProQuest Central, Sage Premier, and completed doctoral studies. I used Ulrich’s Periodicals Directory website for the verification of peer-reviewed journals. I identified five key concepts for the literature review: (a) definition of small business, (b) small business finance, (c) leadership, (d) IT strategy, (e) business strategy, and (f) innovation.

I used selected search terms related to the research question during the literature search. The keywords and phrases used for the literature search includes *IS strategies*, business owners' *IT skills*, *small businesses*, *systems theory*, *small business failure, small business financing, leadership, small business growth, and small business owners.* The literature search yielded 280 articles, consisting of research derived from peer-reviewed, scholarly periodicals and seminal works, including books and government reports. Of the resources (280) cited in the literature review, 96% are peer-reviewed articles, while 219 (78%) of the resources were published between 2018 and 2022, which are within 5 years from the expected date of approval by the Chief Academic Officer (CAO)

General Overview of Small Business

The scope of this qualitative multiple case study which includes SMEs in Austin, Texas, includes SME growth and survival strategies. A problem that emerged from the literature reviewed was that in the United States, only about 50% of small businesses survive for 5 years or longer from start-up (U.S. Small Business Administration, 2018b). In the study, I explored growth strategies to understand how successful business leaders make and implement decisions that allow their companies to grow for an extended period. Analyzing SMEs' growth strategy helped identify potential business elements such as finance, leadership, marketing, business location, and technology innovation that could align with an organization's current long-term capacity and culture. The literature review for this study is a discussion that includes the system theory as the conceptual framework to provide information for leaders of SMEs to use and implement business growth and expansion strategies.

Systems Theory

The biologist Karl Ludwig von Bertalanffy was one of the early founders of general system theory (von Bertalanffy, 1972). Bertalanffy noted that the system theory is an interdisciplinary system with various components intertwined and applicable to multiple disciplines such as cybernetics and other fields. von Bertalanffy (2008) recognized the vital role of components interactions in producing a well-structured complex system while not undermining the interdependence of the individual components.

In a systems theory approach, researchers consider a business organization a natural system used to integrate all aspects and interests of the system's components (Gabriel et al., 2016). Some business components include the stakeholders, the interdisciplinary and cross-linked perspectives, and economic issues like profit maximization. The system theory is a universal principle that can apply to different disciplines (Rousseau, 2015).

As noted by Liu et al. (2020), systems theory concepts have been used by several researchers to explore the notion of a business model. Baden-Fuller and Haefliger (2013) express a business model as a system that solves the problem of identifying a customer, providing for the customer needs, and ensuring customer satisfaction while monetizing the value of the end product. Velu (2017), in addition, describes the relationship of a business model and system theory concept by expressing a business model as a system adopting a system lens as a theoretical frame to articulate how business model evolution takes place.

Chen (2016) noted that the complexity of a system could not be understood by reducing the system parts to smaller units but by embracing the complexity of the individual units that emerge from all the interconnections of the units. I explored the systems theory model to provide the framework for understanding the strategies small business owners in Austin, Texas, use to grow and sustain their business operations beyond 5 years. Sexton and Stanton (2016) opined that systems theories are approaches that incorporate a systemic theory of human behavior and clinical change. Sexton and Stanton (2016) noted that system theory is the theory of human behavior and a form of psychotherapy that acts upon the behavior and mental symptoms of a human within a domain that human social systems operate. The systems theory approach enables and uses clients ’viewpoints on problems, resources, and preferred solutions (Sexton & Stanton, 2016). Business owners depend on systems of activities that include marketing and social networking to drive technology innovation and financing; understanding systems theory helps ground this study.

The systems theory model provides a contemporary framework for understanding a case study. Anaf et al. (2007) discussed in-depth the concept of systems theory and suggested that a case can be viewed as a bounded system, and as a result, can be a subject of the principles of systems theory. Atkinson and Checkland (1988) posited that a case study includes the interactions, interdependency, and result-orientated characteristics of a whole system. systems theory helps ground this study because business owners depend on systems components that include sales, advertising, marketing, networking, and technology. Researchers use a range of theoretical lenses to view a phenomenon. Some similar frameworks to systems theory that I considered for grounding my study included the chaos contingency theory of leadership and the theory of reasoned action.

Alternative Theories

Like systems theory, chaos theory is the foundation of any complex system's activities and behaviors and the initial conditions that served as the drive for its functions; hence, the sensitive reaction of a non-linear system to initial conditions and circumstances (Stewart, 1989). The TRA explains human behavior, which might motivate humans to pursue a particular task (Awadallah & Elgharbawy, 2020).

Chaos Theory

Psychogios and Garev (2012) noted that researchers had applied chaos theory when exploring and expanding current knowledge of the management behaviors that enhance business effectiveness. The concept of chaos theory is derived from a Greek word meaning open, the vacuum of space, cliffs, or making gaps (Öztürk & Kızılkaya, 2017). Öztürk and Kızılkaya (2017) stated that chaos theory describes the relationships in complex organizational structures as non-linear, that there is a mechanism which reveals unexpected and sudden results.

The chaos theory concept is applied in philosophy, sociology, education, and organization. Researchers have defined systems theory differently, as a metaphor in which small changes cause great changes. Adams and Stewart (2015) added that the universal order of life is ruled by a set of unchangeable observable laws, a correlation with chaos theory, which affirms that the universe is unstable, disorderly, diverse, and non-linear. Adams and Stewart (2015) further stated that while the theory is allied with concepts of disorder, it seeks to find order and predictability among indeterminate patterns.

Odrowaz-Coates (2020) also indicated that chaos theory mirrors the disruption and the discontinuation of orders of the interconnected components of a system. Traditional management theory calls for today's managers to strive for simplicity and order (Green & Twigg, 2014). Green and Twigg indicated that business owners or managers are experts in applying the traditional business plans and management functions. Organizational leaders are skilled at planning by predicting anticipated outcomes based on their forecasts and controlling the organization toward these desired outcomes.

Green and Twigg (2014) argued that technological advances and increased global competition have changed business operation rules for today's managers and business owners. Business manager's functions now include managing complex systems made up of individuals that are themselves complex adaptive systems (Green & Twigg, 2014). Desirable outcomes are non-linear because the systems incorporate positive and negative feedback mechanisms. The expectation of a complex and chaotic period is a standard business operation, and managers and owners must learn how to deal with them as normal business operations rather than abnormal business operations (Green & Twigg, 2014). Gleick (1988) defined chaos theory as a science of process rather than a state, of becoming rather than being (Gleick, 1988). Gleick further expanded the theory by demonstrating its relevance and its applications in social science research. chaos theory indicates that systems are in constant evolution over time and undergo ongoing and unpredictable fluctuation patterns (Gleick & Hilborn, 1988).

Small business owners within the market economy are initiators of economic development and play a key role in the growth and stability of the economy (Spremo & Mićić, 2016). Foghani et al. (2017) noted that SME owners are the primary source of technology innovation and the development of new products. Majukwa et al. (2020) suggested that SME owners can provide a strong foundation in developing new industries to promote wealth creation and productivity in the economy. Spremo and Mićić (2016) noted that the drive for private property, entrepreneurial spirit, flexibility and adaptability, and the potential to react to the challenges and turbulence in the environment, small businesses add a unique contribution to a nation's economic growth.

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Spremo and Mićić (2016) noted that due to the nature of private property, entrepreneurial spirit, flexibility and adaptability, and the potential to react to the challenges and turbulence in the environment, small businesses add a unique contribution to a nation's economic growth.

With the instability and chaos in a turbulent business environment, it is important to learn how small business owners can overcome a crisis. Management theorists define periods of uncertainty as uncontrollable, while chaos theory shows that our actions, though small, play prominent roles in shaping the reality in which we live (Said & Termizi, 2020). Said and Termizi noted that in our world's chaotic nature, there is a complex system in its randomness that has organized patterns such as weather and natural events, which may be constantly forecast but never wholly predetermined.

In 1963, Lorenz invented the term *chaos theory* and introduced the theory in a seminal work he published while studying the irregular nature of weather patterns (Lorenz, 2001). chaos theory primarily is associated with natural sciences (Öztürk & Kızılkaya, 2017). However, other researchers have shown that chaos theory is a functional approach to business and organizational management (Huu & Kock, 2011). Barsan et al. (2014) noted that the application of chaos theory in organizational culture allows management to observe how the organizations function as integrated systems. Barsan et al. also expressed that by identifying the organizational patterns that formulate organizational behavior, business owners could find solutions to the organization's problems. Said and Termizi (2020) describe chaos theory as a mathematical method that deals with complex systems sensitive to any slight change in behavior so that minor alterations can give rise to strikingly significant consequences. For small business owners to be successful, they must understand that the ecosystems, social systems, and economic systems in which they do their business are interwoven.

Although chaos theorists met with moderate success, the theory itself has notable weaknesses. Researchers use chaos theory when exploring and expanding the current knowledge base regarding management behaviors that enhance business effectiveness (Psychogios & Garev, 2012). I explored systems theory and focus on the strategies that small business owners have used to grow and sustain their business operations and not just on management behaviors. The business owner is dependent on systems of activities, and the model of systems theory helped ground this study.

Theory Reasoned Action (TRA)

Models such as theory of reasoned action (TRA) and theory of planned behavior (TPB) create hybrid models that can be used to explain small business owners 'business strategies. I considered TRA for grounding this study. Gullate (2006) noted that two psychologists, Ajzen and Fishbein (1975), jointly established TRA in response to trying to understand attitudes and predictors of social behavior. TRA assumes that behavioral intention affects human social behavior and is motivated by the individuals 'attitudes toward behavior and social norms (Veludo-de-Oliveira et al., 2017). Gulllate argued that the two principles that guide TRA are: (a) human beings are rational and make systematic use of information available to them, and (b) people consider the implications of their actions before they decide to engage or not to engage in certain behaviors. Small business owners must refer to TRA to increase employees 'motivation.

According to the theory of planned behavior (TPB), factors such as personal attitudes, social pressures, and a sense of control influence human behavior (Rahayu & Day, 2015). TRA is critical for small businesses because it indicates that humans are rational individuals who systematically organize information and make decisions that impact their behaviors. Rahayu and Day (2015) argued that the two factors that jointly affect the intention to make decisions are the attitude toward behavior and the subjective norm. Ajzen (1991) reviewed the TRA and opined that the TRA model would not compromise in a situation in which the individual is not under volitional control and found that TRA remains a critical concept for employee engagement. The predictive power of the TRA model is limited when applied to a situation in which actual behavior and intention are highly correlated (Rahayu & Day, 2015). To overcome the criticisms and limitations of TRA, Ajzen (1991) developed the TPB, which contains new constructs called perceived behavioral control (PBC).

Ajzen (1991) opined that humans' intention to perform certain behaviors could be influenced by three factors: attitude toward human behavior, subjective norm, and perceived behavioral control. According to Rahayu and Day (2015), both TRA and TPB assume a closeness between intention and behavior. The predictive power of the TPB model is weak if applied in a situation in which intention and behavior are in correlation. Veludo-de-Oliveira et al. (2017) added that researchers from various behavioral disciplines argued that TRA and TPB have different predictive powers. Veludo-de-Oliveira et al. (2017) critiqued the TPB model for not including several factors that can increase predictive power, such as personal norms and practical evaluation of a business owner or manager's behavior.

Attitude towards a behavior plays a crucial role in predicting human behavioral intention. Wong and Chow (2016) indicated that subjective norms refer to an individual's perception of the social pressure regarding business owners' behavior, who can be influenced by media or motivated by friends or relatives and are more likely to consent to the judgment of significant others. The behavioral performance of a manager or business owner could align with certain attributes or performances (Rahayu & Day, 2015). On the contrary, some researchers argued that the use of TRA does not provide a complete understanding of business failures. The results of the research and reflection support the selection of systems theory as the most appropriate framework for grounding this study.

Definition of a Small Business Owner

SMEs operate 99% of business in the EU; SME definition is a vital criterion for SME funding (Dvorský et al., 2020). The Environments in which SMEs work are constantly changing. The strategy to deal with these changes depends on the business owner's ability to adapt and accept the variability of the everyday changes. (Karpak & Topcu, 2010).

SMEs owners have earned recognition as economic growth drivers, accounted for most jobs in the United States, and are considered the backbones in many local communities(Merrick & Howard, 2020; Meyer & De Jongh, 2018; Mills, 2018). Das et al. (2020) echoed that economic growth requires small businesses' participation, which also acts as an essential tool for equitable development. Das et al. (2020) noted that 600 million jobs must be created by 2020, and the majority of the jobs are expected to be generated by small enterprises.

The Office of the U.S. SBA defined a small business for research purposes as an independent business having fewer than 500 employees (Small Business Administration, 2018c). By relying on the statutory language, Dilger (2018) noted that a small business is an established enterprise that is independently owned and operated in the U.S. for profit or makes a significant contribution to the economy. An SME can make use of American products or labor and is not nationally dominant in its field. To be classified as a small business in the U.S., the firm must adhere to the industry size standards established by the U.S. SBA (Small Business Administration, 2019a). The SBA defines small businesses according to the type of industries, either by the average number of employees over the past 12 months or the average annual receipts over the past three years (Small Business Administration, 2019b). SMEs are comprised of paid and unpaid employees. In 2015, there were 30.2 million small businesses; of those, 80% or 24.23 million had no employees, while 20% had paid employees (Small Business Administration, 2018d).

The Importance of Small Business

Bushe (2019) opined that there is a globally accepted view that SMEs are a much-needed remedy to promote economic development because of their contribution to job creation and improved standard of living. However, the author noted that research into the causes and impact of SME failure is still negligible in developing and underdeveloped countries.

