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Innovation Strategies to Create Sustainable Fast-Casual Restaurants

FELIPE MEDINA CINTRON
Walden University

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Walden University

College of Management and Human Potential

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Felipe Medina-Cintron

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
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the review committee have been made.

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Walden University
2022

Abstract

Innovation Strategies to Create Sustainable Fast-Casual Restaurants

by

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MS, Polytechnic University of Puerto Rico, 2007

BS, Polytechnic University of Puerto Rico, 1997

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Management

Walden University

November 13, 2022

Abstract

Most restaurants in the United States fail during their first year of operation and many survivors do not last past 5 years. The problem was that some fast-casual restaurant (FCR) leaders do not understand and cannot identify innovation strategies for business sustainability. The purpose of this multiple-case study was to explore what innovative strategies are used by successful FCR leaders in the U.S. state of Delaware to overcome business challenges and achieve sustainability beyond 5 years. The conceptual framework was based on Schumpeter's entrepreneurship innovation theory. Data were collected from 12 leaders (owners, managers, and supervisors) of six FCRs in Delaware that had been in business for 5 or more years. Sampling selection strategy included FCR leaders with 3 or more years of experience. Data sources included telephone and virtual semistructured interviews with the leaders and social media posts, official publications, and other related documents. Data were analyzed using NVivo 12. The findings included a total of 51 innovation strategies with 12 top highlighted themes or strategies from four primary categories. These four major categories were management and entrepreneurship, business and sustainability, technology and integrated systems, and social diffusion. The social change implications of this research include identifying innovative sustainability strategies to sustain FCRs in Delaware. Using these strategies, FCR employers may potentially generate sustainable profits and benefit the local economy by maintaining current employees, creating additional jobs, and sparking continuous social improvement.

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Dedication

I dedicate this qualitative multiple-case study to the loving memory of my inspirational mother, Gladys F. Cintron; my father, Felipe Medina-Ramos; my grandmother, Felicita Alvarez; and my grandfather, Jose D. Cintron. They raised me with love and values and always encouraged me to be a good person, follow my dreams, and achieve my full potential.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Since 2000, fast-casual restaurants (FCRs) in the United States (e.g., Mission BBQ, Panera Bread, and Chipotle) have steadily grown based on the perception that they offer high-quality food and a pleasant environment at affordable prices (Coomes, 2011). Per the National Restaurant Association (2019), fast-casual segment sales volume rose 5.3% from 2017 to 2018. The National Restaurant Association calculated a labor force of 14.7 million employees at the end of 2019 and projected a 10% increase in workers during the next decade. Yet, as Maze (2017) explained, challenges, such as increased minimum wage regulations, have led many of these establishments to close or delay aggressive expansion plans .

In this qualitative multiple-case study, I explored what innovative strategies enhance the possibility of FCRs in the U.S. state of Delaware to be sustainable. Chapter 1 includes the research background, problem statement, purpose, research question, theoretical foundation, the nature of the study, and definitions of key terms. I also discuss the assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, and significance of the study in terms of practice, theory, and social change.

Background of the Study

The National Restaurant Association (2019) reported that 1,000,000 restaurants were in operation in the United States by the end of 2018. The restaurants provided 14.7 million jobs and had estimated sales of \$798.7 billion. Based on its direct correlation to relevant economic indices, the restaurant industry is considered a critical economic

indicator for the United States. These indices include personal income, employment rate, consumer trust, and manufacturing and retail sales (Economic Indicators, 2018). As Zackfia (2016) explained, FCRs are growing at the fastest rate in the restaurant industry. LaVecchia (2003) wrote that the FCR concept was developed in the United States and combines quick service with a casual dining experience without table service. As mentioned by Mathur and Gupta (2018), the FCR segment continuously attracts customers with higher and more diverse and sophisticated quality and customer service expectations than a fast-food restaurant. Mathur and Gupta noted that FCR customers expect a lower price ticket than a casual restaurant.

As Setyan (2017) explained, the emergence of FCR responds to a new generation of customers who are less concerned about caloric intake, but more concerned about the overall healthfulness and freshness of products related to their selected restaurants' supply chain. Additional factors, such as an increasing urban population, employment opportunities, and higher disposable income, have created opportunities for FCRs to enhance local economies (Maze, 2017). Despite a promising future and the proliferation of FCR, factors such as increasing competition, higher leasing costs, fewer financing opportunities, and aggressive wage inflation have created unexpected challenges that have resulted in business failures (Maze, 2017; McGrath, 2017; National Restaurant Association, 2019). As Setyan established, there are too many variables that create an oversupply, lower prices, limit FCR business growth, and, in some cases, lead to the closing of underperforming FCR units. FCR leaders have made numerous efforts to

alleviate the prevalent scenario, including increasing home deliveries, take-away options, and technology innovations such as digital marketing and online ordering.

Among the issues facing FCR entrepreneurs and existing restaurant entrepreneurs, finding financial institutions and capital investors willing to assist them is perhaps the most challenging one. Most financial institutions consider the overall restaurant industry to be in a category of substantial business risk (Honisch & Ottenbacher, 2017). This perception stems from the often-cited high failure rate of 70-80% during the first year and a median lifetime of only 4.5 years (Honisch & Ottenbacher, 2017; Luo & Stark 2015). Investors in the FCR industry review multiple dynamics to determine whether a restaurant's recent success can be translated into a more significant execution (Zackfia, 2016). As Zackfia (2016) stated, the trend for the fast-casual industry is stable as leaders in the sector are mainly focusing on providing healthier and fresher products to customers. Yet, other factors create challenges for the FCR industry; thus, research is necessary to explore what innovative strategies could help FCR leaders to create sustainability and avoid business closure (Maze, 2017; McGrath, 2017). Some leaders of well-established fast-casual franchises have invested in new concepts, and their businesses are heading in the right direction; these include Buffalo Wild Wings, Shake Shack, Panera Bread, and Starbucks (Setyan, 2017; Zackfia, 2016). Others have poor execution skills and inconsistent customer service, leading to eventual failures, such as Taco Cabana and Pollo Tropical (Mathur & Gupta, 2018, Setyan, 2017; Zackfia, 2016).

In this research study, I explored how the entrepreneurship innovation theory, and derivative theories, such as the integrated management innovation, technology innovation, and social diffusion innovation theories, relate to current innovation strategies in the FCR industry. This study may provide current and future FCR leaders with innovative strategies that might allow them to create sustainable FCR businesses in Delaware beyond 5 years. These strategies could improve the local economy and provide current and future FCR entrepreneurs with knowledge to become successful and sustainable. The study may also benefit FCR leaders in other U.S. who may be able to learn from successful restaurants in Delaware. This study's implications for positive social change include the potential to increase job opportunities. More jobs could create better community cohesion and continuous social improvement (Liu et al., 2014).

Problem Statement

The general problem was that innovation strategies may be needed for FCR entrepreneurs and leaders in Delaware to overcome current challenges to create sustainability for their business beyond 5 years. The primary challenge for entrepreneurs and FCR leaders is to ensure economic growth by crafting innovative, creative, and sustainable competitive business advantages (Tülüce & Yurtkur, 2015). The social problem includes the loss of employment. In the United States, 75% of restaurants fail during their first year of operation with an expected operational life of 4.5 years (Parsa et al., 2015). The inadequate and improper application of innovative strategies can considerably reduce business profitability and sustainability (Arlbjorn & Paulraj, 2013;

Drucker, 1985). The dilemma for general management is that FCR leaders are stressed by increasing challenges that have caused unexpected business failures, minimizing their opportunities to compete and develop innovative strategies to build a sustainable business (National Restaurant Association, 2019).

The specific problem was that some FCR leaders in Delaware do not understand and cannot identify innovation strategies for business sustainability (Zackfia, 2016). I addressed the existing gap in the literature by exploring what innovative strategies are used by FCR leaders in Delaware to become profitable, accelerate growth capacity, and solidify their position in current and future markets. Creating sustainable FCRs may offer communities in Delaware diverse job opportunities that could provide better community cohesion, understanding, and continuous social improvement (Liu et al., 2014).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore what innovative strategies are used by successful FCR leaders in Delaware to overcome business challenges and achieve sustainability. The realization of this research may provide the opportunity for FCR leaders to discover innovative strategies to create sustainability for their business. Using the entrepreneurship innovation theory and derivative theories, I explored strategies related to the management process, integrated systems, technologies, and social diffusion channels that successful FCR leaders used to sustain their businesses. These theories provide insight on what strategies make the selected FCR business models work in Delaware. Telephone or virtual interviews and documentation-gathering with

FCR leaders (entrepreneurs-owners, managers, and supervisors) were used to define how successful FCR leaders in Delaware overcome business industry challenges by creating and implementing innovative strategies to facilitate their success.

Research Question

The research question for this study was: What innovative strategies are used by successful FCR leaders in Delaware to achieve sustainability?

Conceptual Framework

I based the conceptual framework for this qualitative case study on the concepts of entrepreneurship, technology, integrated management systems, and social diffusion, which I used to explore the strategies that could help FCR leaders achieve long-term sustainability. Conceptually, constant innovation is essential to creating a successful and long-lasting business (Drucker, 1985). Like any other enterprise, the FCR industry has been actively accommodating innovation, strategic entrepreneurship, and management strategies to keep competitive while responding to ever-evolving customer needs in a competitive landscape (Lee et al., 2016). The conceptual structure for this qualitative case study was based on Schumpeter's entrepreneurship innovation theory. Schumpeter (1942) defined entrepreneurship innovation theory as a creative and transformational process in which entrepreneurs are the drivers who revolutionize their economic landscape by creating a new structure.

The study results could add to the existing FCR leaders' efforts and philosophy by proposing strategies about what makes the FCR business model work in Delaware. A

deaccelerated population combined with a constant business closures are barriers affecting the development of FCRs in the state of Delaware (National Restaurant Association, 2019). The entrepreneurship innovation theory shows how entrepreneurs and FCR leaders can create a sustainable business by taking advantage of and strategizing new alternatives and ideas created by managerial, technological, systematic integration, and social diffusion changes. Entrepreneurship innovation theory defines an entrepreneur as an innovator capable of taking advantage of new and different available resources (Schumpeter, 1942). As Schumpeter (1942) explained, these resources are products or services, methods of sales, production, marketing, integrated systems, technologies, management process, social diffusion systems, supply methods, and more. Entrepreneurs adapt their strengths and weaknesses, overcome challenges, and take advantage of evolving environments to propel innovative ideas (Drucker, 1985).

Nature of the Study

Researchers engage in qualitative case study research to inductively look for answers in human behavior by studying participants in their natural environment to empathically examine their lives as individuals, groups, organizations, or societies (Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 2008; Miles et al., 2014). Researchers engage in quantitative research to deductively look for answers in human behaviors by directly manipulating and testing observed variables and making predictions (Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 2008). Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias (2008) explained that quantitative researchers place great emphasis on the methodology, procedures, and

statistical measures to demonstrate a clear progression from theory to concepts, before subjecting the data collected to statistical tests to confirm findings and infer their conclusions. The quantitative research methodology was not appropriate for this research study because I intended to explore what innovative strategies are used by FCR) leaders to create sustainability for their businesses beyond 5 years. Such in-depth knowledge could not be provided by the quantification of numeric data or testing of related hypotheses (Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 2008). Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias also stated that researchers use mixed methods to collect, analyze, present, and infer data results by combining both qualitative and quantitative methods in the same study. Mixed methods research was not appropriate for my study because it includes the quantitative study component.

A case study involves investigating a real-life case in a contemporary situation or environment (Yin, 2018). A case study was appropriate for exploring what innovative strategies are used by successful FCR leaders in Delaware to be sustainable beyond 5 years. The targeted population for this study were six FCRs in Delaware that have been in uninterrupted operation for 5 or more years. Based on the national pandemic situation (COVID-19) that influenced and limited all restaurant business services during the study time frame, I restricted this case study to six FCRs. The selection of participant restaurants was determined using the following four steps: (a) contacting the Delaware Restaurant Association and the Delaware Small Business Development Center, (b) conducting online search; (c) making telephone contact, and (d) visiting the locations. To

make the final selections, I used the following criteria: (a) FCRs located in Delaware, (b) FCR with 5 or more years of continuous business in the same location, and (c) FCR that had been under the same owner-entrepreneur for the last 5 years.

During this case study, I obtained data from a total of 12 FCR leaders from six different FCR businesses; the participants were entrepreneur-owners, managers, and supervisors. I explored their perceptions of what innovative strategies can create sustainability FCR in Delaware until data saturation was achieved. The data gathering was accomplished by conducting telephone and virtual interviews and gathering documentation (internet or provided by FCR leaders). My goal was to always maintain neutrality related to the topic under study (Miles et al., 2014). The documentation that was gathered included information founded over the internet and voluntarily provided by the selected FCR leaders. The data included social media posts, advertising, official publications, leadership reports, key performance indicator reports, newspaper or magazine articles, memorabilia, survey results, annual financial reports, company manuals, and daily logs (Patton, 2015).

In terms of the methodology, the fundamental concepts examined included entrepreneurial, technological, integrated innovation management, and social diffusion theories. During the last decade, the FCR industry has actively accommodated innovation, strategic entrepreneurship, and management strategies to maintain a competitive edge to quickly respond to the continually evolving restaurant business, as well as their customers (Lee et al., 2016). I based the conceptual framework for this

qualitative case study on Schumpeter's (1942) entrepreneurship innovation theory. His entrepreneurship innovation poses that entrepreneurs are the drivers who revolutionize their economic landscape by creating a new structure through constant innovation.

Definitions

Back of the house: A term that refers to restaurant areas and components that are not visible or in direct contact with customers (Thomas et al., 2017).

Business sustainability: The effective management of social, financial, ethical, and environmental demands to guarantee long-term business success (Jones & Comfort, 2017).

Consumer trust: An individual's firm belief in the reliability of a corporation's reputation and established commitment as represented by its products or services (Kim, 2019).

Economic indicator: A statistical representation using reports and summaries about economic activity that allows the analysis and prediction of the future economy (United States Economic Indicators, 2018).

Entrepreneur: An individual who takes a financial risk to organize and operate a business (Garbuio et al., 2018).

Entrepreneurship innovation theory: A proposition that an entrepreneur is responsible for introducing innovation and that profits will reward excellent performance; steadily reducing cost or increasing product demand are focal points (Schumpeter, 1942).

Fast-casual restaurant (FCR): A restaurant concept developed in the United States that combines quick service with a casual dining experience without providing service to tables; instead, the customer is provided an inviting atmosphere, flexible menu, high-quality food ingredients, taste, and customer service at affordable prices (Brem et al., 2016; LaVecchia, 2003).

Fast-casual restaurant (FCR) leader: An entrepreneur, business owner, manager, or supervisor of an FCR (Brewer, 2018; Mathur & Gupta, 2018).

Front of the house: A term that refers to restaurant areas and components that are visible and in direct contact with customers (Thomas et al., 2017).

Innovation strategies: New ideas created to satisfy new customers or market requirement needs; they are usually achieved by creating new business models, products, services, or processes (Lee et al., 2016).

Integrated innovation management theory: A proposition to integrate multiple business elements, such as technology, organizational systems, management process, and business culture, to improve the implementation of innovation in business (Wang & Wang, 2016).

Social diffusion of innovations: People's response to innovations that involves communicating their learning through their social groups and channels (Andersson et al., 2012).

Sous vide method: A food preparation method that consists of two main types of processes: a solid item cooked and packed in a plastic vacuum bag and then tumble-chilled in water (Florido et al., 2019).

Assumptions

A qualitative research case study can include assumptions by the researcher that are not necessarily verifiable facts but are statements made to advance conclusions and generalizations (Yin, 2018). Four assumptions were part of this case study. The first assumption was that participants could understand the research questions asked. The second assumption was that the FCR leaders could describe the strategies they used to create sustainability in their business. The third assumption was that the documentation gathered accurately reflected factual events. The fourth assumption was that conducting the case study in the selected FCRs could be replicable in similar cities and similar FCRs through the state of Delaware. During the interviews, I provided participants with time to ask clarifying questions about the questions provided to ensure the quality of the data.

Scope and Delimitations

Scope of Study

I obtained the data from interviews via telephone and video conference and from documentation obtained on the internet or voluntarily provided by the selected FCR leaders during site visits or via email. Different aspects of management and entrepreneurship fields related to products, services, processes, technologies, marketing methods, integrated innovation-management systems, and social diffusion channels,

among others, were correlated with the existing principles of the entrepreneurship innovation theory. All participants were selected from the available population of leaders such as owners-entrepreneurs, managers, and supervisors. Data related to fast food or traditional restaurants were excluded from this research to obtain precise results that could applied only to the FCR segment and replicated by similar businesses in the state of Delaware.

Delimitations

Delimitations are defined as exclusion and inclusion boundaries that the researcher delineates to establish the research's overall foundation (Yin, 2018). Data from FCRs with less than 5 years in business and non-FCRs were not included in this research to avoid data that could change the study results and recommendations. In conducting this research, I considered only FCRs with 5 or more years since established and participants located in Delaware. Data collection procedures, such as interviews via telephone and virtually via Zoom or MS Teams, gathering of documents, and preliminary visits, were conducted considering the selected FCRs days and hours of operation.

The second delimitation was the geographical location selected, the state of Delaware. I chose to delimit the study participants to Delaware. The views of the participants in this state may not represent the viewpoints of other FCR leaders and employees across the United States. Thus, the findings may not be transferable to FCRs elsewhere. Future studies could include additional states to mitigate this delimitation. Data gathering represents the third study delimitation. I posed a series of open-ended

questions to each participant and asked them to describe various business strategies that helped them sustain their business beyond 5 years. Participants could have been fearful of disclosing privileged or proprietary information. This study was delimited by events that occurred at the selected time of the study, the chosen study design, and the interview questions presented to participants; these factors could complicate transferring the outcome of this study to other types of restaurant businesses in different geographical areas.

Limitations

Limitations are defined boundaries that could limit the scope of the case study in terms of the time, relevant groups, organization, sample size, and geographic area (Yin, 2018). The first limitation was the study participants; these leaders may not be an accurate representation of the entire population of the state of Delaware. The second limitation was the openness and honesty of the participants. There are multiple sources of analytical bias that could lead to inaccuracies in qualitative research. They involve personal interpretation of events, data, and the ability to represent and present fieldwork and data analysis (Miles et al., 2014). To address these potential biases and limitations during my study, I used a rigorous ethical code plan. This plan included the use of approved institutional review board (IRB) documentation and guidelines and other means to ensure transparency, honesty, and clarity (e.g., clear written instructions). I also sought to maintain neutrality throughout the realization of the research.

Significance of the Study

As the National Restaurant Association (2019) projected, there may be a 10% increase in workers during the next decade, making the U.S restaurant industry, the second-largest private-sector employer in the United States, a suitable research topic. The same applies more broadly to the topic of restaurant sustainability. As explained by Maze (2017), new and emerging challenges have forced many FCRs to close or limit their expansion plans. This research may provide existing and new FCR leaders with innovative strategies to minimize their odds for business failure in the state of Delaware. This study could advance management practices by providing FCR leaders the opportunity to enhance their knowledge by exploring the strategies that could generate sustainability for their businesses while improving the economy and creating positive social change in Delaware.

Significance to Practice

This study's findings could support professional management practices by providing insight on innovative strategies to achieve FCR sustainability in Delaware. Exploring innovative strategies and applying them to management and entrepreneurship may further business practice. It can position current and future generations of practitioners to achieve continuous success (Lee et al., 2016). Furthermore, the study of FCR innovation strategies may create an opportunity to define the relationship between the multiple management and innovations fields necessary to achieve continuous business success. During the development of this study, I explored what innovation

strategies, perspectives, and opportunities related to the business management process, integrated systems, technologies, and social diffusion channels, underpin successful FCR businesses in Delaware.

The always-changing restaurant business will always require new strategies that facilitate continuous evolution. This study features multiple business management concepts and practical views that could be immediately adopted or be part of future applications or research studies. For FCR leaders, this study represents a source of new knowledge from leaders on the field and practical use of innovation strategies. These new knowledge areas include management processes, integrated systems, technologies, and social diffusion channels that may contribute to the survival, progress, and success of multiple FCRs in Delaware.

Significance to Theory

The study findings may advance existing knowledge of entrepreneurship innovation theory by providing more in-depth knowledge about the connection between entrepreneurship innovation strategies and FCR sustainability and success. Research with a foundation of entrepreneurship innovation theory and derivative theories may provide entrepreneurs, FCR leaders, and scholars with greater knowledge and understanding of FCR and overall business management principles. This knowledge could be transferred to FCR sustainability and satisfaction among leaders, employees, customers, and community members.

Significance to Social Change

As FCRs become sustainable, they could offer diverse job opportunities to community members. The sustainability success of these FCR could also provide a stable social environment for their customers to visit with their family and friends, creating connections between members of the same community while enjoying a sociable atmosphere. The establishment of a stable social environment could result in better understanding, community cohesion, and continuous social improvement (Liu et al.,2014). Furthermore, the implementation of entrepreneurship innovative practices and strategies may contribute to FCR profitability and growth. It could also have a positive economic effect on farmers, local growers, and other small businesses. Finally, business sustainability and community cohesion could attract multiple investors and government and private sector projects or initiatives to the area resulting in a brighter economic future for the entire community.

Summary and Transition

Chapter 1 includes a detailed overview and plan for this research case study. As established, growing opportunities for FCRs across the United States have created new business possibilities for entrepreneurs and, simultaneously, created a new set of customer expectations (Mathur & Gupta, 2018). However, unexpected challenges can force a newly established FCR to close or reduce its aggressive expansion plans (Maze, 2017). The leading question that drove this research revolved around what innovation strategies fast-casual leaders need to overcome existing business challenges and achieve

sustainability beyond their first 5 years. To answer the research question, I conducted interviews and analyzed documentation (see Appendix A) for the 10 interview questions.

I based the conceptual framework for this qualitative case study on Schumpeter's (1942) entrepreneurship innovation theory. This study's target population was six FCRs in Delaware that had been in continuous operation for 5 years or more. In this qualitative research, I captured data about participants' perceptions via telephone or video conference interviews; I also gathered and analyzed pertinent documentation. Throughout the research process, I strove to be neutral regarding the topic under study (Miles et al., 2014). In this chapter, I also presented multiple definitions and discussed the assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, and significance of the study from the practical, theoretical, and social change perspectives. Chapter 2 includes the review of the literature.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The primary challenge for entrepreneurs and FCR leaders is to ensure economic growth by crafting innovative, creative, and sustainable competitive business advantages (Tülüce & Yurtkur, 2015). The established research problem provided the opportunity to research current literature that provided a solid background to the study. I sought further understanding related to innovation strategies in areas such as entrepreneurship, technology innovation, integrated-innovation management, and social diffusion innovation theories, currently in use by FCR leaders to create business sustainability. The literature review is composed of peer-reviewed articles, books, and other scholarly and professional work representing current knowledge that can be used as the foundation to discover new information (Machi & McEvoy, 2016).

Significant sections included in Chapter 2 are devoted to the literature search strategy, conceptual framework, literature review, and a summary of the chapter with an introduction to Chapter 3. After describing the literature search strategy, I explore the origins and development of the entrepreneurship innovation theory. This section is followed by the literature review. The review includes seminal and current literature related to entrepreneurship-innovation, technological-innovation, integrated innovation management systems, and social diffusion innovations.

Literature Search Strategy

Machi and McEvoy (2016) explained that a literature review involves research and data collection from multiple sources to examine a current phenomenon. As also

established by Machi and McEvoy, the literature review signifies that the current state of knowledge is a stepping-stone for discovering new information about a specific topic or phenomenon. The sources searched from Walden University Library included peer-reviewed journals, dissertations, and conference proceedings. They were accessed using the following databases: SAGE Premier, Science Direct, ABI/INFORM Complete, and Business Source Complete. The search engine Google Scholar was another tool that I used to find peer-reviewed literature as well as professional books, newspapers, electronic journal articles, and conference publications. I also obtained information from professional and government webpages, the official website from the National Restaurant Association, and the websites of multiple restaurant industry providers such as Presto, Toast, Touch Bistro, and Upserve.

Some of the terms and keywords used to research topics were as follows: *fast-casual*, *fast-casual restaurants*, *fast-casual restaurants in the United States*, *fast-casual restaurants outside the United States*, *restaurant industry in the United States*, *entrepreneurship*, *entrepreneurship innovation theory*, *restaurant management*, *management innovation*, *technology innovation theory*, *strategic innovation theory*, *social diffusion innovation theory*, *restaurant management*, *sustainability theories*, *integrated innovation-management theories*, *sustainability and restaurants*, *innovation*, and *innovation inside the restaurant industry*. The literature review includes 78 references, composed of books, business and government websites, professional conferences, newspaper articles, peer-reviewed journal articles, and dissertations. The

sources published between 2014 and 2021 constituted 80% of the sources, 75% of which are peer reviewed.

Conceptual Framework

For the conceptual framework of this qualitative multiple-case study, I drew from the concepts of entrepreneurship and innovation to explore what innovative strategies are used by successful FCRs in Delaware, to achieve long-term sustainability. The National Restaurant Association (2019) calculated a labor force of 14.7 million employees at the end of 2018. The National Restaurant Association anticipated an increase of 10% by 2029, establishing the restaurant industry as the second major private-sector employer in the United States. Despite this promising scenario, multiple issues, including economic recession, minimum wage increase, and the constant increase in food costs have been negatively affecting the entire restaurant industry, including the fast-casual segment, and resulted in many closures (Lee & Ha, 2012; McGrath, 2017).

Since 2000, the number of FCRs in the United States has grown consistently, based on the public's perception that they offer high-quality food and the right environment at affordable prices (Coomes, 2011). This new restaurant segment attracts a new kind of customer with higher, more diverse, and sophisticated expectations, making this segment extremely competitive—and it continues to evolve. As presented by the National Restaurant Association (2019), during 2018, the fast-casual segment grew 5.3% compared to the sales volume in 2017. Yet, as Maze (2017) explained, challenges have

forced many FCRs to close due to aggressive expansion plans that outgrow the new restaurant segment and new higher salary regulations.

Conceptually, constant innovation is essential to create a successful and sustainable business (Drucker, 1985). Like any other enterprise, the FCR industry has actively accommodated innovation, strategic entrepreneurship, and management strategies to remain competitive while responding to the ever-evolving customer (Lee et al., 2016). The conceptual structure for this qualitative case study was based on Schumpeter's entrepreneurship innovation theory. Schumpeter (1942) defined entrepreneurship innovation theory as a creative and transformative process in which the entrepreneur is the driver who revolutionizes their economic landscape by creating a new structure. Schumpeter stated that the theory of entrepreneurship is critical for the evolution of the capitalistic system. Schumpeter also mentioned that the entrepreneurship innovation theory must be studied from multiple perspectives other than the entrepreneur's and their firm. As Schumpeter established, these aspects could be studied from diverse views such as the frequent changes and the evolution of the industry under study, markets, society, economy, technological, and the political landscape, all of which were fundamental for the creation of the conceptual framework for this research study.

Since the end of World War II, humans have remained in the early stages of significant innovation and technological transformation (Drucker, 1985). This transformation is evident in advances in high technological and social diffusion, transforming all types of businesses around the world (Dearing & Cox, 2018). As

explained by Dearing and Cox (2018), this transformation also is creating excitement, capturing major headlines, and is responsible for creating the vision for entrepreneurship and innovation in communities. As Drucker (1985) stated, innovation is a specific function of entrepreneurship in which an entrepreneur can create new sources of wealth or enhance existing resources to create future wealth. The term *entrepreneur* is not related to the size or age of a company but is the heart of the entrepreneurship concept. The innovation activity is the key that drives the company or enterprise to reach its economic and social potential (Drucker, 1985).

Several previous research have applied the concepts of entrepreneurship and innovation theory. These studies cover various topics and lenses (e.g., marketing strategies and profitability in restaurants, technology applications, food safety, food handling, and strategies to improve employee engagement in the restaurant industry). Specific related research includes the analysis of innovation, entrepreneurship, and restaurant performance by studying the concepts of human capital as the main driver for restaurant performance (Lee et al., 2016). Other researchers have studied the application of innovation strategies via business supply chain perspectives (Arlbjorn & Paulraj, 2013), the study of sustainability and profitability as balancing aspects of the business (De Clercq & Voronov, 2011), and the study of the leading innovation drivers for restaurant success in Australia (Lee et al., 2016). At this point, there are limited studies related to all aspects of innovation strategies.

This study could benefit and build on the entrepreneur's existing efforts and philosophy by proposing strategies for making the FCR business model work in Delaware. The entrepreneurship innovation theory shows how FCR leaders can create a sustainable business by taking advantage of and implementing options created by entrepreneurial, technological, integrated innovation-management systems, social diffusion, and sociocultural changes. It could demonstrate how these innovative ideas can increase the existing knowledge of this theory as it applies to the FCR industry. The entrepreneurship innovation theory defines an entrepreneur as an innovator capable of taking advantage of the available new and different resources (Schumpeter, 1942). These resources are products or services, methods of sales or production, supply methods, industries or organizations, the adaptation of strengths and weaknesses, overcoming challenges, and taking advantage of evolving environments to propel their innovative ideas. Innovation is the best tool for an entrepreneur to maximize the changing environment for their products or services; it can be taught, learned, and practiced (Drucker, 1985).

