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Exploring Strategies for Small Business Owners Operating in a Small Town

Jacqueline Rabb
Walden University

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Walden University

College of Management and Technology

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Jacqueline Rabb

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Walden University
2022

Abstract

Exploring Strategies for Small Business Owners Operating in a Small Town

by

Jacqueline Rabb

MS, Stevenson University, 2012

BS, University of Mobile, 1998

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Business Administration

Walden University

June 2022

Abstract

Brick and mortar small businesses are the hubs of many small towns. However, some small business owners lack strategies to operate in a small town impacted by unstable economic conditions. Brick and mortar small business owners may experience a higher risk of failure if strategies to overcome the challenges of operating in a small town are not effectively implemented. Grounded in the contingency theory, the purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies some brick and mortar small business leaders could implement for survival in a post-recession, small-town economy. The participants comprised three small business owners in southern Alabama who successfully operated a brick and mortar business in a post-recession small town for 5 years. Data were collected from semistructured interviews, locally published documents, and company websites. An inductive analysis was used to analyze the data. Three themes emerged: (a) market research and competitive analysis, (b) supplementation to original product/service offerings, and (c) community engagement. A key recommendation for traditional small business owners operating in post-recession small towns is to promote growth by implementing omni-channeling as a marketing strategy for small business survival. The implication for social change includes the potential for improving the small-town economy by creating more jobs for local and neighboring residents and increasing revenues to help fund local revitalization projects, education, and community wealth building.

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this study to my son, Nicholas. Because of you, I learned to be multitasked, strong, and independent. I learned to fight harder and never give up on accomplishing my goals. Not only as an individual but as a single mother, I wanted nothing more than to show you that anything can be achieved as long as you put your heart, body, and soul into it. I only pray that I have been a good example to you. I want you to always stay spiritually thirsty, be encouraged, and remain steadfast in your daily goals for success. May your heart be filled with joy and seek to be an example for others to look up to. Remember always to keep God first, and all other things will fall into place. I love you, and I am so proud to be your mom.

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First, I would like to acknowledge and thank the almighty Savior Jesus Christ for giving me the strength and willpower to start and complete this journey. Without you, none of this would be possible. To my parents, who taught me that nothing comes free and to work hard for what you want in life. To my grandmother, who prayed for me and was my constant inspiration. To all my family and friends who have been nothing but supportive throughout this entire journey. A special thanks to Dr. Edgar Jordan for constantly pushing and encouraging me to keep going. To my second committee member, Dr. Olivia Herriford, for your motivation and positive feedback. To my URR, Dr. Cheryl Lentz, for all your guidance. To the Walden University staff who called and offered help many times. I want to acknowledge all the men and women of the Civil Rights Movement who were dedicated and fought for civil rights, justice, and freedom so that I and others would have equal rights. To all the leaders who are continuing the fight for social justice. Lastly, to all the single moms and dads who sacrifice and make it happen every day. Hats off to everyone!

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study

According to the U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA; 2019), small businesses account for about 30.7 million or 99% of all companies in the United States. Although some of the effects of the 2008 recession, such as business closings and job loss, remain an issue, the small business sector continues to expand economically (SBA, 2019). Because of the 2008–2009 recession, small business income has an upward trend of approximately 40%. The movement demonstrates an increase from \$973 billion to \$1371 billion (SBA, 2016). But some U.S. small towns continue to experience problems recovering from the 2008 economic recession (Bowns, 2013; Grunwell & Ha, 2014). However, despite the difficulties, the population in small towns is steadily rising (Toukabri & Medina, 2020). Small businesses are a vital part, and in many instances, most of the businesses operating in small towns (Besser, 2012). Small businesses are also a crucial part of small-town communities because they enhance the community through job creation and support (Frazier et al., 2013). For this qualitative multiple case study, the purpose was to explore strategies some leaders of brick and mortar small businesses in the Southeast region of the United States can use for survival in a small town undergoing a revitalization process.