SMEs total more than 95% of businesses worldwide, and they play a vital role in developing economic, environmental, and social sustainability (Mohammadian & Rezaie, 2020). Wong et al. (2020) note that SMEs ’contribution to GDP in developing countries totals about 52–57%, contributing 61% in employment generation. SME global contribution to the world GDP is about 40% and 50% in job creation (Wong et al., 2020). SMEs are the economic backbone of every country through improving inclusive and sustainable economic growth, providing employment for all, and enhancing sustainable industrialization as tools to achieve sustainable development (Mohammadian & Rezaie, 2020).

As noted by various researchers, the small and medium scale enterprises sub-sector of the economy play an essential role in growth and development in a nation’s economic growth and development (Abbasi et al., 2018; Gherghina et al., 2020; Jibir et al., 2018; Khyareh & Amini, 2021). SMEs play an essential role in achieving sustainable development goals, promoting and creating employment and decent jobs, promoting sustainable industrialization, fostering innovation, and reducing inequality (OECD, 17). Constantin (2019) opined that worldwide economic development is a priority because it assures a nation's prosperity. For this reason, the concept of economic development includes economic growth and improving the population’s living standards through modest incomes, economic opportunities, and safety.

Motta (2020) noted that Sustainable and successful SMEs with high productivity and efficiency could develop sustainability to create livable and sustainable living areas. Motta (2020) noted that SMEs' growth is vital to local economic development in low-and middle-income countries; since small businesses create employment, revenue, and more economic interactions among other small firms, increasing the communities' standard of living. The World Bank and other international agencies have come to aid small- and medium-sized enterprises in a coordinated effort to help improve the development process of the global economy and reduce poverty (Abisuga-Oyekunle et al., 2019). Abisuga-Oyekunle et al. also express that SME advocates often emphasize that SMEs tend to be more innovative and productive than large firms; however, their limited access to financial markets and other institutional failures hinder SMEs ʼdevelopment.

Small business and leadership

Leadership is an individual's interpersonal behavioral process that influences and motivates members toward a common objective (Nixon, 2020). Ghasabeh et al. (2015) noted that leadership is a vital element of organizational behavior and can define, influence, and motivate others to achieve a set of organizational goals. Manzoor et al. (2019) opined that the primary goal of an SME leader is to work toward social and economic benefits for society and influence organizational outcomes; Therefore, leaders should positively affect employees and become a motivating factor to strengthen the organization (Qadir & Yesiltas, 2020)

Qadir and Yesiltas (2020) argue that research in leadership has gained increasing attention in the entrepreneurship literature in the twenty-first century as entrepreneurs ʼ development is related to effective leadership. As Hodge and Larwin (2020) have noted in their study, organizations of all types must confront the need to improve leadership. Whether an entity is a for-profit business, educational system, or public agency, almost all of them experience leadership issues and desire the best outcomes for their organization and the people utilizing their services.

Over the past two to three decades, SMEs have faced leadership issues (Thompson et al., 2018). In their study, Krishnan and Scullion (2017) noted that SMEs business owners face numerous challenges that adversely impact their long-term survival. Lee et al.(2019) opined that business growth depends on the ability of the leader to generate unique novel ideas and select and implement the most favorable of those ideas. Some small business owners and managers lack professional leadership qualifications causing them to rely on their own business experience to guide employees to achieve the organizational goals and objectives (Bakos et al., 2020; Rae, 2017). For organizations to address competition and achieve business growth, they must invest in leadership and management development. Leaders and managers play significant roles in ensuring their organizations' high performance (Ordu, 2020). All organizations need an effective leader who can enhance employees ’motivation and organizational commitment (Qadir & Yesiltas, 2020). Also, Qadir and Yesiltas noted that prior studies illustrated that leaders could affect organizational performance and organizational commitment by inspiring and improving employees ’work-related effectiveness. Leader behaviors and leadership styles greatly influence employees ’work outcomes, both attitudinal and behavioral, such as job satisfaction, job performance, innovation, organizational commitment, organizational citizenship behavior (Li, 2019). Li (2019) noted that the earliest two leadership styles in organizational behavior were transformational leadership and transactional leadership.

Transactional leadership focuses on the leader-follower exchanges that allow leaders to accomplish organizational goals by directing follower behavior and emphasizing extrinsic rewards. In contrast, transformational leadership theory focuses on engaging and empowering followers by promoting identification with organizational goals and values through activating followers ’central concern for self-development, achievement, and actualization (Nixon, 2020; Zhao et al., 2021).

Small Business Financing Information

Small businesses' sufficient access to funds is a vital determinant to SMEs' development (Luo et al., 2018; Wieczorek-kosmala et al., 2020). However, Wieczorek-kosmala et al. (2020) noted that SMEs often face various problems while searching for new funds sources. According to Yasa et al. (2020), small businesses are at the heart of most economies; however, their combination of high risks and the nature of uncertain positive business returns discourages banks and other investors from providing the needed financial help for early success. In comparison to the owners of large and established companies, small business owners are at a disadvantage in accessing bank financing. Lu et al. (2020) noted that information opacity, incomplete financial statements, small asset size, and SMEs' high uncertainty are often difficult to quantify due to their short operational lives.

Lack of funding is one of the primary negative characteristics of SMEs. Warren and Szostek (2017) noted that some SMEs find it challenging to expand growth opportunities available in their markets due to inadequate funding. Small business owners must employ the proper financial management strategies to maintain their business survival; proper funding and adopting the right financial management strategies can aid in a small business's sustainability (Ismanto et al., 2020; Warren & Szostek, 2017).

Additionally, small firms face difficulties accessing traditional financing due to their informational opacity and risky nature (Cheng, 2014). Small business owners find it challenging to obtain financing to grow and sustain their businesses (Cheng, 2014). Financial institutions do not have adequate information to assess new and small business ventures' profitability and survivability or establish their financial creditability (Cheng, 2014). Refait-Alexandre and Serve (2018) noted that by reducing the information opacity, SMEs owners and managers could improve business lending opportunities, which is the primary source of working capital, specifically at local banks.

Cheng (2014) stated that some small firm owners lack management experience and are unlikely to have audited financial statements as evidence of their financial viability. Cheng (2014) noted that banks face relatively high-fixed costs of gathering information for small clients and small transactions to establish creditability. Financial institutions tend to make loan decisions and design loan terms to mitigate the potential risks associated with irregular information internal to small businesses.

SME owners face difficulties sourcing funds to finance their businesses. Access to financing is vital for the efficient allocation of capital and enterprise development. When compared with large enterprises, Wioletta (2014) indicated that SMEs face difficulties in procuring financial resources because of the unstable and inadequate judicial and legislative framework. Other factors affecting SMEs' financing include incomplete information and lack of information from capital providers and enterprises, lack of credit history, and insufficient guarantees for creditors (Nakku et al., 2020; Wioletta, 2014). However, Song et al. (2018) noted in their study that SMEs could minimize the lack of access to credit using supply chain lending. SMEs that adopt the supply chain financing strategy within a supply chain create a financial services provider. The system allows the financial services provider to act as a lending institution to suppliers within the chain.

Most small companies do not have the option to access the capital market, make an initial public offering, or borrow sufficient money from banks as afforded to large corporations (Herciu, 2017). Small business owners obtain alternate sources for financing products, ideas, or services that, in many instances, are risky, hazardous, or over-ambitious (Herciu, 2017). Han et al. (2017) opined that the option for relationship lending as cost of trade credit, with this option the financing of payables, is greater than the interest cost on the debt. Han et al. noted that with relationship lending, the loan officer has intimate knowledge of the small business owner and the firm, thereby providing better qualitative information to access lending opportunities.

Focusing on the small business lending system literature is important for understanding small firms ’access to bank credit. Most SME owners use bank loans to finance their businesses. Dai et al. (2017) stated that small firms tend to borrow significant amounts of money, regardless of their small asset bases, and cannot offer much collateral. The average ratio of small business firms' total liabilities to total assets was between 47% and 48% during the 1993–2003 period (Dai et al., 2017). Andrieu et al. (2018) noted that small and medium-sized enterprises depend on regular cash inflows to ensure their survival and growth. Andrieu et al. (2018) also indicated that bank financing and trade credit are two significant SME finance sources; however, banks are more likely to provide loans to large firms because large firms have more assets than SMEs. For this reason, SMEs are more dependent on alternative forms of financing such as trade credit. SMEs with profitable projects experience no restrictions on gaining access to external finance, while SMEs with poor projects suffer from some loan approval restrictions (Andrieu et al., 2018).

The World Bank and other international agencies have offered direct assistance to small and medium-sized enterprises in a coordinated effort to accelerate the global economy's development process and reduce poverty (Abisuga-Oyekunle et al., 2019). Abisuga-Oyekunle et al. (2019) also noted that SME advocates often emphasize that SMEs tend to be more innovative and productive than large firms; however, limited access to the financial market and other institutional failures hinder SMEs development.

Rekkas. (2021).noted that SMEs are known to create jobs and significantly contribute to creating national economic wealth. Motta (2020) added that SME growth remains an issue as labor productivity is low in emerging economies. As a result of information irregularities, access constraints to external finance hinder more significant SME participation in the economy, preventing expansion of their business operations. In the absence of collateral requirements, Motta noted that SMEs might rely on exporting activities to signal lenders ’project quality since this may indicate that firms have good projects in which to invest. Small business development is an essential factor for a nation's economy; hence the government must play a crucial role in its financing. Government subsidies, loans, the formation of state funds, the provision of tax rebates, and benefits are some of the support the states can render to SMEs owners (Dvulit & Zlotnik, 2018).

To reduce the financial burdens of SMEs businesses and promote their role as a nations economic growth engine, governments around the world have legislated a variety of public policies and generated programs to bring needed funds to the small business sector, such as subsidized loans, public credit lines, government-backed credit guarantees, priority lending regulations, specialized grants, fiscal credit, and tax incentives (Cecere et al., 2020; Li et al., 2019; Lin et al., 2021)

Small Business Growth Factors

Researchers in various fields of business strategy have identified factors that support SME success and survival. Lack of finances and obligations from the government, economic measures, and indices as determinants of SME's' survival (Badwan et al., 2017; Manzoor et al., 2021). Calme and Polge (2018) opined that the lack of managerial skills is one factor of SME survival. Ehigie and Umoren (2018) opined that SME owners and managers lack access to essential resources because of limited market presence and SME business dependent on a niche customer base.

SMEs play a critical role in every nation's economic growth, such as generating work opportunities, income and wealth creation, and poverty reduction (Manzoor et al., 2021). Rivza et al. (2019) opined that entrepreneurship is an important economic growth engine in today's global economy for the European Union.

Chomba and Nyang'au (2019) stated that SMEs ' survival and growth are linked to entrepreneurial competencies. As stated by Al Mamun and Fazal (2018), entrepreneurial competencies are combinations of capabilities and experiences possessed by a business owner that pave the way for success. It is the ability of the owners of the SMEs to properly utilize the available resources to improve business performance (Al Mamun & Fazal, 2018). Rusu et al.(2020) also emphasized the importance of leadership in the innovation process in SMEs to ensure their competitiveness globally.

Juwita and Arifin (2017) noted that a business owner's primary objective in starting a business is to make a profit and gain a competitive advantage over other competitors in the marketplace. The competitive advantage remains the bedrock of the business strategy to build long-term relevance (Juwita, & Arifin, 2017). SMEs face many challenges that prevent efficient contribution to socio-economic development (Rachidi & El Mohajir, 2021). Rachidi and El Mohajir (2021) indicated that the consequences of SME's current difficult situation are visible in many economic and social aspects, such as market stagnation with an average life span of 10 years and the disappearance of a large number each year. As the authors have indicated, such factors raise the urgency to analyze their environment, identify their obstacles, design a solution, and identify the best way to implement it. Suleman et al. (2018) noted that factors such as product diversification, innovative capabilities of the entrepreneur, trade opportunities, and market information availability limit SME owners in terms of internationalization and growth.

Rehm and Goel (2017) specify in their studies that researchers have demonstrated that engaging SMEs in innovation networks or as part of broader business ecosystems can bring about substantial benefits. To gain access to complementary resources and develop new and valuable capabilities, SMEs must ally (Rehm & Goel, 2017). Firms must form partnerships within a business ecosystem to gain comparative advantages from their symbiotic relationships (Rehm & Goel, 2017). SME owners should network within the business ecosystem to grow and sustain their businesses.

Salah et al. (2019) opined that the world is experiencing changes in knowledge and scientific development characterized by tremendous rapid progress in all fields, especially information and communication technology (ICT). ICT assists small business owners with strategic advantages such as customer relationship management (CRM) systems, which could influence goals to improve their competitive edge (Salah et al., 2019). Basly and Saunier (2019) noted that SME owners could exploit new technologies to differentiate their businesses from other businesses with similar organizational objectives.

Industries and businesses in the modern economy rapidly evolve and change because of the diffusion of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) within organizations (Cenamor et al., 2019; Giotopoulos et al., 2017). New technologies empower and facilitate a broad range of business activities concerning information storage, processing, distribution, transmission, and reproduction (Giotopoulos et al., 2017). Kuway and Kosala (2017) noted that most researchers believe that most small business owners do not understand the importance of ICT, and the majority of the small businesses have used technology only for administration purposes. Kuway and Kosala posited the importance of technology as a universally accepted, essential tool in improving a country’s economic competitiveness. Additionally, Kuway and Kosala indicated that SME owners could use technology to improve their firm's competitiveness and gain opportunities to compete with larger companies.

Some SME owners generally do not have strategic or financial plans, human resources, general management policy plans, a proper accounting system, or an effective risk management system (Umadia & Kasztelnik, 2020). As Singh et al. (2019) have opined, ICT usage can aid business efficiency by optimizing resources, decreasing waste, decreasing power consumption, and providing a way to attain sustainable growth opportunities from managerial viewpoints. Das et al. (2020) opined that factors such as technology environment, digitalization, and the improvement coupled with the increase in adoption of technology aid in the competitiveness and sustainability of a small of SMEs. Gilboa et al. (2019) express the notion of customer experience as crucial in business performance, given its role as an antecedent of positive customer outcomes. The authors also noted that customer experience in large enterprises has focused on managing the multiple touch points of interaction between the company's employees, customers, and machines.