Literature Review

FCRs combine speed, quality food, influential atmosphere, accessible prices, and technology to increase the perception of better value for customers' money (Mathur & Gupta, 2018; Siemering, 2004). The literature review conveys the current state of knowledge on the origins, developments, and main concepts of the FCR industry;

entrepreneurship innovation theory; integrated innovation management theory; social diffusion theory; integrated innovation theory; and technology innovation theory.

Fast-Casual Restaurant Origins and Development

Since 1999, FCRs have been the only restaurant segment demonstrating consistent growth in the United States (Giuntella, 2018). The emergence of the FCR segment responded to an entrepreneurship movement to provide healthy eating to a new generation of healthy-eating customers. As Giuntella (2018) explained, since their beginning, the FCR segment has grown by 550%, approximately 10 times the fast-food industry's growth rate during the same period (1999-2018). Setvan (2016) established some of the factors contributing to the FCR industry's success. These factors include the continuous growth of single-person households, the aging population, female participation in the labor market, longer work hours, and increasing consciousness of healthy eating habits, and a consistent decline in cooking skills. Setvan further stated that there are opportunities for the FCR industry due to consumers who want to spend less time and effort on food preparation activities but are focused on a healthy lifestyle. As Giuntella explained, health conscious FCR customers will no longer accept compromising their food's freshness and healthfulness.

Case Study Design Choice

A multiple-case study was the appropriate qualitative research design to provide the purpose and proposed research questions required to focus on gaining recent, in-depth information within the real-life context (Yin,2018). As Yin

explained, a case study is used when a researcher requires a detailed description of a social phenomenon to attempt to determine what innovation strategies fast-casual leaders use to overcome their business challenges to achieve sustainability beyond 5 years.

Entrepreneurship Innovation Theories

There are multiple theories derived from the original entrepreneurship innovation theory such as technology-innovation theory, integrated innovation-management system theory, and social diffusion innovation theory (Sundbo & Elgar, 2001). As defined by Sundbo and Elga, innovation involves everything new that could represent a commercial or business gain. These innovations could be part of a product, process, technology, management approach concepts, marketing, culture, regulations, social organization, and changes in consumers' expectations. The classic theory of innovation suggests that for an innovation to be adopted and subsequently spread, the innovation must adapt to the current user's needs and daily habits and provide incentives to initiate the change (Pandya & Dholakia, 2005). Pandya and Dholakia also established that innovation should represent a minimal social, physical, psychological, and economic risk.

Origins and Development of Entrepreneurship Innovation Theories

Schumpeter developed the original entrepreneurship innovation theory in the 1930s based on the earlier work of sociologist and psychologist Jean-Gabriel De Tarde (Sundbo & Elgar, 2001). As Schumpeter (1942) presented, entrepreneurs and FCR leaders are the primary agents for economic development because they always push for

innovations as a countermeasure for direct competition and to guarantee their financial success. As Schumpeter (1942) established, entrepreneurs and FCR leaders should pursue technological innovations to gain a strategic advantage over the competition and make money. Eventually, someone will imitate it and, consequently, innovation will create something new. This innovation will result in a new set of ideas that will later provide the equilibrium in terms of profits and write a new set of rules. At this point, the cycle will repeat itself, and the process of creative destruction will continue to evolve and destroy previous rules to create new ones (Bessant & Tidd, 2015).

The word *entrepreneur*, which is French, is credited to 18th-century French writer Cantillon who was a pioneer in acknowledging the entrepreneur's critical role inside the economy (Tülücea & Yurtkurb, 2015). The authors defined an entrepreneur as a person or business owner who focuses on establishing and generating economic stability through the creation and expansion of new products, services, processes, or marketing strategies. As Tülücea and Yurtkurb explained, an entrepreneur is an innovator who consistently pursues the discovery, assessment, and development of new products, services, management processes, or marketing strategies for his or her business to create business opportunities and financial sustainability. Schumpeter (1942) defined entrepreneurs and FCR leaders as primary economic development agents who exploit market opportunity through technical and organizational innovation. Schumpeter also explained that a nation's wealth depends on entrepreneurs and FCR leaders' development capabilities to keep a competitive advantage. Schumpeter (1942), whose work was founded on Marx's

theories and fundamentals of sociology, made his theory of economic innovation and business cycle access to the world.

Main Concepts of Entrepreneurship Innovation

Tülücea and Yurtkurb (2015) defined an entrepreneur as someone who can take risks while acting to profit and achieve economic success. Tülücea and Yurtkurb claimed that an entrepreneur is linked to innovation since identifying his or her business opportunities and innovative strategies transform their ideas into new products or services that will impact human lives, thereby increasing business productivity and the current economy. The main effect of entrepreneurship and innovation is on the foundation and development of the socio-economic structure, the creation of job opportunities, and the creation of different products and services to a global population (Tülücea & Yurtkurb, 2015). During his theory of entrepreneurship innovation, Schumpeter emphasized business cycles, describing how companies, through a process of internal mutation, change their internal structure to create a new one. Schumpeter (1942) explained that during this process, the innovation developed to transform the business from an adaptive to a creative business environment. Based on Schumpeter's entrepreneurship innovation theory, when an entrepreneur makes innovation the center of his or her business competitiveness, this will create the base for the principles of business growth and sustainable development.

Sundbo and Elgar (2001) explained that over the years, the original entrepreneurship innovation theory Schumpeter developed, started a constant evolution

with diverse perspectives based on global changes in the economy, markets, and society. These global changes transformed the initial focus of entrepreneurship innovation concepts for a more technology-innovation driven discussion with an economic emphasis. As the authors explained, during the 1970s and 1980s, the focus on technology-innovation failed to deliver sustainable economic growth. The pressure demanded a change in the theoretical discussion of the existing entrepreneurship innovation theory. Then Drucker (1985) developed an innovation theory change and proposed a systematic management procedure focused on increased business management knowledge to outmatch the continuous and evolving pace of technological innovation.

As Drucker (1985) established, even with the constant technological entrepreneurship knowledge, there was still a gap between existing education and available innovation opportunities that could propel business success and sustainability. The author defined innovation as the main venue for entrepreneurs and FCR leaders to maximize their opportunities to produce or use available resources to generate and magnify revenue. Drucker clarified that there is a common perceptual mistake between innovation and the size or age. Drucker explained that the significant innovation propellants for any company are their own internal business needs, abrupt circumstances, and the constant changes in the industry, markets, demographics, knowledge, and customers' perceptions. A significant aspect of Drucker's innovation theory perspectives was his approach to innovation as systematic business management and leadership

perspective, which is constructed based on simplicity with a centralized focus on ingenuity more than business knowledge.

The original concepts derived from Schumpeter's innovation theory (1942), and later the development concepts from Drucker's innovation and entrepreneurship theory (1985), were fundamental for the development of the ideas of the integrated innovation management theory (Wang & Wang, 2016). As explained by Wang and Wang (2016), the integrated innovation management theory began its earlier development during the 1970s with cooperative work from several economist-scholars from that era, including Giovanni Dosi. In 1982, this work was expanded by the scholar-economists Nelson and Winter (Wang & Wang, 2016). During their work, Nelson and Winter established solid concepts around the integrated innovation management theory, with the primary objective of improving the implementation of innovation in business by integrating multiple elements such as technology, organizational systems, management, and business culture (Wang & Wang, 2016). As the authors stated, the integrated innovation management theory's critical concepts are intended to take advantage of the synergy created by integrating innovation in a company as an entire concept and not, as previously suggested, as merely isolated concepts for different business areas. Since then, the ideas have become popular and widely implemented in management and technology innovation by integrating new products, systems, and equipment, creating more flexible and innovative integrated organizations.

Integrated Innovation Management Theory

The concepts from the integrated innovation management theory, opened the door for the continuous development of the technology innovation theory, as proposed by Iansiti in 1998. This theory focused on integrating new events and trends in technology, economy, information technology, and never-ending developments on the internet (Wang & Wang, 2016). As the authors explained, these new components, combined with the competitive global business environment, are imperative to the integrated innovation management theory's continuous development. The entrepreneurship innovation theory's actual focus is more aligned with organizational resource-based marketing and strategic innovation implementations (Sundbo & Elgar, 2001). During the last decade, a new focus, derived from the entrepreneurship innovation management theory, emerged around the concepts of the social diffusion innovation theory (Dearing & Cox, 2018). As the authors explained, this theory was presented by Rogers in 2005. Rogers' developments dated back to the 1960s, more than 40 years. Rogers expanded his diffusion of innovation theory based on the concept of distribution as a social process. The theory of social diffusion innovation focuses on people's natural response to innovations and then communicates what they learned through their social groups and channels (Andersson et al., 2012).

Social Diffusion Innovation Theory

This theory contains four main elements; innovation, communication, time, and the social systems (Andersson et al., 2012). The critical factor for diffusion is the

innovation adoption phase, which drives social members of a group to adopt an innovation based on social pressure created by their social system (Dearing & Cox, 2018). As the authors described, over time, these constant innovation diffusions continue to change and differentiate entire societies. They can also be perceived in different cultures through rapid knowledge implementation and access to government and commercial services. When people discover an innovation, they typically want to learn more about it and then pass their knowledge to the members of their social network (Dearing & Cox, 2018). As the authors explained, this leads to further exploration and knowledge-sharing between the entire social group who exchange and explore the various aspects of the innovation, such as function, cost, benefits, effectiveness, simplicity, and compatibility. The process of innovation diffusion starts with the first adopter, who immediately feels the excitement of the innovation and shares it with their immediate social circle (Dearing & Cox, 2018). As the authors stated, the next person to adopt is the one who offers opinions and expresses them in terms of advantages and disadvantages. After this, the rest of the social network will become involved early, and the rest will later adopt the innovation based on social pressure.

As presented in this section, the exploration of the origins, evolution, fundamental concepts, and derivative theories of the entrepreneurship innovation theory, such as entrepreneurship innovation, technology-innovation, integrated innovation-management, and social diffusion, were critical for the development of this research study. The connection with the entrepreneurship innovation theory's concepts is perceived and can

be evidenced in every modern, thriving business driven by owners/entrepreneurs, managers, employees, customers, suppliers, and consultants. The original concepts of entrepreneurship theory evolved as advances in technology, communication, the internet, social consciousness, and globalization of business continuously create an evolving generation of smart customers and a highly competitive and dynamic business world. This evolution makes it necessary to connect concepts and innovation strategies with the theories of management, technology, and social diffusion (Sundbo & Elgar, 2001; Wang & Wang, 2016).

The acquisition of knowledge and integration of innovation theories may promote understanding of how to implement strategies in products, services, production processes, integrated systems, culture, marketing methods, regulations, and social-diffusion channels to develop sustainable FCR in Delaware (Wang & Wang, 2016). There is still abroad and open debate emerging from the constant desires of entrepreneurs and FCR leaders to match their internal and available business resources with consumer trends (Sundbo & Elgar, 2001).

Entrepreneurship Innovation Strategies

As LaVecchia (2003) defined, a FCR is a concept developed in the U.S. that combines quick service with a casual dining experience without providing service to tables but provides high-quality food ingredients, taste, atmosphere, and customer service at affordable prices. FCR success came from the constant application and alignment of innovation strategies through the organization that would situate it to achieve a privileged

market position (Brem et al., 2016). Entrepreneurship is about exploring opportunities, and the innovation process is the key to creating new ways and how to exploit them (Bessant & Tidd, 2015). As the authors explained, entrepreneurs and FCR leaders are calculated risk-takers as they moved forward, if the cost and existing markets are worth the effort. Innovation is a significant component of gaining a competitive advantage in dynamic and ever-changing business environments (Ham, Choi, & Lee, 2017). The application of innovative strategies through the concepts of entrepreneurship, management, technology, socio-cultural changes, and social diffusion is critical to achieving business and profitability success (Arlbjorn & Paulraj, 2013). As Arlbjorn and Paulraj explained, entrepreneurs and FCR leaders should apply multiple simultaneous innovation strategies across their entire business supply chain to maximize their chances of creating a sustainable and profitable business.

There are three primary types of entrepreneurial business strategies: (a) the defender's strategy, focus on the small product-market segment; (b) the prospector's strategy, focus on a continuous pursuit of market opportunities; and (c) the analyzer's strategy, with emphasis on cost-efficient business operation and constant innovation (Miles & Snow, 2006). In a different perspective, Alstete (2014), after completing 11 years of examining business plans from 380 student entrepreneurs at a mid-size private business college in New York City, revealed and argued that there are five leading entrepreneur's business model strategies. These five strategies are: (a) the low-cost provider strategy; (b) the broad-differentiation approach; (c) the focused or market niche

low-cost strategy; (d) the targeted or market niche differentiation strategy; and (e) the best-cost provider strategy (Alstete, 2014). The results from Alstete's study showed that 58% of the participant entrepreneur students selected the focused-differentiation (market niche) business strategy. The second-largest portion of entrepreneur students (28%) chose the broad-differentiation business strategy. Of the rest of the participants, 14% selected between the remaining three strategies: low-cost (3%), focused low-cost generic business strategy (3%), and business plans classified as a best-cost strategy (8%).

The study results from Alstete (2014) suggested that there is an actual lack of options for future entrepreneurs and FCR leaders to combine existing business model strategies, which is what is happening in today's business landscape. The opportunity for novel entrepreneurs and FCR leaders to learn from current and innovative business models can expand their opportunities to compete with already-developed, successful businesses in the real business world (Alstete, 2014; Miles & Snow, 2006). Business school's curriculums are not designed to prepare future FCR leaders with the latest innovation and business management model tendencies (Alstete, 2014). This disconnection, as described by Alstete, could affect the exploration and the continuous development of business management and entrepreneurship innovation strategies (Alstete, 2014; Cammarano et al., 2019).

Entrepreneurs and FCR leaders are full of new ideas, passion, and motivation for creating business ideas (Alstete, 2014). Most of these entrepreneurs' motivations are personal, monetary, or disliking the traditional employee-supervisor job structure. Neither

innovations nor successful businesses happen quickly; both must be driven by an individual or a group of entrepreneurs and FCR leaders with the vision, energy, and passion for transforming a good idea into something real (Bessant & Tidd, 2015).

Another perspective in Alstete's (2014) study was related to how actual entrepreneurship and management and academics and scholarly systems discourage entrepreneur candidates from developing their business ideas and strategies. As Allstate explained, most future entrepreneur candidates have harmful or inaccurate information about what experience, knowledge, skills, time, resources, and capital are needed to start and develop a sustainable and successful business.

The FCR entrepreneur or owner is responsible for creating, implementing, propelling, and attracting innovation (Cammarano et al., 2019). As the authors established, creating an innovation team should be a critical goal and fundamental strategy for FCR leaders to create and achieve business competitiveness and success. Businesses that always pursue innovation can create loyalty and motivated employees and customers who can become their main collaborators (Leavengood et al., 2014). As the authors also explained, there are two primary sources for the introduction of business innovation: internal or closed innovations, and external or open innovations. An internal or closed innovation introduces innovations to the business with the collaboration of entrepreneur-owners, employees, and managers. Open innovations are inserted into the business by external collaborators such as providers, manufacturers, consultants, customers, friends, family members, and other FCR leaders or professionals

who share the same business (Brem et al., 2016). Establishing an innovation team comprised of both internal and external collaborators is a practice proved to induce constant innovation and propels businesses to new levels of sustainability success (Brem et al., 2016; Leavengood et al., 2014).

The literature review for this study revealed that FCR leaders should be cautious when inserting open innovation strategies into their business (Cammarano et al., 2019; Ham et al., 2017). It has not been proven, nor is there conflicting evidence to indicate that a combination of open and closed (internal and external) innovation strategies could affect business sustainability or success (Ham et al., 2017). The concepts of open and closed innovation strategies propose using different and simultaneous management, absorptive, descriptive, and dynamic approaches to establish and maintain business advantage (Bockelmann & Braun, 2014; Ham et al. 2017; Lichtenhaler, 2013; Spithoven et al., 2013).

Closed, Absorptive, and Dynamics Innovations

Business management is one of the pillars of introducing and promoting business innovation (Ham et al. 2017). As Ham et al. explained, the FCR entrepreneur expectation is that their management team uses its capacity, experience, business knowledge, food industry contacts, food and management training, and constant field exploration to take a dominant role in establishing and strengthening their business innovations. In terms of absorptive innovation strategies, these could be open or closed innovation strategies, and they are generally accepted as introduced to the business, by internal or external sources

(Ham et al. 2017). Organizations should introduce and promote a culture of closed innovators in which every employee can feel motivated and empowered to embrace changes as a team (Alawamleh et al., 2018). As Alawamleh et al. established, these changes will eventually promote positive attitudes and constant communication to external sources (e.g., friends, family members, community members, and potential customers).

The concept of closed or internal innovations came as the result of constant encouragement from FCR entrepreneur-owners and managers by establishing innovation teams and continuously investing in employee innovation training and innovative education programs (Cammarano et al., 2019). The inclusion of innovation programs for FCR employees is fundamental to creating a collaborative and dynamic innovation working team and environment (Ham et al. 2017). These dynamic innovations came as the result of constant interactions between internal and external sources. In this case, these interactions could occur as the result of employees in face-to-face, telephone, electronic, or social network interaction such as Facebook, Instagram, and web pages with external sources (e.g., customers, suppliers, manufacturers' representatives, amongst others), or by executing marketing or promotional campaigns (Alawamleh et al., 2018; Cammarano et al., 2019; Ham et al., 2017).

Open Innovations

Open innovations are the use of external business resources to create fast-casual restaurant innovations (Ham et al. 2017; Jimenez-Jimenez et al., 2019). As previously

described, FCR entrepreneurs, managers, supervisors, and employees are fundamental pillars to establishing a culture of a constant flow of innovation strategies, with promoting innovation teams as the base of their business to create sustainability and success (Cammarano et al., 2019; Ham et al. 2017). As this innovation team and culture become established, the natural progression is to actively promote closed innovation strategies, including outside resources as part of their fast-casual innovation team interactions (Alawamleh et al., 2018; Cammarano et al., 2019; Ham et al. 2017).

Open innovations can create the synergy that combined with closed innovations, can adjust, synchronize, and create a competitive advantage FCR business (Jimenez-Jimenez et al., 2019). Open innovations also provide multiple sources of knowledge and unlimited access to industry information, such as trends and insights. Customers are the first and primary source of open innovations for FCR (Cammarano et al., 2019). As innovators, customers have first-hand access to FCR products and services. As they come to like them, they will gradually become frequent customers and enthusiastic advocates of the FCR business. As customers and internal sources (entrepreneurs, managers, supervisors, and employees) develop mutual trust and respect, they will gradually become established as regulars (Alawamleh et al., 2018). Eventually, these customers will serve as direct sources of open innovations by providing recipes, food quality feedback, environment experience feedback, sharing contacts, and sharing their experiences with other local and non-local restaurants (Cammarano et al., 2019; Ham et al., 2017).

External sources also can be involved by providing online feedback, pictures, and videos that can help FCRs develop and establish a solid reputation in social media between family members, coworkers, friends, and prospective customers. Suppliers, contractors, manufacturers, consultants, and others related to the same line of FCR also serve as additional sources of open innovations (Cammarano et al., 2019). These external sources of innovation can accelerate the FCR levels of expertise, advanced technologies, and working with internal sources to create an innovative team (Alawamleh et al., 2018; Cammarano et al., 2019; Ham et al., 2017).

Technology Innovation Strategies

FCRs cannot exist online because a good meal is engaging and sensory inviting unless they are a nationally recognizable and iconic FCR franchise (Reinke, 2016; Weiner, 2015). As Reinke (2016) explained, FCR must embrace constant innovation to stay in business, and any adaptation of FCR technology innovation (e.g., online ordering, online reservations, online menus, amongst others) should be experimental. Customers will continuously look for multiple factors to make their decision to return. These factors include convenience, service time, food quality, overall customer service, price, and the essence of their overall dining experience. This situation creates a big challenge for entrepreneurs and FCR leaders when introducing technological innovations that can create a business advantage against similar FCRs concepts (Cavusoglu, 2019).

FCRs' technological innovations came from multiple areas on both ends of the restaurant in front of the house (FOH) and back of the house (BOH)). Some of these

innovations are ordering devices, menu design, point of sale (POS) devices, atmosphere, engineering, and architectural designs, among many others (Cavusoglu, 2019; Rodgers, 2008). As Rodgers established, technological innovations benefit FCR and translate beyond customers' value-created perceptions. Technological innovations are critical to creating and maintaining competitiveness, cost-structure alignment, food safety, business flexibility, and market differentiation (Mathur & Gupta, 2018). Sophisticated technology innovations are another essential factor not easily replicated, and with robust brand recognition, these technological additions can strongly benefit FCR operations capabilities (Rodgers, 2008).

Many restaurant businesses fail, which typically happens because business owners and their inner circle of employees, customers, and suppliers cannot recognize the need for innovation change until it is too late (Bessant & Tidd, 2015). As presented, during the Alstete (2014) study, 58% of the students developing entrepreneurs' business plans selected the focused or market niche differentiation strategy, and 28% selected the competitive strategy planned for large differentiation business. These results mean that the majority (86%) want to differentiate their businesses from others to attract focused or a broad range of customers. Technological innovations are expensive and require the development of technical skills and training to take full advantage of their implementation; not every FCR can afford technical innovations during the initial stages of their introduction to the market. This fact leads to established and large FCR corporations taking advantage of during the initial stages (Rodgers, 2008). For that

reason, FCR leaders and innovation teams with internal and external contributors must be aware of technical innovations' availability. They can prioritize introducing them to their business based on their needs, technical skills, and budgetary limitations.

Back-of-the House Technological Innovations

A restaurant's back of the house (BOH) typically uses point of sale (POS) technology innovations for accounting/financial analysis and reporting, inventory/storage management, kitchen ordering (printers), and internal internet use (intranet) (Cavusoglu, 2019). As explained by Cavusoglu, in terms of equipment innovation, there are not many differences between FCR technological innovations and any other restaurants, including fast-food, casual, and fine dining. The typical difference is the use and adaptation to volume's needs, sources, and space constraints of their kitchens (Cavusoglu, 2019; Rodgers, 2008). As Rodgers and Cavusoglu explained, some of the BOH equipment technologies innovations are related to providing better heating and food preparation, extending the shelf-life of food, reducing oil absorption, reducing frying time, faster fresh food preparation, and improving appearance.

The fresh-food concept established by FCR leaders requires modified concepts of business purchasing practices, just-in-time, and lean manufacturing principles (Cavusoglu, 2019). As explained by Cavusoglu, food preparation, preservation techniques and technologies need to be designed to store and keep food fresh, such as vacuum packaging, sous vide process, and multi-functional equipment for cooking and chilling solutions. An FCR facility design needs to be accessible and ergonomic for

employees, visually attractive for customers, but practical and efficient to allow the quick service to customers (Cavusoglu, 2019; Rodgers, 2008).

The actual gaps between BOH restaurant technical innovations and management/entrepreneurial schools are related to the lack of courses to prepare future FCR leaders to get in front of the technical innovation so they can drive change instead of leaving it to manufacturers and equipment providers (Rodgers, 2008). At this stage, is when innovation teams can establish communication and challenge manufacturers, suppliers, and service providers to collaborate with minor adjustments (e.g., temperature and airflow control, energy consumption, efficient cleaning techniques, preservation ingredients and techniques, and technical and practical training) to better and more efficiently handle existing technologies and capabilities (Mathur & Gupta, 2018; Rodgers, 2008).

Front-of-the-House Technological Innovations

Technological innovations for FCRs from the front of the house (FOH) have a significant impact on customers' perception of value creation and perceived values. These are technologies that relate to the restaurant's atmosphere environment (e.g., lights, scenarios, temperature, colors, music, layouts design, furniture, and scent), menu (e.g., ordering, design, pricing), POS technology (e.g., software, gift cards, payment methods, analytics, among others), customer service (e.g., delivery, catering, pick-up, and take-out), and food quality (Cavusoglu, 2019; Rodgers, 2008).

Fast-Casual Restaurant Atmosphere Environment. Existing food service literature established a positive relationship between the perceived restaurant atmosphere and customer service attributes with the perceived food quality (Mathur & Gupta, 2018). The authors established that FCRs were created on the premise of fast, quality food in a casual dining environment at reasonable prices. FCR design is the first and most crucial element of drawing customer attention and interest (Ivkov et al., 2016). Based on that perspective, and because FCR does not provide table service, the atmospheric environment becomes equally important as customer service when it comes to providing customers with an exceptional culinary experience (Mathur & Gupta, 2018).

The FCR should establish its FOH technological-innovations approach to provide each customer with a consistent enhancement of their sensorial experience touch, taste, smell, sight, and sound. Using this perspective, FCR leaders should create a unique atmospheric experience, including attractive and comfortable design, layouts, furniture, colors, music, temperature, scent, and lights to enhance customers' value perception (Ivkov et al., 2016). The atmosphere environment also must stimulate the customers' emotions, intellect, and behaviors to influence and promote their next visit and simultaneously generate positive feedback and promotion within their inner and social circles (Bae et al., 2018; Mathur & Gupta, 2018).

Fast-Casual Restaurant Menu. FCR menus connect the customers with their products, services, history, success, values, practices, social responsibility practices, and local community efforts (Freed, 2015). FCR customers preferred an efficient and quick

delivery menu with healthier options to improve the quality of their diet, such as natural, and organic ingredients, low calories, and sugar-free refreshments (Glanz et al., n.d.; Ivkov et al., 2016). The FCR menu is the first analytical contact between the customers and the restaurant, and a powerful tool to promote high-profit items, open customer's curiosity, and expectations to gain their confidence and trust eventually (Freed, 2015; Ivkov et al., 2016).

In an in-depth structured telephone interview study presented by Glanz et al. (n.d.), 41 senior menu developers and executives from fast and casual restaurants cover the influences for the introduction of healthy food items in their established menus; the data demonstrated four primary considerations. The main considerations provided by the participants, in terms of percentages, were: (a) grow sales and increase profits (mentioned by 61% of participants); (b) health and nutrition content (21%); (c) avoid losing healthy food-seeking customers (27%); and (d) additional (short shelf life of products, preparation time, and high labor cost) with (47%). As established by the authors, restaurants measure their profit margins based on their sales versus food, labor, and operating expenses, making the development of their menu a key component and an integral part of their success or failure (Glanz et al., n.d.).

Some of the most common FCR challenges are the fluctuation of consumer tastes, increased food costs, constant changes in ordering technology, delivery options, and, since 2016, steady wage inflation (McGrath, 2017). As explained by McGrath, it is well known that restaurants are labor-intensive with slim profit margins, and the increase in

labor rates across the nation is making large companies such as Shake Shack and Chipotle, among others, to consider different strategies. Examples include expanding their menus to offer breakfast since it would mean earlier hours and adjusting their menu for extended hours (McGrath, 2017). A successful FCR menu should include breakfast options, a steady regular menu with daily, weekly, and seasonal specials that include dietary options such as gluten-free, low-fat, low sodium, vegetarian, and accommodate allergies and intolerance and other special needs as part of their daily specials (Jimenez-Jimenez et al., 2019; McGrath, 2017). FCRs need to ensure that they can always provide what is offered in their menu while enhancing their customers' dining experience, service quality, and maintaining fair pricing. When pricing is fair, the customers are likely to return and become regular clients (Anelmsson et al., 2014; Brown & Johnson 2017; Rodriguez et al., 2014).

Point-of-Sale Technology. An essential aspect of an FCR is to attract and establish customer loyalty by providing convenience, great atmosphere, quick service, and perception of fair pricing that could reflect the overall style of the restaurant while providing a great experience (Cavusoglu, 2019; Ozturk et al., 2017). Happy customers spend more, which can create a competitive advantage, especially if the price is perceived fair and aligned with the offer of a superior product and services (Anselmsson et al., 2014). POS systems have been added as a necessary element to provide FCR integration and competitive advantage (Cavusoglu, 2019).

A POS system is an integrated technology developed to execute sales transactions at any retail store using any cashier technology (e.g., restaurants, supermarkets, and hotels) (Cavusoglu, 2019). As Cavusoglu explained, a POS offers hardware and software for checkouts. Since the 1950s, it has evolved from mechanical cash register transactions to a complete spectrum of multiple applications. From credit card processing, split checks, smartphone mobile payments, gift card activations, reservations, age verification, food service sequencing, payroll modules, integrated accounting modules, to customer relationships and service management modules (e.g., service management, customer feedback, buying frequency, direct marketing, among others) (Cavusoglu, 2019; Ozturk et al., 2017; Reynolds, 2019).

Many businesses and suppliers have been integrating their POS technologies to provide interconnected and synchronized services with standardized interfaces (Cavusoglu, 2019). In the modern FCR, POS integrates their computer systems and registers to internal or external networks and printers located outside their locations and at both ends of their restaurant, front and back of the house (Cavusoglu, 2019; Reynolds 2019). The POS integration and functions increase restaurant efficiency and accelerate service time while keeping complete, overall business management integration (Reynolds 2019). In the United States, there are many companies dedicated to serving FCR immediate, and future system integration needs such as Presto, Toast, Touch Bistro, and Upserve, among others.

In a study made by Moon, Kim, and Ham (2014), the results suggested that the adaptation and use of POS depend on the task, convenience, and usefulness. The authors argued that the evaluation of the POS design, tasks, and applications is critical for all users' success, including employees and customers. The authors explained that the POS developer should assess the existing and future needs of the FCR to fit the selected POS system for these needs. POS systems have been a great revolution for the FCR business to improve services, employee management, and have the ability for FCR to interact and define their customers' needs (Moon et al., 2014; Presto, Autumn 2019).