Background of the Problem

This study focused on exploring strategies some brick and mortar small business leaders can implement for survival in a small town still recovering from the 2008 economic downturn. As of 2014, recovering from the 2008 economic downturn remains an issue for several small towns (Grunwell & Ha, 2014). Because many people lost their

jobs during this time, the need to start a small business became the only option for most people (Grunwell & Ha, 2014; Hefer et al., 2015). Although small businesses have a high rate of failure within their first 5 years, opportunities may be plentiful for small business success in small towns (Grunwell & Ha, 2014; SBA, 2017). However, with a population of around 10,000 or fewer people to support local businesses, some small towns in south Alabama do not have adequate resources to support a vast number of businesses (Fekete, 2014). Therefore, extensive community support is necessary for brick and mortar small business success or survival in a small town (Fekete, 2014). Though much of the southern region of Alabama consists of small and midsize businesses, the brick and mortar small businesses with 100 or fewer employees were the focus of this study. Exploring strategies for the success or survival of these physical stores in locations experiencing slow economic growth may be beneficial to these small businesses.

Problem Statement

Some small businesses in small towns continue to have difficulties recovering from the 2008–2009 economic recession (Small Business Committee, 2018). Responsible for 9.6 million jobs and continuing to be generators of economic growth, small businesses are a vital part of small towns where about 46.1 million residents or 14% of the U.S. population resides (SBA, 2019; U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2020). The general business problem is that some brick and mortar small business leaders continue to have trouble in small towns that are still affected by the 2008 economic downturn. The specific business problem is that some brick and mortar small business leaders lack strategies to operate successfully in a post-recession small-town economy.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies some leaders of brick and mortar small businesses can implement for survival in a post-recession small town. The targeted population consisted of brick and mortar small business leaders with 5 or more years of successfully operating in post-recession small towns in southern Alabama. The implication for positive social change includes the potential for small business leaders to preserve and create more jobs in the community to improve the economy.

Nature of the Study

The nature of the study is a qualitative method and multiple case study design. Qualitative research involves listening and understanding people, observing their habits and interactions, and becoming familiar with what and why they do certain things (Aspers & Corte, 2019). The quantitative method consists of measuring variables or testing theories (Apuke, 2017). Because measuring variables or testing theories was unnecessary for this study aiming to explore strategies for brick and mortar small business survival in a post-recession small town, the quantitative method was not appropriate. The mixed method consists of qualitative and quantitative data (Mabila, 2017; Tunarosa & Glynn, 2017). Because the qualitative method was not a part of this study, the mixed method was also not appropriate.

Case studies, phenomenology, and ethnography are among a few qualitative designs (Hammersley, 2018; Yin, 2018). Case studies involve more of an in-depth understanding of a specific event that could include a case study on individual experience

or activity (Yin, 2018). With a multiple case study, the study includes at least two or more cases (Reinhardt et al., 2018; Yin, 2018). Phenomenology involves more research on the individuals' lived experiences rather than the individuals themselves (Rodriguez & Smith, 2018). According to research requirements by Walden University, a selection of at least 20 participants would be mandatory if I choose the phenomenological design. This number of participants would be complex because of the limited number of potential individuals who fit the qualification and description to participate in the study.

Ethnography involves groups of participants under shared cultural conditions (Abdulrehman, 2017; Hammersley, 2018). Ethnography researchers usually focus more on the participants' surroundings and experiences (Abdulrehman, 2017; Hammersley, 2018). Ethnography was not appropriate because the goal was not to study a cultural group that shares a natural environment.

Phenomenology nor ethnography research offers the same flexibility as case study research (Aspers & Corte, 2019). For this study, I used a multiple case design over other qualitative designs. The multiple case study was better because the goal of this study was to explore and understand strategies from various small business leaders and collect information using a variety of data collection procedures.

Research Question

What practical effective strategies do some brick and mortar small business leaders implement for survival in a post-recession small-town economy?

Interview Questions

1. What effective strategies did you use from the start to successfully operate in a small town?
2. In what ways have your strategies changed as the economy changed?
3. What have been your biggest internal and external challenges for successfully operating in a small town?
4. What strategies have you implemented to overcome these challenges and maintain success beyond five years?
5. To increase traffic flow to the area, what strategies do you have in place to ensure your business is known to the surrounding communities?
6. What strategies did you implement that small business leaders, hesitant to locate because of the town's economic condition, can use to operate the business successfully?
7. What additional information can you share about small businesses operating successfully in a small town?