Marolt et al. (2020) argue that social media (SM) has refined how enterprises manage customer relations. The authors noted that before the rise of SM, customers were mainly passive receivers of messages. Since the rise of SM, the flow of information from businesses and customers has become multidirectional as customers create, seek, and share data using different channels and devices (Marolt et al., 2020).

Small Business Information System Strategy

Technology is a vital supporting tool for enterprises and plays a strategic role in enhancing business competitiveness (Steyn, 2018). According to Qosasi et al. (2019), Information technology(IT) capability is one way for enterprises to increase their competitive advantage. IT capability involves a firm's ability to strategically apply information and communication technology functions or applications to improve their business operations. (Parida & Örtqvist, 2015). Incorporating IT functions such as email, the web, and other similar tools that give a competitive advantage will aid enterprise business operations (Parida & Örtqvist, 2015). An organization can attain a competitive advantage by providing low-cost services, faster services, or a better target market than its competitors (Rokanta, 2017).

The growing cost of IT from 1990-2020 and the ability to use technologies to change industry structures and create new ways of doing business has stirred new interest in professionals and researchers (Devece et al., 2017). Issues of IT management or the possibility of technologies as a source of sustainable competitive advantage is an ongoing debate among organizations that risk their capital and efforts beyond the infrastructure and applications common with their competitors (Devece et al., 2017). A large number of SMEs are at a crossroads on how to handle IS strategy (Wynn, 2008). SMEs 'owners often face the decision to decide whether to increase or continue to limit investment in additional systems and infrastructures as their business expands to support medium and long-term growth and profitability aspirations of the organization (Wynn, 2008). Information system management generally is not a priority of SMEs operations, and the introduction of IS into SMEs tends to be insignificant and falls short of a sustaining technology framework (Wynn, 2008).

Devece et al. (2017) indicated that some authors use two basic terms to define the difference between strategy and IS strategy. IS strategy focuses on business systems or applications, and its main objective is to align with the business's needs. IT strategies focus on technology policies such as architecture, technical standards, safety standards, and technological risk attitude. With the help of information technology, small business enterprises have access to information that leads to organizational effectiveness (Adnans & Tarigan, 2020). Adnans and Tarigan (2020) also indicated that technology is no longer considered a technical service but a critical resource to enhance SMEs 'competitiveness in any business environment.

In their study of the competitive advantage of 107 small business firms in Finland, Tornikoski et al. (2017) noted that firms 'technological uniqueness, coupled with managerial tolerance of uncertainty, led to a competitive advantage for the selected firms. Tornikoski et al. (2017) demonstrated the need for combining technological competencies and managerial capabilities in smaller businesses to succeed. Chen et al. (2010) have argued that, regardless of the importance of IS strategy in practice and across many well-developed research lines, it is still a term that is readily used but not fully understood within the three literature streams.

SME owners should seek IT innovations to grow and sustain their businesses. Chen et al. (2010) posited three main conceptualizations of IS strategy. The first concept involves using IS to support business strategy, suggesting that an IS strategy must be tied to a previously established business strategy. The second concept focuses on IS as a business whose primary function is to provide services to the organization's employees. The third concept describes IS strategy as a shared vision of IS's role in the organization. Firms that continually seek IT innovations stand a chance at developing and exploiting unique IS systems that generate competitive advantages in cost or differentiation (Devece et al., 2017).

IT Knowledge and Skills of Business Owners

The importance of ICTs and the Internet is evident in the business context, and its application grows along with technological advances (Perez-Soltero et al., 2017; Soares et al., 2019). SMEs are increasingly adopting technologies for their business processes. Perez-Soltero et al. (2017) noted that most SMEs do not have favorable results in ICT implementation due to a lack of knowledge about the potential and application of these technologies (Perez-Soltero et al., 2017). The lack of most small business owners' technical skills has caused the limitation of technology adoption, technology equipment acquisition, and computer systems.

Zenebe et al. (2018) argued that prior research had shown the existence of a relationship between IT and entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurial capacity factors, such as personality characteristics, learning, experience, social and cultural factors, and entrepreneurial enhancing factors such as IT and education, influence youths' attitudes toward free enterprise programs. The skill and knowledge of managing enterprise performance differ significantly from the skill and knowledge required for IT solutions development and automating workflows (Millers & Sceulovs, 2017). The proper approach selection requires sufficient knowledge and experience from a manager in charge (Millers & Sceulovs, 2017). Small businesses often face the challenge of limited resources and competencies, which could lead to confusing and disappointing results from implementing a SMEs' process management approach.

SMEs Market Strategy

Despite research contending that marketing is a pivotal factor in small business success, many small business owners continue to underutilize low-cost marketing options available to them (Lupo & Stroman, 2020; Sinha & Fukey, 2021). Lupo and Stroman (2020) opined that social media marketing is a vital option and a valuable tool to maintain competitiveness in the larger marketplace. Oktini (2019) noted that market strategy is a strategy in which the company focuses on consumers who have the most significant opportunity to be served and satisfied.

Aini and Hapsari's (2019) study shows that traditional marketing communications' effectiveness has decreased, and digital marketing is experiencing significant growth. Digital marketing can simplify marketing, service, and goods; obstacles such as distance, time, and language cannot limit its effectiveness (Aini & Hapsari, 2019). Despite the known benefits of digital promotions, Ritz et al. (2019) noted that SME owners know little about digital marketing because most digital marketing literature focuses on large businesses and organizations. Additionally, the authors stated that large enterprises have websites that also are mobile-enabled and can hire experts to manage search engine optimization projects and social media marketing firms to implement and run social media campaigns. In contrast, small business owners "develop, change, and evolve their marketing activity intelligence through social media use.

SMEs owners can expand their business by utilizing Digital Marketing through export activities. The results from Xie's (2018) study showed that adopting a marketing concept and practices could help SMEs achieve a long-term competitive advantage. Failure to implement social media marketing by SME's owners or Managers minimize the advantage of attracting new customers thus, impacting sales (Xie, 2018).

Kubberod et al. (2019), in support of the vital role of marketing strategy, opined that small business owner-managers face many challenges. Among these challenges, marketing is one of the most important for survival, renewal, and growth. Lupo and Stroman (2020) indicated in their study that despite research contending that marketing is a pivotal factor in small business success, some small business owners lack the knowledge to utilize the benefit of low-cost marketing options available to them. One of these marketing options noted by Lupo and Strongman is social media marketing which is considered a tool to maintain competitiveness in the larger marketplace.

Business Environment and Location

A business location is essential in determining its success(D'Silva et al., 2018; Ur Rehman et al., 2019). Shaikh et al. (2020) opined that a business location is critical for the success or failure of the business. Shaikh et al., in addition, noted that business owners need to consider multiple factors in deciding on a business site. The author noted that business site selection is a multi-criteria decision. Bridgen (2017) suggested that successful SME owners place their business in a location that will attract targeted customers and have the best chance of expanding their client base. Scarlat (2020), in his contribution to the business location, opined that it is essential that SME owners determine their business location during the planning stage of the business start-up.

Marasinghe et al. (2018) expressed that business location is a critical factor, and the decision to invest in business locations is a long-term investment. Marasinghe et al. added that business stakeholders are responsible for strategically deciding the business location; placing a business in the wrong location might negatively affect the business growth, resulting in financial losses, hostile customers' views on the company brand, and loss of market share in terms of customers that patronize the organization products. Early research on spatial economic strategies reveals that the choice of a business location is determined by the cost of moving the input and output of the product or minimizing the cost of the products (Capello, 2020). Capello, in addition, indicated that the product of the cost of goods or services includes wages and capital, which are factors that determine profit maximization.

Snieska et al. (2019) noted that when choosing new locations for business development, it is essential for business owners to consider each location's environment and circumstances; this strategy helps attract, sustain, and encourage new business investments. The decision to select a business site by business owners or managers is a complex strategic decision that may affect a company’s future in the long run (Dixit et al., 2019). Business location is a business strategy to source for current and potential resources and is vital in determining business vulnerability (Herbane, 2019).

Furthermore, market size, initial investment, the product's profit potential, competition in the area, and other factors play a role in a business location setup.

According to Kiyabo and Isaga (2020), various indicators could be used to measure SME growth. Factors such as growth in sales, employee training, new markets product, business owners or manager's attitude and behavior can positively or negatively affect the Strategies for SME's business growth and survival (Calme & Polge, 2018; Lupo & Stroman, 2020; Umadia & Kasztelnik, 2020). Mohammadian and Rezaie (2020) noted in their study that prior research shows that SMEs are a significant contributor to the job market and reflect 95% of businesses worldwide. Research also reveals that SMEs face challenges stemming from a lack of management experience, funding, marketing innovation, technology innovation, and good leadership strategies. This research proposal shed light on the successful management strategies, organizational assessment, and employee management strategies employed to build the success of the SME.

Summary of Literature review

This literature review was focused on the lack of business strategies by SME leaders to sustain their business beyond 5 years, with an emphasis on viewing their business within the lens of systems theory to see how the systems they built were being managed to sustain their business beyond their initial 5 years. In their study, Nel and Abdullah (2017) noted that SME leaders who have adopted and implemented an effective business plan could maintain a competitive advantage against their competitors and sustain their business beyond 5 years. Using the conceptual foundation of the system theory, the review of existing literature shows that SME's long-term strategic growth and success, as noted by Au et al. (2016), depend on the effectiveness of relationships within the organization, communication between all business units, and the reactions between the clients and the business environment. Chaos theory provides an additional lens related to the randomness of strategies that emerged as SMEs worked to survive in their initial years. The theories of reasoned action and planned behavior complement chaos theory by offering a lens for reviewing the rational, planned actions that SMEs engaged in to keep their businesses running past their first 5 years.

Transition

In Section 1, I introduced the important role of small businesses in the national economic growth of countries worldwide and the U.S. in particular. In this section, I included information about the background of the study, the problem statement, the purpose statement, the nature of the study, and the research questions. Section 1 also included the conceptual framework, the definition of terms, the assumptions, the limitations of the study, and the literature review.

In Section 2, I have provided detailed information about the research method and design chosen for the study. This section continues with a definition of the population and the planned sampling methods, including all the necessary information related to data organization, the role of the researcher, and the instrument used in data analysis. I discussed the study's reliability and validity as related to this research. Then, in Section 3, I have presented the findings, the application to professional practice and implications for social change, recommendations for action and further study, my reflections, and a conclusion.

Section 2: The Project

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the strategies that leaders of SMEs in Austin, Texas, have used to grow and sustain their business's operations beyond 5 years. The target population was five small business owners in Austin, Texas, who have successfully developed strategies to sustain their businesses for at least 5 years. The study's findings may contribute to positive social change for small business owners and aspiring entrepreneurs seeking to start businesses. The implication of positive social change is that the survival of SMEs could result in lowering local unemployment rates, improving the standard of living of employees, and providing for and contributing to the local government's revenue for social development. Yuliarmi et al. (2021) opined that SMEs are the primary contributor to the economy of nations and are the central absorber of labor in times of economic crises.

Role of the Researcher

In qualitative studies, the researcher plays an important role in asking, gathering, and interpreting the research data (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019). I adopted the semi-structured interview technique. Adams and Lawrence (2019) suggested a semistructured interview protocol to encourage researchers to follow a pattern that allows them to engage the research participants in a deeper conversation, creating richer and thinker data collection techniques. I was the primary instrument for data collection in the research process. I conducted a semi-structured, virtual interview with each of the study participants. I reviewed documents collected from SMEs leaders in Austin, Texas, who have sustained their business beyond the first 5 years of business start-up.

My interest in conducting this research came from my formal education in technology management and my 20 years of experience as an information technology analyst who managed various technology innovations and project deployments for major firms. I am not a small business owner; however, I have consulted for a small business in Austin, Texas. I have family members and friends who are small business owners and entrepreneurs in Austin seeking ways to sustain their businesses for an extended period. So, this topic was of particular interest to me. My prior experience in business management was limited to being an observer or a customer. I chose to research small businesses 'SMEs business growth and survival because of the significant social and economic impact they can bring to the economies of the city of Austin, Texas, and the United States.

Rutberg and Bouikidis (2018) noted that researchers use qualitative research methods when there is a desire to explore a problem that is difficult to understand. Through the qualitative method, the researchers can explore phenomena with an in-depth, holistic approach to produce rich and telling narratives (Levitt et al., 2018; Rutberg & Bouikidis, 2018). It is the responsibility of the qualitative researcher during the research to ensure the freedom of choice of the participants, protect the identity of the participants and report a transparent and honest report without deception (Arifin, 2018). My role in this study was to select the appropriate research methodology, collect, organize, analyze, and report the results scholarly, ethical, and unbiased.

According to Karagiozis (2018), the failure of researchers to identify their own biases could expose the researcher to discrimination such as the participant's color, age, gender, culture, disability, race, ethnicity, religion, and socio-economic status. Galdas (2017) noted that a qualitative researcher's understanding and recognition of research bias is crucial for determining a study's utility. Galdas also added that the research proposals and manuscripts often do not provide sufficient detail on the mechanisms employed by qualitative researchers to minimize bias; hence they are unlikely to be viewed favorably.

As the primary data collector for this study, I abided by the fundamental ethical principles outlined in the Belmont Report (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1979) to preserve all ethical standards. The basic principles of the Belmont Report indicate respect for persons, beneficence, and justice. I observed and supported these guidelines for ethical conduct by ensuring that my participants entered the research study freely and guaranteeing that they understood what I expected from them. Walden University's IRB approval number for this study is (10-01-21-0416102), and it expires on (September 30, 2022). In July 2015, I completed the National Institutes of Health (NIH) required training on Protecting Human Research Participants, and my NIH certification number is 1797334, as shown in Appendix B. I sought the permission of Walden University's IRB before collecting data or recruiting participants for this study.