Customer Service. Customer satisfaction is the customer's perception and judgment based on the characteristics of the service received or a product purchased (Dehghan et al., 2015). Restaurants' high rate of failure is attributed to increasing competition and evolving customer requirements (Kurian & Muzumdar, 2017). As established by Kurian & Muzumdar, high-quality customer service is imperative to attracting and retaining customers for the business to survive. As Ivkov et al. (2016) explained, FCR customers do not want to spend too much time inside a restaurant. They intend to receive quick service during their busy daily agenda and limited time, such as traveling to or from work or at lunchtime. As presented by the authors, conditions of the modern way of life are transforming the restaurant sector, placing FCR at the forefront of this evolution with a convenient, flexible, and customizable menu concept that includes differentiation between low calories, healthy and natural options, sugar-free, gluten-free, and organic food options.

Customer service elements vary between different categories: quality of service, management styles, employees' capabilities, customer gratification, location environment (aesthetics and ambiance), and price perception. In previous studies, these elements have been positively related to customer satisfaction, loyalty, and brand recognition (Dehghan et al., 2015; Kurian & Muzumdar, 2017). Customers expect great food and service at a competitive or lower price, and when they do not receive what they expect, they move to a different option (Kurian & Muzumdar, 2017). Customer service-oriented culture has been established as a foundation for innovation and to obtain a competitive advantage (Ivkov et al., 2016). To establish a robust customer service-oriented culture, FCR must be focused on effective strategies for recruiting, training, motivation, rewards, and continually engaging with their employees, customers, and suppliers (Dehghan et al., 2015). A competitive advantage exists with the development and constant training of internal human resources (Ikov et al., 2016). When these internal resources are developed, they become assets to the FCR, and reduce the chances of imitation, solidifying the restaurant's base for innovation and sustainability.

As presented by Ivkov et al. (2016), younger managers, up to 41 years of age, are more likely to implement innovation strategies in their restaurant in overall design, atmosphere, and existing technologies than their older counterparts. The study also revealed that FCRs should focus on customer orientation, local food providers, social media marketing, mobile applications, selling experience, anticipating market changes, evolving and customizable menus, and social responsibility after-purchase customer care.

In a different study, by Kleiman (2006), the author established that the main challenges for the overall restaurant industry, including FCRs, is to provide consistent customer service due to staffing challenges related to escalated salary increase and high turnover. Ivkov et al. (2016) also established that the restaurant industry's challenges came from increasing competition, federal and state regulations, and technological changes.

Food Quality. There is a significant relationship between customers' overall perception of restaurant atmospherics and their food quality perception (Mathur & Gupta, 2018). Mathur and Gupta (2018) also established that the restaurant food quality is an essential contributor to the overall customer value perception and a direct contributor to sponsorship and repetitive visits. For example, after being in the middle of a food contamination crisis, Chipotle targeted a campaign of food quality enhancement as a strategy to regain its value and reputation to investors and customers (McGrath, 2017). As McGrath mentioned, Chipotle's strategy also combined multiple innovation strategies to increase customer engagement, such as on-site hospitality, digital experience, and overall economic and sustainability model.

Since the beginning of 2010, there have been an increasing number of studies related to food service, food safety, and restaurant management strategies to increase customer expectations in areas such as convenience, use of technology, corporate responsibility, food quality, and food labeling information (DiPietro, 2017). With the increase in FCR competition, there has been an increase in the number of business concepts and menus copied from originals and successful business models such as Panera

Bread and Chipotle, among others (Brewer, 2018). Brewer conducted a study undertaken in Dublin, Ireland, with professionals between 25 to 39 years of age. Brewer explained that the attribute of business authenticity was not perceived as an essential factor for FCR selection compared with other factors such as customer service or food quality.

Customers are aware of the potential risks that a restaurant can create where their health is concerned. Thus, restaurants continually evaluate food labeling and nutritional information for their food choices and perception value (DiPietro, 2017). Customers are willing to pay more for healthier choices, and fresh ingredients, so FCR leaders need to define how the concept and interpretation of food quality with superior quality and ingredients can create successful marketing campaigns for their business (Brewer, 2018; Mathur & Gupta, 2018).

The major challenge for FCR is to provide consistent food quality with fresh, organic, seasonal, and natural ingredients to meet their customers' increasing expectations while keeping competitiveness, customer value perception, and minimum required order quantities from their suppliers (Allan, 2018). As Allan explained, FCRs have increased local farm providers' use and partner with specialized regional providers to keep consistency and mitigate most of their food costs created by food waste. In these terms, FCR must ensure that its distributors invest in the technologies to keep ingredients fresh before delivery or are willing to negotiate, increasing the number of deliveries per week (Allan, 2008). As Allan (2018) presented, different food quality and sustainability improvement for a FCR mean establishing consistent training and re-training. Some of

these areas are food safety, ingredient rotation, spoilage and conservation practices, conditions of storage areas (e.g., layout, temperature, and humidity), amongst other quality assurance programs and practices (Allan, 2018; Mills 2019; PR Newswire, 2018).

Integrated Innovation Management Strategies

The integrated innovation management theory can be traced back to the origins of Schumpeter's innovation theory in 1912 but was formally established based on a cooperative effort during the 1970s to improve the overall implementation of innovation strategies in business; notable in strategic innovation strategies in business organizational culture, operations, management, and marketing areas (Sundbo & Elgar, 2001; Wang & Wang, 2016). Similarly, Li et al., (2010) defined the integrated innovation theory as interconnected innovation strategies that combined technology, organizational practices, business knowledge, production process, and many other business fields with strategies to guarantee full implementation of innovation in business products and or services.

Organizational Culture

Innovation strategies are necessary to achieve business success, and the implementation of organizational culture and management strategies is fundamental to guarantee the successful application of innovation in business processes, services, and products (Wu et al., 2019). In a conceptual model study developed by Wu et al., (2019), using 233 questionnaires from 17 small and medium business in Taiwan, China, the results demonstrated that the implementation of innovation strategies was more suitable and successful for those businesses with a robust, innovative organizational culture and

more flexible managerial and operational practices. The integration of innovation strategies must build into the company's product and service lifecycle, and as the foundation of the business culture and management practices (Huo & Pei, 2011). The business organizational culture is considered the core of business innovation ability, which is defined by employees' values and behaviors responsible for creating a unique social, cognitive, and psychological environment that will guide internal and external thinking and behaviors (Wu et al., 2019).

Organizational Resources

Owners-entrepreneurs and FCR leaders are critical to guarantee the adoption and implementation success of business innovation strategies (Lee et al., 2013). Based on the levels of business responsibilities, organizations should segregate levels based on their strategical or tactical decision-making activities following their core functions (e.g., product or service management, cost, quality, procurement, inventory, or human resources management) (Huo & Pei, 2011). The executive management of the organization, owners-entrepreneurs, investors, and managers are responsible for integrating innovation strategies from multiple fields (e.g., technology, management, operational, marketing and supply chain, among others) to ensure a continual reduction of production or services cost, quality improvement, product delivery, and quick adaptation to customers' needs and demands to gain or maintain their business competitive advantage (Huo & Pei, 2011; Lee et al., 2013).

In terms of human resources or human capital, FCRs leaders must be opened to involving all employees to promote a culture that motivates continual learning, development, and adaptation of innovation strategies to quickly respond to market changes and their customers' needs (Altındağ et al., 2019). As explained by Altındağ et al., human resources or human capital could be organized into two segments, general and specific. The concept of global human capital relates to the skills, knowledge, experience, and competencies of employees, while the specific human capital relates to the adaptation of employees with the organization (e.g., satisfaction, recognition, and training, amongst others). The inclusion of employees and the continuous development of their intellect is a critical factor to attracting and retaining qualified employees who can access, process, and codify innovation strategies that could support and improve their business's competitive advantage and sustainability opportunities (Altındağ et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2013).

Social Diffusion Innovation Strategies

The social innovation diffusion strategies emerged from the concepts and developmental theory of Rogers back in the 1960s. It focused on how people communicate what they learned about innovation through their social groups (Andersson et al., 2012; Dearing & Cox, 2018; Jain & Rogers, 1968; Rogers, 2001). Social Diffusion Innovation Strategy for FCRs could be defined as the process whereby innovation is promoted by a customer or adopter who visited or received a delivery from the FCR. Customers would convey this to the rest of their social system using specific channels of

communication over a period by telephone calls, emails, text messages, social media, and word of mouth (Cheng, 2017). As previously presented, a critical factor in the diffusion of innovation strategies is the adoption phase. This phase initiates the process that motivates and creates social pressure on the members of a social group to adopt the presented innovation (Dearing & Cox, 2018; Rogers, 2001). As previously explained, the social diffusion innovation strategies proposed by Rogers has four main components: innovation, communication channels, time, and social system (Cheng, 2017).

Social Diffusion Innovation Component

The factors of innovation that represent an advantage for customers or adopters are curiosity, consistency, visibility, compatibility, complexity, and trialability (Cheng, 2017). These factors, or perceived advantages, occur when many customers or adopters recognize the benefits of the innovation and influence its accelerated adoption through their social networks (Dearing & Cox, 2018).

Social Diffusion Communication Channel Component

The success and propagation of any innovation depend on its communication channels (Jain & Rogers, 1968; Rogers, 2001). As defined by Rogers, these channels could propagate the communication via a group, mass, or interpersonal communication. As Rogers also established, a group or mass communication will always be faster and more efficient than a single interpersonal communication channel. Interpersonal communication will always provide a more direct, selective, focused, and reciprocal communication that will eventually lead to innovation diffusion increase (Cheng, 2017).

Social Diffusion Time Component

The first element for a social diffusion innovation strategy is time, which initiates a chronological decision procedure involving the following five steps: knowledge, persuasion, decision, implementation, and confirmation (Rogers, 2001). The second element Rogers presented was that innovation can only start in a group when a certain number of adopters are reached, and there are enough adopters to be sustainable. This number usually fluctuates between 10% to 20% of the individuals in a social group. In contrast, when this number is around 50%, the diffusion rate tends to be saturated and decreased. Furthermore, if it cannot reach a sustainable percentage, the innovation will eventually disappear.

Social Diffusion System Component

The main characteristics of a social diffusion system include social structure, social norms, and leaders' opinions (Rogers, 2001). Rogers defined social norms as thoughts and principles shared and created to guide a social structure. The social diffusion innovation system component is described as a challenging process, typically debated, and in many circumstances, contradictory to defined social structures and norms (Cheng, 2017; Dearing & Cox, 2018; Jain & Rogers, 1968; Rogers, 2001;). Dearing and Cox also explained that the social system leaders are responsible for initiating and guiding other members, directly or indirectly, to the innovation adoption by well-defining and introducing the social pressure that will drive other members to adopt the innovation.

Summary and Transition

Chapter 2 included a concise literature review methodology (review strategy and conceptual framework), followed by a broad literature review that may expand the existing knowledge related to theories, perspectives, previous studies, and related concepts of what is known, not known, and the existing gaps. The literature review may assist in implementing innovation strategies to create sustainable FCRs in Delaware. There were multiple gaps found during the literature review of this chapter, as Schumpeter mentioned (1942), the entrepreneurship innovation theory must be studied from multiple perspectives aside from the sole aspect of the entrepreneur and its firm. That was the leading gap for this case study. As Schumpeter also mentioned, the distinct aspects of innovation strategies could be analyzed from diverse views such as the evolution of the industry, markets, society, economy, technology, and the political landscape under study.

As Schumpeter established (1942), entrepreneurs and FCR leaders are the primary agents for economic and business development as they need to push for innovation strategies as a countermeasure for competition and guarantee financial success. Eventually, they must reinvent themselves to create a sustainable business and create a cycle of creative destruction that will destroy and substitute their previous strategies to create new ones (Bessant & Tidd, 2015; Schumpeter, 1942). As the literature review progressed, there were other related theories and concepts such as the entrepreneurship-innovation, technological-innovation, integrated innovation management system, and

social diffusion innovations derived from the original concepts of entrepreneurship innovation theory. These derived theories and concepts combinations are responsible for the restaurant industry's continual evolution, including the recent growth and success of the FCR segment.

Innovation is the best tool for an entrepreneur to maximize the changing environment for products or services, and it can be taught, learned, and practiced (Drucker, 1985). The topics covered during the development of this literature review included: the entrepreneurship innovation theory; origins and development; technological innovation theory and strategies (FOH, BOH, menu, POS technologies, and food quality), integrated management innovation theory and strategies (organizational structure, and organizational resources), social diffusion innovation theory and strategies (innovation, communication channels, time, and diffusion system). The literature review presented in this chapter created a solid background for the topics, which were focused while transitioning to the methodology to make a feasible multiple-case study, as described in Chapter 3. Chapter 3 includes a comprehensive explanation of the study's purpose, research design, rationale, role of the researcher, methodology, and issues with trustworthiness.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this qualitative multiple-case study was to explore what innovative strategies are used by successful FCR leaders in Delaware to overcome business challenges and achieve sustainability beyond 5 years. The social change implications of this research include the creation of sustainability of FCRs in Delaware, while at the same time making contributions to the local economy by creating jobs and sparking favorable community effects, cohesive relationships, greater understanding, and continuous social improvement. The use of the entrepreneurship innovation theory and derivative theories may provide information about what strategies, perspectives, and opportunities makes the FCR business model work in Delaware. In Chapter 3, I provide a comprehensive explanation of the research design and rationale, role of the researcher, methodology, and issues with trustworthiness.

Research Design and Rationale

The research question for this qualitative multiple-case study was: What innovative strategies do FCR leaders in Delaware used to overcome their business challenges and achieve sustainability beyond 5 years? The main concepts for this multiple-case study are from entrepreneurship, technology, integrated management systems, and social diffusion. I used these concepts to explore the strategies that could help FCR achieve long-term sustainability. Schumpeter's entrepreneurship innovation theory provided a foundation for the conceptual framework. Schumpeter (1942) defined entrepreneurship innovation theory as a creative and transformational process in which

the entrepreneur is the driver who revolutionizes the economic landscape by creating a new structure.

Qualitative research design connects the data collected and conclusions derived from the study's initial questions (Yin, 2018). The main reason for a qualitative study approach was to take an active role in the study to generate insights based on human knowledge, observation, detailed description, and in-depth interviewing (Patton, 2015). I considered multiple qualitative research designs other than case studies. These included ethnography, grounded theory, narrative research, and phenomenology; however, none was a good fit for answering my study's intent and research questions.

The essence of ethnographic research and the core questions related to it evolve around what creates the culture of the specific group under study and how their culture can explain their behaviors and perspectives (Patton, 2015). Ethnographic research design is a naturalistic form of inquiry that provides an in-depth exploration and contact within a community culture focused on individuals' perspectives, daily events, local activities, peculiarities, and interpretations of their world (Miles et al., 2014). I did not select the ethnographic research design after considering that my intent was not to explore the culture, perspectives, activities, or peculiarities surrounding the FCR community culture.

Ethnographic research would not define or propose innovative strategies that could enhance the possibility for FCR in Delaware, being sustainable beyond 5 years. The nature of grounded theory research emerges inductively with the constant interaction with data collected during a study or a series of studies (Maxwell, 2013). As Miles et al.

(2014) explained, a researcher using a grounded theory approach generates codes that are the basis for categories and theory development. A grounded theory methodology involves the researcher participating with the actual world and obtaining results and findings established by specific actions, processes, practices, and procedures (Patton, 2015). The main objective of grounded theory is to establish a theory from the data obtained with a methodical and comparative analysis (Burkholder et al., 2016). In contrast, the purpose of this qualitative multiple-case study was to explore what innovative strategies are used by successful FCR leaders in Delaware to overcome business challenges and achieve sustainability beyond 5 years. Based on that established purpose, grounded theory research did not fit my research.

The focus of narrative research is on capturing and analyzing stories that reveal human experiences (life) and social structures (culture) from the perspectives of the participants (Patton, 2015). Narrative research is analytical and is developed by collecting stories in chronological order (Yin, 2018). The narrative research design was not adequate for my study because my intention was not to define the life or culture created by the participants.

The nature of phenomenological research emerges from the analysis of the collected data in a thematic way to extract the context, structure, and essence of the experience of participants living with the phenomenon under study (Miles et al., 2014). Phenomenological research focuses on descriptions of the participants' experience with the phenomenon under study (Patton, 2015). My study's objective was not to follow the

participants' experiences or define the human factor involved in the phenomenon under study. For that reason, the phenomenological research design was not a good fit for my study.

A multiple-case study was the appropriate qualitative research design to answer the purpose and research questions and to focus my study. I used a multiple-case study research method to explore what innovative strategies are used by successful FCR in Delaware to be sustainable beyond their first 5 years. As Yin (2018) explained, there are four types of case study designs: (a) Type-1, or single-case holistic; (b) Type-2, or single-case embedded; (c) Type-3, or multiple-case holistic; and Type-4, or multiple-case embedded. This study was Type-3.

The rationale for selecting a multiple-case study over a single-case study design was that a single-case study is appropriate when the design is critical, unusual, familiar, revelatory, or longitudinal in a context of a single-case experiment with a holistic (single) or embedded (multiple) units of analysis (Yin, 2018). My case study included six FCR restaurants with each considered a different case. However, each case was considered a holistic unit of analysis or participants, such as owners-entrepreneurs, managers, and supervisors per case. As illustrated in Yin's (2018) typology of case study design, the accurate description for this research study was a multiple-holistic-case study Type-3. As Yin explained, a multiple-case study is considered more compelling, reliable, and robust than a single-case study. A multiple case study also requires more extensive resources and time from the researcher as each case can predict similar (literal replication) or

contrasting results, but for anticipatory reasons (theoretical replication; Patton, 2015; Yin, 2018). As Yin (2018) explained, the multiple-case procedure consists of three phases: (a) define and design; (b) prepare, collect, and analyze; and (c) analyze and conclude.

A multiple-case study addresses five traditional concerns: rigorous research methodology, a transparent process to avoid confusion, specific generalization (if desired), careful management of effort, and comparative analysis (Miles et al., 2014). The five components of a qualitative multiple-case study design include the following: the case, case study questions, propositions, the logical linkage of the data to the proposals, and interpretation of the findings (Miles et al., 2014; Yin, 2018). During this study, I performed telephone and virtual interviews with open-ended questions in a semistructured format with entrepreneurs-owners, managers, and supervisors associated with the selected FCR.

Role of the Researcher

In qualitative research, the role of a researcher is to use literature to narrow the focus to a specific topic, propose the questions for the study, establish propositions, collect data to link to the propositions, and, finally, establish the criteria to serve as the base by which to interpret research findings (Yin, 2018). The researcher's participation and subjectivity influence the research and format the methodology, the analysis, and the treatment of the collected data (Karagiozis, 2018). The role of a qualitative researcher is to conduct a study through an intense and prolonged interaction with participants in their

natural environment to gain a clear overview of the context under study (Miles et al., 2014).

I interviewed the selected participants to explore what innovative strategies are used by successful FCR leaders in Delaware to overcome business challenges and achieve sustainability beyond 5 years. As Patton (2015) established, the interview allows the researcher to enter the participant's perspective by starting with the assumption that the view is meaningful, knowledgeable, and valuable. During my research, I used telephone and virtual interviews in a semistructured format with open-ended questions to gain insight into innovative strategies aimed at FCR leaders. I started my interviews by asking neutral questions and using necessary descriptive information about the phenomenon under study. This information established the base for the rest of the questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Data collected through interviews and documentation depends on the information the researcher wants to define (motives and intentions) and who desires those perspectives. Being courteous, nonjudgmental, and polite is crucial to achieving a positive interaction during the interview process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As a researcher, asking the right questions, being a good listener, staying adaptive to new information, understanding the issues, and conducting the interview ethically were essential for the successful realization of my qualitative case study (see Yin, 2018). As a former restaurant owner and food and manufacturing plant beverage manager, I had more than 15 years of experience in the restaurant and food industry. That experience provided

me with firsthand knowledge of the practices, processes, and innovation strategies related to restaurant sustainability. To avoid any bias during the realization of my research, I maintained a rigorous ethical code that also included the use of a reflective journal. I performed transcript review with all participants to guarantee the accuracy of the audio transcriptions and notes taken during the interviews to guarantee the credibility of the data and eliminate preconceptions or biases (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Ethical issues were identified that could interfere or create a conflict of interest in power differentials with participants.

My plan was to obtain IRB approval, be transparent, provide written guidelines about the entire process, and maintain a neutral position by making appropriate referrals to other sources as needed (Miles et al., 2014). As a manufacturing plant manager living in Delaware at the time of the study, I was also a customer of some FCR restaurants. To avoid ethical issues or biases, I had no position of power or a relationship with any participating business or individual that could interfere with maintaining a high level of subjectivity during the realization of my research study. A qualitative researcher is responsible not only for producing high-quality knowledge but also for protecting the confidentiality and maintaining the basic principle of not harming those whose lives are under study (Miles et al., 2014).

Methodology

This multiple-case study's primary objective was to explore what innovative strategies are used by successful FCR leaders in Delaware to be sustainable beyond 5

years. To address this purpose, I used a qualitative research design and methodology. A qualitative research case study grants the researcher an opportunity to focus on specific details while maintaining a holistic and realistic perspective (Yin, 2018). Using a qualitative research study, I attempted to capture data about participants' perceptions during a telephone or virtual interviews and data-gathering always keeping neutrality related to the topic under investigation (Miles et al., 2014). In this section, I explain the logic of a multiple-case study procedure and the plan behind participant selection logic, instrumentation, participant recruitment, participation, data collection methods, and data analysis.

Participant Selection Logic

Qualitative research typically focuses on small samples of the number of cases and participants (Patton, 2015). All the locations and participants should meet the criteria presented as part of the study's scope and delimitations. Yin (2018) explained that the optimal design to achieve compelling support of initial propositions for a multiple-case study is between six to 10 cases. Each case was carefully selected based on the need to (a) predict comparable results (literal replication) and (b) predict conflicting results, but for anticipatable reasons (theoretical replication). As Yin also explained, just because the research design calls for a multiple-case study does not eliminate the need for holistic units or embedded subunits. During this multiple-case study, I used a holistic unit approach where the participants (entrepreneurs-owners, managers, and supervisors) inside the context of each case FCR considered part of a single unit of analysis. As Yin

recommended, the research sampling strategy of several participants per case was an estimation of the total pool of potential candidates per FCR under study. The relationship between data saturation and the selected sampling size was based on a realistic number of participants for a typical FCR, which could be two participants. Based on that reality, my research study interviews involved 12 qualified candidates or until data saturation was achieved. Data saturation is defined as the amount and quality of information researchers could receive during their data collection process to the point that any new information or theme is observed (Miles et al., 2014). For that reason, this study's targeted population involved 12 FCR leaders or enough participants to achieve data saturation, and six qualified FCR located in Delaware. An FCR leader in this case study was an entrepreneur, business owner, manager, or supervisor working at the selected FCR.

A case study is defined as a detailed exploration of a current aspect within the real-world context and relies on interviews, direct observation, and documentation related to the phenomenon under study (Yin, 2018). The data gathering from internet or voluntarily provided by FCR leaders included social media posts, advertising, official publications, leadership reports, key performance indicator reports, newspaper or magazine articles, memorabilia, survey results, annual financial reports, company manuals, and daily logs (Patton, 2015). Choosing the participant restaurants was determined using the following four steps: (a) contacting the Delaware Restaurant Association and the Delaware Small Business Development Center, (b) conducting online search, (c) making telephone contact, and (d) visiting the locations. I used the

following criteria to make the final selection of the six research sites: (a) FCR located in Delaware, (b) FCR with 5 or more years of continuous business in the same location, and (c) FCR that had been under management by the same owner-entrepreneur for 5 or more years.

Instrumentation

As Yin (2018) explained, there are six primary sources of evidence during the development of a case study: interviews, documentation, archival records, direct observations, participant observation, and physical artifacts. As Merriam and Tisdell (2016) established, the entire case study can be jeopardized when the data collection process during the search for evidence is not well executed. I developed three instruments to ensure collecting the data evidence needed for this case study's success. These instruments are an interview protocol, data gathering, annotations log, and reflective journal. These instruments represent the design to collect actual, factual, and reputable sources of information that are consistent and aligned with the established purpose, research questions, scope, and significance of the study.

The research interview protocol, annotation log, and reflective journal for this case study included four main goals: (a) the use of multiple and not a single source of evidence; (b) create a database; (c) maintain a chain of evidence; and (d) the careful use of electronic sources of evidence (Yin, 2018). The evidence obtained during data collection and the use of Yin's four leading goals provided a high-quality multiple-case

study and helped in addressing potential problems during the construction of credibility and transferability of the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015; Yin, 2018).

The interview protocol (see Appendix B) instrument includes 10 to 12 open-ended questions developed based on the established research conceptual framework and purpose. The initial two questions were focus on establishing the participant's trust and engagement with the interview process. The Interview Questions 3-10 were focused on exploring what successful FCR leaders in Delaware use innovative strategies to overcome business challenges and achieve sustainability beyond 5 years. I asked follow-up questions necessary to access the true essence of the participants' experiences. Finally, Interview Questions 11-12 were additional questions to add any missing critical information or clarification to a previous response. The interview protocols increased the credibility, transferability, and dependability of my case study and provided the opportunity to auscultate in-depth information (Yin, 2018).

The second instrument used was an annotation log (see Appendix C). This instrument helped to provide credibility and transferability to the data collection process. The annotation log process helped to codify the data and obtain an in-depth and complete description of interviews and documentation gathering. This instrument helped to summarize, eliminate irrelevant information, perform qualitative analysis, and obtain a complete description of the compiled data. Using this instrument, I captured daily activities such as ideas, comments, contradictory information, issues, and achievements after the categorization. The third instrument developed was a reflective journal (see

Appendix D) used to include relevant actions during the entire data collection process and insert all interview transcriptions. The participants also used this instrument to revise, eliminate, add any missing valuable information, and obtain content validation.

Interview Protocol Validation

During my interview protocol validation, I had the opportunity to provide details about the purpose of my research study and present my interview protocol (see Appendix B) and my research questions (see Appendix A) to a panel of five experts of scholars and practitioners. With the interview protocol assessment, experts evaluated the congruency and alignment of the research questions with the purpose of the study. The panel also verified the clarity and conciseness of language, grammar and spelling errors, and the transition of questions from introductory to transitional to closing questions. The consensus between the panelists was that the established process of dependability would enhance the credibility of the interview protocol, they also agreed that the research interview questions were aligned with the purpose and main research question, that questions are positioned in a logical order that could facilitate the flow and maintain the interest of the participants during the interview. All panel members agreed that the closing question would provide an excellent opportunity for participants to add multiple and valuable perspectives. This question created buy-in from the participants and created a positive experience that enhanced any future communication and follow-up with them (Castillo-Montoya, 2016).

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

Recruitment and Participation Procedures

In a qualitative research study, selecting the participants depends on two major factors: what the researcher wants to know and how the participants could help increase the researcher's perception of the phenomenon under study (Merriam & Tisdell 2016). To identify research locations, I contacted the Delaware Restaurant Association and the Delaware Small Business Development Center to request an updated list of FCR in operation as of January 30, 2021, including their status (open or closed) and opening date. As alternative method to determine their operation length, I searched online, called, and visited several FCR facilities across the three Delaware counties (New Castle, Kent, and Sussex). To continue with the preselection process, I contacted business owners-entrepreneurs and general managers by telephone and email to coordinate a telephone or virtual meeting, based on Walden University's IRB guidelines. During this meeting, I explained the research purpose, document management, confidentiality guarantees, and agreements, risk, and benefits of the study. I emphasized that participation was voluntary.

After the initial meeting with business owners-entrepreneurs or general managers, I pre-selected all suitable and participant locations. I sent a formal letter to the preselected sites, and I reintroduced my research study intentions (see Appendix E). I also requested that each owner-entrepreneur or manager in charge provide me with a signed authorization (see Appendix F) to begin my research. After receiving letters of approval from entrepreneurs, business owners, or general managers, I sent an informational

announcement to be posted in their internal communication boards. This informative announcement included a collaboration statement requesting their leaders for volunteer participation in my research investigation, the criteria to participate, and my personal contact information (see Appendix G). This informative announcement was posted at their administrative bulletin boards, or any other area recommended by the owner-entrepreneur or general manager. The interested candidates had confidentially contacted me by telephone call or email. Then, I coordinated a telephone call or virtual meeting to introduce myself and explain the research study's general concept, documentation management, confidentiality agreements and guarantees, risks, and benefits.

I extended a formal consent form to each possible participant. This consent form explained the study's purpose, participation criteria, participation procedure, interview questions samples, voluntary participation statements, privacy statements, and contact information. As Miles et al. (2014) described, this step is a critical step to establish a preliminary criterion-based case selection (Miles et al., 2014). The criteria for the identification and selection of participants were based on: (a) all participants were 18 years of age or older; (b) all participants were currently covering a leadership role in the selected FCR located in Delaware; (c) owners-entrepreneurs from the selected FCR had at least 5 years of continuous ownership in that specific location, and (d) managers and supervisors had at least 3 years of consistent experience in that specific FCR location. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) stated that a preliminary qualification of candidates was necessary for a qualitative research study.