Conceptual Framework

The contingency theory articulated by Fred Fiedler in the 1960s was the conceptual framework for this study. Fiedler (1981) proposed that two factors relate to the effectiveness leaders can have in an organization: the style of leadership and the situation. Fiedler based the theory on the premise that no one way to organize or manage an organization exists (Asrar-ul-Haq & Anwar, 2017), as a successful leadership style in one situation may not be successful in another situation because the leadership style can

consist of both internal and external factors (Fiedler, 1981). The performance of a group depends on the interaction of leadership styles and situations of the organizational leaders' involvement (Vidal et al., 2017).

Researchers have shown that small business success depends on several factors: management styles, financing, organizational skills, product quality, and the economy (Sanchez-Badin et al., 2018). Small business survival and success depend mainly on the employees, the business location, present economic conditions, and the distinct leadership styles of employees in critical positions (Sanchez-Badin et al., 2018). The traits that researchers associate with success and survival helped to iterate the use of the contingency theory as the conceptual framework for this study.

Operational Definitions

Brand revitalization: Efforts to reestablish life into an aging brand to attract customers once more (Zhao et al., 2018).

Brick and mortar: A traditional physical store where potential customers can receive face-to-face service and the opportunity to carefully inspect the features of products (Blair & Wang, 2017).

Economic downturn: A recession or a decline in economic activities because of economic difficulties, resulting in hardship for businesses and individuals (Grunwell & Ha, 2014).

Omni-channel: A strategy businesses use by providing service through multiple and cross channels, including online, brick and mortar, catalog, or phones, to enhance the shopping experiences for customers (Yrjölä et al., 2018).

Pull factor: The characteristics of an area that generally draws consumers from outside locations towards the area's attractiveness while retaining current consumers (Calvo-Porrall & Levy-Mangin, 2018; Ryu & Swinney, 2013).

Small business: Businesses operating as partnerships, sole proprietorships, or corporations, usually with 500 or fewer employees (SBA, 2019).

Small Business Administration (SBA): An agency established by the United States government in 1953 for aiding and addressing small business concerns to strengthen the economy (Office of the Federal Register, n.d.).

Small town: Places with distinct geographic and cultural features usually consisting of less than 50,000 people. Any area including rural with a population not classified as a large urban or metropolitan territory (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2019).

Social media: An online communication service, which individuals can use to exchange information with others over the internet (Arora et al., 2019).

Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) analysis: Technique used by business leaders and managers to identify the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats when planning and operating a business (David et al., 2017).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

Assumptions

Assumptions are facts researchers consider valid but unverifiable (Wolgemuth et al., 2017). Most assumptions are beneficial and often necessary because of their essential role in the way individuals perceive information (Francis, 2014). Two assumptions

influenced the results of the study. The first assumption was that all brick and mortar small business owners would benefit from this qualitative multiple case study. The second assumption was that the participants would truthfully answer the interview questions.

Limitations

Limitations are potential weaknesses of the study out of the researcher's control (Castillo et al., 2017). Disclosure of possible weaknesses within the study is imperative to ensure that readers receive a fair opportunity to draw an appropriate conclusion (Castillo et al., 2017). Two limitations influenced the outcome of the study. The first potential weakness was the restrictions on meeting with brick and mortar small business leaders to gather data. The second potential weakness was the possibility of not being able to eliminate all bias in the study.

Delimitations

Delimitations are factors that limit the scope or boundaries of the study (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2019). Researchers set the study's parameters to ensure the objectives are achievable (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2019). Two delimitations in the study included the population and the location of the study. The first delimitation was the outcome of the study would not be generalizable to leaders of these types of small businesses in all small towns. The second delimitation was the target of the study would consist of brick and mortar small businesses with less than 100 employees. The use of these small businesses could cause the study's outcome to be nongeneralizable to others who do not own or operate a small business in a small town.

Significance of the Study

The purpose of this research was to explore strategies some brick and mortar small business owners could use to survive in post-recession small towns. The study results may provide individuals with additional knowledge on how these owners of these small businesses can use the strategies to increase the customer base and improve the quality of the community through increased foot traffic. Because a business problem was the focal point of this study, the research results could significantly impact the community and add value to small businesses.

Contribution to Business Practice

Better opportunities are favorable for new developments in small towns (Lazzaroni, 2013). In addition to these opportunities, many small businesses can survive better in small towns (Besser, 2012; Lazzaroni, 2013). Small businesses and the community can prosper economically with the support of each other (Besser, 2013). Brick and mortar small business leaders can gain knowledge and experience in various leadership roles because of involvement with the vast amount of work and individuals working on improving the economy of a small town. The possibilities for the increase in brand revitalization, foot traffic, and customer base for new and existing traditional small businesses and revenues for the town are limitless.