Wadams and Park (2018) opined that mitigating bias and raising awareness of researcher biases in a qualitative study; researchers can use bracketing, semi-structured interviews, diverse peer review, thinking inductively, investigator responsiveness, and critical reflexivity. I mitigated bias by bracketing my presumptions, beliefs, and judgments and maintaining a reflective journal throughout the research process. The credibility of research results was the core of a high-quality qualitative study. Member checking is a phase in qualitative research in which the researcher compares his or her view of the interpretations and understanding of the data obtained with the participants. I used member checking to correctly interpret the meanings that the participants gave to events, contexts, and situations. As shown in Appendix C, I provided a consent form to each of the selected participants for this study. I also ensured that all participants understood: (a) they have the right to withdraw from the study at any time with no consequence, (b) participating in this study volunteer at will, and (c) I ensured participants 'confidentiality is secured. A copy of each participant's signed acknowledgment form will be kept and locked in a safe place and accessible only by me for 5 years. After that, I will properly dispose of all hard and soft copies of the participants 'consent forms.

I asked each participant interview questions in the same order listed in the interview protocol (Appendix A). I recorded the interviews, took interview notes to reduce bias, and dedicated sufficient time to collate data generated to ensure the validity of the information obtained. As Galdas (2017) proposed, I took responsibility for the reliability and validity of the study by implementing verification strategies such as probing and self-correcting during participant interviews. I developed a verbatim transcription of each interview and verified my interpretations of the interview by supplying a one-page summary of interpretations after each initial interview. The goal of this procedure is to gather any new information until I reach data saturation. I coded the interview data with the aid of qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) to facilitate the identification of themes. CAQDAS, as suggested by Castleberry and Nolen (2018), can assist the researcher in mitigating bias during the data analysis stage.

Valentine et al. (2017) noted that the concept of constructivism advocates that human beings *construct* understanding through a recursive process, comparing pre-existing beliefs with human experiences (p. 624). Valentine et al.added that social constructivism is an area in which scholars believe worldviews are constructed through interactions with others. I adopted the semi-structured interview protocol. Adams and Lawrence (2019) suggested a semistructured interview protocol to encourage researchers to follow a pattern that allows them to engage the research participants in a deeper conversation, creating richer and thinker data collection techniques. Bell et al.(2018) noted that researchers use semistructured interviews to engage research participants to focus and respond to the core research questions. I collected data by conducting face-to-face virtual interviews and reviewing documentation. Semi-structured interview questions were prepared in a semi-structured format and presented to the interviewees in the same order as on the form

According to Yeong et al. (2018), a qualitative researcher needs a reliable interview protocol to obtain good qualitative data. Yeong et al. added that a reliable protocol help facilitates the interview process by involving a diverse group of people through earlier delimitation of the issues to be explored. Qualitative researchers use interview protocol to mitigate bias, maintain consistency in collecting data and enhance the quality of data obtained (Aguinis & Solarino, 2019; Castillo-Montoya, 2016).

Participants

To narrow the focus of this research and provide easier access to potential participants, the data for this study was generated from a population of small business owners in Austin, Texas. Campbell et al. (2020) pointed out that the clarity of the purposive sample is to recruit participants who could inform the researchers' aims and objectives. The research question for this study was: What strategies do SME owners use to grow their business operations beyond 5 years? The participant's eligibility for this study included: (a) SME owners who had successfully implemented business strategies for SMEs growth and survival, (b) maintained their SME business for more than 5 years, (c) were at least 18 years or older, and (d) had their SME located in Austin, Texas.

Dawson et al. (2019) noted that ethics is an integral part of qualitative research, and it is critical when the research involved human subjects. However, Dawson et al. (2019) also indicated that some researchers perceive ethics in research as a procedure focused on a few well-established ethical issues that need attention to obtain ethical approval to commence research work. I used Texas public business directories and local business directories to find the telephone numbers of small business owners as defined by the U.S. SBA. I contacted the business owners or managers via email and telephone. I ensured they met the eligibility criteria and were willing to have a virtual meeting through Zoom or Microsoft team meeting interview. These first steps helped determine whether the participants were suitable for my study.

A winning strategy in establishing an interview protocol and building a successful relationship in qualitative research is to develop a good relationship with the research participants. According to Yin (2018), researchers can create a shared relationship with the appropriate professional distance where the participants feel relaxed and improve response quality. Barrett and Twycross (2018) opined that interviews help researchers with a straightforward approach to collect rich data regarding a particular phenomenon. Qualitative researchers must have warm interactions with research participants while collecting data for the study (Karagiozis, 2018). The interview with participants was conducted virtually through the internet or phone because of the Corvid 19 restriction.

Research Method and Design

Finn et al.(2018) opined that well-structured Qualitative data emphasize the importance of presenting research study information in a simple, readily understood language. Wynn and Borrie (2020) noted that some methodological choices might alter research outcomes; hence the validity of the study results may depend on the degree to which the research designs are structured and well justified. The research design for this study was a multi-case study. According to Castleberry and Nolen (2018), qualitative researchers can develop a complex, holistic picture of a phenomenon in a natural setting due to the descriptive nature of qualitative approaches. There are three classifications of research methods: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods (Rutberg & Bouikidis, 2018). Before selecting a qualitative, multiple case study design, I reviewed all three research methods. The following subsections showed my justification of the research methodology and design chosen for this research.

Research Method

Unlike quantitative research, qualitative research involves asking questions about human experiences and realities, interviewing individuals in their natural environments, and producing rich, descriptive data to help the researcher understand their experiences (Yesodharan et al., 2021). Researchers use qualitative research to understand a phenomenon better in a natural setting rather than experimental settings while emphasizing the participants' meanings, experiences, and views (Farghaly, 2018). Similar to Canbulat et al.(2020), I adopted a qualitative research methodology to guide the process of collecting, presenting, and analyzing data on the strategies small business owners in Austin, Texas, have used to implement the strategy for business survival and growth.

Researchers use qualitative methods to explore and understand the meaning individuals and groups assign to their lived experiences (Christenson & Gutierrez, 2016). Qualitative methods allow the researcher to collect data and analyze it in a non-numerical data form (Christenson & Gutierrez, 2016; Savela, 2018). The qualitative researcher may collect data through observations, interviews, and reviews of written materials (Christenson & Gutierrez, 2016). Qualitative researchers need to subdue their feeling, emotions, sentiment, and reaction by considering the impact of their social locations and biases on the research process (Thurairajah, 2019).

Bansal et al. (2018) indicated that when researchers adopt qualitative methods, they draw meaning on the observations from the research data to introduce facts that can be generalized beyond the specific contexts. According to Rutberg and Bouikidis (2018), qualitative studies address the social aspect of research. Rutberg and Bouikidis noted that researchers use open-ended questions and interview subjects in a semi-structured fashion; this methodology is used when the problem is not well understood and needs to be explored to make meaning. Qualitative research interviews often take place in the participant's natural setting or a quiet environment like a conference room (Rutberg & Bouikidis, 2018).

A quantitative researcher uses numerical data and statistics to interpret and understand the research data or test a hypothesis to achieve the research goal (Henson et al., 2020). According to Bloomfield and Fisher (2019), quantitative research can be defined as a methodical process qualitative researchers embrace to test and describe the relationship between variables and examine cause and effect associations between variables. Carminati (2018) noted that the aim of quantitative research, as the positivist tradition defines it, is to produce laws that can explain and govern every observed phenomenon and determine a universal knowledge that is true and is invariable in all places and at all times.

Leedy and Ormrod (2019) added that the quantitative method relies on generalizing from a sufficient sample. Furthermore, quantitative designs test conceptual models, understand the relationships between the variables, establish a particular treatment's effectiveness, or measure opinions (Christenson & Gutierrez, 2016). In this study, I was neither testing hypotheses nor measuring variables. Hence, the quantitative approach was not suitable for this study.

The third methodology was mixed methods. Mixed-methods researchers incorporate techniques from both the qualitative and quantitative methodologies to investigate complex questions and collect more in-depth data ((Şahin & Öztürk, 2019; Yin, 2018). A mixed-methods researcher takes advantage of the strengths of both methods in addressing complex social problems, which provides an opportunity for researchers with diverse backgrounds to work together and provides more insight into research problems (Christenson & Gutierrez, 2016). Since I was not testing hypotheses about variables' relationships or differences, the mixed methods approach was not appropriate for this study

Research Design

A researcher can consider one of the several research designs that apply to a qualitative study. I chose to use a case study design because case studies are the preferred strategy for qualitative researchers when *how or why* questions need to be answered when the investigator has little control over events and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context (see Alam, 2021; Dyar, 2021). There are two types of case studies in qualitative research: a single case study and a multi-case study. Yin (2018) expresses that researchers can use single or multiple-case designs for their study. Yin, in addition, noted that researchers use multiple case study in comparison to a single case study to develop more solid analytical conclusions than single case studies. I used the multi-case study methodology for this study because case study design provides tools for researchers to study complex phenomena within their contexts, using various data sources (Yin, 2018). Yin (2018) added that several cases are needed to understand the similarities and differences between the cases in a multi-case study. I interviewed more than one business owner; thus, applying the qualitative multi-case methodology was the best fit for the study.

Other alternative qualitative research designs include phenomenology and ethnography. Phenomenological researchers focus on the participant's perspective of a situation and the meaning of experience from the participant's points of view (Rutberg & Bouikidis, 2018). Researchers use phenomenology design to focus on the essence, structure, and meaning of experience or consciousness of each individual to understand the meaning of lived experiences of the research participants through interviews and observations (Bower, 2019). The phenomenological design was not appropriate for this study because the study was not about interpreting phenomenology, describing the meaning of the essence of the experience, or explaining the role of an individual's culture in the meaning-making process for the experience. Ethnographic researchers are more concerned with studying human lives in a natural context, a culture-focused concept (Côté-Boileau et al., 2020). Hence, an ethnographic study was less appropriate because the research goals were much broader than culture-specific research.

Smith and McGannon (2018) opined that Data saturation increases reliability in qualitative research by identifying the commonalities in data. Fusch et al.(2018) also opined that failure to reach data saturation harms the validity of the research results and that data saturation is attained when no additional new information is available. Member checking, follow-up interviews, and methodological triangulation were some of the strategies I used to reach data saturation for this study.

Population and Sampling

The population for this study included five small business owners located in Austin, Texas, who had successfully implemented a business strategy to sustain and grow their businesses for at least 5 years. From this group, I selected a purposive sample of five successful small business owners who met the eligibility criteria defined in the research design and aligned with the definition of small business as defined by the SBA. Qualitative researchers use purposeful sampling to choose participants who meet the research eligibility standards and have the required knowledge to answer the research questions during an interview(Campbell et al., 2020; Ellis, 2020; Sodeify & Tabrizi, 2020). Qualitative researchers adopt purposive sampling compared to random sampling to ensure that specific cases that could be included in the final sample are not missed (Campbell et al., 2020; Farrugia, 2019). Gill (2020) noted that the qualitative study sampling method includes convenience, extreme, snowball, theoretical, and purposeful.

I did not choose extreme sampling because, as pointed out by Farrugia, researchers choose extreme sampling in cases that involve the selection of extreme cases of the studied phenomenon, that are exceptions, or remarkable failures or successes, to extract as much information as possible relevant to the research question. Extreme sampling was not selected because I did not want a preliminary result but developed a deep understanding of the study phenomenon process. Wall Emerson (2021) opined that convenience sampling is a researcher's choice when using specific sampling strategies to choose participants because they fit their study criteria. Aktin (2019) opined that convenience sampling requires the researchers to choose participants because they are easily accessible. Knechel (2019) opined that convenience sampling, which allows the selection of readily available participants, is the most common and weakest method of enrolling a sample and introduces the most significant risk for sampling bias I did not choose this method because this could have introduced bias into the study.

Kirchherr and Charles (2018) noted that the snowball sampling method is proper when participants are not readily available; such a study needs the recommendation of participants who will be willing to participate in the study. An example is a study that involves the homeless, Illegal drug users, or illegal migrants. The snowball method will not be appropriate for this study because it involved asking only qualified participants, allowing for bias and the risk of breaking confidentiality.

Bazen et al. (2021) opined that qualitative studies usually use purposive sampling to recruit individuals with specific characteristics who are knowledgeable or have experience with the topic of interest. As noted by Sodeify and Tabrizi (2020), purposive sampling help maximize the participant's diversity to achieve rich and solid information from a specific group willing to share relevant information. Ames et al. (2019) have stated that in qualitative evidence synthesis, extensive data collection due to the study's size can undermine the researcher's ability for a compressive analysis of the data. Ames et al. (2019) noted that applying purposive sampling of primary studies can help manage large amounts of data.

Marshall et al. (2013) suggested three methods used in the justification of the sample size of interviews in qualitative research: (a) citing recommendations by qualitative methodologists, (b) acting on precedent by citing sample sizes used in studies with similar research problems and designs, and (c) internal justification that involves statistical demonstration of saturation within a dataset. As Guest et al. (2020) opined, data saturation is the conceptual benchmark for estimating and assessing qualitative sample sizes. Hennink and Kaiser (2022) also noted that sample sizes have been vague and might vary significantly depending on each study's characteristics. Young and Casey (2019) noted that it is a challenge for qualitative researchers to find a sample that will produce thorough and meaningful findings while minimizing the burden on participants and optimizing the management of scarce resources such as time and research dollars.

Gaskins (2019) strategies for small business survival for longer than 5 years use a sample size of three. Guy (2019) strategies to improve small business sustainability uses purposive sampling of four. The qualitative multicase study on marketing strategies of U.S. small businesses led by African immigrants conducted by Osei-Sarfo (2018) uses a sample size of five. Osei-Sarfo, Gaskins, and Guy's research resemble this study; hence, five participants were the appropriate sample size for this study.