After receiving the invitation and consent confirmation forms from all the participants' showing their interest in participating via email, I matched and verified their responses with the established qualifications to select possible candidates. I used only those individuals who met the pre-established criteria and agreed to participate in the study (Patton, 2015). After the participation criteria were matched and selected, I contacted the selected participants with appropriate instructions and scheduled telephone or virtual interviews at a mutually convenient time and date. All interview data were collected during the predetermined data collection events based on participants' availability, and my interviews took place on multiple dates. The length of each interview was no more than 60 minutes.

Data Collection Procedures

I ensured that all interviews (via telephone or video conference) occurred with no business productivity or sales interference. I made clear to all participants that their participation was strictly confidential. I also ensured that participants understood that they could withdraw from participation at any moment before, during, or after completing their participation without any consequence or penalty. The withdraw requirement was to provide a written decision via email. As a debriefing protocol, I engaged via telephone or email with every participant to explain or clarify any doubt or question-related to their voluntary early exit, stop, or future engagement with the case study. Also, I provided a summary of the study objectives or any missed objectives.

As Miles et al. (2014) explained, case study interviews assist the researcher by suggesting explanations for critical events and insights that reflect the participant's perspectives about the phenomenon under study. As Yin (2018) explained, the researcher's job during a case study interview is to follow the line of inquiry established by the case study protocol and develop questions in an unbiased manner that delivers responses related to the researcher's line of inquiry. In qualitative case studies, the researcher and participants must reach explicit agreements about shared expectations (Miles et al., 2014). During interviews, the interviewer and participants' interaction is a complicated phenomenon based on both sides' unique set of biases, attitudes, predispositions, and physical attributes that may affect their interaction (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explained, the most effective strategy is for the interviewer to provide proper and good communication, a good personality, a positive attitude, orientation, and an in-depth definition of the situation.

After telephone and video conference interviews, I used the same telephone and video conference software capabilities to provide an accurate transcription to participants. After receiving and completing all interview transcripts, I reviewed them for accuracy and sent them via email to each participant for their confirmation (transcript review) to ensure accuracy and confirm the process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). After sending all transcripts to participants for their confirmation, I made a follow-up telephone call to ensure consistent interpretation and provoke sharing opinions (the researcher) with participants (Chang, 2014). I also made handwritten notes using an annotation log during

each interview and telephone calls to ensure confirmation and reduce audio recording device software issues.

I developed the interview questions listed in Appendix A based on the established study purpose and conceptual framework. As interviewer and data collector, my role was to provide guidelines, control, and maintain the interviews conversation and data collection on focus and on time by providing clarification questions and using an engaging and detailed conversation. To accomplish the interviews, I followed these steps:

1. For all interested participants that fit the selection criteria, I called or sent an email to coordinate the best time and date for a telephone or video conference interview.
2. During the interview, I reviewed the consent statement details, including the participant's selection criteria, before the beginning of the interview. Then, I asked clarification questions as needed, and at the end of the interview, I let the participants to ask me questions related to the subject under discussion.
3. All participants received a thank you card, expressing my gratitude for the collaboration with the study.

The procedure to follow up with all participants consisted of sending all the interview transcripts recorded during the telephone or video conference interview by email to clarify any response or add additional comments from participants. All selected participants received an email with a summary of my study results using Microsoft Word software with an audience-appropriate format of no more than two pages. Also,

participants received a link as an invitation to participate in one-on-one virtual video-call meeting attached to the email. The video-call meeting intention was to explain the study results and clarify any question or doubt related. I transcribed only the audio part of the video-call meeting and sent it to all participants in a separate email. There was no recording of the video.

Documentation Gathering. As the only researcher, I collected and confirmed all data and documentation available on the internet or supplied by the FCR leaders. As Yin (2018) stated, the documentation required, whether on paper or in electronic format, the data collected for the development of a relevant case study should include: social media posts, advertising, official publications, leadership reports, key performance indicator reports, newspaper or magazine articles, memorabilia, survey results, annual financial reports, company manuals, and daily logs. For case study research, documentation gathering is essential and not only serves as trusted evidence but corroborates evidence provided by other sources (Miles et al., 2014). Data documentation can also serve as a confirmation method for spelling names correctly, documenting the sources mentioned during the interview process, confirming specific details to make inferences, and providing clues that could lead to further inquiry and investigation (Yin, 2018). As established during the research consent and agreement with participants, I reviewed any documentation available and provided by the selected FCR leaders (owners-entrepreneurs, or managers). I expected to find substantial and meaningful information to

confirm, sustain, align, and confirm details obtained from my interviews to achieve data saturation.

In qualitative case studies, documentation is collected during the study (Yin, 2018). For this case study, the frequency of the data collection events was daily, and all details were captured using a reflective journal. The documentation requested included promotional brochures, menus, and daily logs and was provided voluntarily by entrepreneur-owner, managers, and supervisors of the selected FCR, except for social media posts, newspaper, and magazine articles that were searched online. The duration of the data collection events was less than 3 months. The data were recorded electronically using a portable flash drive stored in a lock safe. This data storage method assisted in the use and retrieval of the documentation as needed during the development of the study and could assist for future studies (Yin, 2018).

Data Analysis Plan

In qualitative data analysis, there is not a fixed formula or handbook to follow. Data analysis leans on the researcher's strong, intrinsic ability for empirical thinking, presentation of evidence, style, and alternative considerations (Yin, 2018). As Patton established (2015), the main challenge for qualitative research analysis is making sense of the massive amount of data (e.g., interview recordings and transcripts, field notes, and documentation). I used interviews and documentation analysis to write my case study record (Patton, 2015). As Patton established, during a case study, the researcher collects all the significant findings for the final case analysis. The information is then edited,

sorted, and distinct parts put together to organize the case in a way that can be accessed chronologically and by topic.

Coding Process

I used a consistent method of review, coding, and data interpretation to analyze all data from my interviews and documentation. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explained that coding consists of making comments, notes, and queries in the transcripts' margins or during the data collection process that could help a researcher answer the research questions. As Maxwell (2013) presented, the concept of coding involves fragmenting data and rearranging it into categories that could facilitate comparisons and the development of theoretical concepts. I started the coding process by identifying the units that were perceived as relevant for developing the case study based on my preconceived ideas and knowledge. I then codified these data segments by categories and themes. As Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explained, the number of categories depend on the data and study focus and should be manageable. I completed my coding from my interview transcriptions and data collection notes.

Use of Computer-Assisted Software

During this research, I used NVivo 12 software to store my transcriptions and facilitate organizing all collected data. As Yin (2018) explained, NVivo is a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) that serves as a tool and guide to assist with data codification and categorization in themes. The selected data software did not generate the final data analysis or help with the accuracy of coding. Still, it facilitated

organizing the research data by locating all words, phrase-matching codes, and multiple combinations of codes in my data files. This organizing method allowed me to build codes, categories, themes, and additional concepts (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2018). I used a codebook to gather and maintain all codes, definitions, and essential details to keep me on target with my research progression. I developed a matrix that structured my primary research questions, categories, themes, and high-order concepts for each participant. This matrix allowed me to visually sort the data and compare similarities and discrepancies, thereby developing my analysis and, eventually, conclusions (Maxwell, 2013).

Theme Development Process

To analyze collected data and interview results, I explored themes emerging from the coding and categorization related to creating innovation strategies to create sustainable FCRs in the state of Delaware. These themes became a significant contribution to the development of my research interpretations and conclusions.

Data Triangulation

Patton (2015) explained that the data triangulation process strengthens a research study by combining different methods, data, measures, and perspectives. As Patton established, using multiple methods can illuminate a research question's rationale with multiple methods that will not have overlapping weaknesses, and they can add complementary strengths. The use of multiple sources of evidence in case studies far exceeds other qualitative research methods due to the primary case-study motivation to

do an in-depth study of a phenomenon in its real-world context (Yin, 2018). In qualitative case studies, it is common to combine interviews, observations, and data gathering. For my study, I combined interviews with documentation gathering to solidify and demonstrate the credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and consistency of the data collected from multiple data sources (Patton, 2015; Yin, 2018).

As Yin (2018) explained, the process of data triangulation corroborated and confirmed the credibility of the information by exploring, analyzing, and evaluating the data that will made possible the credibility and transferability of the research. For the exploration phase, I organized the data obtained from the documentation, literature, and interviews. For the analysis phase, I generated, categorized, and codified the findings and then made a critical, systematic, and comprehensive analysis that allowed the development of new conceptualizations (Yin, 2018). Finally, for the evaluation phase, I re-examined, integrated, and tabulated results to develop a sequence of evidence that conceptualized the results (Yin, 2018).

Issues of Trustworthiness

Because empirical social research, including qualitative case studies, is based on interpretations and assumptions of reality, the criteria for establishing trustworthiness differ from quantitative studies (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). For qualitative case studies, the way to judge and develop quality is to use four tests: credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability (Yin, 2018).

Credibility

Credibility refers to when the researcher tries to explain how and why it leads to another event (Yin, 2018). As Yin established, during a case study, speculation can occur when an incident or phenomenon cannot be observed, meaning there is a need to infer from previous occurrences that are based in previous interviews and collected documentation. During the interviews, I encouraged participants to be open and sincere with their responses and I performed an interview transcript review sent to each participant via email (Chang, 2014). Once the interview transcript was completed, I emailed a copy to each participant to verify it to enhance credibility and ensure accuracy. I used a reflective journal and bracketing; this process served as a credibility tool to reduce possible biases.

Transferability

Transferability points to whether the study findings can be replicated or adapted to other situations or cases (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As Merriam and Tisdell established, the ability to transfer results to different settings or people depends on ensuring similar conditions, sample size, and population. To increase the transferability of my case study, I provided a thorough description by presenting a highly descriptive and detailed explanation of my settings, participants, and evidence that built my findings and conclusion by using quotes taken from my interviews, as well as revisions of documentation (Maxwell, 2013). Transferability is left to those who read my research, based on my extensive and detailed description of participants, methodology, and results.

The study findings will not be transferable given a nonrandom sample and a small geographical space. The study process may be transferable as documented.

Dependability

The dependability of qualitative data is based on how a researcher can establish consistent procedures that can be replicated with the same findings and conclusions (Yin, 2018). Dependability in social sciences is problematic due to the inconsistent behaviors of the human being (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As Yin (2018) presented, the best method for approaching dependability is to create specific procedures that any other researcher could follow. Merriam and Tisdell explained that using multiple methods is an excellent strategy for obtaining consistent and dependable data, making it more congruent with the participants' reality and understanding of the phenomena under study.

During my study, I contributed to dependability by using comparison methods (Patton, 2015). Before my interview process, I made sure that every interview question was clear and aligned with the rest of my study design. To ensure dependability, I established an audit trail process. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explained that a detailed journal should include all detail of the process under study in written, including memos, issues, ideas, interactions, analysis, interpretations, and conclusions.

Confirmability

Confirmability refers to establishing and presenting the research data and findings in a neutral position and away from the researcher's biases (Miles et al., 2014). As Maxwell (2013) presented, in case studies, the researcher is part of the context under

study and by direct consequence, a significant influence (e.g., interviews). For that reason, understanding and explaining possible biases and how to deal with them is a critical element of integrity during the researcher's proposal (Maxwell, 2013). Miles et al. (2014) recommended that I enhanced confirmability by implementing robust and detailed procedures during my data analysis process (interviews and documentation collection). I also made all the data available for review by other researchers and participants using an audit trail as permitted by the researcher and participant agreements and by the IRB.

Ethical Procedures

A critical concern for every researcher is how to produce ethical knowledge accurately and reliably (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As Merriam and Tisdell explained, the primary reason for this is that research findings and results are the knowledge base and starting point for many professionals' and practitioners' research and intervention to make new field contributions. As with many professions and academic institutions, Walden University, through its IRB, has a well-established code of ethics, guidelines, and multiple written forms to establish proper ethical codes before research begins (Miles et al., 2014). To gain access to participants and collect my research data, I made a detailed summary that explained the background information, study participants requirements, information about the researcher, study's procedure, samples of interview questions, voluntary nature of the study, risks and benefits of participation in the study, privacy statement, research contacts and questions, and Informed Consent Form for Participants that were sent to all qualified participants by email and after signed by participants'

returned via email to me. The IRB approval number for this study was 07-15-21-0173695.

To address any possible ethical issues, including those that could occur during data collection or adverse events such as refuse participation or withdrawal from the study, I used IRB-approved documentation and guidelines. I was transparent when informing each participant about each aspect of the research, including research goals, details, participants' rights, permissions, time involved, privacy and confidentiality measures, communication methods, contact information, methods of data collection, ethics reviews, and any research relationship with licensed activities (Miles et al., 2014). All the communication with participants were via email or telephone, as previously detailed. As Miles et al. explained, I was open and treated every participant with respect and honesty. I developed a good relationship and sense of trust with participants by providing precise and concise information while maintaining constant open communication during the entire process. During qualitative case studies, the interaction between the researcher and participants is highly collaborative, and ethical issues related to data collection and the circulation of findings can emerge at any time (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I addressed ethical issues during data collection interviews and documentation gathering by being transparent and providing written guidelines about how the data and materials planned to be collected, stored, destroyed, and accessed (Miles et al., 2014).

Confidentiality

As Merriam and Tisdell explained (2016), during interviews, the participants could feel that their privacy was being invaded. To minimize or avoid this situation, I provided each participant with the contact information (telephone number and email address) of an IRB Walden University representative who could respond to privacy or other issues that may arise. Regarding documentation, I maintained ethical considerations such as assessing all data sources' authenticity, being the only custodian for all documents provided, and maintaining all documents in a secure and locked safety box. I clarified with all participants, which data was or not public and available without consent. Regarding analyzing the data, I did not exclude any contradictory or adverse data collected (Miles et al., 2014).

During interviews, I avoided the use of names or positions that could identify any of the participants. Also, I identified each participant with a code, from P1 to P12. This description was used as I progressed into the later Chapters 4 and 5, providing a personal identification of participants to avoid compromising their identities. To maintain strict confidentiality, I conducted all interviews by telephone or virtual, away from their workplace and outside their regular working hours. For online interviews, I used Microsoft Teams, which provides strict confidentiality features that allowed me to control the attendance with forced meeting passcodes and locked chat room functionality. All interviews were immediately deleted after downloaded from the data stored media. Finally, about circulating findings, I guarded and ensured the privacy of all participants

as agreed (data storage and destruction). Once my research was completed, protocols, documentation, notes, computer files were stored in USB flash drives, and records stored in a locked safe. After 5 years, everything will be destroyed. Paper protocols, documentation, notes, and records will be machine-shredded, and all electronics files stored in USB flash drives will be physically smashed and destroyed and any remaining computer file deleted from my computer's trash folders. All electronically recorded files will be erased from the recording machine.

Summary

The objective of Chapter 3 was to provide a concise overview and plan about how the research design, researcher role, methodology, and issues of trustworthiness will be presented during the study. This qualitative multiple-case study intended to explore what innovative strategies are used by successful FCR in Delaware, to be sustainable beyond their first 5 years. Interviews (telephone or video conference) and the documentation provided were used to explore the innovation strategies used by successful FCRs in Delaware to overcome their business industry challenges and facilitate their success beyond 5 years.

I presented the purpose of the research and the theory related to exploring what innovative strategies are used by successful FCR in Delaware to be sustainable beyond their first 5 years. Next, I presented the rationale and detailed information behind my selection of a multiple-case study for my research, as well as the rationale related to why others' qualitative research design was not enough to answer my study purpose and main

research question. I also detailed the researcher's role and influence, interactions, data collection tools, ethical considerations, and personal background. I presented how the study (interviews and documentation gathering) was executed, including the selection and criteria for participants, instrumentation, procedures for recruiting participants, data collection, and data analysis plan. I explained the definitions and possible issues of trustworthiness that could surface through the development of my research and how I intended to face the anticipated ethical problems of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Finally, I included the ethical issues and how Walden's IRB codes, guidelines, and forms helped to eliminate or minimize possible quandaries with ethical conduct through the research.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this qualitative multiple-case study was to explore and describe what innovative strategies are used by successful FCR leaders in Delaware to overcome business challenges and achieve sustainability beyond 5 years. I explored the data using the conceptual framework of entrepreneurship innovation theory as correlated with findings from the literature review. The data came from 10 open-ended questions in semistructured interviews and documentation gathering. The research study results present 51 innovation strategies with 12 highlighted top themes from four primary categories. These four major categories (with number of themes in parentheses) are (a) management and entrepreneurship-innovation strategies (22), (b) business and sustainability-innovation strategies (16), (c) technology and integrated systems-innovation strategies (9), and (d) social diffusion-innovation strategies (4). All strategies and themes emerged from analysis of interview and documentation data. The interview questions pertained to the primary research question, which was, What innovative strategies are used by successful FCR leaders in Delaware to achieve sustainability?

I used three investigation instruments during the data compilation process: a research interview protocol, an annotation log, and a reflective journal. Combined with NVivo 12 software, these instruments allowed me to organize, relate, and analyze the data obtained to provide a comprehensive analysis for all interview questions and resulting top themes. Significant sections included in Chapter 4 include descriptions of the research setting, demographics, data collection, data analysis, evidence of

trustworthiness, and results for each research question, as well as a summary transition to Chapter 5.

Research Setting

The COVID-19 pandemic affected the realization of this study. I had to modify the procedures for participant selection, recruitment, interviews coordination and execution, data collection coordination, and execution outlined in Chapter 3. These had to be redefined and adjusted throughout the development of the study to fully comply with the evolving protocols and procedures imposed by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Delaware Department of Health.

These protocols and procedures imposed the use of masks, social distancing, regular employee testing, proof of vaccination, quarantine periods, indoor-occupancy limitations, outdoor eating accessibility, cleaning and sanitation practices, scannable menus, rigorous hand-washing practices, adequate ventilation, and compassionate leadership (Sirsat, 2021). As Sirsat (2021) noted, the increase in positive COVID-19 cases across the United States, combined with the economic effect and stimulus assistance benefits approved by the U.S. government for displaced, unemployed, or employees unavailable for work, decreased the numbers of employees available to effectively manage the increasing demand for FCR food. Additional areas of study that were affected during the pandemic included customers' innovation expectations (e.g., online orders, deliveries, and curbside pick-up), prices, salaries, cost, business capital investments, profitability, marketing strategies, recruitment practices, service hours, and

mores (Sirsat, 2021). The pandemic also limited the number of FCR leaders available for this study because they had to work overtime or cover other positions due to the lack of labor available. Additionally, the pandemic diminished FCR leaders' ability to implement some potentially permanent innovation strategies such as third-party deliveries, kiosk-ordering, online orders, and curbside pick-up.

Demographics

Twelve FCR leaders participated in the study, all of whom were residents of the state of Delaware. Of the participants, nine were men (75%), and three were women (25%). In terms of race, nine identified as White (75%), two identified as Black or African American (16.6%), and one as Latin American or Hispanic (8.3%). In terms of age, eight were 21 to 30 years of age (66.6%), two were 31 to 40 years of age (16.6%), and two were 41 years of age or older (16.6%). In terms of education, five had bachelor's degrees (41.6%), five had an associate or technical degree (41.6%), and two had high school diplomas (16.6%).

Regarding their actual FCR leadership positions, 10 indicated that they store managers (83.3%), and two indicated that they general or area managers (16.6%). Regarding their total FCR experience, six indicated 6-9 years of experience (50%), five indicated they had 3-5 years (41.6%), and one had more than 10 years of experience (8.3%). Finally, in terms of their FCR management experience, 10 indicated 3-5 years (83.3%), and two indicated 6-9 years (16.6%). None indicated having more than 10 years

of experience. The average years of FCR management experience was. Table 1 includes an overview of participant demographics.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Participants (N = 12)

Variable	N	%
Gender		
Female	3	25
Male	9	75
Race or Ethnicity		
White American	9	75
African American	2	16.6
Latin or Hispanic	1	8.3
Age (years)		
21-30	8	66.6
31-40	2	16.6
41 or more	2	16.6
Education		
Bachelor	5	41.6
Associate or technical	5	41.6
High school diploma	2	16.6
Position		
General/Area manager	2	16.6
Store manager	10	83.3
Years of experience (overall)		
3-5	5	41.6
6-9	6	50
10 or more	1	8.3
Years of experience (management)		
3-5	10	83.3
6-9	2	16.6
10 or more	0	0

Data Collection

The data collection procedures for interviews and data gathering involved 12 FCR leaders from six FCR locations in Delaware. I conducted all interviews via telephone or videoconference calls using the participants' cell phones or computers through the

Microsoft Teams videoconference platform. All interviews were conducted from October through December 2021. The duration of each interview was 30 to 60 minutes. The data-gathering process occurred from September through December 2021. The primary method of data gathering was via extensive online data search and included newspaper and magazine articles, participants' FCR websites, social media pages (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and LinkedIn), and specialized online customer and employee online feedback websites such as Google Reviews, Indeed, Glassdoor, TripAdvisor, and Yelp. I also visited each participant's location.

During interviews, all participants answered the same 10 open-ended questions. To maintain confidentiality, I identified each participant by a unique code ranging from P1 to P12. All interview questions were presented following the interview protocol (see Appendix B). All telephone interviews were recorded using a recording device, and all videoconference interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed using Microsoft Teams features. All interview dates, times, and corresponding details were registered in the interview journal, and transcription notes were captured using the annotation log. All interviews were transcribed into Microsoft Word documents and eventually uploaded into NVivo 12. All data gathering was completed by downloading all internet public information from online sources to Microsoft Word documents. The additional data collected, such as marketing information, local newspapers, coupons, promotional menus, posted business licenses, posted permits, public documents, and press releases, were

captured in pictures during my visit to each location, and uploaded into Microsoft Word documents with corresponding notes and summaries.

There were no variations from the data collection process previously described in Chapter 3; however, there were two unusual circumstances encountered during the data collection. The first unusual circumstance was the unsuccessful attempt to attract participants by directly calling only their FCR locations. After several failed attempts, I started visiting candidates at their FCR location on weekends and weekdays between 5 p.m. and 6:30 p.m. However, the proposed visiting hours were not as productive because they coincided with peak sales volume hours. Thus, I changed my strategy again, and started visiting possible FCR candidates during their slower volume dates and times – Monday through Wednesday between 1 p.m. and 3:30 p.m. The second unusual circumstance occurred when some of the interested candidates were denied authorization by their area managers, general managers, or owners, who alleged breach of their respective companies' employee-company confidential agreements.

Data Analysis

I based the data analysis on fundamental concepts of entrepreneurship and innovation. The literature review on technology, integrated management systems, and social diffusion provided critical knowledge that was later solidified with data collection and added perspectives by FCR experts during the interview process. All interviews were realized, recorded, transcribed, and analyzed based on the established interview protocol, and all related details were recorded in the annotation log and reflective journal. All 12

participants answered the same 10 interview questions (see Appendix A). All data collected were transcribed to Microsoft Word documents and transferred to NVivo 12 to facilitate the codification, organization, analysis, and themes evaluation.

The interview questions helped understand the participants' socio-demographic background and FCR experience, perspectives related to recruitment factors, core business innovation, management-innovation, technology-innovation, integrated-innovation, social-diffusion innovation, sustainability-innovation, innovation-key performance indicators, and leadership-entrepreneurship innovation strategies. The answers that better described by category the main innovation strategies to create sustainable FCRs in the state of Delaware were presented verbatim.

To determine the codes for the study, I used an open coding process (see Appendix H) to categorize the data and let themes flow naturally from the collected data (Miles et al., 2014). The codes that emerged allowed me to identify the categories related to my study (Maxwell, 2013). The process started by coding all data resulting from the direct responses of the interviews and allowed me to make a systematic and comprehensive analysis to obtain multiple emerging themes (Yin, 2018). Second, I tabulated all resulting codes by participant by using a preestablished identifier per participant (P1-P12).

Third, I summarized the frequency of the emergent codes found for each question (see Appendix I). I focused my data analysis only on the information relevant to my proposed research questions and the life experiences of each participant. Through the

previously described codification process, I identified 83 codes, which led to a more significant representation of 51 strategies and four categories emerged. They were management and entrepreneurship, business and sustainability, technology and integrated systems, and social diffusion innovation strategies (see Appendix J). The emerging themes guided my interpretation and conceptualization of which innovative strategies are used by successful FCR leaders in Delaware to overcome business challenges and achieve sustainability.

To confirm the emergent themes, I reexamined, integrated, and correlated information from the presented literature review, transcribed interview perspectives, and discrepant cases as factored into the analysis. All interviews were verified using the member-checking protocol (see Appendix K). This process was established to develop a precise sequence of evidence for each theme, and to sustain their importance (Yin, 2018). Finally, I confirmed the additional FCR data-gathering information to ensure the data saturation, dependability, and credibility of my results (Patton, 2015; Yin, 2018; see Appendix L).

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Credibility

As established (Miles et al., 2014), credibility esteem provides truth value to the participant's experiences and the readers of this study. Also, credibility is achieved by eliminating personal biases, providing an authentic portrait of what I was looking for, and connecting participants' experiences with the described phenomenon and the research

findings (Patton, 2015). As established in Chapter 3, the implementation of credibility started with my selection of a credible literature review from updated and peer-review sources, then confirming my interview protocol with a selected and qualified group of field experts (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). During the interview and data gathering process, I adjusted some pre-established techniques to the realities of the COVID-19 pandemic. One of these realities was the adjustment of whether I had the ability to provide flexibility for interviews, which I achieved by switching from face-to-face interviews to video conference interviews. All interviews were performed following the preestablished privacy protocols.

To ensure and maintain credibility during the interview process, I emphasized that participants provide only honest answers and elaborate as needed to obtain in-depth answers to the proposed questions (Miles et al., 2014). In addition, all interviews were sent to participants to ensure proper member-checking procedures and enhance the transcript's accuracy. To ensure transparency and credibility from participants, all participants received a final copy of their transcribed interview via email with a petition for their approval. Also, all participants received a summary of tentative findings before drafting my conclusions. Finally, data saturation was achieved by using data triangulation to provide sources of comparison and contrast with other interviews, data gathered, and discrepant cases that offered multiple and an extended range of findings and perspectives (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Transferability

Maxwell (2013) established that transferability could be achieved by a detailed description of settings, participants, and evidence built on findings and quotes from interviews, data gathering, and comparison with discrepant cases. All data were collected consistent with the established protocols, and no deviation for participation criteria, interview settings, and data collection were necessary (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Miles et al. (2014) confirmed that transferability could be established by providing a thick description for readers to assess the potential transfer for their intended settings and contexts. This study's findings are not transferable given a nonrandom sample and a small geographical space; however, the study process may be transferable as described and documented.

Dependability

Dependability was achieved when the processes for the study were consistently stable over time and across researchers and methods (Miles et al., 2014). The process and data collected were compatible with the established procedures and protocols that may allow this study to be replicated in the future (Yin, 2018). All data were presented in a neutral position and away from my biases, with all the data available for review as needed by other researchers and participants, as permitted by participant agreements and Walden University IRB (Miles et al., 2014). Also, I used a technique of triangulation to ensure the results were consistent, detailed, contrasted, and comparable (Yin, 2018). The interviews were analyzed correctly using codification (with keywords and phrases) and

thematic analysis to accurately represent the participants' experiences using innovative strategies to create sustainable FCRs in the state of Delaware.

Confirmability

As established by Miles et al., (2014), confirmability refers to the domain that exists between the neutral and reasonable freedom from researchers' unacknowledged, explicit, and inevitable, but existing, biases. Confirmability also refers to establishing and presenting the research data and findings in a neutral position and away from the researcher's biases (Miles et al., 2014). I enhanced confirmability by implementing robust and detailed procedures (interviews and documentation collection) during my data analysis process. I also made all the data available for review by other researchers and participants, presenting the entire picture, including *backstage* information, using an audit trail as permitted by the researcher and participant agreements and by the IRB (Patton, 2015).

Study Results

During this study, the participants responded to 10 interview questions. Each question was correlated to four categories: management and entrepreneurship, business and sustainability, technology and integrated systems, and social diffusion. The results were supported by interview transcriptions and data gathering, leading to the establishment of 51 innovation strategies organized into three leading strategy levels: employee, customer, and overall. The questions were analyzed according to the interview

protocol, with corresponding answers registered for transcriptions in the annotation log and reflective journal according to protocols proposed by Yin (2018).

To guide the conversation, I developed 10 interview questions, followed by applicable subquestions (see Appendix A). I present the results by category. These categories were developed from the data collected. Themes and codes emerged based on the participants' answers to each of the interview questions.

Category 1: Management and Entrepreneurship Innovation Strategies

The first category, Category 1: Management and Entrepreneurship Innovation Strategies, resulted from the participants' responses to the following four interview questions: (a) Question 1: How long have you been working or related to this FCR business? (b) Question 2: What interested and attracted you the most about the FCR business? (c) Question 4: What specific management-innovation strategies have you used in your FCR during the last 5 years? Furthermore, (d) Question 9: What indicators did you measure at your FCR to ensure innovation strategies were working effectively? The emergent themes, theme's levels of development, theme's definitions, theme's frequency, and participation or endorsement percentage of themes for Category 1 are presented in Tables 2-5.

Table 2

Strategies for Category 1, Interview Questions: 1, 2, 4, and 9

Strategy Levels	Category 1 - Emerged Strategies (22)
Employee Level	develop a culture of trust, maintain work-life balance, offer growth opportunities, develop good communication, develop team members, create a good teamwork, establish precise work instructions, and connect with employees.
Customer Service Level	high customer service level, support local communities, use social media for feedback, quick response to customers, feedback by satisfaction surveys, and maintain focus on quality.
Overall Level	use POS to manage the business, participative leader, benchmarking, develop a unique business model, create internal audits process, track multiple indicators, maintain a clean work environment, and use technology for routine work.