Implications for Social Change

Many small towns and small businesses in these areas still struggle because of the 2008 economic recession (Grunwell & Ha, 2014). With the results of this study and new knowledge that could benefit both the small towns and their traditional small businesses,

the implications for social change are favorable for the southern portion of Alabama. Many small towns in Alabama do not have an array of goods and services that usually exist in areas with a larger population (Fekete, 2014). Therefore, success with revitalization projects may increase these choices and create opportunities for more people to visit or move to the area. Small town business leaders engage more in improving the community (Besser, 2012; Bowns, 2013; Massawe et al., 2014). With more residents and visitors, potential small business owners may likely relocate to the area. An increase in small businesses could lead to more jobs for the community, which could, in turn, increase revenues for the town.

Despite some setbacks from the 2008 recession still being an issue, particularly for small towns, according to some statistics, small businesses' effects on the economy are positive (Demko-Rihter & ter Halle, 2015). Brick and mortar small businesses, particularly in rural and small towns, are advantageous to many customers who still choose to shop in a face-to-face environment (Demko-Rihter & ter Halle, 2015). Because of some difficulties with visiting the more prominent shopping centers, about 30% of people at least 65 years old or older in small towns consider traditional small businesses the only place to mix with friends and acquaintances socially (Demko-Rihter & ter Halle, 2015). These social mixes can considerably impact the community and small businesses (Demko-Rihter & ter Halle, 2015).

Closing traditional brick and mortar small businesses can harm the community and cause a loss of population. A loss in self-employment and an increase in unemployment are also negative side effects of traditional small businesses closing

(Demko-Rihter & ter Halle, 2015). By starting a small business, the owners may better understand the different strategies for small business success and build a better community by creating more jobs. Creating new jobs and local wealth, bringing the community together through social engagement, and community building through financial support are just a few of the benefits of conducting a small business in a small town (Frazier et al., 2013; Grunwell & Ha, 2014). With an increase in revenues for the community, the opportunities for applying more funds to different programs to help build a better community can multiply. The opportunities for more interaction between the city and small business leaders to work together on new projects for the benefit of the community socially can also be an advantage. The increase in opportunities for more scholarships to help fund education can be an effective service with help from small businesses.

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

This section includes a review of the literature regarding brick and mortar small businesses, leadership, and strategies crucial for survival in a post-recession small town. The primary purpose of a literature review is to provide a critical analysis of prior research to advance scholarship and contribute to the knowledge and comprehension of the topic (Milian et al., 2019). The primary keywords in the literature review are *small businesses*, *contingency leadership*, *marketing*, *transformational leadership*, and *small business leaders*. The literature includes 109 articles from several databases within the Walden Library, including Google Scholar, ProQuest, ABI/INFORM Complete, and Business Source Complete. Eighty-seven percent of the articles are 5 years old or less,

which provides modern research relating to small business issues. However, incorporating earlier articles provided some history of the topic. Ninety-six percent of the articles in this literature review are peer-reviewed, and 4% are from government sources.

The literature review includes an analysis of (a) leadership theories with a focus on the contingency leadership theory, (b) the potential for small towns being favorable locations for small business success, and (c) determining what strategies are beneficial for traditional small business survival in a small town. Themes in the literature review include contingency leadership, different leadership styles relevant to the study, such as the importance of using more than one strategy, transformational and situational, brick and mortar small business survival in small towns, and survival strategies for small business leaders operating in post-recession small towns.

The Importance of Implementing Different Strategies

In some small towns where revitalization efforts remain in process, more than one strategy for survival may be necessary. Performing research on different strategies in similar situations can be advantageous. Through research, whether personal or other study findings, the leaders of these small businesses may gain some ideas on different strategies to include in their business plans for survival in a small town. Although several strategies can be a part of these plans, this study only includes strategies focusing on traditional small business survival in a post-recession small-town economy. Therefore, focusing more on survival strategies may be beneficial for traditional small businesses operating in small towns.