In their research, Turner-Bowker et al.(2018) noted that a few studies offer guidelines for determining saturation, including adequacy tests for sample size. Yin (2018) suggested two to three cases as the minimum acceptable sample size in multi-case studies. For this research, I used seven open-ended questions to perform semi-structured interviews. I adopted a purposive sampling of five business owners in Austin, Texas, who met the eligibility criteria to achieve data saturation.

The criteria for selected participants was that they are the sole owner or manager of an independent small business venture in Austin, Texas. The participant has successfully implemented business strategies for at least 5 years. The participants have a workforce of 500 or fewer employees at any point in time, and in addition, have succeeded in sustaining the business operations for more than 5 years. The first five small business owners who consented to participate in this study helped the researcher validate the number of cases and reduce bias in selecting cases for this study. I scheduled a virtual interview time and date that was mutually convenient for each selected business leader.

Ethical Research

King, N. et al. (2018). opined that ethics is a vital part of a qualitative study. Researchers must observe strict ethical standards and procedures while building a trusted relationship with the research participants (King, N. et al., 2018). I reminded the participants before the start of the interviews that their participation was voluntary and that they can withdraw their participation at any time without penalty. The interview session did not begin until I received the signed informed consent form, in compliance with the standard ethics for research involving human subjects, as suggested by Mallia (2018).

Reid et al. (2018) highlighted the importance of the procedural requirement of ethics and gaining initial approvals for research studies as established by the principles preserved in the Declaration of Helsinki and the Nuremberg Code. Xu et al.(2020) stated that informed consent is the cornerstone of ethical research practice; it intends that participants agree to participate in the research voluntarily, with an understanding of what their participation demands. A researcher's ethical beliefs and practice are an essential feature of a qualitative study because ethical questions often arise during the research process (Roth & Von Unger, 2018). Borovecki et al.(2018) added that informed consent is an ongoing process in which a human subject who is to participate in research work agrees to give their consent after the participants have received proper information about the risks and benefits involved in the study.

Borovecki et al.(2018) stated that research participants are informed clearly in a simple language: (a) all research participants must take part in research willingly, (b) the potential benefits of the research for the participant and society in general for participating in the study, and (d) the potential harm, discomfort or, pain or procedures to the participant included in the research. Before contacting potential participants, I sought approval from Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) (Approval No. 10-01-21-0416102). Following the IRB requirement, it was my responsibility to ensure all participants understood that they have the right to withdraw from the interview at any time; the participants understood the purpose of the study and understood that their participation in the study was voluntary.

Before collecting data, I provided each participant with the consent form outlined in Appendix C. Included in the consent form were specifications that there is no compensation for participating in the study. I ensured that all participants understood the following: (a) the purpose of the study, (b) their right to withdraw willingly from the interview at any time, (c) they are volunteering willingly and not under any pressure to participate in the research, and (d) I will protect the confidentiality of all participants. I stored a copy of the signed consent form in a locked safe in my home office for a retention period of 5 years, and the safe is only accessible by me. I will discard all hard copies of the participants ’consent forms and data after 5 years.

Participants in this study were allowed to withdraw from participating at any time, as the consent form states, by contacting me via text message, email, or phone. If a participant withdrew during the research, data relating to the participant had to be destroyed and discarded. A new search had to be held to select a participant to replace the participant that left the study. All hard copies and electronic notes of interviews were stored in a secure safe. Additionally, all electronic data was encrypted, and I am the only one with access to these data on an external hard drive. I am the only person who knows the combination of the safe holding the paper documents and the decryption key to the encrypted data. Data collected for this study will be retained for 5 years, after which it will be destroyed. Arifin (2018) noted that protecting the research participants' privacy is a responsibility of the researcher and a core principle of research ethics. It is the responsibility of the qualitative. In a qualitative study, the research participants’ confidentiality is vital to achieving credibility (Noble & Smith, 2015). The published documents did not contain names or any other identifiable information about the participants or their business enterprises. I coded the participants’ written responses by labeling them as P1 or P2 (i.e., Participant #1 was P1 or Participant #2 was P2) as a replacement for the business or individual's name.

Each research inquiry comes with its own set of specific ethical requirements. Thus, a standard rubric cannot address all possible scenarios. Therefore, it will be helpful to review the IRB application before you complete this component to ensure you address any requirements not identified in the *DBA Doctoral Study Rubric and Research Handbook*. However, as a minimum, discuss the informed consent process. Include a copy of the informed consent form used in the study, not the actual filled-in form provided by the consenting party, in an appendix and list it in the Table of Contents. Discuss participant procedures for withdrawing from the study. Describe incentives to be used, if any. Clarify measures to be taken to assure the ethical protection of participants. Agreement documents are to be listed in the (a) text of the study, (b) appendices, and (c) Table of Contents. Include a statement that data will be maintained in a safe place for 5 years to protect rights of participants. Ensure you indicate that the final doctoral manuscript will include the Walden IRB approval number. Ensure the document does not include names or any other identifiable information of individuals or organizations.

Data Collection Instruments

The research sources of data collection for this study were collected through semi-structured, virtual interviews with five successful small business owners who had been operating in Austin, Texas, for at least 5 years. In addition to the interviews, I requested corroborating company documents, such as written business plans, feasibility reports, company website links, and as additional data collection instruments.

Instruments

Researchers must choose a data collection methodology that has been proven successful (Fusch et al., 2018). Qualitative data collection is no longer exclusively equated with face-to-face research, as the researcher now has another viable option in online platforms to conduct focus groups and individual interviews (Namey et al., 2019). Namey et al. (2019) noted that the online interview option is attractive in part because of the flexibility it provides to expand the range of people and places that can be included in a study sample without needing to travel.

Yin (2018) suggested that qualitative researchers often adopt multiple data collection methods in a case study, including direct observation, interviews, archival records, documents, participant observation, and physical artifacts. Semistructured interviews give the research participants the flexibility to express any concerns about themselves or the study (Blagden & Perrin, 2018). As the primary data collector of this study, I gathered data from the interviewees using virtual digital face-to-face, semi-structured interviews that followed interview protocol (see Appendix A) and reviewed the organizations 'documentation to ensure the credibility and the validity of the data collected during the interviews.

Interviews

As opined by DeJonckheere and Vaughn (2019), qualitative study researchers use semi-structured in-depth interviews as the primary apparatus to collect data. As Yin (2018) noted, researchers use semi-structured interviewing to obtain in-depth data using predefined, approved questions. According to Chu and Ke (2017), interviews are a data collection method that allows individual participants to be asked questions about a research problem. I used the interview protocol (see Appendix A) to solidify the interview's scope. The interview protocol aid the researchers in aligning the interview questions with the study’s research questions. (Castillo-Montoya, 2016; Tefera et al., 2019).

I also used journaling to capture notes and triangulate the collected data (Houghton et al., 2013). Researchers use triangulation to verify data gathered from interviews, artifacts, company documents, and case information derived from multiple sources within the study (Pryce et al., 2019; Yin, 2018). The seven interview questions for this study were open-ended face-to-face virtual digital, and phone interviews served as the foundation of data collection to gain insight into how a small business owner in Austin, Texas, has successfully grown their business beyond 5 years. The interviews occurred in a one-on-virtual Zoom setup, as agreed upon by the participants. Each confidential interview's planned duration was approximately 60 minutes to minimize the participant’s loss of productivity.

Documentation

The reviewed company documentation includes the company strategy chart, website, company application order input page for taking new orders, business plan profit, and loss statements. I collected data from company documents such as marketing advertisements, balance sheet statements, news articles, and a search on the company website. I also used probing questions during follow-up interviews to ensure the accuracy of all information collected in the first interview.

In my quest to enhance the reliability and validity of the data collection process of this study, I organized data to clarify statements and ensure the adequate measurement of concepts. Houghton et al. (2013) proposed five strategies to ensure the credibility of qualitative research: (a) prolonged engagement, (b) persistent observation, (c) triangulation, (d) peer debriefing, and (e) member checking. The use of triangulation in qualitative research can increase the study's validity, decrease researcher bias, and provide multiple perspectives of the phenomenon under study (Renz et al., 2018). Houghton et al. (2013) proposed an audit trail and reflexivity as a means to establish the dependability of qualitative research. The use of member checking and triangulation allowed the participants to review the analysis and interpretation of the data. I ensured that all requests for raw data comply with the NIH standards for extramural research and ethics (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2020).

Data Collection Technique

Similar to Vandal et al.'s (2018) method, the data collection technique for this study included semi-structured, face-to-face virtual digital interviews using the interview protocol in Appendix A and the company documentation review as the data collection tool. The company documentation reviewed before the interviews included profit and loss statements, the business's website, and the business's social media activities.

Interview

Researchers use qualitative research interviews to understand the world from the participant's point of view, unfold the meaning of peoples' experiences in their natural environment, and uncover their lived world prior to a scientific conclusion(DeJonckheere

& Vaughn, 2019). Interviews in qualitative research aid the researcher in striving to understand the interviewee's subjective perspective of a phenomenon rather than formulating a global understanding of large groups of people (McGrath et al., 2019). Researchers' interview methods in conducting qualitative research include face-to-face conversation, email, video conference, and telephone (Dadzie et al., 2018). There are three kinds of qualitative interviews: structured, unstructured, and semi-structured interviews. Chu and Ke (2017) noted that the researcher has a prepared list of questions for the interviewee in a structured interview. In a semi-structured interview, a researcher can ask questions from a prepared list in addition to a probe or follow-up questions (Chu & Ke, 2017). In informal interviews, the researcher does not use a prepared list of questions but formulates specific interview questions on-site (Chu & Ke, 2017). A semi-structured interview is the most frequently adopted in a qualitative case study because of its flexibility in the application of qualitative research (Chu & Ke, 2017). The aim of using the semi-structured interview is to explore the clarity and relevance of the items, understandability of the instructions, and visual appearance of the questionnaire (Kross & Giust, 2019).

The decision to use face-to-face semi-structured interviews comes with some advantages and disadvantages. The advantages of interviews include the following: (a) interviews have the potential to create deep, rich data because they explore topics in considerable detail; (b) the researcher can ask questions from a prepared list in addition to a probe or follow-up questions; (c) the strength of the semi-structured interview is not only because they are easy to undertake, having some structure, but they also allow for in-depth probing of the responses given; (d) interviews offer the opportunity to ask questions about a specific topic and explore them in detail until the answer is clear and complete; and (e) conducting face-to-face interviews may help participants feel comfortable sharing their experience regarding the topic in their environment (Barrett & Twycross, 2018; Chu & Ke, 2017).

Some of the disadvantages of interviews include the following: (a) interviews take longer and may be more expensive to conduct than surveys or questionnaires, (b) some companies may be unenthusiastic in participating in the study because they did not want to share the type of information requested, (c) interviews may lead to extensive data that can be difficult to manage and analyze, (d) interviews require interviewer skills, and (e) interview reliability might be suspect due to researcher bias (Marshall & Rossman, 2014; Yin, 2018). To attain data saturation, I collected data using in-depth, semi-structured, Virtual face-to-face interviews, the interview protocol (Appendix A), and probing questions as an integral and self-correcting strategy during the interview with the participants (Yin, 2018).

Documentation

In addition to using virtual face-to-face interviews as my data collection tool for this study, I also requested corroborating company documents, such as written business plans, feasibility reports, information from company websites, and a company account balance sheet as additional data collection instruments. Azungah (2018) ague that the interviewer and interviewee effects on research findings can be improved by reviewing supplementing company documentary data to support and augment the interview data.

The review of company documentation strengthens the study's validity (Azungah, 2018). The advantage of using company documents is that the information is specific to the company and not retrieved from a secondary source (Yin, 2018). Secondly, reviewing company documentation provides the researcher with more accurate data that strengthens the study's validity. Thirdly, company documentation has a rich archival history (Marshall & Rossman, 2014). Some of the disadvantages of documents as the data method in a qualitative study include the possibility that they may be outdated, incomplete, or unavailable (Yin, 2018). There is the possibility that the information may be outdated, irrelevant, incomplete, and biased (Yin, 2018).

In addition to validating the data collected, I scheduled 60 minutes for each face-to-face interview at an agreed-upon and convenient location. Before conducting the face-to-face interviews, I ensured that each participant had signed the consent form (Appendix C). I recorded the virtual face-to-face audio-only interviews with the participants' permission using the laptop audio software. I also transcribed the audio data, and a one-page summary of interpretations of the text was made available to participants to verify the accuracy and completeness of the recordings and the reliability of the data. As suggested by Iivari (2018), I used member checking to follow-up interviews to ensure the researcher's data or interpretations were correct or meaningful from the informants' viewpoint. As Madill and Sullivan (2018) suggested, Member checking provides an opportunity for the participants to review and verify the researcher's interpretation of their answers for accuracy or clarification.

Data Organization Technique

The data organization for this study included interview digital audio files, interview transcripts, interview notes, organization and industry documents, and market reports. All data collected was digitally processed and safely stored on a password-protected computer, with iCloud password-protected storage as a backup. The journals, including all notes written during the interviews, were stored in a locked safe, and I am the only one with access to the safe.

At the end of the recorded face-to-face interview with each participant, I used a code to protect the identity of each business owner by organizing the interview notes and results for each audio-recorded interview. Yin (2018) indicates that a case study researcher must host a large amount of data from multiple sources. I masked the identity of each participant by assigning each participant a specific code such as Participant #1 to indicate Austin business owner number one, Participant #2 to indicate business owner two, etc. This procedure was one of the strategies used to protect the identity of the participants in this research who were elected for the virtual face-to-face interview. All data and analytical results for this study will be shredded and discarded after 5 years.

Data Analysis

Haven and Van Grootel (2019) noted that using data generated during qualitative research to determine the interpretation or to generate hypotheses and new research questions is a strong asset of qualitative research. Cassell and Bishop (2019) noted that data analysis in qualitative studies is a set of processes that researchers undertake to understand the raw data's descriptive information and the deeper meaning. Renz et al.