Table 3*Strategies and Definitions for Category 1, Interview Questions 1, 2, 4, and 9*

<u>Category 1 – Strategies</u>	<u>Definitions</u>
Develop a Culture of Trust	Trust between all team members and at all levels.
Maintain Work-life Balance	Importance of work-life balance.
Offer Growth Opportunities	Internal promotion and advancing opportunities.
Develop Good Communication	Constant communication at all levels.
Develop Team Members	Need for being developed and cross-trained.
Create Good Teamwork	Develop a healthy teamwork environment.
Establish Precise Work Instructions	Detailed instructions for repetitive work tasks.
Connect with Employees	Close, working, and personal relationship.
High Customer Service Level	Overall great customer service.
Support Local Communities	Continuous sponsorship to local charitable causes.
Use of Social-Media for Feedback	Use social media to collect customer feedback.
Quick Response to Customers	Immediate response to customer complaints.
Feedback by Satisfaction Surveys	Satisfaction surveys for evaluations and feedback.
Maintain Focus on Food Quality	Keeping natural and healthy ingredients.
Use POS to Manage the Business	Use POS as primary tool to manage the business.
Participative Leadership	Participative and democratic leadership.
Benchmarking	Continuous evaluation of direct competitors.
Develop a Unique Business Model	Business uniqueness.
Create Internal Audits Process	Continuous and robust internal audit process.
Track Multiple Indicators	Track of achievements versus established goals.
Maintain a Clean Work Environment	Prioritize a clean working environment.

Technology for Routine Work Use technology to manage routine work.

Table 4

Frequency of Strategies for Category 1, Interview Questions 1, 2, 4, and 9

Strategies	Number of participants mentioning the strategy	Total quotes associated
Track Multiple Indicators	12	19
Use POS to Manage	10	32
Use of Social-Media for Feedback	8	22
Develop Good Communication	8	14
Feedback by Satisfaction Surveys	7	11
Maintain a High Customer Service Level	6	13
Quick Response to Customers	6	9
Develop a Culture of Trust	5	9
Develop Team Members	5	8
Maintain Work-life Balance	4	8
Offer Growth Opportunities	4	8
Benchmarking	4	4
Create Internal Audits Process	4	4
Create a Good Teamwork	3	17
Connect with Employees	3	12
Support Local Communities	3	11
Establish Precise Work Instructions	3	7
Technology for Routine Work	2	9
Maintain Focus on Food Quality	2	5
Participative Leadership	2	4
Develop a Unique Business Model	2	2
Maintain a Clean Work Environment	2	2

Table 5*Participation Percentage of Strategies for Category 1, Interview Questions 1, 2, 4, and 9*

Strategies	Number of participants	Participation %
Track Multiple Indicators	12	100%
Use POS to Manage	10	83.3%
Use of Social-Media for Feedback	8	66.6%
Develop Good Communication	8	66.6%
Feedback by Satisfaction Surveys	7	58.3%
Maintain a High Customer Service Level	6	50%
Quick Response to Customers	6	50%
Develop a Culture of Trust	5	41.6%
Develop Team Members	5	41.6%
Maintain Work-life Balance	4	33.3%
Offer Growth Opportunities	4	33.3%
Benchmarking	4	33.3%
Create Internal Audits Process	4	33.3%
Create a Good Teamwork Environment	3	25%
Connect with Employees	3	25%
Support Local Communities	3	25%
Establish Precise Work Instructions	3	25%
Use of Technology for Routines	2	16,6%
Maintain Focus on Food Quality	2	16.6%
Participative Leadership	2	16.6%
Develop a Unique Business Model	2	16.6%
Clean Work Environment	2	16.6%

Interview Questions 1, 2, 4, and 9 were related to the first identified category. All 12 participants endorsed this category, showing the relevance of the management and entrepreneurship strategies for the sustainability of the FCR segment. Twenty-two strategies emerged from the participants' responses to these four questions. The strategies were organized into three levels: employee, customer, and overall. At the employee level, eight innovation strategies were identified. The following were the identified strategies with their respective number of participants and participation/endorsement percentage as presented in Table 5. develop good communication (8, 66.6%), develop a culture of trust (5, 41.6%), develop team members (5, 41.6%), maintain work-life balance (4, 33.3%), offer growth opportunities (4, 33.3%), create a good teamwork environment (3, 25 %), connect with employees at a personal level (3, 25%), and establish precise work instructions (3, 25%).

At the customer service level, six innovation strategies were identified. The following were the identified strategies with their respective number of participants and participation percentages as presented in Table 5: use of social media for feedback (8, 66.6%), feedback by satisfaction surveys (7, 58.3%), quick response to customers (6, 50%), maintained high customer service level (5, 41.66%), support local communities (3, 25%), and maintain focus on high food quality by using natural ingredients (2, 16.6%).

Finally, at the overall level, eight innovation strategies were identified. The following were the identified strategies with their respective number of participants and participation percentages as presented in Table 5. track multiple indicators (12, 100%),

the use of the POS to manage the business (10, 83.3%), benchmarking (4, 33.3%), create internal audits process (4, 33.3%), technology to facilitate management of routinary work (2, 16.6%), participative leadership (2, 16.6%), develop a unique business model (2, 16.6%), and maintain a clean and organized work environment (2, 16.6%).

Category 1 Top Themes

According to participants' responses to the Interview Questions 1,2, 4, and 9, and based on the higher participation percentage and associated quotes, the top four themes or strategies related to management and entrepreneurship were: track multiple indicators (100%, 19), use of pos to manage (83.3%, 32), use of social media for feedback, (66.6%, 22), develop good communication (66.6%, 14). In addition, most of the participants endorsed the critical role that their direct supervisors, managers, and owners play in their performance, motivation, and future career decisions.

Category 1, Theme 1: Track Multiple Indicators. According to participants, the establishment and tracking of key performance indicators have been critical for the success and sustainability of their businesses. Most of the participants they were very aware of their daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly goals and expectations and identify it as an integral part of their management role. Most participants expressed that their current metrics are established and tracked by their corporations; however, they are responsible for establishing, communicating, monitoring, and executing activities related to keeping them under control. As explained by one of the participants,

There are several measures, such as sales and profits for business purposes. Nevertheless, we measure our social media scores, so reviews on Facebook, Google, Yelp, and TripAdvisor. Count and refusal ratio of complaints versus compliments that we could submit it onto our website from our customer base. That is another way that we measure it. We send out surveys to both our leadership teams and our hourly teammates twice a year, and we use that to see how we are doing culturally, right. If restaurant scores were really, well in that it is, we are taking care of our teams. If we score poorly, then that means we are not.

All 12 participants reported similar web pages and business reports based on the constant standardization and advances in POS system technologies with major POS system providers such as Presto, Toast, Touch Bistro, and Upserve, among others, offering standard and inclusive systems. Also, the rapid development of social media platforms for business is making Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and specialized online review companies' platforms, such as Yelp, Google Business, and Trip Advisor, among others, the standard choice for advertising and receiving direct feedback from customers.

“We use a rating system that we get created on what we do as a store for comparing with the same period last month. We compete with ourselves. We are also compiling all data and information. So, the following stores open in this market understand how we created and escalated the store and the business. So, for all the jobs and stores in the country, we know where ranking regarding cleanliness, order accuracy, order time, among other indicators.”

Based on the participants, constantly tracking multiple indicators provides a sense of certainty, direction, and motivation to run their respective FCRs effectively. In addition, the continuous generation, distribution, and discussion of key performance indicators reports generate the communication necessary with the rest of the organization to maintain the required sense of urgency and accountability to achieve their goals.

Category 1, Theme 2: Use POS to Manage the Business. With the participation of 83.3% of the participants, the use of POS to manage routine tasks was mentioned 32 times during the interview's interactions. Ten of 12 participants said POS is critical for the success and progression of their business. Per most of the participants, their POS systems can provide reporting in terms of labor, cost, inventory control, and sales that can alleviate their office time and workload, giving them more time to assist customers and their respective teams – and employee satisfaction reviews. As established by one of the participants, the focus of their business - and key to their sustainable success - is related to establishing innovative strategies based on technology that can help them improve and simplify their day-to-day management activities.

“Now we are working with a new POS system to be more efficient and improve our cooking times and overall service. Everything technology basis makes everything easier to manage.”

Another participant mentioned that their primary investments are technology, specifically their POS integration with inventory control, material use, sales tracking,

online ordering, delivery, curbside pickup, and employee labor and payroll tracking. The participant mentioned,

“I will say it is our POS, but at the same time, we keep upgrading and adding more functions to it that makes it more friendly aspects to manage our store easier. POS it is massive for us, our entire structure of how we run the store, like bringing on those delivery services was a game changer during the Pandemic, so, finding a POS system that could integrate all those was amazing for us and keep us afloat during those hard times.”

Based on the participants' responses, the use of POS has been critical for FCR's success, and the continuous investment in these platforms is necessary to compete in the industry. As explained by participants, during and after the COVID 19 pandemic, customers popularized new services that are considered standard for every FCR, such as ordering online, curbside pickup, and third-party deliveries (e.g., Door Dash, Uber-Eats, and Grub-hub). As explained by multiple participants, there are many POS providers with great systems to anticipate customers' needs and provide FCR businesses with the integration needed to adapt to their current expectations.

Category 1, Theme 3: Use of Social Media for Feedback. Another relevant theme that emerged from the participants' answers was the role of social media to communicate, receive, and deliver customer feedback. As explained by eight of 12 participants, the increased use of digital platforms and the increased need for FCR to actively engage in venues such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Tik-Tok, amongst

others, are increasingly essential to reach existing and prospective customers. In addition, as mentioned by five of the participants, the increasing popularity of specialized social media and digital marketing sites such as Yelp, TripAdvisor, and Google to reach for customer feedback, pictures, videos, and menus of interested FCR. As one participant stated,

“It is important for us to use of technology to ensure and maintain good internal communication and communicate with the civilian population thru social media. As managers, we measure our business through social media scores, with different applications like Yelp, Google, Trip Advisors [sic], and Facebook. Also, our main headquarters office compiles all information, and they give us quarterly scores for every restaurant. So, they let us know where we are ranking in terms of the store, and what are people are saying about us. However, you know, internal reviews are essential, and we use teammate questionnaires for that, you know, this helps to keep a successful team and teammates.”

Also, other participants mentioned that their social media reputation is critical for their growth and sustainability. However, FCR must maintain an active presence on multiple social media platforms to impact all generations. Another participant said,

“We as a company have Facebook, Instagram, and Tik Tok pages as [sic] the franchise level; the company does the general marketing. However, they help us with social media information, and this is valuable for us as the younger customers post videos, which helps us promote our business to the younger

crowd. Our customers are technology inclined, and that is why our efforts are focus on younger generations and create daily interaction with them. For example, we recently released new meat on social media, and that day we were slammed.”

A third participant focused their interaction on explaining how platforms such as Google Services have helped them grow their business.

“I feel like social media is our best bet. Also, Google Business has been helpful. I realized that as soon as I connected to Google business, I saw it increased right after that. Like people could search for us and find us very quickly. Many people leave reviews on Google business, and so it is like showing off.”

As discussed, and reflected in the participants' responses, social media has been a critical marketing strategy for the sustainability and growth of the FCR business.

Category 1, Theme 4: Good Communication. According to participants' responses to the Interview Questions 1,2, 4, and 9, and with 66.6% participation, the theme or strategy related to establishing a sound communication system with employees and customers becomes one of the main strategies to create a sustainable FCR. As established by one of the participants,

“In terms of management and entrepreneurship strategies our priorities are to ensure good communication, have consistent team meetings, and make sure the employees communicate well between them, with customers, and are happy. If they are happy, they will take good care of our customers and the product we consistently put out. It is also essential for us to use technology to ensure and

maintain proper internal communication; we often communicate with the civilian population by social media. Also, we communicate with other stores and upper management through conference calls, text messages, and social media.”

A second participant stated,

“It is relevant that top management encourage constant communication, ideas, and engage with other store managers and crew members to identify potential ideas and make things happen. Just the sharing of information has been a huge factor for this company.”

A third participant reported,

“Management and entrepreneurship innovation is once again, just getting back to the basics where I know my team and I know what they do for fun, it is all about great communication. Our job as leaders is to motivate and engage our employees constantly and ensure there is a on constant communication from the top to the bottom of the organization as we recognize that happy employees take better care of their customers. It is also important to keep a constant communication with all our different customer’s generational base, as a customer, you want to feel like you are ordering from a place that cares about it. Furthermore, when you start building up, you start knowing the customer names, and they call you like they are already here. It is when you know that you are building customers and friends.”

Based on these participants' comments, one may conclude that creating good communication is essential to the development of sustainable FCR. Communication is a critical component to making employees and customers feel they are more than just a number. As indicated by one of the participants,

“They do not feel like they are numbers when you learn your customers’ names; they come in with the most incredible smile to pick up their order. Also, employees start caring more when they see their management motivating and listen to them, showing them that their work matters and want to be able to listen to their needs.”

To see a graphic representation of Category 1 development and findings, please refer to Appendices L and M.

Category 2: Business and Sustainability Innovation Strategies

This category resulted from the participants’ responses to the following three interview questions: (a) Question 3. What main business innovation strategies do you think are essential to maintaining a FCR in Delaware for 5 or more years? (b) Question 8. How does the implementation of sustainability—innovation in your business strategies—help sustain your FCR business in Delaware through the first 5 years? And (c) Question 10. What would additional information be relevant to helping me define the most effective innovation strategies to achieve success in the FCR business? The emergent strategies, strategy levels of development, strategy definitions, strategy frequency, and

participation or endorsement percentage of strategies for Category 2 are presented in Tables 6-9.

Table 6

Strategies for Category 2, Interview Questions: 3, 8, and 10

Strategy Levels	Category 2 - Emerged Strategies (16)
Employee Level	facilitate collaboration, take care of your team, great communication and feedback, recognize contributions, and celebrate success.
Customer Service Level	personalized service, make it personal, maintain great reputation, adapt to customer needs, reach new generations, and offer daily deals.
Overall Level	technology to improve productivity, adjust marketing to demographics, keep consistency, maintain winning formula, and stay flexible and adaptable.

Table 7

Strategies and Definitions for Category 2, Interview Questions 3, 8, and 10

Category 2 - Strategies	Definitions
Facilitate Collaboration	Develop teamwork and engagement.
Take Care of Your Team	Care about employees set them for success.
Great Communication and Feedback	Internal communication and constant feedback.
Recognize Contributions	Constantly recognize employees' contributions.
Celebrate Success	Celebrate accomplishments and milestones.
Personalized Service	Make all customers feel special and well treated.
Make It Personal	Memorize and recognize frequent customers.
Maintain Great Reputation	Maintain online and local community reputation.
Adapt to Customers' Needs	Adapt marketing campaign to customers' tendencies.
Reach New Generations	Continuous marketing to younger generations.
Offer Daily Deals	Availability of daily deal to attract customers.
Technology to Improve Productivity	Use technology advances to improve productivity.
Adjust Marketing to Demographics	Adjust and adapt marketing efforts based on demographics.
Keep Consistency	Keep a consistent communication and quality.
Maintain Winning Formula	Maintain and keep their winning strategy.
Stay Flexible and Adaptable	Adapt to the constant changes in the FCR industry.

Table 8*Frequency of Strategies for Category 2, Interview Questions 3, 8, and 10*

Strategies	Number of participants mentioning the strategy	Total quotes associated
Adapt to Customers' Needs	8	17
Personalized Service	6	15
Take Care of Your Team	6	12
Great Communication and Feedback	4	14
Facilitate Collaboration	4	10
Recognize Contributions	4	10
Reach New Generations	3	11
Offer Daily Deals	3	9
Technology to Improve Productivity	3	9
Make It Personal	3	8
Maintain Great Reputation	3	6
Adjust Marketing to Demographics	3	6
Celebrate Success	2	8
Keep Consistency	2	7
Stay Flexible and Adaptable	2	6
Maintain Winning Formula	2	5

Table 9*Participation Percentage of Strategies for Category 2, Interview Questions 3, 8, and 10*

Strategies	Number of participants	Participation %
Adapt to Customers' Needs	8	66.6%
Personalized Service	6	50%
Take Care of Your Team	6	50%
Great Communication and Feedback	4	33.3%
Facilitate Collaboration	4	33.3%
Recognize Contributions	4	33.3%
Reach New Generations	3	25%
Offer Daily Deals	3	25%
Technology to Improve Productivity	3	25%
Make It Personal	3	25%
Maintain Great Reputation	3	25%
Adjust Marketing to Demographics	3	25%
Celebrate Success	2	16.6%
Keep Consistency	2	16.6%
Stay Flexible and Adaptable	2	16.6%
Maintain Winning Formula	2	16.6%

Research Questions 3, 8, and 10 were related to the second identified category, Business and Sustainability Innovation Strategies. Sixteen strategies emerged from the participants' responses to the three questions mentioned. The strategies were organized into top three theme levels: employee, customer, and overall. At the employee level, five innovation strategies were identified. The following were the identified strategies with their respective number of participants and participation/endorsement percentages as presented in Table 9. Take care of your team (6, 50%), facilitate collaboration (4, 33.3%), great communication and feedback (4, 33.3%), recognize contributions (4, 33.3%), and celebrate success (2, 16.6%).

At the customer-service level, six innovation strategies were identified. The following were the strategies identified, along with their respective number of participants and participation percentages as presented in Table 9. adapt to customer needs (8,66.6%), personalized service (6, 50%), reach new generations (3, 25%), make it personal (3, 25%), maintain great reputation (3, 25%), and offer daily deals (3, 25%).

Finally, at the overall level, five innovation strategies emerged. The strategies and their respective number of participants and participation percentages are presented in Table 9. technology to improve productivity (3, 25%), adjust marketing to demographics (3, 25%), keep consistency (2, 16.6%), stay flexible and adaptable (2, 16.6%), and maintain winning formula (2, 16.6%).

Category 2 Top Themes

According to participants' responses to Interview Questions 3, 8 and 10, and based on the higher participation percentage and associated quotes, the top three themes or strategies related to business and sustainability were: adapt to customer's needs (66.6%, 17), personalized service (50%, 15), and take care of your team (50%, 12). Additionally, most of the participants recognized the importance of collaboration, communication, and recognizing team members' contributions as critical factors in developing a sustainable organization.

Category 2, Theme 1: Adaptation to Customers' Needs. According to 66.6% of the participants, the faster your business can adapt to its customer's tendencies, the better chance the company will have to keep growing and create sustainability. One of the participants mentioned that their business does not adapt to new tendencies or innovations, but they are always focused to their customers' needs. The participant described that their business and sustainability innovation strategies focused on bringing personalized attention to their customers and getting familiar with their team members for the past 5 years. The participant mentioned that they did not focus on innovation; however, they constantly followed and discussed innovation trends. Furthermore, if some of these latest trends or innovations could represent a sustainable benefit in sales, customer service, or profitability, they could accelerate their proposal and implementation.

“So, it is kind of funny you asked that and in terms of innovation, because for us, what has made us so successful, in my opinion, really is that we have gotten back to the basics and customer service where we try to take care of each customer that comes through the door.”

A second participant mentioned that their FCR focuses their business and sustainability innovation strategies on developing loyalty and a strong connection between employees and customers. Also, their strategies are to create a flexible, professional, and attractive environment. The participant stated they try to stay adaptive to innovation because they want to understand their customers’ needs to understand their strengths, weaknesses, and business opportunities. The participant described their strategies to stay adaptive as follows:

“Invest in your team; that way, they can be focused on the customers. For us, it is the small-town relationship kind of aspect. We have a tight-knit crew of people working here.”

Based on the participants' responses to the questions, their customers do not visit their FCRs just for food or a quick drink. Their customer visits their FCRs to have a conversation with a friend, study, or have a small-group meeting. Furthermore, four participants mentioned that their menu options offer some alternatives to how they create their food. Also, six of the participants said they care and always try to make their customers happy, and for that reason, they are always adaptive, listen to their customers' opinions, and quickly respond to their needs.

Category 2, Theme 2: Personalized Service. According to 50% of the participants, establishing and maintaining a personalized service is essential to developing a sustainable business. One of the participants established that their operations must memorize their customers' names, remember what they typically order, maintain significant conversations, and create unique and unforgettable moments for their customers, communities, and employees. This participant described his business and sustainability innovation strategies experiences as follows:

“I genuinely believe that listen to the customers and getting back to the fundamentals of customer service has changed my perspective on what we serve. Do it in such a way so that they get better service than when they go to a full-service sit-down restaurant.”

“Here we try to personalize everything. We use names rather than numbers. You know, even when I go out to eat at a full-service restaurant, they never ask me what my name is. They never comment on what I am wearing. They never have meaningful conversations about how my day has been. We find out what they do for a living. We learn about their families and make a place where people can call home.”

A second participant described the following strategies:

“I will say it is properly advertising and marketing to include all customers. The company itself invests a lot in marketing, and they do much marketing such as commercials, TV, billboards, emails, and group text messages. I will say it is like

60% marketing, and then the other 40% is the experience you can offer to your customers at the store, the quality of the food, and the customer service. It is important to get familiar with the customer and create that loyalty.”

Based on the participants' answers to the three questions related to Business and Sustainability Innovation Strategies, personalized service focus is critical to create a good balance between a new generation of customers and maintaining a loyal customer base. As expressed by participants, as customers come to like employees, they will gradually become frequent customers and enthusiastic advocates of their FCR business.

Category 2, Theme 3: Taking Care of Team Members. According to 50% of the participants, taking good care of your employees or team members is critical to achieving sustainability. As established by one of the participants:

“Employees are going to start caring when they see their management motivating them. Showing them that their work matters. You want to be able to listen to their needs. I believe that the key sustainability strategies for a successful FCR needs to be around their ability to create good advertising, marketing, food quality, and an excellent environment for their employees to grow.”

A second participant emphasized the importance of developing a unique business concept based on the latest innovations and always putting it in front of their customers and employees to create a unique, scalable, and sustainable business. The participant's main point was that if they can increase productivity, managers will have more time to invest in their employees and customers. Another relevant point made by the participant

was to focus strongly on having all their work instructions and standards in place, care about their employees, and offer learning and growing opportunities inside the organization. The participant described his business and sustainability innovation strategies experiences as:

“Establishing a culture takes time; we have the same goals, but it is about how you talk to your employees, show appreciation, and encourage them to keep growing in our company. Also, the opportunity for promotions and raises, sometimes just ordering a different food to demonstrate to them that you care about them, and I see their challenging work [can increase their commitment to the company].”

A third participant established that he was looking for a job closer to home and with a flexible work schedule during his college years, and his current employer offered both benefits. He also said the main reasons for accepting his current management role were life-work balance, business integration with the community, and overall organizational culture. The participant described his management and entrepreneurship innovation strategies experiences as:

“Management innovation is just getting back to the basics where I know my team and what they do for fun. Also, I know what they do with their families and know their kids, teens, parents, siblings, and spouses. We try to get to know them on a personal level. During COVID-19, it was interesting that the founders came out and they said, “Do you know what? We are going to keep everyone. All we are

going to do is keep our entire team employed.” Thus, even though we were, you know, down 60-70% in sales, what we did. We held training sessions where we brought our entire team to learn things to practice things to get refreshers.

Moreover, that galvanized us to grow the way we have.”

As described by the participants, a FCR leader must demonstrate that he or she cares about their team members. Furthermore, it would be best to include employees in some of the main management strategies. As indicated by six participants, keeping employees driving, pushing themselves, engaged, and supporting each other is critical to keeping morale up and creating a successful business. To see a graphic representation of Category 2 development and findings, please refer to Appendices N and O.

Category 3: Technology and Integrated Innovation Strategies

The third category, Category 3: Technology and Integrated System Innovation Strategies, resulted from the participants’ responses to the following two interview questions: (a) Question 5. What specific technology-innovation strategies have you used in your FCR during the last 5 years? (b) Question 6. What specific integrated-innovation system strategies have you used during the previous 5 years in your FCR? The emergent strategies, strategy levels of development, strategy definitions, strategy frequency, and participation or endorsement percentage of strategies for Category 3 are presented in Tables 10-13.

Table 10*Strategies for Category 3, Interview Questions: 5, and 6*

Strategy Levels	Category 3 - Emerged Strategies (8)
Employee Level	point of sale, online ordering, and third-party deliveries
Customer Service Level	deliveries with tracking capabilities, and self-kiosk ordering
Overall Level	portable computers, kitchen technologies, and third-party delivery integration

Table 11*Strategies and Definitions for Category 3, Interview Questions 5, and 6*

Category 3 – Strategies	Definitions
Point of Sale	Participants' responses indicated the importance of point-of-sale technologies for an efficient FCR operation.
Online Ordering	Participants reiterated the importance of online ordering for the profitability and success of FCR businesses.
Third Party Deliveries	Participants expressed the importance of third-party deliveries for FCR business profitability.
Deliveries with Tracking	Participants expressed the importance of tracking deliveries to ensure customer satisfaction and business efficient operation.
Self-Kiosk Ordering	Participants expressed the importance of the development of self-kiosk technology.
Portable Computers	Participants expressed the importance of computer portability for an efficient management of a FCR operation.
Kitchen Technologies	Participants established the importance of constant investment in kitchen technologies for quality improvements and energy savings.
Third Party Deliveries Integration	Participants reiterated the importance of the integration of POS with third party deliveries.

Table 12*Frequency of Strategies for Category 3, Research Questions 5, and 6*

Strategies	Number of participants mentioning the strategy	Total quotes associated
Point of Sale	10	33
Online Ordering	8	19
Third-Party Deliveries	5	12
Third Party Deliveries Integration	3	6
Self-Kiosk Ordering	2	8
Deliveries with Tracking	2	6
Portable Computers	2	4
Kitchen Technologies	1	3

Table 13*Participation Percentage of Strategies for Category 3, Interview Questions 5 and 6*

Strategies	Number of participants	Participation %
Point of Sale	10	83.3%
Online Ordering	8	66.6%
Third Party Deliveries	5	41.6%
Third-Party Deliveries Integration	3	25.0%
Self-Kiosk Ordering	2	16.6%
Deliveries with Tracking	2	16.6%
Portable Computers	2	16.6%
Kitchen Technologies	1	8.3%

Interview Questions 5 and 6 were related to the third identified category: Technology and Integrated Innovation Strategies. A total of eight strategies emerged from the participants' responses to the mentioned two questions. The strategies were organized into three top strategies levels: employee, customer, and overall. At the employee level, three innovation strategies were identified. The following were the identified strategies with their respective number of participants and participation/endorsement percentages as presented in Table 13. point of sale (10, 83.3%), online ordering (8, 66%), and third-party deliveries (5, 41.6%).

At the customer service level, two innovation strategies were identified, with their respective number of participants and participation percentages as presented in Table 13. Self-kiosk ordering (5, 41.6%), and deliveries with tracking capabilities (2, 58.3%). and finally, at the overall level, three innovation strategies were identified. The following were the identified strategies with their respective number of participants and participation percentages as presented in Table 13. third-party delivery integration (3, 25%), kitchen technologies (2, 16.6%), and portable computers (1, 83%).

Category 3 Top Themes

According to participants' responses to Interview Questions 5, and 6, and based on the higher participation percentage and associated quotes, the top three themes or strategies related to technology and integration were: point of sale (83.3%, 33), online ordering (66.6%, 19), and third-party deliveries (41.6%, 12). In addition, most of the participants recognized the importance of third-party delivery integration and deliveries

with tracking capabilities, self-kiosk ordering, and portable computers to facilitate FCR operations as critical factors in developing a sustainable organization.

Category 3, Theme 1: Use of Point-of-Sale System for Efficiency. According to most participants (83.3%), POS is the most critical integrated technology software to operate an efficient FCR. As stated by one of the participants:

“In terms of technology, our online orders combined with our pickup service area and delivery options combined with our updated POS System are completely changed the atmosphere of our restaurant.”

“Based on these new tendencies, we are considering different layouts for our new stores, more relaxed and set up to do delivery, and pickups at the first stores were not designed for that.”

A second participant stated:

“Also, since the COVID-19 Pandemic, her FCR adopted new services such as curbside pickup and deliveries through third-party companies such as Door Dash, Uber-Eats, and Grub-hub. These new services are aligned with the increasing demand and are integrated with their online ordering and POS systems.”

Based on participant responses, it can be further concluded that the POS innovation strategy has increased the chances of sustainability of FCR by providing constant standardization, integrated systems, efficiency, and accelerated service time.

Category 3, Theme 2: Online Ordering. As eight of 12 participants stated, online ordering changed their business positively and is here to stay. One participant

stated that since the COVID-19 pandemic, their online ordering system increased and flipped their customer base during 2021 from ordering 20% online and 80% in-person, to ordering 80% online and 20% in-person. Also, the participant said their current focus is on establishing new stores with drive-up service windows. The participant detailed her FCRs leading successful technology and integrated system innovation strategies as:

“The digital ordering system has changed this business from the ground up. I mean, we were talking about before it being fast-casual getting to know your customers over the past 2 1/2 years, especially with COVID-19.”

“We went from being an 80% in-person, 20% digital ordering business model to nearly flipping, being more heavily on the digital end of sales and not the in-person. Due to worldwide events.”