Brick and mortar small business leaders interested in enhancing opportunities for survival in a post-recession small town can do so by changing or adding new strategies. These strategies can include enhancing activities such as using social media as a survival strategy for small businesses using a robust online presence. Social media is the primary marketing source for small businesses (Omolloh & Lao, 2020). For this study, I incorporated research on how social media as a tool for small business survival in a post-recession small town can be advantageous, especially if the local environment and the business are struggling. Social media has become a central element of small business owners' survival efforts on social networks (Omolloh & Lao, 2020). Social media can be one of many effective strategies some small business leaders can implement for survival in a post-recession small town. These leaders may also inform future small businesses attempting to open in a post-recession small town about the effectiveness of using social media.

Although implementing different strategies to enhance survival opportunities can be a head start, without a strong dedication to leadership, leaders of small businesses may struggle with ideas on how to avoid problems or undermine company values and ethical business practices (Huberts, 2018). As some brick and mortar small businesses struggle to survive in small towns, the opportunities for success or survival are contingent on several conditions, including but not limited to leadership, honest business practices, and community support. Small business leaders must focus more on ethical business practices because of the potential for corruption to evolve as the business attempts to sustain success (Cheng et al., 2019; Tremblay et al., 2017). These practices could begin with

gaining knowledge of good leadership styles and theories associated with small business survival, particularly in a small town. These practices could also begin with understanding why one leadership style may not be effective in all situations.

Contingency Leadership Theory

Under the contingency theory, an effective organizational leadership style in one situation may not be useful in another situation (Abba et al., 2018; Asrar-ul-Haq & Anwar, 2018; Vidal et al., 2017). The performance of a group is contingent because of the dependence on the interaction of leadership styles and internal and external situations concerning the organizational leaders (Vidal et al., 2017). Small business leaders operating in small towns may benefit from the contingency theory of leadership and develop a growth mindset that could enable them to use effective leadership skills in the right situation. These leaders can start with determining if their leadership style is task motivated or relationship motivated.

Task-Relationship Motivated

Leaders who follow the contingency theory take on a label as either task-motivated or relationship-motivated (Abba et al., 2018; Asrar-ul-Haq & Anwar, 2018). Per contingency theorists, leadership is the result of collaboration among four variables: (a) the nature of the task requiring completion, (b) the relationship between leaders and followers, (c) the power inherent in the position of the leader, and (d) the willingness of the followers to perform, which reflects the power of the leader (Henkel et al., 2019). Small business leaders must understand the connection between these variables and how

doing so could ensure a collaborative mindset effective for survival in a post-recession small town.

Similarly, situational variables are an essential part of contingency leadership when determining leadership styles (Asrar-ul-Haq & Anwar, 2018). These variables are task structure, position power, and leader-member relations (Abba et al., 2018; Asrar-ul-Haq & Anwar, 2018; Henkel et al., 2019; Uslu, 2019; Vidal et al., 2017). However, James Burns, responsible for developing the transformational leadership theory in 1978, stated that another variable is necessary for leadership effectiveness—the distinction between transformational leaders and transactional leaders (Asrar-ul-Haq & Anwar, 2018; Tian et al., 2020). To be effective as small business leaders, learning what leadership is and how to be transformational and transactional in a particular situation is essential for survival in a small town. Transformational leaders are inspirational and visionary leaders whose main goals are to meet the followers' expectations and needs. Their goals are also to develop a shared vision for the future of the business (Asrar-ul-Haq & Anwar, 2018; Fletcher et al., 2019; Tian et al., 2020). On the other hand, transactional leaders take more into account the collaboration between the leader and the follower (Asrar-ul-Haq & Anwar, 2018; Kabeyi, 2018). Ensuring leaders and followers can collaborate and keep the goals of the small business as the main focus, small business survival in a post-recession small town can remain positive.

Some theorists have criticized the contingency theory because of little evidence proving why individuals who possess certain leadership styles are more successful in certain situations than in other cases (Asrar-ul-Haq & Anwar, 2018; Henkel et al., 2019).

Task-motivated leaders are more successful in accomplishing tasks in different situations that involve a small degree of creativity (Henkel et al., 2019). By contrast, relationship-motivated leaders may not be successful in these same situations, although they may have the same amount of power (Henkel et al., 2019). Furthermore, even when relationship-motivated leaders are in situations where they are less powerful, they regularly center a tremendous amount of attention on relationships in achieving their work (Henkel et al., 2019). Despite the many different beliefs, depending on the situation, different leaders and various leadership skills can be necessary to achieve specific tasks for small business survival in a small town.