(2018) suggested that data collection in the qualitative study is often conducted through interviews, note-taking, tape recording, and field notes that capture the phenomena under study.

One of the advantages of the case study is using multiple means of data collection such as participant observation, unstructured interviews, direct observation, and describing records are commonly used for collecting data (Basias & Pollalis, 2018; Sadeghi Moghadam et al., 2021). Yin (2018) added that using multiple sources of evidence enables researchers to seek consistency in the findings.

One approach used to mitigate bias and enhance data saturation in a qualitative case study is triangulation (Fusch et al., 2018; Saunders et al., 2018). Triangulation adds in-depth data analysis processes to ensure data consistency for analysis in this study (Fusch et al., 2018). I used methodological triangulation that includes interview transcripts and company documents. Renz et al. (2018) suggested that in a qualitative study, the researcher is required after the collection of data through interviews, note-taking, tape recording, and the use of field notes that capture the phenomena under study to start data analysis by reviewing notes and begin to code the data for categorization. There are five steps in completing a qualitative data analysis: compiling, disassembling, reassembling, interpreting, and concluding (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018; Yin, 2018).

Compiling

The compilation of data into a useable form was the first step in analyzing qualitative research data. Castleberry and Nolen (2018) noted that this data analysis stage includes transcribing. Researchers use a computer-assisted application such as NVivo to properly facilitate the compilation and identification of patterns (Shafiee et al., 2019; Sotiriadou et al., 2014). The researcher, in this step, records interviews, collates responses and organizes other textual data that is part of the data analysis. I did the transcription alone with the aid of a digital application to familiarize myself with the data.

Disassembling

The second step of data analysis was disassembling. This step involves dissecting the data compiled in the first steps and creating meaningful groupings from them. Castleberry and Nolen (2018) indicate that the process of disassembling data involves taking the data apart and creating meaningful groupings using coding. Coding is the process by which raw data is bit by bit processed into usable data through the identification of themes, concepts, or ideas that have some connection with each other (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018).

The process of disassembling data and creating meaningful groupings is done through coding (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). Coding involves identifying specific data features systematically across the entire data set, a process that occurs at multiple levels (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). Castleberry and Nolen (2018) noted that coding requires the researcher to ask specific data questions such as: What is happening in the text? Who are the actors, and what are their roles? When is it happening? Where is it happening? What are the explicit and implicit reasons why it is happening? How is it happening? I used the same strategy in this study and allowed themes and patterns to emerge from the data. I completed this step by identifying essential phrases, trends, and themes as I isolated emergent patterns, commonalities, and differences.

Reassembling

The third step of data analysis was reassembling. The codes, to which each concept in phase two is mapped, form into context with each other to create themes (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). A theme captures some vital information about the data concerning the research question and represents some level of patterned response within the data set (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). I grouped data segments with related codes to identify themes in this phase of data analysis. I will use computer-assisted qualitative analysis software (CAQDAS) such as NVivo to validate that the groupings of data are consistent with the raw data by establishing inter-coder reliability.

Interpretation

The fourth step of data analysis was the interpretation stage. The research, raw data forms, and codes form themes and thematic maps (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). I evaluated the data to accurately interpret the research discoveries to determine themes (Marshall & Rossman, 2014). Yin (2018) suggested that five qualities should be the goal of all qualitative interpretations: the interpretation should be complete, the interpretation should be fair to allow other researchers to reach the same conclusion, it should be accurate and representative of the raw data, the interpretation should be in the context of current literature (good studies will add value to the understanding of the topic), and data methods and subsequent interpretations should be credible. In the fourth step of data analysis, I made analytical conclusions from the data presented as codes and then themes.

Conclusions

The final step of data analysis involved the development of conclusions. Castleberry and Nolen (2018) noted that all research could start the data analysis process with a realistic research question, and analysis should always answer a question. As opined by Castleberry and Nolen (2018), conclusions are the response to the research questions or purpose of the study. Castleberry and Nolen (2018) additionally noted that the process of qualitative data analysis is defined in five steps: compiling, disassembling, reassembling, interpreting, and concluding.

Marshall and Rossman (2014) noted that a research study's conceptual framework, the research questions, and the literature review of the research phenomenon should align with the themes developed during data evaluation. This study's conceptual plan included using computer-assisted qualitative software (CAQDAS) NVivo for help with coding that leads to identifying themes. NVivo software is a query-based function used to manage any size data set.

This study's data analysis will focus on discovering new themes and correlating the findings with the literature review. The conceptual framework employed to explain the organizational activities of SME growth and survival strategies beyond 5 years after startup includes holistic perspectives of the systems theory (Ashby, 1958; Drack et al., 2007; von Bertalanffy, 1950). I applied the data triangulation structure to develop the patterns and themes, report the findings and discuss the relationship of the emergent themes to the systems theory model for the small business model and the literature.

To enhance the transferability of the findings, I used methodological triangulation of data. The process included phone interviews, virtual or in-person interviews, document reviews, and a review of business websites to review their mission statements, product catalogs, and the annual audit report to gain more insight into the business operations. Yin (2018) noted that qualitative researchers use the comparison method to match the similarities and variances in participants' responses. At the end of the data analysis, I compared the study results with recent literature findings. The findings included new literature that emerged as this study was being conducted regarding the implementation of systems theory and new research related to SMEs ' long-term success in terms of leadership and the interplay between varying elements of their business system.

Reliability and Validity

The concept of reliability in qualitative research is rooted in the idea of data adequacy, while validity is native to data suitability, a notion that aids researchers in providing an accurate account of the experiences of the research participants within and beyond the immediate setting (Liao & Hitchcock, 2018; Spiers et al., 2018). The qualitative research report can be a highly variable experience for the researcher; the methodologies that guide the findings in qualitative research and the rhetorical structures that guide writing are many (Stahl & King, 2020). As opined by Stahl and King, researchers adopt different styles in their research procedure; some make lists, while others make maps or use a narrative approach and tell a story. The researcher's responsibility includes ensuring that the research findings are sturdy rather than justifying the limitations and deficiencies written after the study is completed (Spiers et al., 2018). Qualitative researchers aim to design and incorporate methodological strategies, such as accounting for and acknowledging the potential for personal biases, great attention to detail record-keeping, and ensuring clarity in terms of the thought processes during data analysis and data triangulation, a process that helps produce a more comprehensive set of findings (Noble & Smith, 2015)

Dependability

Reliability in qualitative research is the accuracy of the research methods and how the methods were applied and implemented in a qualitative research study(Rose & Johnson, 2020). Spiers et al. (2018) opined that reliability in qualitative research could find its origins in data adequacy, a process researchers use to show consistent support for data analysis across participants. One way a researcher can demonstrate reliability is based on the researcher's consistency and care in the application of research practices, which reflects the visibility of research practices, analysis, and conclusion; and is also a reflection of an open account as a reminder of partiality and limits of the research findings (Cypress, 2017).

A strategy to demonstrate qualitative study reliability includes applying a case study protocol, recorded and accurately transcribed interview data, documented data analysis techniques, and disclosure of the procedures used in the case study (Marshall & Rossman, 2014). Dependability enhanced by member checking and transcription review strengthens a research study (Yin, 2018). In my quest to address the dependability of the data gathering process of this study, I will adopt strategies such as using the procedure outlined in the interview protocol (see Appendix A), methodical triangulation, member checking, and constant participation and feedback from participants throughout the research process.

To improve the dependability of this study, I performed member checking of the collected data. Qualitative researchers use interview protocol to maintain consistency in data collection and enhance the quality of the data obtained (Aguinis & Solarino, 2019; Castillo-Montoya, 2016). I enhanced the study's dependability by using methodological triangulation of the semi-structured interviews and collection of documents relevant to a strategy for business survival. I sought the participants 'consent to audio record the interviews to ensure research validity and reliability (Yin, 2018). I provided the participants with a summary of their answers after the interview to check for errors or discrepancies in the data collected.

I used qualitative analysis software (CAQDAS) such as NVivo to further strengthen the study's dependability. A computer-assisted application such as NVivo facilitates the identification of patterns and ensures transparency in the analytical process (Côté-Boileau et al., 2020). The use NVivo software in a research data analysis could assist in the efficiency of qualitative analysis and facilitate the management and analysis of complex data (Côté-Boileau et al., 2020)

Validity

Validity of qualitative research means the accuracy at which the research findings represent the phenomenon that the study is designed to investigate (Collingridge & Gantt, 2019; Rose & Johnson, 2020). Validity addresses the accuracy of the data collected to accurately reflect the phenomena under inquiry (Jordan, 2018). The validity of qualitative research focuses on the credibility, authenticity, and trustworthiness of the data collected (Yin, 2018). FitzPatrick (2019) opined that the validity of qualitative research depends on the goal and context of the study and refers to conclusions based on the research methods used to address validity threats related to the study. As opined by Cypress (2017), data generation, analytic procedures, and presentation are some of the standard validity techniques in qualitative research.

Credibility

Creating trustworthiness and credibility in qualitative research through multiple views is not about validation; instead, it is the creation of an alternative that encompasses the depth, complexities, and rigor sought for qualitative research (Singh et al., 2021; Stahl & King, 2020). Credibility in qualitative research relies on persistent engagement, persistent observation, triangulation, peer debriefing, negative case analysis, referential adequacy, and member checks (Morse, 2015). According to Nyirenda et al. (2020), credibility in a qualitative study is concerned with how consistent the research finding aligns with reality. The Researcher can enhance research credibility by adopting member checking, prolonged engagement, triangulation, saturation, building a good rapport with the participant, and member checking. To improve the credibility of this study, I used interview protocol, member checking, methodological triangulation, and follow-up interviews. Houghton et al. (2013) noted that member checking is a procedure used to establish credibility. To ensure and improve the credibility of this study, I used member checking by asking the participants to re-affirm the accuracy of the interview responses.

In qualitative research, credibility or internal validity is a method for researchers to validate how consistent are the research findings with reality or whether the research findings represent a credible interpretation of the original(Collingridge & Gantt, 2019; Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Kyngäs et al., 2019)

The credibility in qualitative research portrays quality in the study.; It strengthens rigor in the research process and the relevance of research (Daniel, 2019). I enhanced the credibility of this study by applying my experience as a researcher and verifying the findings of my research with each participant (Candela, 2019). Qualitative analysis software such as NVivo and the continuous review of my research notes improved credibility. I used the standard interview protocol (see Appendix A) to collect data and use the company documents to establish credibility.

One method of promoting credibility in qualitative research, as suggested by Stahl and King, is through the various processes of triangulation. To improve the study's trustworthiness, I included the methodological triangulation of member checking and was transparent about researcher bias. Triangulation refers to using multiple methods by qualitative researchers to capture more detailed data about the phenomenon from multiple sources of evidence. (Abdalla et al., 2018). Noble and Heale (2019) noted that triangulation is a method used by qualitative researchers to increase the credibility and validity of research findings. I ensured the participants in the study had the opportunity to review a summary of the transcribed version of the interviews and research findings before the final validation of the research findings. The verification of the accuracy of the research findings by the participants will improve the accuracy of the statement derived from the data analysis and research findings, thus improved the credibility of the data.

Transferability

A thick description is essential for transferring the original research findings to another (Morse, 2015). Transferability is the aspect of qualitative research that concerns the element of applicability (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). As Korstjens and Moser (2018) have noted, it is the responsibility of the researcher to provide a thick description of the participants and the research process to enable the reader to assess whether the research findings are transferable to their setting.

Gordon (2019) added that transferability represents the degree to which the researcher can transfer the research results, conclusions, or other accounts to other institutions, individuals, or settings other than those directly studied. It is the responsibility of the reader to decide whether the findings can be transferred to another context (Gordon, 2019; Houghton et al., 2013). I provided a detailed description of the setting, context, participants, actions, and events to enable the readers to make informed decisions about the transferability of this study. The evidence of transferability included the chains of notes of all decisions made during data collection, analysis, recording, observations, and documenting the study's assumptions.

Confirmability

Farghaly (2018) noted that confirmability of qualitative research is the accuracy of the study findings, which are based on the participants ’viewpoints. Haven and Van Grootel (2019) describe confirmability as the phase-in qualitative research when the researchers ensure that the analyses of the data were coherent and whether the interpretations based on that data were fair.

Researchers achieve confirmability when the next researcher can validate the study findings. To enhance confirmability in this study, I collected quality data without any personal bias. Houghton et al. (2013) noted that confirmability in a qualitative study is the accuracy of the data, lack of bias, and rigor of the overall research process. In addition to capturing accurate data, I used probing during the interview process by asking follow-up questions. Levashina et al. (2014) suggested probing by using follow-up questions intended to seek additional or more clarifying information from the participant to achieve validity.

As Houghton et al. (2013) have noted, researchers use reflective journaling to express confirmability by making notes of all decisions made during the research process. I documented all decisions made during the research process by using a reflective journal, notes, and email for outreach to the participants. I explained in detail the research process to allow other experts to make informed decisions on the findings of the study.