“It is great to be ahead of the game in terms of technology. It is getting that technology out there, making it available to people. As soon as the Pandemic hit, they introduced it, and the integration went extremely fast. Moreover, it links us to anything that we want to use throughout the day, whether it be ordering, payroll, changing account information; it makes everything easier for us.”

A second participant said since the pandemic, the online ordering system increased to 66% online versus 33% in-person. The participant detailed his FCR leading technology and integrated system innovation strategies as:

"The best thing, it is no more paper menus, everything is online now, ordering online, and third parties' deliveries like Door-Dash, Uber eats, and Grub-hub are transforming our business."

"Between ordering online and in-person, it is almost two to one ordering online over in-person ordering. People are walking in and out. I do not want to say it is all related to the Pandemic, but we need to understand that it is a new generation of customers and food delivery companies."

Based on participant responses, there is enough evidence to support the argument that online ordering increased during the COVID-19 pandemic and maintained, and for others, it continues to grow. Five participants mentioned the incremental increase in online orders pushed their companies to modify their floor layouts and alter their future store concepts to quickly adapt to the higher volume projections of customers ordering online ordering, as well as third-party delivery traffic.

Category 3, Theme 3: Third-Party Deliveries. As established by 41.6% of the participants, the addition of third-party deliveries is a critical factor in creating a sustainable FCR. As one participant stated:

"Now, based on these new deliveries options we are considering different layouts for our stores, to accelerate the speed up of the pick-up at our store and delivery to our customers."

A second participant said their FCR's leading technology and integrated system innovation strategies are related to implementing portable tablet computers, online orders,

and POS integration. The participant emphasized that even with advances in technology and consistent system integration, their core business philosophy is still face-to-face interaction. However, they are investing in technology as necessary, but when they do, they only invest in the latest technology, including third-party delivery options.

Based on participants' responses, there is supporting evidence for the argument that even with changes in the pandemic, a new generation of customers and food delivery companies must be considered as an extension of the FCR business, and a critical factor and strategy to guarantee long-term success and sustainability. Please refer to Appendices P and Q to see a graphic representation of Category 3 development and findings.

Category 4: Social Diffusion Innovation Strategies

The fourth category, Category 4: Social Diffusion Innovation Strategies, resulted from the participants' responses to the following interview question: Question #7 (Q7) What specific social-diffusion strategies have you used during the last 5 years in your FCR? The emergent strategies, strategy levels of development, strategy definitions, strategy frequency, participation, and endorsement percentage of strategies for Category 4 are presented in Tables 14-17.

Table 14

Strategies for Category 4, Interview Question 7

Strategy Levels	Category 4 - Emerged Strategies (4)
Employee Level	Social-Media and Word-of-Mouth
Customer Service Level	Branding Ambassadors

Overall Level

Multiple Marketing Venues

The employee level resulted in two specific innovation strategies: social media (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn) and word-of-mouth. The customer service level resulted in one specific innovation strategy focused on branding ambassadors. Finally, at the overall level, it resulted in a strategy focused on simultaneously using marketing venues such as magazines, newspapers, billboards advertising, printed mail, electronic coupons, TV commercials, and digital advertising.

Table 15*Strategies and Definitions for Category 4, Interview Question 7*

Category 4 - Strategies	Definitions-
Social Media	Participants reiterated the importance of social media to increase business visibility, increase traffic, and maintain FCR business profitability and success.
Word-of-Mouth	Participants' responses indicated the importance of reputation to increase word-of-mouth publicity to attract new customers.
Branding Ambassador	Participants expressed the importance of FCR branding and community ambassadors to attract customers and guarantee a sustainability business.
Multiple Marketing Venues	Participants expressed the relevance of investing in multiple marketing campaigns and venues to attract different generations of customers.

Table 16*Frequency of Strategies for Category 4, Interview Question 7*

Strategies	Number of participants mentioning the theme	Total quotes associated
Social Media	10	25
Word-of-Mouth	8	15
Multiple Marketing Venues	6	13
Branding Ambassador	2	5

Table 17*Participation Percentage of Strategies for Category 4, Interview Question 7*

Strategies	Number of participants	Participation %
Social Media	10	83.3%
Word-of-Mouth	8	66.6%
Multiple Marketing Venues	6	50%
Branding Ambassador	2	16.6%

Interview Question 7 was related to the fourth identified category: Social Diffusion Innovation Strategies. Four strategies emerged from the participants' responses to the question asked. The strategies were organized into three top strategy levels: employee, customer, and overall. At the employee level, two innovations strategies were identified. The following were the identified strategies with their respective number of

participants and participation/endorsement percentages as presented in Table 17. social media (10, 83.3%), and word-of-mouth (8, 66.6%).

Only one innovation strategy was identified at the customer service level. The following identified strategy with the respective number of participants and participation percentages as presented in Table 17- Branding ambassador (2, 16.6%). Finally, at the overall level, one innovation strategy was identified. The following was the identified strategy with its respective number of participants and participation percentage as presented in Table 17- multiple marketing venues (6, 50%).

Category 4 Top Themes

According to participants' responses to the interview question 7 and based on the higher participation percentage and associated quotes, the top two themes or strategies related to social diffusion were: social media (83.3%, 25) and word-of-mouth (66.6%, 15). In addition, most of the participants recognized the importance of multiple marketing venues and business and community integration to establish a solid reputation and a sustainable FCR operation.

Category 4, Theme 1: Social Media. According to most participants (83.3%), social media is the most powerful marketing tool to attract customers and generate consistent customer traffic and income. As mentioned by 10 of 12 participants, most of their current marketing significant efforts were related to social media. However, not everyone was aligned on the best specific strategies for getting into the social media alternatives. One of the participants said:

“We also use social media as our customer are attracted to it, Facebook, Instagram. For example, we recently released a new meat on social media and that day we were slammed.”

A second participant said:

“We do not do much. We have, our primary social media, so Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn, and I do not know if there is more than that, quite honestly. Instagram and Facebook are our main social media sites, and right now, we are redesigning our website and app, trying to match them with the additions and concepts of the new restaurants.”

A third participant established that they relied more on social media during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. However, they understood the need to provide different promotions and marketing alternatives via mail, email, and newspaper for their older customer generations. They believed in moving with the innovation; however, they are conscious of maintaining a fair balance for their formal base of customers as they adopt these new social diffusion trends. The participant detailed their main social diffusion innovation strategies as follows:

“It was a lot easier before COVID happened because it will do door hangers, so we say, this upcoming weekend is going to be the new special, and when the customer opens the door, the promotion was there, was more personal. However, corporate does not want us going anymore.”

“We also send coupons via emails direct mail inside the newspaper, and now you can download them from our website or from your application.”

As participants stated, it is evident that marketing via social media is becoming more effective and cost-efficient than the traditional options of magazines and newspaper ads, and less tedious than the alternatives of an e-mail chain or text messages. However, as expressed within the participants' responses, the popular social media platforms such as Facebook, and Instagram, among others, are becoming the favorite alternative for FCR to capture customers' attention and attract them to explore or visit their FCR business. Also, based on the participants' comments, even with the alternative of social media advertising, FCRs will need to keep their continuous investments in their business website and maintain a solid presence and reputation on other specialized online review platforms.

Category 4, Theme 2: Word-of-Mouth. The second most popular answer among participants (66%) in relationship to social diffusion strategies was the strategy of word-of-mouth. As stated by some of the participants, the word-of-mouth strategy has been underestimated by many FCRs, but over the years, has proved that is the more powerful, stable, and cost-effective strategy to attract new customers. As described by one of the participants:

“We use Facebook and Instagram, but it's more word of mouth grassroots advertising. We go out into the community and top this store stuff out what

services we provide. I like more coupons and have it close to the register to reward the customers.”

A second participant stated:

“We have the paper marketing that we put up on our windows on our doors. You know, windows that kind of thing, but other than that we indeed rely on word of mouth, so we do not pay for any advertising we do not pay for TV, commercials, billboards, radio spots. We do not pay for any of those things. We rely on word of mouth. We rely on the customer experience being significant enough that they are going to bring their friends and family back.”

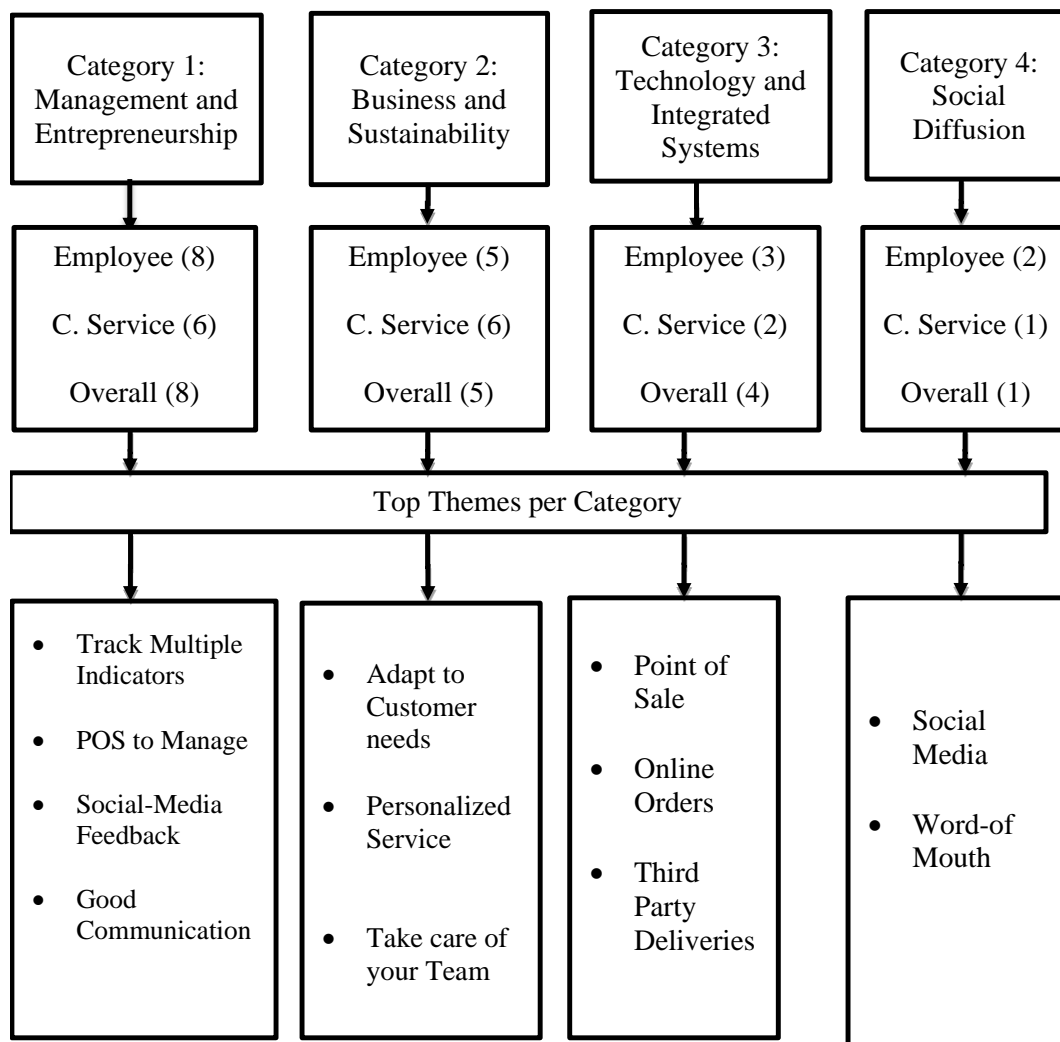
A third participant said their social diffusion innovation strategies depend more on their digital marketing and social media through their Facebook and Instagram pages. However, they also said their social diffusion strategy positions their stores in high foot-traffic areas – areas such as airports, malls, or close to colleges or universities where they can quickly impact more customers and accelerate their market presence. The participant described their main social diffusion innovation strategies as follows:

“Walking traffic is also essential for us, this store, for example, pitches for the students from nearby colleges and schools and our social media campaigns for this specific store. We also hire many students from these schools and colleges to attract their social circles. As you can notice it is much-walking traffic here.”

Based on participants' answers to the social diffusion question, there is enough evidence to suggest that a satisfied customer is the best marketing tool and guarantees

FCR success and sustainability. The main factors participants discussed to ensure customer retention and business recommendations to others were the overall quality of food, fair prices, convenience, and overall excellent customer service.

For a graphic representation of Category 4 development and findings, please refer to Appendices R and S. Figure 1 represents the qualitative analysis process used to develop the resulting specific innovation strategies findings.

Figure 1*Strategies and Top Themes*

Note. The categories, specific innovation strategies, and top themes shown in the figure were based on data from interviews and analysis of company documents.

Summary

The objective of Chapter 4 was to provide a detailed overview and evidence related to the study settings, including the perceived COVID-19 pandemic's impact on the study, demographics, characteristics, data collection process (including unusual circumstances and variations affecting participants or customer experiences), and data analysis, including the inductive identification of specific codes, categories, strategies, emerging top themes, and concepts related to innovation strategies to create FCR sustainability. Also, evidence of trustworthiness (credibility, transferability, dependability, and ability to confirm) and results by theme were presented, including supporting participants' quotes, discrepant cases, explicative tables, and figures.

The research study results presented 51 innovation strategies with 12 top highlighted themes from four primary categories: (a) management and entrepreneurship (top themes: track multiple indicators, pos to manage, social media feedback, and good communication), (b) business and sustainability (top themes: adapt to customer needs, personalized service, and take care of your team), (c) technology and integrated systems (top themes: pos, online orders, and third party deliveries), and (d) social diffusion-innovation strategies (top themes: social media and word-of-mouth), each category with three primary conceptual strategy levels: employee, customer service, and overall.

All results emerged from the interviews and data-gathering focused on answering the purpose of the research and primary research question about what innovative strategies are used by successful FCR leaders in Delaware to achieve sustainability. The

main themes that answered the research question and resulted from the data collected were: track multiple indicators, pos to manage, point of sale, social media advertising, online orders, social- media feedback, good communication, adapt to customer needs, word-of-mouth, personalized service, take care of your team, and third-party deliveries.

With supportive participant quotations, I sustained the base for the development of each presented category, strategy levels, specific innovation strategy, and emerged top themes that will be expanded during Chapter 5. I also presented multiple appendixes, figures, and participants' comments supporting the results. Chapter 5 includes the study findings discussion, interpretations, limitations, recommendations, implications for social change, and the study's conclusive thoughts.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this qualitative multiple-case study was to explore and describe what innovative strategies are used by successful FCR leaders in Delaware to overcome business challenges and achieve sustainability beyond 5 years. This chapter includes the interpretation of the findings, limitations, recommendations, implications, and conclusions of this qualitative multiple-case study. These findings emerged from exploring what innovative strategies were used by 12 FCR leaders from six FCRs in Delaware to overcome business challenges and achieve sustainability. I studied the strategies related to the management process, integrated systems, technologies, and social diffusion channels using the entrepreneurship innovation derivative theories to illustrate what makes the selected FCR business models work in Delaware.

The key findings included 51 innovation strategies resulting from four main categories: (a) management and entrepreneurship (22), (b) business and sustainability (16), (c) technology and integrated systems (9), and (d) social diffusion (4). The top 12 themes highlighted from the study with their respective participation percentage were track multiple indicators (100%), POS to manage (83%), POS (83%), social media advertising (83%), online orders (66%), social media feedback (66%), good communication (66%), adapt to customer needs (66%), word-of-mouth (66%), personalized service (50%), take care of your team (50%), and third-party deliveries (41.6%).

Interpretation of Findings

The findings of this study were composed of the direct answers to 10 leading interview questions and related subquestions. I interviewed participants until the resulting responses became repetitive, and data saturation was achieved after interviewing 12 FCR leaders. The data collected related to the study's overarching question: What innovative strategies are used by successful FCR leaders in Delaware to achieve sustainability? I transcribed and coded the participants' answers. To increase the credibility of the interviews, a member-check process with participants' reviews was conducted (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The resulting codes were tabulated and based on the frequency of appearances, and four primary innovation strategy categories were revealed. Finally, the interviews were synthesized and compared with the previously presented literature review and major theoretical foundations.

Category 1: Management and Entrepreneurship Innovation Strategies

The findings showed that FCR leaders in Delaware use 51 innovation strategies to achieve business sustainability. However, my discussion focuses on the top 12 themes or strategies from the four primary categories. The first category (Category 1) was based on four interview questions: Q1, Q2, Q4, and Q9. Analysis of data revealed four top themes.

Theme 1: Tracking of Multiple Indicators

This strategy or theme refers to how FCR leaders track key performance indicators. Schumpeter (1942) established that entrepreneurs and leaders are the primary economic agents. They exploit market opportunities through technical and organizational

innovation, developing capabilities and concepts to keep a competitive market advantage. In that regard and congruent with Schumpeter's comments, participants expressed that establishing and constantly tracking key performance indicators had been a critical strategy to their success and sustainability. Most participants perceived that being conscious and aware of their daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly goals and continuous discussion with their leaders had given them a deep sense of certainty, ownership, and direction to maintain their efforts. This finding supports that of Tülücea and Yurtkurb (2015), who explained that an entrepreneur or business leader's primary role is to consistently assess and ensure that their company strategies, services, and employees are on track to achieve their established goals and financial sustainability. Most participants confirmed that they are responsible for establishing, tracking, informing, communicating, monitoring, and executing all the activities related to achieving and maintaining their key performance indicators under control.

Theme 2: Use of Point-of-Sale System to Manage the Business

This strategy or theme is related to the use of POS as a focal point to manage the entire FCR operation. Ten participants using their POS system to manage their FCR operations concurred that it appeared to be a significant factor in their continued success and adaptation to modern technologies and customer tendencies. The findings related to this strategy are consistent with Setvan's (2016) comments. He established that continuous advances in technology innovations are making consumers less interested in spending time and effort on food preparation activities. They are more focused on a

healthy lifestyle, so these tendencies are creating a continuous increase in FCR customers' expectations of food ingredients and overall quality, service time, payments, and delivery options, as well as customer service.

As Giuntella (2018) explained, health conscious FCR customers will no longer accept compromising their health habits or the food's freshness. In terms of business, this positively impacts the expansion of FCR concepts. As validated by the participants, POS systems have become a critical management system for FCR leaders to integrate the increasing demand and manage their day-to-day operations with continuous success. Participants mentioned that POS technologies facilitate internal and external business communication. They also serve as a database, providing accurate business reporting and interface with other technologies such as online ordering and delivery options saving time for FCR leaders to focus on their team members and customers.

Theme 3: Use of Social Media for Feedback

Eight of 12 participants described using social media to receive feedback as a critical tool to facilitate direct communication with customers and maintain high-quality customer service. These comments were consistent with Cheng's findings (2017) that FCRs could maintain a close relationship with their customers while at the same time conveying their experiences to the rest of their social media system. The participants described how social media platforms is essential to reaching existing and prospective customers. With the increase in specialized online reviews, platforms are becoming critical for growth and sustainability to maintain an excellent online reputation. All

participants said they focus on maintaining their customer base; however, most expressed their continuous investment of time to attract younger customers. To achieve that goal, they must be vigilant of social media interactions and feedback. These comments were consistent with the statements by Mathur and Gupta (2018) that technological innovations are critical to creating and maintaining competitiveness, cost-structure alignment, food safety, business flexibility, and market differentiation.

Theme 4: Good Communication

Establishing excellent communication with employees, customers, and providers was a predominant strategy discussed by eight of 12 participants and described as a critical FCR strategy to achieve success and sustainability. Also, the participants described how effective communication with employees is the best management strategy to guarantee that they feel appreciated and valued, making them respond by taking good care of their customers. Participants' responses also pointed out that using technology to maintain good internal and external communication has been essential to maintaining focus and motivation among all FCR organization members. Participants' comments were consistent with Setyan (2017), who explained that the continuous growth of FCR responds to a new generation of customers. Setyan mentioned that these new customers are less concerned about caloric intake, but more interested in the overall convenience, healthfulness, freshness, and where they feel they are appreciated, recognized, and establishing excellent communication with the employees who regularly interact.

Category 2: Business and Sustainability Innovation Strategies

The second category (Category 2) had three Interview Questions: Q3, Q8, and Q10. The data analysis revealed three top themes that helped document the participants' perceptions of FCR business and sustainability innovation strategies.

Theme 1: Adaptation to Customers' Needs

As eight of 12 participants expressed, the critical aspect is maintaining their FCR's adaptability and vigilance to their customers' needs, as well as market changes. The participants' responses were congruent with Schumpeter (1942), who explained that all businesses undergo a process of internal mutation, where they change their internal structure to create a new one. Schumpeter also explained that during this mutation process, the innovation developed to transform the business from an adaptive to a creative business environment. The participants who agreed that adapting to customers' needs is a critical factor for business sustainability also agreed that to achieve a sustainable business, the FCR must be adaptive. They constantly evaluate what their customers want and their FCR's strengths and weaknesses and use these findings to develop strategies and business opportunities. These participants' comments are in alignment with Drucker (1985), who expressed that to be a successful business entrepreneur one must adapt one's strengths and weaknesses, overcome challenges, and take full advantage of evolving environments to propel innovative ideas.

Theme 2: Personalized Service

Six of 12 participants identified personalized service as a critical strategy for FCR success and sustainability. Some participants stated they are not focused on leading in technology or innovation advances, but they are conscious of available opportunities and ready to respond as needed. Participants also agreed that it is crucial to always listen to customers and suppliers regarding new tendencies. However, four participants said their primary focus is to provide excellent customer service and make every customer feel great about the quality, price, and the environment of their respective FCR. Participants' comments aligned with the comments made by Alawamleh et al. (2018) that, in terms of innovations, customers have the firsthand ability to evaluate and access FCR products and services and serve as business ambassadors to their social network followers and family members. Other participants said they always maintain loyalty to their principles and winning formula. That is excellent customer service and personalized customer treatment. They require their team members to learn customer's names and what they like and have casual conversations with them to make them feel valued. The participants expressed that keeping personalized treatment to their customers helped them make loyal customers and establish an excellent reputation that were key to their sustainability.

Theme 3: Taking Care of Team Members

Six of 12 participants described continuous investment in their team members as a critical factor for their business success and sustainability. Participants' comments have been consistent with Lee et al., (2013) comments. They established that the constant

investment in attracting, developing, and retaining employees is fundamental for FCR to maintain a profitable and evolving business. Some participants concurred with Wu et al. (2019) that employees drive their business when they feel their company cares, listens, trusts, and invests in them. As three participants agreed, a healthy cultural base is defined by the environment, internal values, and behaviors promoted within the company. Based on participants' comments, promoting, engaging, encouraging, and showing appreciation for employees is a critical strategy to develop and maintain a successful FCR.

As one of the participants stated, their long tenure with their current FCR is based on their company's previous training opportunities that allowed them to be promoted from regular-line employees to managers and leadership positions. Participants' comments support the statements from Tülücea and Yurtkurb (2015). They explained that an entrepreneur or business leader's primary role is to consistently assess and ensure that their company strategies, services, and employees are engaged in achieving their established financial goals.

Category 3: Technology and Integrated Innovation Strategies

The third category (Category 3) had two related Interview Questions: Q5 and Q6. These two interview questions and the data analysis revealed three additional top themes or strategies that helped document the participant's perceptions of FCR: Technology and Integrated System Innovation Strategies.

Theme 1: Use of Point-of-Sale System for Efficiency

Ten of 12 participants stated a POS system is considered the primary FCR technological system capable of integrating all distinct aspects of their business necessary to manage and control their operations efficiently. Participants' statements aligned with Cavusoglu (2019), as the author explained that a POS system is necessary to integrate and manage an actual FCR business. Most of the participants expressed that POS is not only critical for their day-by-day operations, but also necessary to compete, integrate, and maintain them with the fast passed FCR industry and constantly changing customers' needs. The participants mentioned that these actual customers' needs include fast deliveries, curb or in-store pick-ups, and online ordering—all critical income venues to maintain a profitable FCR business.

Theme 2: Online Orders

By interviewed participants, online orders with 66% of the participants represented the second most mentioned technological and system-integrated strategy to create a successful and sustainable FCR. Participants expressed that it is critical for FCR success to maintain agility, adaptability, and vigilance vigilant to their customer needs and market changes. Participants were congruent with Reinke (2016), who expressed that FCR must embrace constant innovation to stay in business and adapt their environment to the evolving technological innovation, including online ordering, online reservations, and online menus, amongst others. Eight of 12 participants mentioned that since the COVID-19 pandemic, their business models had become based on online orders, pushing them to

quickly adapt to it. This, in addition to taking full advantage of the technological advances available for the FCR industry to guarantee profitability and sustainability.

Theme 3: Third-Party Deliveries

Five of 12 participants identified third-party deliveries as an effective strategy to achieve FCR success and sustainability. Many participants mentioned that the increased popularity of delivery companies such as Uber-Eats and Grub-Hub, among others, has intensified the pressure for many FCRs to offer the services or expand their number of delivery drivers to achieve the increasing and popular demand. Some participants also expressed that providing third-party delivery services does not necessarily mean increased profitability for their business. As established by Rodgers (2008), technological additions can enormously benefit restaurant operations' capabilities. Participants' comments aligned with Rodgers, expressing that even though technological innovations are expensive, they require technical skills and training to take full advantage of their implementation. Eventually, they will pay for themselves and benefit from their business's profitability.

The five participants mentioned that the COVID-19 pandemic made third-party deliveries a necessity for their business, and now they are considered an extended part of their business success. Participants also expressed that those third-party deliveries have been instrumental in diffusing their menus and spreading their name and reputation into closer communities, especially for the younger customers. Another crucial point made by most participants was that third-party deliveries and customer pick-ups affect their

current and future store layouts in which the stores need upgrades to accommodate the increasing demand. Some participants established that their current FCR has been reconfigured to accommodate additional accessible racks and provide additional accessible parking to speed up the pick-up for customers and third-party delivery companies.

Category 4: Social Diffusion Innovation Strategies

The fourth category (Category 4) had one related Interview Question: Q7. This interview question and the data analysis revealed two additional top themes or strategies that helped document the participants' perceptions of FCR—Social Diffusion Innovation Strategies.

Theme 1: Social Media

Ten of 12 participants' responses revealed that social media is the premier marketing tool for FCR to promote their business. Most participants expressed that their primary social media efforts are focused on constant updates on their Facebook, Instagram, and Tik-Tok, among other social media accounts. Consistent with the classic innovation theory, Drucker (1985) suggested that innovations should be adapted to daily habits to promote business changes. In that same perspective, half of the participants mentioned that since COVID-19 pandemic, their FCR had reduced its traditional marketing campaigns to focus on social media marketing campaigns to attract younger customers, expand its customer base, and increase its online reputation.

Three participants mentioned that they still have a solid customer base that is not continually active on social media. Therefore, they still maintain a solid presence in community activities, local newspapers, and direct mail with discount coupons to reach those older customer generations. Some participants explained that their companies are investing exclusively in social media campaigns and relying on their food quality and customer service to receive word-of-mouth promotions.

Theme 2: Word-of-Mouth

Eight of 12 participants' responses indicated that customer's word-of-mouth promotion of their business is the best and most cost-effective marketing strategy to attract new customers. The interviewed participants expressed that the term *word-of-mouth* today cannot be compared with the same concept a decade ago. Participants explained that in the modern era, word-of-mouth includes social media posts (Facebook, Instagram, Tik-Tok, Twitter, among others), text messages, phone calls, emails, expression bulletin boards, and the traditional colloquial conversation between individuals or groups. Participants' comments were congruent with Cheng's (2017), that mentioned that a critical factor for social diffusion is the period right after a customer visits or tastes an FCR for the first time. As explained by participants, the first visit or food taste to an FCR starts the process of diffusion where individuals share their perceptions of food quality, customer service, cost, and overall atmosphere with their social group, which immediately triggers social pressure in their inner circles.

Limitations of the Study

The major limitation of trustworthiness that arose from the execution of this study was tied to the selection of participants. Most of the participants were front-line managers and not necessarily owners, investors, or top executives who could have firsthand information about the current or future strategic direction for their respective FCR businesses. Based on that, the findings cannot guarantee the entire population of FCR in Delaware. Another limitation was the number of participants (12) that, even though I reached data saturation, the number of participants was low compared to the entire population of FCR leaders in Delaware.

Another limitation was the broad selection of topics, such as management, entrepreneurship, technology, integrated systems, and social diffusion innovation strategies. This broad selection of topics made it exceedingly difficult to expand deep into each area, making it imperative to suggest future individual research studies for each innovation strategy subject presented in this study. Regarding how the proposed limitations before and after the study were compared, there were similarities such as expected perceived honesty and openness during the interview's sections.

Recommendations

I consider it essential to mention that FCR innovation strategies are in constant change that will certainly require new strategies that could facilitate their continuous evolution. However, based on the findings, strengths, limitations, and literature review of this study, there is a series of recommendations for future studies focused on providing

innovation strategies guidelines and a template for actual and future FCR leaders, owners-entrepreneurs, investors, scholars, and practitioners. In terms of recommendations for action,

- Propose business schools to design and incorporate courses related to FCR innovation strategies to create consciousness about sustainability.
- Publish the results of this study to provide guidelines for existing, new, and future FCR leaders.
- Suggest creating online programs, courses, seminars on social networks (e.g., LinkedIn, YouTube, etc.) to inform FCR leaders and the overall public about the latest innovation strategies.
- Use the results of this study to create a checklist, guidelines, and training about innovation strategies for FCR leaders.
- Create FCR innovation strategies guidelines for business school professors, SBA loan officers, and lending officers at banks.
- Use the results of this study as a base for future investigations related to updates FCR innovation strategies tendencies.