Saturation

Saturation is necessary to ensure a well-thought-out and valid study (Guest et al., 2020; Saunders et al., 2018; Sebele-Mpofu & Serpa, 2020; Sim et al., 2018). Guest et al. (2020) indicated that data saturation is the conceptual yardstick for estimating and assessing qualitative sample sizes. Furthermore, Guest et al. (2020) opined that it is the point when no additional data categories and patterns arise from the data. Failure to reach data saturation harms the validity of the research results (Fusch et al., 2018). I continued interviewing participants until no new information was uncovered to ensure data saturation. The sample size of five participants, the application of methodological triangulation, and member checking further guaranteed data saturation and improved the credibility of the study

Transition and Summary

The topics discussed in Section 2 comprised a restatement of the purpose statement, clarification of the role of the researcher, information about the participants, research methodology and design that was used for the study, population and sampling techniques, ethical research, data collection techniques, data organization and analysis, and reliability and validity. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with five small business owners in Austin, Texas, to explore the strategies these small business owners used to grow and sustain their business operations beyond 5 years. Section 3 started with the presentation of the study topic, which included the research question, application to professional and academic practice, implications for social change, recommendations for action and further study, reflections, and the study conclusion

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study is to explore the strategies that leaders of SMEs in Austin, Texas, have used to grow and sustain their business's operations beyond 5 years. The target population will consist of small business owners in Austin, Texas, who have successfully developed strategies to sustain their businesses for at least 5 years. I collected data through face-to-face virtual digital, phone interviews, and a review of company documents. The owners 'demographics differed in the business sector, business age, company size, number of employees, and customer size. I reached data saturation by collecting data until no new themes or patterns emerged by using interviews, member checking, and document review. I used methodological triangulation to validate the interview data with data collected from company documents. I used thematic analysis and Yin's (2018) five-step process to analyze the data. I evaluated the research findings through the lens of the System Theory framework. The three emergent themes were Strong relationships lead to business sustainability, (b) High quality of services is the best marketing tool, and (c) Challenges to business sustainability.

Presentation of the Findings

All over the world, businesses come into being daily; many people take their innovations to market. At the same time, thousands of businesses open every year, countless others shutter. One of the most important things when opening a business is planning for how it will be sustained over time. This study consisted of qualitative multicase interviews with five business owners in Austin, Texas. These interviews were conducted over a Virtual internet network. I employed NVivo 12, a data analysis application, to categorize the data and create nodes (themes).

The overarching research question for this qualitative multiple-case study was: What strategies do SMEs owners use to grow their business operations beyond 5 years? Using the system theory framework, I analyzed the data using Yin's five-step data analysis approach, which resulted in three themes. I represented the participants in the order of (P1= participant 1, P2 = participant 2, P3 = participant 3, P4 = participant 4, P5 = participant 5).The three themes were: (a) Strong relationships lead to business sustainability, (b) High quality of services is the best marketing tool, and (c) Challenges to business sustainability. These three themes represent strategies for growth and survival by SMEs owners. The implications for positive social change include the potential for owners of small and medium sized businesses to use the findings to contribute to job creation, economic growth, and the promotion of sustainable communities.

All interview transcripts were imported and analyzed using NVivo 12. Interviews were read thoroughly, and a preliminary codebook was developed. All interviews were single-coded once, and the codebook was modified with changes. All codes were then thoroughly re-read to ensure codebook fidelity. Major themes were summarized, and quotes were gathered for contextual support. NVivo 12 software also helped identify frequencies in words used in the interview transcripts. I scrutinized the context in which those phrases were used as part of the data analysis process. In Table 1, I have outlined the Frequency of Themes relatives to the Parent Codes. The bar chart in Figure 1 also outlined the Frequency of Themes relatives to the Parent Codes in a highly visual mode.

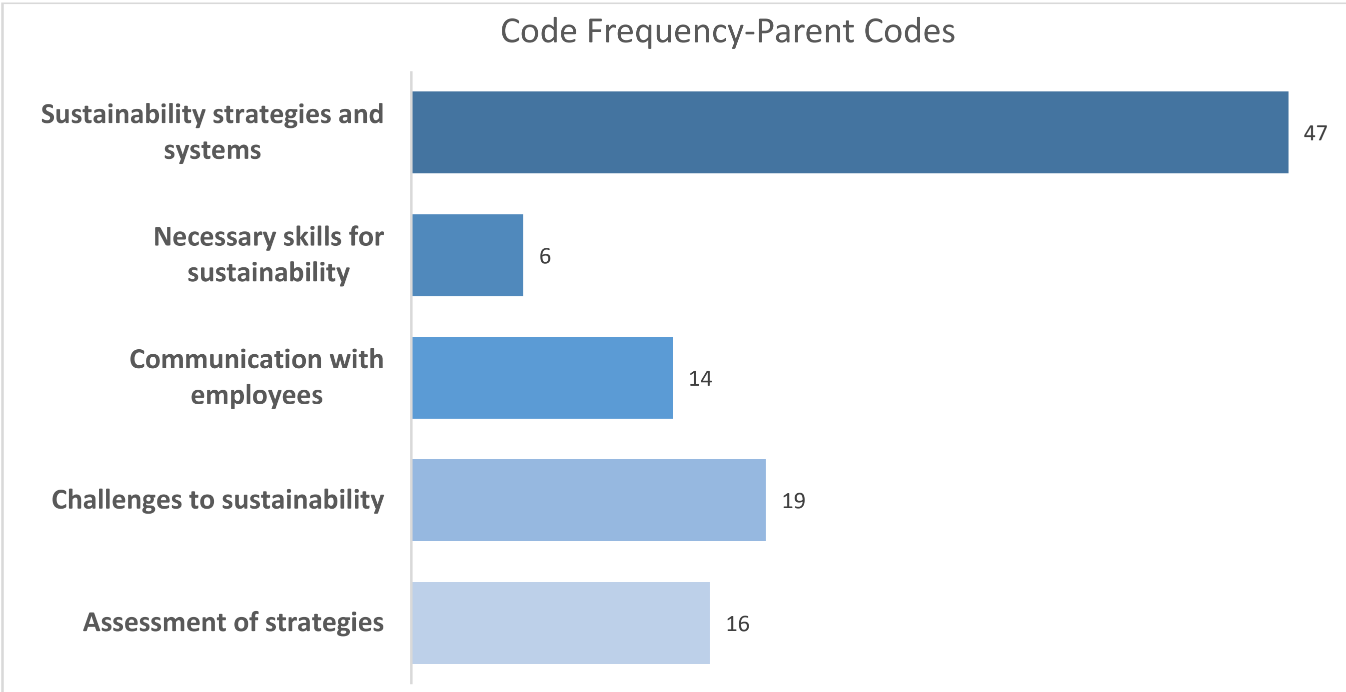
Table 1

Frequency of Themes relatives to the Parent Codes

Theme	Number of References
Assessment of strategies	16
Challenges to sustainability	19
Communication with employees	14
Necessary skills for sustainability	6
Sustainability strategies and systems	47
Total	102

Figure 1

Code Frequency-Parent Codes



Emergent Theme 1: Strong relationships lead to business sustainability

All five of the interviewed business leaders spoke about the importance of strong relationships. These relationships included their direct clients/patients, parents, staff, and other businesses in the area. The study participants made one of their main focuses their relationship with their clients, providing them with excellent customer service time and time again. P-1 and P-2 spoke about how the importance of these strong relationships and building trust with clients increased their referrals. P-5 agreed, saying that they could lock in generations of clients by building strong relationships. They ensured that their clients would return to using their services by nurturing these partnerships.

The business owners also stressed the importance of having an excellent relationship with their staff. They found that if they took the time to find the right people to work for them, as well as ensuring they were continually kept up to speed on business practices, they would both retain staff and a continual level of high quality, both of which they found to be necessary to their sustainability. P-1 spoke about how building trust with their staff enabled them to be team leaders, and P-2 confirmed the importance of hiring the right people to be on that team. P-3 and P-4 agreed, saying a particular success of their business was having the right people working for them and taking care of their employees.

The business owners also spoke about the importance of stepping in wherever they were needed. They wanted to understand all aspects of their business so that their staff viewed them as both a leader and a team player. P-1 and P-4 gave specific examples of when they would step in, such as taking over for a classroom teacher who called out sick. P-2 and P-5 spoke about both knowing as much as possible about their business but also finding others who knew more to oversee specific areas. P-1 explained how this relationship worked, saying, "Also, another strategy I have adopted is developing a relationship with my clients, a strategy that has tremendously helped grow the business. You, the provider, you are the adult the parent can trust with their loved ones. So you have to maintain that trust, establish the trust, maintain the trust between you and the clients.To elaborate more on our trust strategy, we are able to establish a good relationship with our students' guardians. In doing so, they spread a good word for us in the community about our quality of service, and that sort of serve as our marketing strategies." P-4 spoke about their collaboration with staff, saying, "The main thing that has created longevity for us is our collaboration with the employees. I know people who have the same software as we do, same technology, but still, fail, but we have successfully made sure we brought our employees into whatever we were doing. The second thing that we did was to get them involved in every aspect of what we are doing. And when we are making any changes, they know about it before it happens, when we are doing more work, you know, anything, anything at all that we're doing, we make sure there are involved.". In Table 2, I have outlined the Frequency of Themes relatives to sustainability strategies and systems. The bar chart in Figure 2 also outlined the Frequency of Themes relatives to sustainability strategies and systems in a highly visual mode.

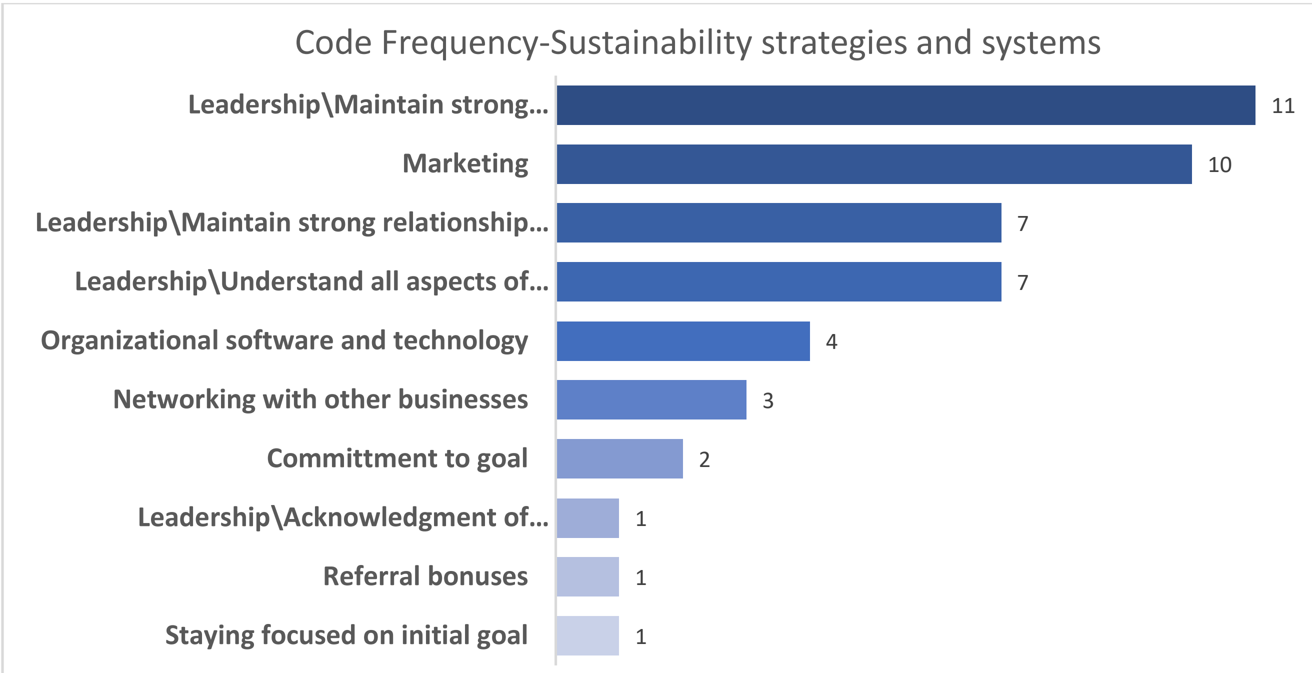
Table 2

Frequency of Themes relatives to Sustainability strategies and systems

Theme	Number of References
Leadership\Maintain strong relationship with clients & customer	11
Marketing	10
Leadership\Maintain strong relationships with clients & customers	7
Leadership\Understand all aspects of business	7
Organizational software and technology	3
Networking with other businesses	3
Commitment to goal	2
Leadership\Acknowledgment of differences	1
Referral bonuses	1
Staying focused on initial goal	1
Total	46

Figure 2

Code Frequency-Sustainability Strategies and systems



Emergent Theme 2: High quality of services is the best marketing tool

All of the participants spoke about the importance of the quality of service. This was often cited while discussing the importance of relationships, but several participants specified how high-quality care was the best way to market their business. P-1 referred to the quality of service five times during the interview as a strategy for growth. P-1 spoke about these referrals, saying, "I will say what we have done most of the time is what I call excellent Customer service. We have to gain the students' trust and their family members in this business. About 40% of our current enrollments are through a referral from currently enrolled students. So there is something that we must be doing right for them to be able to send us a referral. That is why I call it excellent customer service". P-5 echoed this sentiment and spoke about how cost-beneficial it was to use customers as marketers, saying, "We do not have much money for marketing. However, we ensure that anyone who walks through our doors is made a marketing machine because we give them excellent customer service.