In terms of recommendation for further studies,

- Suggest detailed individual research studies for each one of the FCR categories presented in this study: management and entrepreneurship, business, and sustainability, technology and integrated systems, and social diffusion.

- Suggest a detailed study with the top 12 themes resulted from this study.
- I recommend expanding the study with follow-up sections with interviewed participants and a higher number of participants, including a higher number of owners, investors, and top executives.
- During the follow-up of interviewed participants, additional factors can be evaluated, such as startup strategies, new tendencies, pre- and post-pandemic effects of online orders, deliveries, and in-person sales, also, with the current labor shortage since the COVID-19 pandemic, what actions were taken and how the participants FCR evolved to adjust to the labor crisis during and after 2022.
- An exciting fact not discussed or presented during the study was the number of years in business of the participants FCRs. Future research could analyze the relationship between FCR years in business and their business success.
- Another critical factor discussed during Chapter #2 was the different marketing strategies and the generational focus targeted by FCR's. A future study could compare the relationship between marketing strategies, generational or age-targeted, and their business success.

The strength of this study was based on the followed protocols, deep collected information, solid presented findings with included supporting participants' citations that will serve as significant contribution and solid base for the current and future entrepreneurship and management fields with direct implications in social change,

practice, and theory as explained in the Implications section. The recommendation for future research includes the analysis of FCR strategies pre- and post-COVID-19 pandemic and the replication of this study, though in a different geographical and socio-demographic scenario or environment.

Implications

The implications of this study in conjunction with the projected need for workers and the current labor shortage crisis due to the COVID-19 pandemic, made relevant the realization of this study (National Restaurant Association, 2019). Also, continuous challenges in raw materials, transportation, real estate availability, and incremental costs are emerging as limiting factors for the continuous success, potential, and expansion of this novel food industry sector into the future (Maze, 2017). This study was realized to create the opportunity for many current and future entrepreneurs, owners, and leaders to enhance their knowledge and maximize their potential to generate a sustainable future for their business, creating along the way positive social change, theory, and practice implications.

This study presented different methodological and theoretical implications. At the individual level the findings on this study may present positive social change implications by demonstrating how combining multiple individual experiences and perspectives by FCR Leaders in Delaware may be used to establish an effective strategic plan to create sustainable business. This study reinforced the main points made by Maze (2017), who established that it is imminent the need to establish strategies that could face the new and

emerging challenges that are constantly forcing many FCRs to close or limit their expansion plans.

In terms of implications for positive social change with respect to the family level the results of this study presented how the primary focus of multiple FCR participants are directed to influence the perception of their customers. These perceptions are established by providing an excellent customer service that could make every customer feel great about the quality, price, and the environment of their respective FCR. Participants' comments aligned with the comments made by Alawamleh et al., (2018) that, in terms of innovations, customers have the first-hand ability to evaluate and access FCR products and services and serve as business ambassadors to their social network followers and family members. The second most popular answer among participants (66%) in relationship to social diffusion strategies was the strategy of word-of-mouth. As stated by some of the participants, the word-of-mouth strategy has been underestimated by many FCRs, but over the years, has proved that is the more powerful, stable, and cost-effective strategy to attract new customers and rely on the customer experience being significant enough that they are going to bring their friends and family back

In terms of implications for positive social change at the organizational and societal level the results of this study provided a solid base of knowledge, which could positively affect existing and future FCR businesses' ability to create sustainability opportunities that could also lead to a positive change for their communities. This could be the base to create and maintain a stable social base for the benefits of individuals,

families, organizations, and the general community that could improve the social atmosphere in the area, resulting in better and continuous social improvements, cohesion, and understanding (Liu, Miller, & Wang, 2014). These effects will create positive social changes for everyone, including related business such as local providers, farmers, and suppliers.

As FCR become sustainable, they could offer diverse job opportunities to community members. The sustainability success of these FCR could also provide a stable social environment for their customers to visit with their family and friends, creating connections between members of the same community while enjoying a sociable atmosphere frequently. The establishment of a stable social environment could result in better understanding, community cohesion, and continuous social improvement (Liu et al., 2014). Furthermore, the implementation of entrepreneurship innovative practices and strategies may contribute to FCR profitability and growth. It could also create a positive economic effect on their community's local businesses, such as farmers, local growers, and other small businesses. Finally, business sustainability and community cohesion could attract multiple investors and government and private sector projects or initiatives to the area resulting in a brighter economic future for the entire community.

In terms of theoretical implications, the realization of this study represents a significant advance for the existing entrepreneurship innovation theory, expanding it with an in-depth connection to the FCR industry in areas such as management, entrepreneurship, technology, integrated systems, and social diffusion innovation

strategies. Expanding the theories of entrepreneurship innovation theory could create multiple studies that could advance the individual themes and findings presented, enhancing entrepreneurs, FCR leaders, scholars, and practitioners' knowledge that could eventually be translated to benefits for leaders, employees, customers, community members, and general society.

In terms of implications for practice, the realization of this study will support professional management and entrepreneurship practice by the direct application of the findings presented from successful FCR in Delaware and their application of innovative strategies to create sustainability for their business beyond 5 years. Also, the presented knowledge will serve current and future generations of FCR leaders and practitioners to understand how this knowledge can be translated to their business guidelines that could represent a template for them to modify or create an evolving path of evolution for their continuous business success. This study included FCR innovation strategies from multiple perspectives, with practical views that could be used to create improvements opportunities to FCR in areas such as business management process, integrated systems, technology, and social diffusion channels as used by their counterparts and appears to make successful FCR business model work in Delaware.

Conclusions

Since 2000, FCRs have steadily grown based on their concepts of high-quality food, pleasant environment, and affordable prices (Coomes, 2011). Despite a promising future, multiple factors such as increasing competition, higher leasing costs, fewer

financing opportunities, wage inflation, and most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic and its implication with employee shortage have created a challenging situation for FCR business (Maze, 2017; McGrath, 2017; National Restaurant Association, 2019). The identified problem for this study was the need to understand how to stop this negative trend and identify strategies to create FCR sustainability. Aligned with the central problem, the purpose of this qualitative multiple-case study was to explore what innovative strategies are used by successful FCR leaders in Delaware to overcome business challenges and achieve sustainability beyond 5 years.

The conceptual framework was based on Schumpeter's entrepreneurship innovation theory. To create credibility, protocols of interview validation, members check, and data triangulation were developed and followed using literature reviews and two primary sources of data: interviews and documentation gathering. Interview data until achieving saturation were collected from six FCR via telephone and virtual semi-structured interviews with 12 FCR leaders in Delaware doing business for five or more years. Data was collected from social media posts, advertising, official publications, leadership reports, key performance indicator reports, newspaper and magazine articles, and other related documents.

The data analysis revealed four main categories: (a) management and entrepreneurship, (b) business and sustainability, (c) technology and integrated systems, and (d) social diffusion. Three different strategy levels emerged from each theme: employee, customer service, and overall. The findings established solid evidence to

develop a list of 51 innovation strategies used by successful FCR businesses in Delaware to achieve and maintain sustainability for 5 years or more and simultaneously created positive economic and continuous social effects for their surrounding communities. The identified 51 innovation strategies with the expanded discussion around the top 12 FCR sustainability themes can be immediately compared, evaluated, adopted for immediate or future implementation, and the presented knowledge could be also expended at a larger scale.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

The interview questions and subquestions are:

1. How long have you been working in or related to this fast-casual restaurant business?
 - 1.1 How long have you been in the food industry?
 - 1.2 : How long have you been in your current leadership position?
2. What interested and attracted you the most about the fast-casual restaurant business?
 - 2.1 Describe the factors that made you apply to this FCR.
 - 2.2 Describe why you choose to apply for a leadership position in this FCR.
 - 2.3 Describe what is keeping you engaged and working in this FCR.
3. What are the main business innovation strategies you think are essential to maintain a fast-casual restaurant in Delaware for 5 or more years?
 - 3.1 Describe your experience during the application of these leading business innovation strategies.
 - 3.2 Describe why you consider them to be essential for your FCR.
4. What specific management-innovation strategies have you used in your fast-casual restaurant during the last 5 years?
 - 4.1 Describe how these management-innovation strategies improve your business.
 - 4.2 Describe your experience during the application of these strategies.
 - 4.3 Describe why you consider them essential for the success of your business.
5. What specific technology-innovation strategies have you used in your fast-casual restaurant during the last 5 years?

- 5.1 Describe how these innovation-technologies improve your business.
 - 5.2 Describe your experience during the application of these strategies.
 - 5.3 Describe why you consider them essential for your business.
6. What specific integrated-innovation system strategies have you used during the last 5 years in your fast-casual restaurant?
 - 6.1 Describe how these integrated-innovation strategies improve your business.
 - 6.2 Describe your experience during the application of these strategies.
 - 6.3 Describe why you consider them essential for your business.
7. What specific social-diffusion strategies have you used during the last 5 years in your fast-casual restaurant?
 - 7.1 Describe how these social-diffusion strategies improve your business.
 - 7.2 Describe your experience during the application of these strategies.
 - 7.3 Describe why you consider them essential for your business.
8. How does the implementation of sustainability-innovation in your business strategies help to sustain your fast-casual business in Delaware, throughout the first 5 years?
 - 8.1 Describe how these sustainability-innovation strategies improve your business.
 - 8.2 Describe your experience during the application using these strategies.
 - 8.3 Describe why you consider them essential for your business.
9. What indicators did you measure or are measured at your fast-casual restaurant to ensure innovation strategies were working effectively?

9.1 Describe how these indicators assist to improve your business.

9.2 Describe your experience during the application using these indicators.

9.3 Describe why you consider these indicators essential for your business.

10. What additional information would be relevant to helping me define the most effective innovation strategies to achieve success in the fast-casual restaurant business in Delaware?

10.1 Describe how these relevant innovation strategies improve your business.

10.2 Describe your experience during the application using these relevant strategies.

10.3 Describe why you consider them essential for your business.

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Interview Goal: Obtain knowledge and an in-depth understanding as they relate to what innovation, skills, systems, behaviors, trends, and opportunities, can best position a fast-casual restaurant to achieve a sustainable business for more than 5 years.

Interview Introduction: I will start the interview by introducing myself, the institution, the research topic, background, and approaching each participant for their voluntary participation.

"Hello, my name is Felipe Medina-Cintron (Doctoral student of Management with a concentration in Leadership and Organizational Change at Walden University).

My purpose with this study is to explore what innovative strategies are used by successful FCR leaders in Delaware to overcome business challenges and achieve sustainability beyond 5 years. A qualitative case study involves the investigation of a real-life case in a contemporary situation or environment. Participant responses will not be judged to be right or wrong. I intend to recognize and interpret what you think and learn from your research subject experiences. All information, including your name, will remain strictly confidential and recorded and transcribed for the sole purpose of research analysis and interpretations.

Thank you for your voluntary participation."

I will request each participant's current position at the fast-casual restaurant under study.

I will notify the participants that the interview will be limited to 60 minutes, with 10 open-ended questions.

I will explain the different stages and details of the telephone or video conference interview to each participant, which includes: a review and clarification of the Participants Consent Form; all details of the interview process (e.g., use of audio recording device and note-taking); how the transcript review, interview transcription, and related documentation will be managed; the participant's interview transcription (via email); and the post-interview process.

Finally, I will again thank each participant for volunteering to participate during my research.

Appendix C: Annotation Log

Date: _____

Interview Format: _____

Start time: _____

End Time: _____

Question 1: How long have you been working or related to this fast-casual restaurant business?

Comments:

Total Time: _____

Question 2: What interested and attracted you the most about the fast-casual restaurant business?

Comments:

Total Time: _____

Question 3: What are the main business innovation strategies you think are essential to maintain a fast-casual restaurant in Delaware for 5 or more years?

Comments:

Total Time: _____

Question 4: What specific management-innovation strategies have you used in your fast-casual restaurant during the last 5 years?

Comments:

Total Time: _____

Question 5: What specific technology-innovation strategies have you used in your fast-casual restaurant during the last 5 years?

Comments:

Total Time: _____

Question 6: What specific integrated-innovation system strategies have you used during the last 5 years in your fast-casual restaurant?

Comments:

Total Time: _____

Question 7: What specific social-diffusion strategies have you used during the last 5 years in your fast-casual restaurant?

Comments:

Total Time: _____

Question 8: How does the implementation of sustainability-innovation in your business strategies help to sustain your fast-casual business in Delaware, throughout the first 5 years?

Comments:

Total Time: _____

Question 9: What indicators did you measure or are measured at your fast-casual restaurant to ensure innovation strategies were working effectively?

Comments:

Total Time: _____

Question 10: What would additional information be relevant to helping me define the most effective innovation strategies to achieve success in the fast-casual restaurant business in Delaware?

Comments:

Total Time: _____

I would ask the following subquestions only for a clarification of a response (as necessary).

Appendix D: Reflective Journal

Reflective Journal: Is a series of writings response of life experiences and events as reflections on what took place, expressions of motivations or emotions, understandings, conclusions, lessons learned, or action plans. Every individual one will be a journal entry using the following format.

Date: _____

Time: _____

Topic: _____

Content:

Comments:

Appendix E: Introduction Letter for Business Owner-Entrepreneur or Manager

<Owner-Entrepreneur/or Executive Manager Name or Names>

<Date>

Dear Owner-Entrepreneur/Manager,

My name is Felipe Medina-Cintron, and I am a doctoral student and dissertation candidate at Walden University. I also am an active doctoral degree (Ph.D.) candidate in Management with a specialization in Leadership and Organizational Change. I am developing a research study related to exploring *Innovation Strategies to Create Sustainable Fast-Casual Restaurants*. The purpose of this study is to explore what innovative strategies are used by successful Fast Casual Restaurant leaders in Delaware to overcome business challenges and achieve sustainability beyond 5 years. This study may influence fast-casual restaurants like yours by providing innovative strategies and guidelines that could help minimize the odds for business failure in Delaware. This study also could advance management practices, improve your local economy, and create positive social change in Delaware.

The targeted population for this study were fast-casual restaurants located in Delaware that had been in uninterrupted operation and under the same owner-entrepreneur for 5 or more years. As part of the data collection for this research, I am requesting your written authorization to conduct voluntary semi structured interviews with open-ended questions with you, your managers, and supervisors. Furthermore, I am requesting your authorization or direct designee to access internal organizational

documents. The criteria for the identification and selection of participants will be based on (a) all participants will be 18 years of age or older; (b) all participants are currently covering a leadership role in the selected fast-casual restaurants located in Delaware; (c) owners-entrepreneurs from the selected fast-casual restaurants with at least 5 years of continuous ownership in that specific location; and (d) managers and supervisors with at least 3 years of consistent experience in that specific fast-casual restaurant location.

All interviews would be conducted by telephone or video conference in a quiet environment to avoid distractions and would take place outside the participants' workplace and schedule. Participation would be entirely voluntary.

Some interviews questions are:

- What are the main innovation strategies you think are essential to maintain a fast-casual restaurant in Delaware for 5 or more years?
- How does the implementation of innovation help to sustain your fast-casual business in Delaware, throughout the first 5 years?
- What indicators did you measure or are measured at your fast-casual restaurant to ensure innovation strategies were working effectively?

I will ensure not reveal the name of your business or the names of your employees at any stage of my study, including the recruitment and data collection activities. If you agree and authorize me to develop my research at your fast-casual restaurant by interviewing your employees (managers or supervisors) please read, sign, and respond to

me via email, or scan the attached Letter of Cooperation to an email and send to me.

Please feel free to contact me with any questions or concerns related to my research.

Thank you,

Felipe Medina-Cintron

Appendix F: Company Authorization Letter (Letter of Cooperation)

<Name of the Participant Fast-Casual Restaurant>

<Owner/Entrepreneur Name or Names>

<Owner/Entrepreneur Contact Information>

<Date>

Dear Felipe Medina-Cintron,

After a careful review of your doctoral study proposal, I authorize the realization of your research study related to what innovation strategies can create sustainable fast-casual restaurants in Delaware. As part of this authorization, I will post your informational announcement at our location, and I will assist you providing the contact information for all employees that meet your research inclusion criteria. Also, I authorize that you can confidentiality engage with our leaders (managers or supervisors) based on their free will.

As a private company, we can withdraw from your intent to conduct a research study if the preliminary intent and agreements between both parties change over time. As a representative of the company, I authorized the study's realization in the setting and circumstances discussed following our organization's policies. All data and information collected as part of this research study will be maintained as confidential. They will not be authorized to be provided to any other source outside Walden University staff and faculty as authorized by Walden University IRB Committee.

Sincerely,

<Owner-Entrepreneur or Manager>

<Contact Information> >

Appendix G: Informational Announcement

Research Study of Innovation Strategies to Create Sustainable Fast-Casual Restaurants in Delaware seeks for participants

A new study called “*Innovation Strategies to Create FCR in the State of Delaware*” may help existing and future fast-casual restaurants to create innovation strategies, knowledge, and sustainable job opportunities for business in the State of Delaware.

This research study is part of the doctoral dissertation requirement for Felipe Medina-Cintron, a Ph.D. student at Walden University.

About the study:

- One 30 to 60-minutes telephone or video conference interview

Volunteers must meet these requirements:

- 18 years old or older
- 3 years in a leadership role (supervisor or manager) in this location.
- Owners must have at least 5 years of continuous ownership in this location.

If you are interested in participating, you can communicate with Felipe Medina-Cintron (researcher).

Appendix H: Codes Identification Process

Codification Summary						
Categories / Questions		Participants			Codes Frequency (How many times was mentioned)	Total Codes
		P1	P2	P3		
1	How long have you been working or related to this fast-casual restaurant business?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 8 years - FCR experience • 5 years - FCR management roles • Male, 41, White 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4 years – FCR experience • 3 Years – FCR management roles • Female, 27, White 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 8 years - FCR experience • 5 Years – FCR management roles • Male, 35, White 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. FCR Overall experience = 6 years 2. FCR management experience= 4 years 3. Sex: Male: 9 Female: 3 4. Ages: 20- 30 = 8/12= 66.6% 30-40 = 2/12= 16.66% 40+= 2/12=16.66% 5. Race: White: 10/12 = 83.33% BA = 1/12 =8.33% Latin: 1/12 = 8.33% 	Codes = 5
2	What interested and attracted you the most about the fast-casual restaurant business?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Culture •Work- life balance •Support to local communities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Business model •Support to local communities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Growth opportunities •Management training opportunities •Support to local communities 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1.Culture and core values (5) 2. Work-life balance (4) 3.Growth opportunities (4) 4. Support local communities (3) 5.Familiar with other employees (from the same community) (3) 6.Food quality (2) 7.Customer service (2) 8.Good business model (2) 	Codes = 8
3	What are the main business innovation strategies you think are essential to maintain a fast-casual restaurant in Delaware for 5 or more years?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Back to the business basics •Personalize customer experience •Everything fresh and made from scratch 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Take care of the team. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Create a teamwork environment •Customer service - Keep customer happy •Personalize customer experience •Have daily good deals. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Customer service and overall experience (5) 2. Collaboration and team engagement (4) 3. Personalize your service (flexibility) (3) 4.Food quality (3) 5. Have Regular deals (offers, coupons, etc) (3) 6.Technology to improve Productivity (3) 7.Adjust Marketing to customer demographics and needs (3) 8.Involve with Community Causes (2) 9.Standardized all your process to improve productivity (2) 10.Back to Customer Service basis (1) 	Codes = 10
					Total Codes	83

Appendix I: Codes, Strategies, and Categories Identification

Categories/Questions	Codes Summary	Total Codes	Themes	Categories
1. How long have you been working or related to this fast-casual restaurant business?	a.FCR Overall experience = 6 years b.FCR management experience= 4 years c.Sex: Male: 9; Female: 3 d.Ages: 20- 30 = 8 (66.66%), 30-40 = 2 (16.66%), 40+ = 2 (16.66%) e.Race: White: 10 (83.33%), Black American = 1 (8.33%), Latin/Hispanic: 1	Codes = 5	• Demographics Data	Demographics Data
2. What interested and attracted you the most about the fast-casual restaurant business?	a.Culture and core values b.Work-life balance c.Growth opportunities d.Support local communities e.Familiar with other employees f.Food quality g.Customer service h.Good business model	Codes = 8	• Support to local communities • Work-life balance • Growing opportunities • Company Culture • Unique Business Model	Top FCR leadership-attraction factors
3. What are the main business innovation strategies you think are essential to maintain a fast-casual restaurant in Delaware for 5 or more years?	a.Customer service and overall experience b.Collaboration and team engagement c.Personalize your service d.Food quality e.Have regular deals (offers, online or physical coupons, etc.) f.Technology to improve Productivity g.Adjust marketing to customer demographics h.Involve with the community i.Standardized all your process to improve productivity j.Back customer service to the basics	Codes = 10	• Customer Overall Experience • Personalized service • Food quality • Colaboration and team engagement • Regular deals • Technology to improve productivity • Adjustable marketing for different generations	Top business-innovation strategies
8. How does the implementation of innovation in your business strategies help to sustain your fast-casual business in Delaware, throughout the first 5 years?	a.Reputation b.Maintain good communication c.Improve communication d.Adapt through changes e.Maintain High-quality standards f.Better understand the business g.Better understand the employees and customer needs h.Improve Productivity i.Reach new generation of customers	Codes = 9	• Reputation • Maintain good communication • Adaptability through times • Maintain high quality standards • Understand your business weakness and strenghts • Understand your employees and customer needs	Top sustainability-factors strategies
		83	51	10

Appendix J: Emergent Strategies and Categories

Questions	Emergent Strategies	Emergent Categories
1. How long have you been working or related to this fast-casual restaurant business?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • FCR Overall experience = 6 years • FCR management experience= 4 years 	Management and entrepreneurship innovation
2. What interested and attracted you the most about the fast-casual restaurant business?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Culture and core values • Work-life balance • Growth opportunities • Support local communities • Familiar with others employees • Food quality • Customer service • Good business model 	Management and entrepreneurship-innovation
3. What are the main business innovation strategies you think are essential to maintain a fast-casual restaurant in Delaware for 5 or more years?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Customer service and overall experience • Collaboration and team engagement • Personalize your service • Food quality • Have regular deals (offers, online or physical coupons, etc.) • Technology to improve productivity • Adjust marketing to customer demographics • Involve with the community • Standardized all your process to improve productivity • Back customer service to the basics 	Business and sustainability innovation
4. What specific management-	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good communication, sense of urgency, and 	Management and entrepreneurship-innovation

<p>innovation strategies have you used in your fast-casual restaurant during the last 5 years?</p>	<p>accountability</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Taking care and develop your team • Create a good working environment • Teamwork • Use technology to facilitate management • Provide constant training, coaching, and mentorship • Participative leadership • Follow establish protocols 	
<p>5. What specific technology-innovation strategies have you used in your fast-casual restaurant during the last 5 years?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Point of Sale (POS) • Online Ordering • Third Party Deliveries Tracking (GPS and System) • Tablets for Mobility • Kitchen Technologies 	<p>Technology and integrated system innovation</p>
<p>6. What specific integrated-innovation system strategies have you used during the last 5 years in your fast-casual restaurant?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • POS (labor hours, sales, recipes, social media, order, cost, inventories, customer service, work instructions) • Third party delivery integration • Integrated inventories and accounting computerized systems 	<p>Technology and integrated system innovation</p>
<p>7. What specific social-diffusion strategies have you used during the last 5 years in your fast-casual restaurant?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facebook and Instagram • Word of mouth • Printed, mail, or electronic coupons • TV commercials and digital advertising • LinkedIn • Branding Ambassadors • Magazines, newspaper, and billboards advertising 	<p>Social-diffusion innovation</p>
<p>8. How does the implementation of</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reputation • Maintain good 	<p>Business and sustainability innovation</p>

<p>sustainability - innovation in your business strategies help to sustain your fast-casual business in Delaware, throughout the first 5 years?</p>	<p>communication</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve communication • Adapt through changes • Maintain High-quality standards • Better understand the business • Better understand the employees and customer needs • Improve Productivity • Reach new generation of customers 	
<p>9. What indicators did you measure or are measured at your fast-casual restaurant to ensure innovation strategies were working effectively?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sales, profit, and loss • Social media customer reviews • Employee and customer surveys (satisfaction) • Customer complaints • Labor hours vs standards • Internal comparison with other business (inside/outside) • Order accuracy • Line speed (waiting time) • Overall customer service • Internal Audits • Cleanliness • Inventories • Ingredient yield and food cost 	<p>Management and entrepreneurship-innovation</p>
<p>10. What additional information would be relevant to helping me define the most effective innovation strategies to achieve success in the fast-casual restaurant business in Delaware?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand customers' and employees' needs • Create a good environment • Community involvement • Make it personal with your customers and employees • It's about taking care of your team • Teamwork (focus on your team) 	<p>Business and sustainability innovation</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Communication and constant feedback• Recognize your employees' contributions• Offer opportunities to grow• Make close personnel relationship• Have all standards and work instructions on place• Get to the basics• Always maintain your winning formula• Participative leadership• Celebrate success• Keep consistency• Be flexible and adaptable.• Develop a solid culture	
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Note. Emergent strategies and categories resulted from established interview questions and codification analysis.

Appendix K: Emergent Categories Chain of Evidence

Emergent Categories	Literature Review, Interview Quotations, Discrepant Cases, and Data Gathering related chain of evidence examples	
1. Management and entrepreneurship - innovation strategies	Literature Review	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Since 1999, FCR has been the only restaurant segment demonstrating consistent growth (Giuntella, 2018). The origins of the FCR segment responded to an entrepreneurship movement to provide healthy eating to a new generation of healthy-eating customers.” (p.27) • Business management is one of the pillars of introducing and promoting business innovation (Ham et al. 2017). As Ham et al. explained, the fast-casual restaurant (FCR) entrepreneur expectation is that their management team uses its capacity, experience, business knowledge, food industry contacts, food and management training, and constant field exploration to take a dominant role in establishing and strengthening their business innovations. (p.39)
	Interview Quotes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • P3: “Here is a community involved. So here I’m able to get into management. I got training and my manager took me under his wing’s, and I got promoted as I wanted.” • P4: “We are very strict in terms of protocols and management aspects we need to follow 100% our policies and make sure our

		<p>employees follow it 100% of the time. Very strict standards.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • P8: “We have many years in service, and our success in terms of management is being focused on our employees. Is about the people, who we bring to the team and how we can make them work as a team. We encourage that people from the area work here to create a better bond with the local community.”
	Discrepant Cases	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • P5: “There was a health issue. I was a construction worker and came here while I was thinking about figuring out what to do with my life. And ended up staying here because I wanted to be closer to my house and working towards a healthier lifestyle.” • P9: “There's a lot of things, something we kind of look at is like the days of the week, like knowing different days are usually slower and faster and like preparing for that, but I really don't use too much data. I kind of I like, look around and see what we need, if that makes sense.”
	Data Gathering	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By Google search, most of the participant’s websites alluded to the importance of social responsibility and community integration. • Critical KPI’s data (e.g., sales, inventories, etc..) were not

		available for verification. However, online reviews related to food quality, compensation, benefits, culture were available.
2. Business and sustainable innovation strategies	Literature Review	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Conceptually, constant innovation is essential to create a successful and sustainable business (Drucker, 1985). Like any other enterprise, the FCR industry has actively accommodated innovation, strategic entrepreneurship, and management strategies to remain competitive while responding to the ever-evolving customer (Lee et al., 2016).” (p.24) • “As Arlbjorn and Paulraj explained, entrepreneurs and FCR leaders should apply multiple simultaneous innovation strategies across their entire business supply chain to maximize their chances of creating a sustainable and profitable business.” (P.36)
	Interview Quotes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • P2: “Whereas for a specifically we have tried to make it a personalized experience where we try to get to know our customers by name. We find out what they do for a living. We learn about their families and really making a place where people can call home.” • P4: “You need to have standards in place. You need to have guidelines that people can follow. Because if you don’t have clear instructions.