Furthermore, because of the quality of service to our patients, we can market them to get us referrals. So word of mouth referral, which cost us nothing, was what we used to sustain our business and get through the hump and become sustainable. So customer service was the central key to what we did. And that brought in much stuff, brought in much business, and brought in a lot of free marketing because our clients were doing the marketing for us. We depend pretty much on the relation with our clients, and we made sure that anyone that walked through the door had an exceptional experience. And this is what sustained and grew our business. So customer service relationship with the clients is the number one thing that kept us going." P-2 and P-4 detailed this while discussing the importance of relationships, specifying how high-quality care was the best way to market their business. P-3 spoke about how the firm only partners with other businesses that will enhance the quality of their service, saying, "We also partner with other professional providers, which we describe as independent contractors. We look for reputable ones because we are supposed to provide certain aspects of services, which we do not provide directly, for example, therapy services. So we make sure that we can filter out nonperforming agencies and stick with those who will enhance the type of quality care we provide and add value to the organization in terms of taking care of the patients that we are privileged to serve." In Table 3, I have outlined the Frequency of Themes relatives to the assessment of strategies. The bar chart in Figure 3 also outlined the Frequency of Themes relatives to the assessment of strategies in a highly visual mode

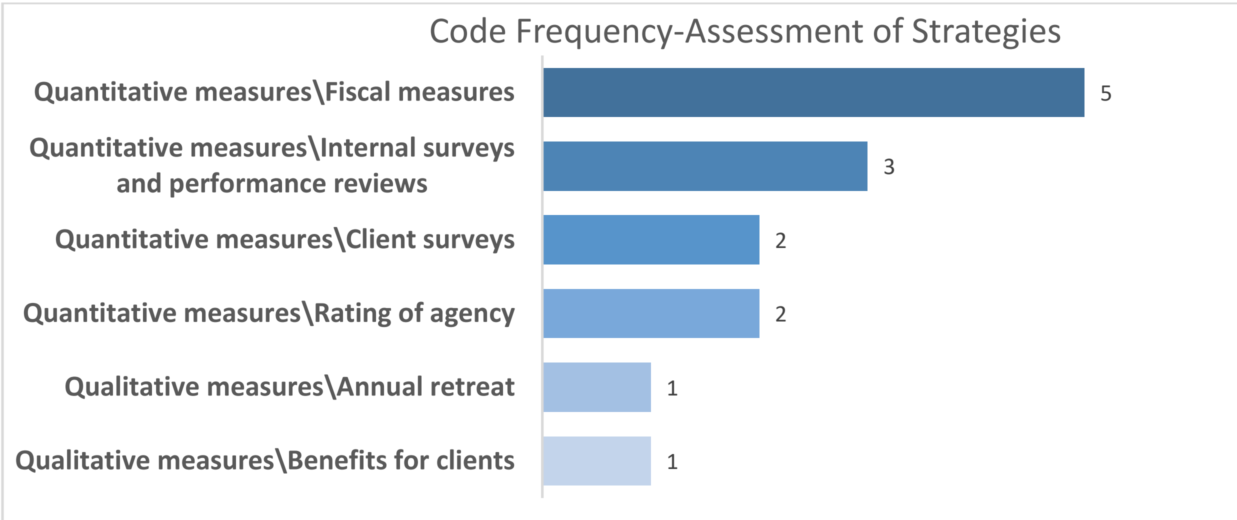
Table 3

Frequency of Themes relatives to Assessment of Strategies

Theme	Number of References
Quantitative measures\Fiscal measures	5
Quantitative measures\Internal surveys and performance reviews	3
Qualitative measures\Annual retreat	2
Quantitative measures\Rating of agency	2
Qualitative measures\Annual retreat	1
Qualitative measures\Benefits for clients	1
Total	14

Figure 3

Code Frequency-Assessment of Strategies



Emergent Theme 3: Challenges to business sustainability

While there were many sustainability facilitators for the business owners interviewed, they also identified several challenges. Four out of the five research participants identified challenges relating to staffing. P-3 and P-5 spoke about how sometimes it is hard to find the right people for the jobs in their companies. It was well worth it when they did, but it took time and resources to do so. P-1 and P-2 cited staff turnover as being a challenge. As with business in every sector, limited resources was also seen as a challenge. Smaller businesses had difficulties going up against large corporations, and competition is stiff. P-2, P-4, and P-5 mentioned how locking down capital to make necessary improvements to their businesses. Finally, as all business owners interviewed were in the health and human services sector, P-1, P-2, P-3, and P-5 spoke about struggling to keep up with the different standards and rules imposed on them by regulating bodies. Table 4 displays the Frequency of Themes relatives to Challenges to Sustainability, and the same result was shown in a bar chart visual model in figure 4.

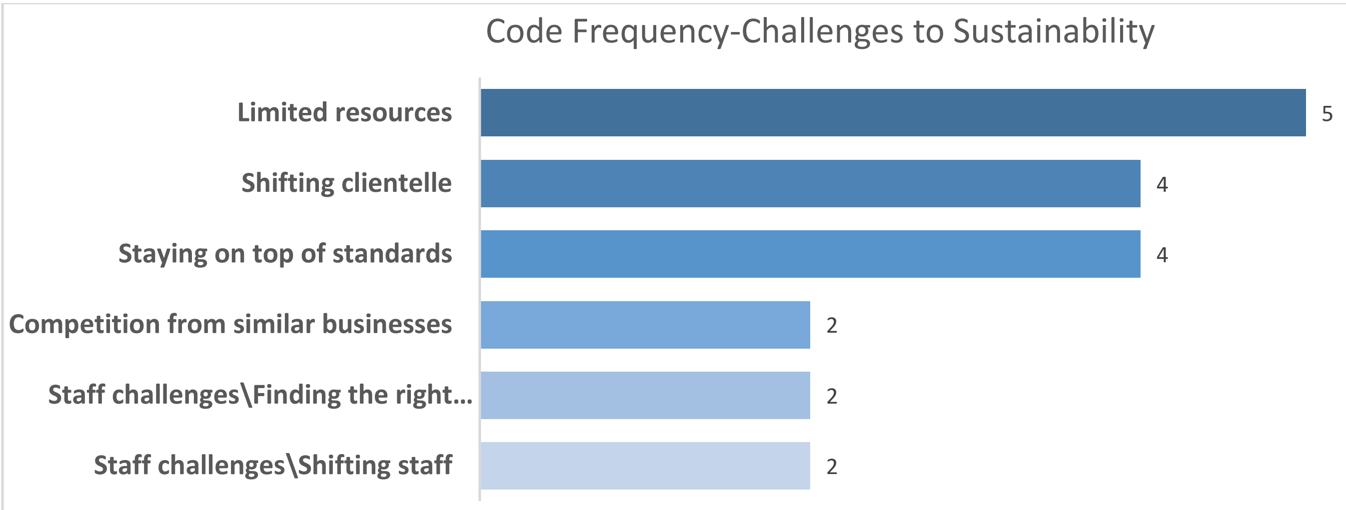
Table 4

Frequency of Themes relatives to Challenges to Sustainability

Theme	Number of References
Limited resources	5
Shifting clientele	4
Staying on top of standards	4
Competition from similar businesses	2
Staff challenges\Finding the right people	2
Staff challenges\Shifting staff	2
Total	21

Figure 4

Code Frequency-Assessment of Strategies



Applications to Professional Practice

The data collected and analyzed for this study provides valuable insight into SMS growth and survival strategies beyond 5 years. The findings from this study provided insight into the specific strategies that affect the success of small business owners. Therefore, the findings of this study could be valuable for future studies as well as for current and prospective small business owners' growth and survival strategies. SME owners might use the findings of this study as a significant, positive influence to improve existing business practices, implement effective business strategies, and improve business growth for a long time survival.

Kumar et al. (2018) noted that dynamic capabilities and relationship-based collaboration between partners are essential strategic actions business owners undertake to develop and support long-term sustainability. This research indicates that SME owners who develop strong relationships and collaborate with other business entities may succeed quicker than business owners who do not apply this business strategy. The business leader's inclination to establish strong relationships with clients and other business entities helps reach business goals. The findings presented in this research indicated that SME owners grow and increase business longevity by exploiting the right strategies. These strategies may be maintaining a strong relationship with staff, customers, and clients. Maintaining the quality of service, adopting the right technology, hiring the right employee, partnership with other businesses, customer-to-business engagement, outsourcing services to other similar business providers to increase business cost, and maintaining quality and efficiency.

Implications for Social Change

The implication of this research for positive social change includes the potential to improve the standard of living of the local residents, contribute to job creation and provide greater economic stability for the local government and the nations as a whole.

Hence helping communities progress and improving their local economies through tax revenue contribution to the local government. Al-Tit et al.(2019) posited that SMEs play an essential role in the modern economy, the factors that determine their success are ongoing academic debates. The application and implementation of recommendations may contribute to the financial stability of SMEs. Local communities may benefit economically and socially because of lower unemployment rates, improved living standards of residents, and improved local government economy.

Recommendations for Action

This study was a limited scope multiple-case study; therefore, if any, transferability of the finding to other cases by future researchers exists. The limitation of this study result was that the accuracy and validity of data collected through the virtual interview relied on the experience of the SME owners in five companies located in Austin, Texas, and did not reflect the experiences of the broader population of all SMEs leaders globally. Hence the findings of this study may not be generalizable to a larger population of SMEs in the United States or globally.

I recommend that future researchers conduct quantitative or mixed-method research in different states or in the same state of Texas to test the transferability of the findings of this study. Future researchers may also conduct extensive research regarding business growth and survival within small or large businesses to expand the sample population used in this study.

Small business owners and potential SME owners must learn how to maximize their human capital, evaluate the skills required to operate the business, and know their business operations to sustain and grow their business. In addition, the business owners need to be open to exploring business strategies that other small business leaders have implemented successfully to increase small business growth and survival. All participants expressed the importance of employee retention, strong customer relationship, and quality of services as a catalyst to the growth and survival of their business. I recommend that small business owners establish a strong customer relationship strategy, ensure they invest in their employee growth, and provide quality service.

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Recommendations for Further Research

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the strategies that leaders of SMEs in Texas have used to grow and sustain their business's operations beyond 5 years. I recommend further research. Small businesses have become a driving and dynamic force of the world economy(Ali Qalati et al., 2021; Lin et al., 2020; Mmbengeni et al., 2021). This study was a limited scope multiple-case study; therefore, if any, transferability of the finding to other cases by future researchers exists. The limitation of this study result was that the accuracy and validity of data collected through the virtual interview relied on the experience of the SME owners in five companies located in the state of Texas and did not reflect the experiences of the broader population of all SMEs leaders globally. Hence the findings of this study may not be generalizable to a larger population of SMEs in the United States or globally.

Although, I did not use mixed methods or quantitative research study methods. I recommend that future researchers conduct either quantitative or mixed-method studies in different states to test the transferability of this study's findings. Future researchers may conduct extensive research regarding business growth and survival within small or large businesses to expand the sample population used in this study.

Small business owners and potential small business owners must learn to maximize their human capital and evaluate the skills required to sustain and grow their business. They need to be open to exploring business strategies that other small business leaders have implemented successfully to increase small business growth and survival.

All participants expressed the importance of employee retention, strong customer relationship, and quality of services as a catalyst to the growth and survival of their business. I recommend that small business owners establish a strong customer relationship strategy, ensure they invest in their employee growth, and provide quality service.

Reflections

My experience at Walden University as a doctoral student has been an opportunity for me to gain knowledge regarding the strategies SMEs owners use to grow and survive in business longer than 5 years. The leading factor that motivated me for this study was my personal interest to learn that despite the significant role SMEs play, this class of firms has historically been vulnerable to competition., and evidentially ended up failing within years after opening.

Before conducting the research, I reflect on the background, my preconceived notions, biases, challenges, and benefits of this doctoral research. My preconception was that SMEs owners fail before 5 years of a business startup because they lack good knowledge of the application of information technology, have little or no access to capital, and most SME owners lack business management skills. Conducting this study expanded my comprehension and knowledge of the strategies used by small business owners to survive longer than 5 years.

During the journey of the DBA program, I gained remarkable knowledge about business strategies that SME leaders used to grow in the United States and beyond. During the data collection, I had significant concerns and made every effort to minimize bias to the minimum. I obtained Walden University IRB approval, and I ensured to follow the interview protocol closely My major challenge appeared at the data collection stage of the research. During participant selection, I ensured to select successful business owners in Austin, Texas. Throughout the data collection process, I remained neutral and attentive to the role of the researcher while doing my utmost to make the interviewees feel comfortable.

Conclusion

. Small business entrepreneurs are the architects of wealth creation social development of a nation worldwide. The objective of this qualitative multiple case study is to explore the strategies that leaders of SMEs in Austin, Texas, have used to grow and sustain their business's operations beyond 5 years. I selected five business leaders in Austin, Texas, who have experience in reducing business failure. The System theory was a good conceptual framework for this study because the research data provided evidence to support the System theory. Also, business owners depend on systems of activities that include marketing, employee relationship, client relationship, and social networking to drive technology innovation, financing, and profitability; for business survival, understanding systems theory helps ground this study. Yin's five-step data analysis approach resulted in three themes which are: (a) Strong relationships lead to business sustainability, (b) High quality of services is the best marketing tool, and (c) Challenges to business sustainability. These three themes represent strategies for growth and survival by SMEs owners. All five interviewed business leaders spoke about the importance of solid relationships. These relationships included their direct clients/patients, parents, staff, and other businesses in the area. All of the participants spoke about the importance of the quality of service, which was mostly mentioned in conjunction with staff and customer relationship ship. While discussing the importance of relationships, the participants often cited how high-quality service was the best way to market their business.While there were many sustainability facilitators for the business owners interviewed, they also identified several challenges. Four out of the five research participants identified challenges relating to staffing. The implications for positive social change include the potential for owners of small and medium-sized businesses to use the findings to contribute to job creation, economic growth, and the promotion of sustainable communities.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

The researcher and the participant/interviewee will follow the procedure below during the interview process:

I. I will meet the participant at the agreed designated location.

II. I will introduce myself to the participant and go through the interview protocol before I begin the interview.

III. I will present the consent form, go over contents, and answer questions and concerns presented by participants.

IV. The participant gets a copy of the consent form.

V. Turn on the recording device before the commencing the interview.

VI. Follow the procedure to introduce the participant using the pseudonym

VII. Identification; with date and time.

VIII. Begin the interview with question numbers 1 to 7.

1. What strategies did you use to sustain your business operations beyond the first 5 years of the business startup?
2. How did you communicate your business strategies to your employees?
3. How does your organization assess the effectiveness of its strategies for growth and sustainability?
4. What are the challenges you faced to implement strategies to increase business sustainability
5. What skills as an entrepreneur were needed to create and sustain your business successfully beyond 5 years?

6. Could you describe the types of systems used in your business to help, you succeed in the long term?
7. What other information concerning the strategies that you used in achieving the growth of your small business would you like to share

IX. Follow up with additional questions.

X. Discuss a follow-up procedure and member checking with participants

XI. Thank the participant(s) for their part in the study.

Sincerely,

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