		<p>Everything will fall after that.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • P9: “I think really knowing your customers and knowing your location and like what kind of people are going to come in because at the beginning of this, but the current owners were like.”
	Discrepant Cases	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • P5: “We have had the same equipment since the time we started. I think that's a lot of people like us because the old equipment gives a better taste, a taste they expected, and they are used to. Many people come from close to other stores because they think here tastes better, like that old school flavor.” • P6: “When we do mail and door hangers our sales can go up probably 20% and for example this week, we did a email drop and our sales only went up probably 10%. Our customer better keep a piece of paper in their hand than an email.”
	Data Gathering	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A Google search validated that all the participants FCR already have orders online and food delivery or pickup services. Also, food quality and customer service were top factors and mentioned as critical during online reviews (e.g., Google reviews, Trip Advisor, Yelp, etc.). • Validated thru online search (e.g., social network, and online

		<p>reviews) and documentation (fliers, information posted at public bulletin boards) that all participants FCR's are currently focused on understand their customers and employee's needs, create a good working environment, connect with their communities, and improve their customer service while adapting to technology and service trends.</p>
<p>3. Technology and integrated system-innovation strategies</p>	<p>Literature Review</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fast-casual restaurants cannot exist online because a good meal is engaging and sensory-inviting (Reinke, 2016; Weiner, 2015). As Reinke (2016) explained, FCR must embrace constant innovation to stay in business, and any adaptation of FCR technology innovation (e.g., online ordering, online reservations, online menus, amongst others) should be experimental. (p.42) • The concepts from the integrated innovation management theory opened the door for the continuous development of the technology innovation theory, as proposed by Iansiti in 1998. This theory focused on integrating new events and trends in technology, economy, information technology, and never-ending developments on the internet (Wang & Wang, 2016). (p.33)
	<p>Interview Quotes</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • P4: "Point of Sales System, and we just follow a process, protocol, and sheet cheat for everything. How we make food,

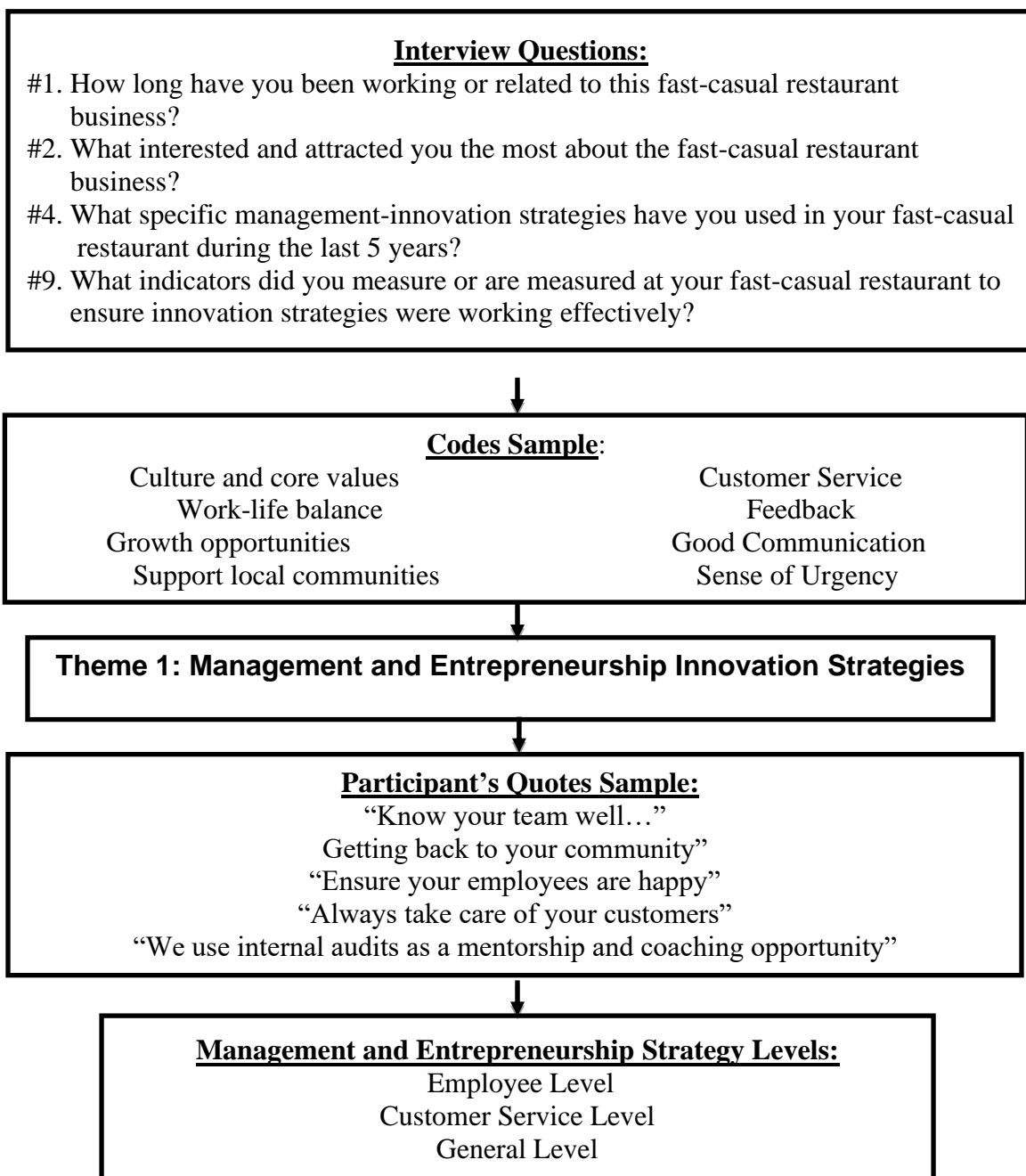
		<p>how we interview people. Everything here has script, and we just follow it, everything is connected.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • P7: “Technology in the source changes drastically. We went from being an 80% in person, 20% digital ordering business model to nearly flipping being more heavily on the digital end of sales and not the in person. Obviously due to worldwide events.” • P11: “The pandemic pushed us to board with delivery companies such as Uber eats, Grub hub, Door Dash. So, using all those delivery services, plus our own pickup and ordering service on our own website.”
	Discrepant Cases	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • P1: “We strongly believe to move to technology later to keep true to our basis, eventually, once you kind of realize how we're going to be alright as a brand, then we did implement online ordering. However, it's not like a lot of other places where you just walked in your names on a bag, and you grab it. We walked you back out.” • P2: “Every store order themselves. We use ordering and signs. I mean we use pencils, paper, and spreadsheets for seeing what we have on hand as well as what we need to order. And then we just go away and contact 3rd parties’ companies

		directly to their company website and make the ordering.”
	Data Gathering	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By searching online and visiting participants FCR’s, I verified that online ordering, curbside pickup, delivery options, online menus, nutrition guidelines, job applications, online coupons, amongst others are already part of the participants FCR’s. • During my on-site visit, I confirmed most of the participants FCR are using primarily four POS companies’ providers: Presto, Toast, Touch Bistro, and Upserve.
4. Social-diffusion innovation strategies	Literature Review	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The process of innovation diffusion starts with the first adopter, who immediately feels the excitement of the innovation and shares it with their immediate social circle (Dearing & Cox, 2018). (p.34)
	Interview Quotes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • P5: “We as a company have a Facebook page as the franchise level, but the company do the general marketing. Also, help us with our Facebook, Tik Tok, and Instagram pages...younger customer post videos and that help us to promote our business into the younger crowd.”
	Discrepant Cases	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • P1: “You know it's going to be interesting. I think you're going to hear some very different answers from what I'm going to give you. We really don't do much.” We have, you know our basic social media, so Instagram, Facebook,

		LinkedIn, and I don't know if there's more than that, quite honestly.”
	Data Gathering	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• I was able to verify and all participants FCR have the minimum of Facebook and Instagram pages. However, the frequency of their posting varies from daily to bi-weekly.

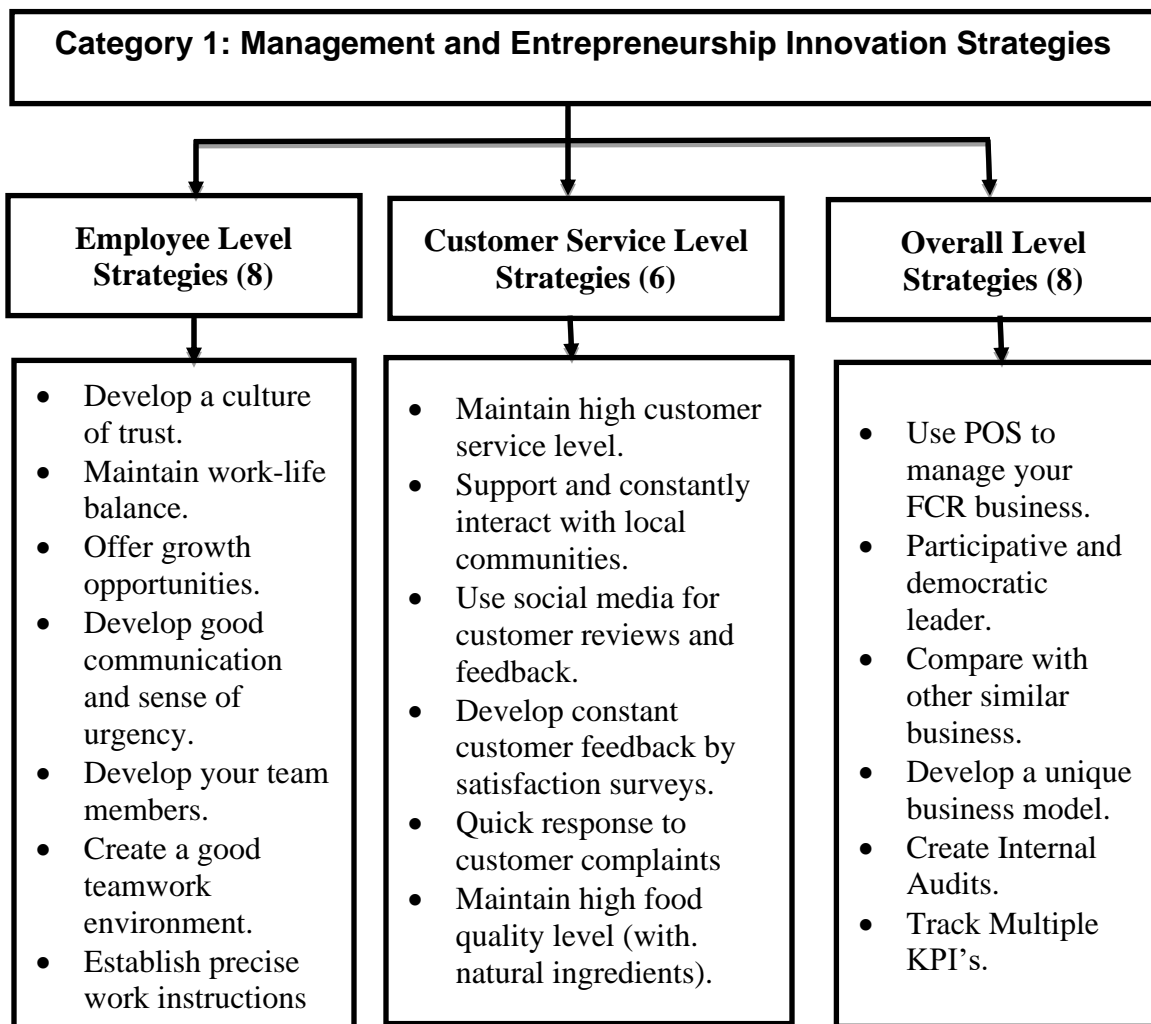
Appendix L: Category 1 Management and Entrepreneurship Innovation Strategies

Development

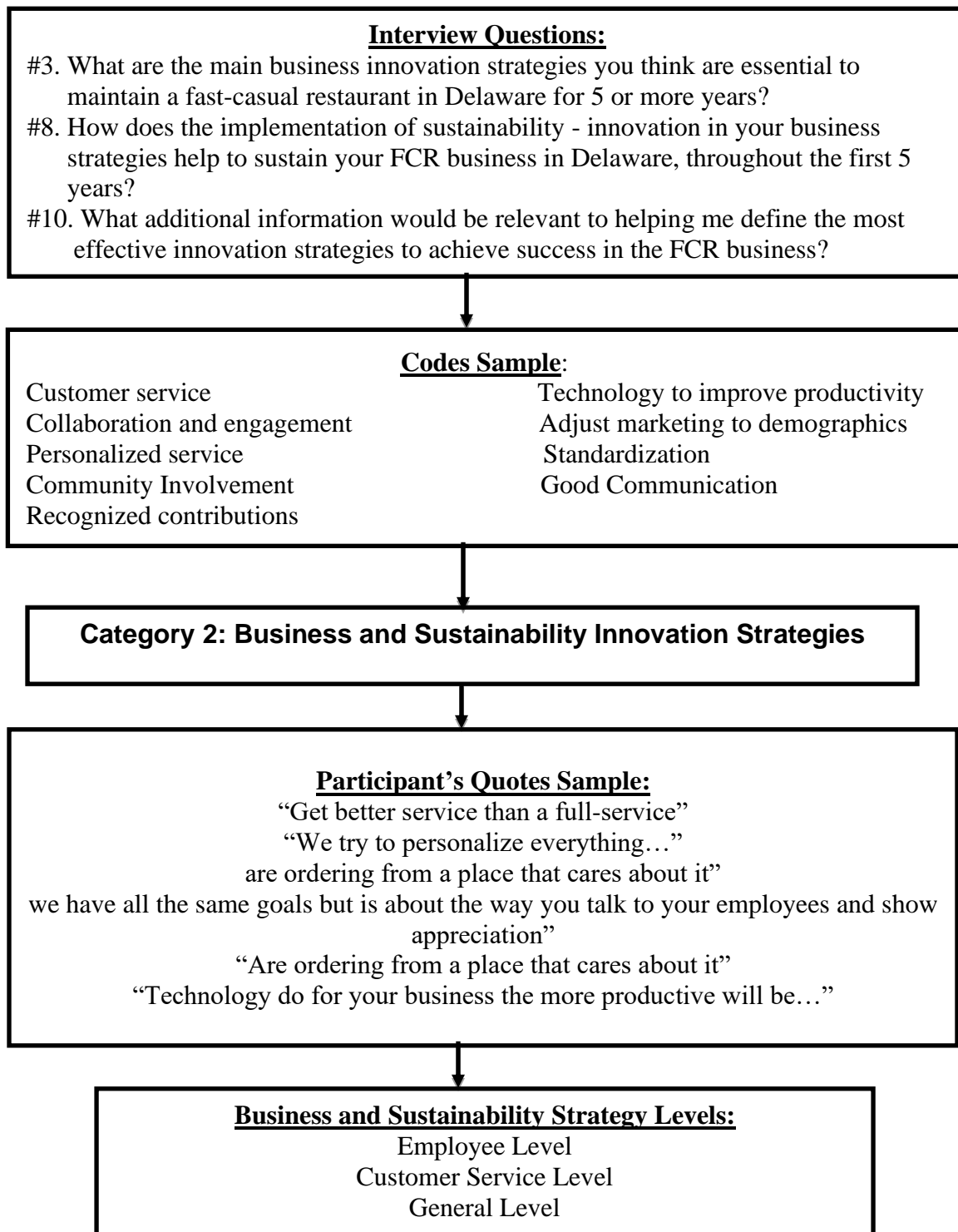


Appendix M: Category 1: Management and Entrepreneurship Innovation Strategies

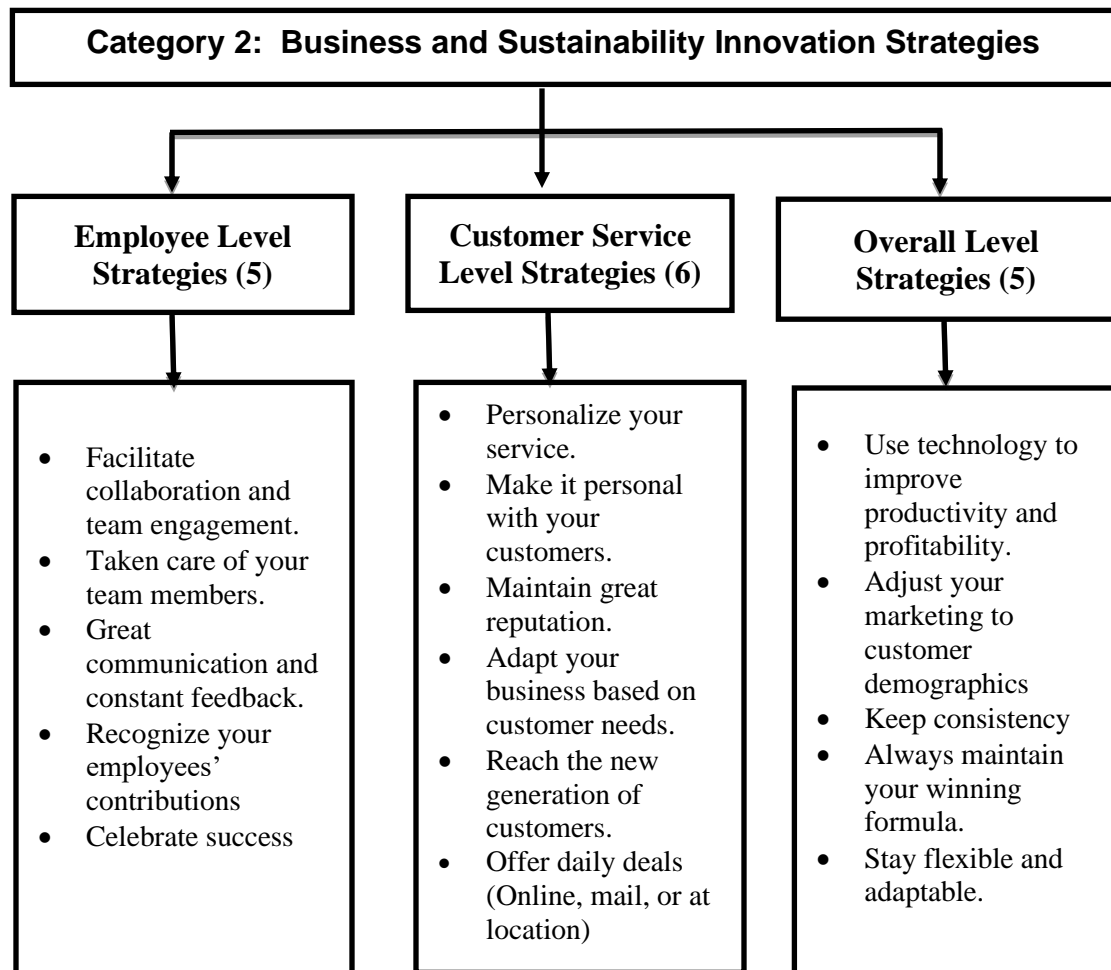
Findings



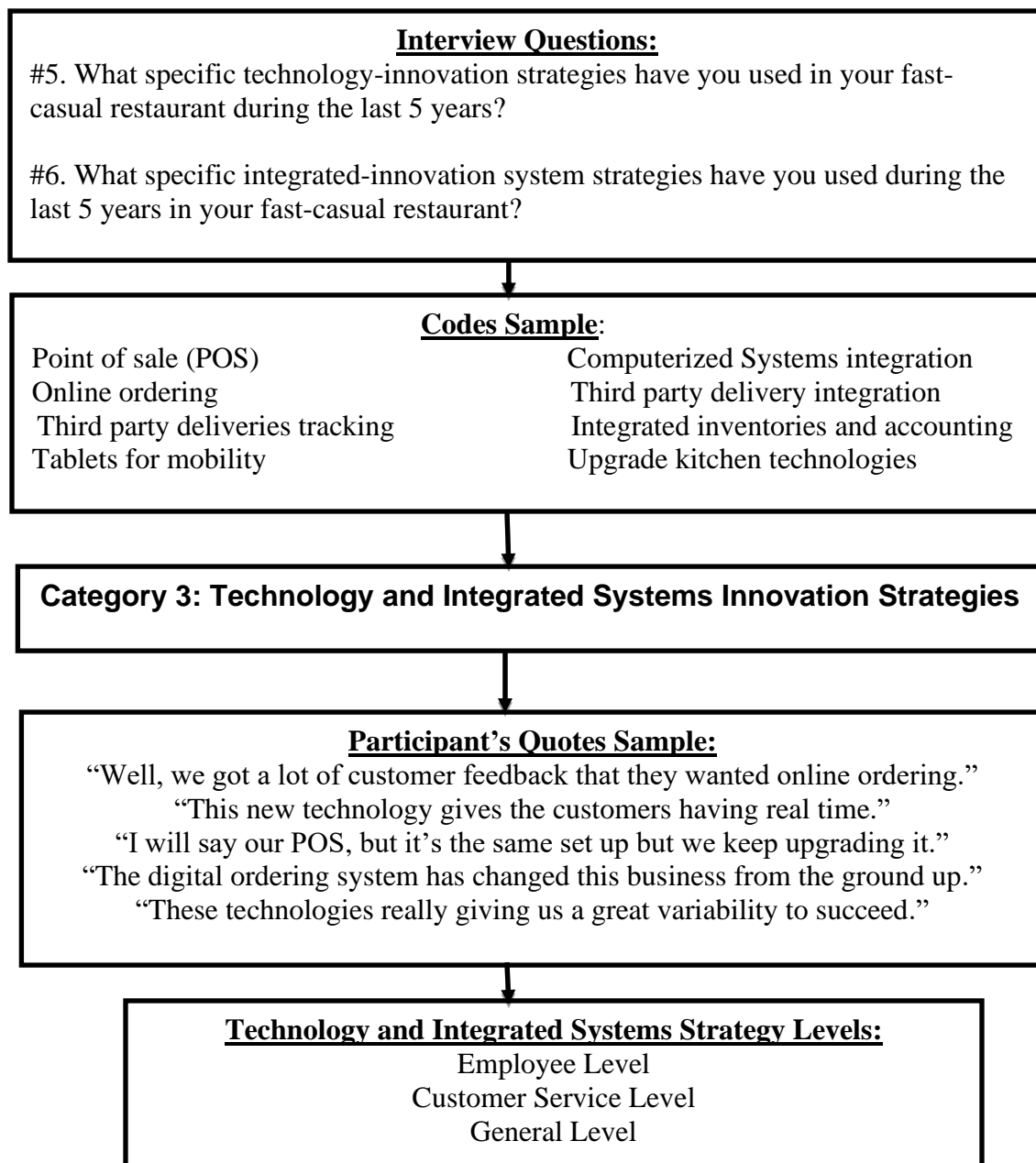
Appendix N: Category 2: Business and Sustainability Innovation Strategies Development



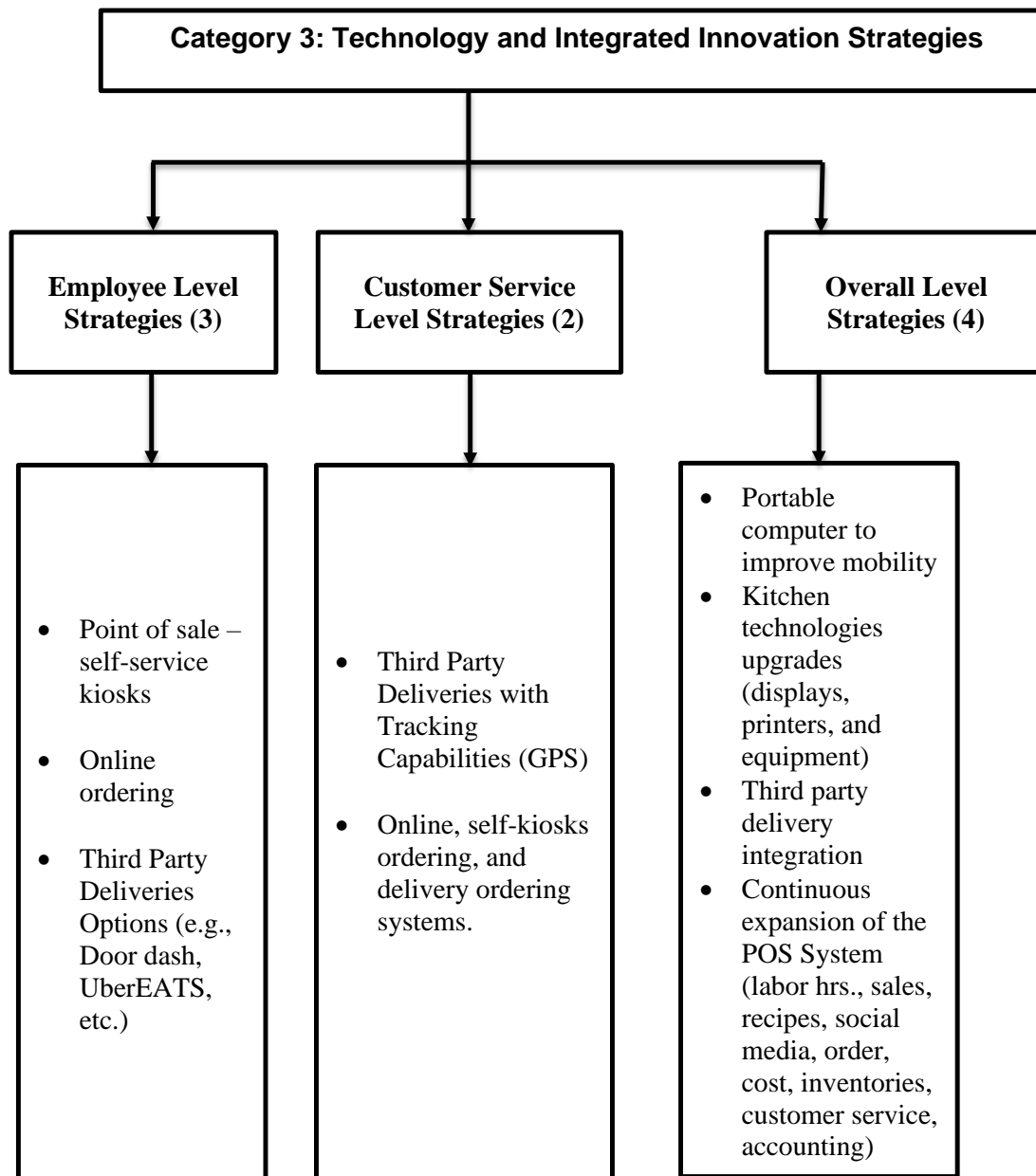
Appendix O: Category 2: Business and Sustainability Innovation Strategies Findings



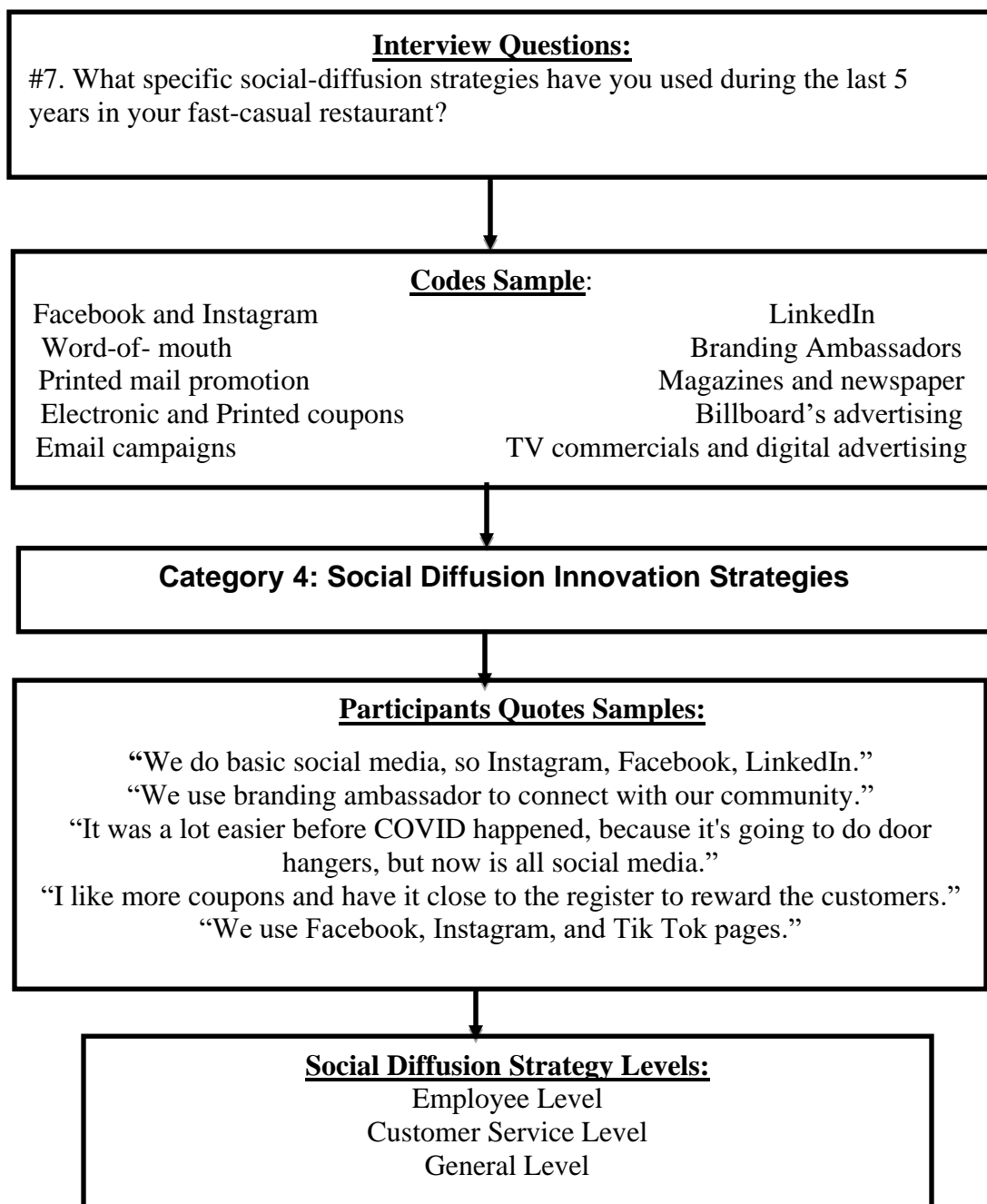
Appendix P: Category 3: Technology and Integrated Innovation Strategies Development



Appendix Q: Category 3: Technology and Integrated Innovation Strategies Findings



Appendix R: Category 4: Social Diffusion Innovation Strategies Development



Appendix S: Category 4: Social Diffusion Innovation Strategies Findings