To measure the orientation or relative position of individuals, contingency theorists use the Least Preferred Coworker Scale created by Fielder (1960; Asrar-ul-Haq & Anwar, 2018). With the Least Preferred Coworker Scale, theorists use a score to determine if leaders are task-motivated or relationship-motivated. Higher scores lean more toward leaders who are relationship-motivated, with lower scores indicating leaders are task-motivated. Small business leaders can take advantage of this tool to determine if they are task or relationship motivated so they can find different avenues to work together with followers to operate in a small town that is still struggling from the 2008 recession successfully jointly. Despite some criticism, the contingency leadership theory has remained a proper consideration for leadership success (Vidal et al., 2017).

Learning Opportunities for Leadership Success

Leaders of small businesses operate in work environments with abundant learning opportunities (Turner & Endres, 2017). Factors that can contribute to learning include

support and guidance, external interaction, internal communication, and task characteristics (Gerald et al., 2017). Support and guidance are training techniques obtained by small businesses through persons working inside and outside the business. External interaction is exchanging information and ideas with stakeholders outside of the business, including customers, suppliers, or buyers. Internal communication is the information structures employees use to interact and exchange ideas and information. These structures can include team meetings and feedback from persons within the business. Task characteristics are the small business philosophy on the features required to make room to be strategic for innovation. These features include work tasks associated with flexibility, specialization, and reflection opportunities (Gerald et al., 2017; Zawawi & Nasurdin, 2017).

Brick and mortar small business leaders can consider different opportunities for learning because different situations may require more knowledge on how to handle changes that happen during the business's lifespan. These small business leaders must seek every opportunity to obtain knowledge of survival in small towns still struggling from economic conditions. Opportunities and threats posed by a rapidly changing internal and external university environment demand a more diverse set of leadership and management skills than previously has been the case (Lepkowska-White et al., 2019). Therefore, small businesses in post-recession small towns still struggling from the 2008 economic downturn may need to upgrade their leadership skills for survival. The owners of one small business can make a wrong decision several times without repercussions and still can survive, but owners of another small business can make one wrong decision and

have to close (Frankish et al., 2013). Without repetitive opportunities for learning and taking chances, entrepreneurial learning circumstances would more than likely not exist in the business (Frankish et al., 2013). Because situations for traditional physical small businesses in small towns can change regularly, the leaders of these small businesses should take advantage of learning opportunities for business survival. Doing so could increase their chances of gaining knowledge on what to do during challenging times.

Leadership in a Changing Environment

Brick and mortar small businesses operating in changing environments may require leaders to change their normal modes of thinking, interfacing, and socializing with others to specific modes contingent for survival. To be successful in these changing environments, managers must recognize conflicts and uncertainties that are a part of work event flows and successfully lead others through these flows (Backström, 2013). Small businesses operating in post-recession small towns must keep abreast of changes in the environment to continue to operate successfully. Small business leaders must achieve business goals by working with others and recognizing the activities that compel others to accomplish the same goals (Backström, 2013). For small businesses to grow and be successful, the staff must be goal-oriented, highly qualified, and willing (Cortellazzo et al., 2019). Leaders must spend the time motivating and upskilling employees in order to foster a culture that aligns with the aims of the small business (Cortellazzo et al., 2019). Therefore, one of the strategies for the survival of small businesses in post-recession small towns can be leaders and staff working together to ensure they meet the common

goals of the business. Even in stressful situations, the small business leaders' and staff's actions can determine the success of the small business or whether the business survives.

Further, as the global economy continues to evolve and new technologies begin to enable new ways of organizing, organizations must continue to assume new forms and craft new business models and processes (Abba et al., 2018). As a result, seeking knowledge about operating in the ever-shifting and uncertain developing economic environment is essential for small business leaders operating in post-recession small towns still struggling but also going through a revitalization phase to improve the economy. Some leaders face significant challenges that call for fundamental changes in how they operate, including not merely getting better at their current approaches. In an age of turbulence, when small business leaders handle change well, they are successful; however, when these leaders handle change poorly, small businesses can suffer from decreased profits (Sow & Aborbie, 2018). Small business leaders of brick-and-mortar businesses must be willing to adjust and make changes necessary to continue operating successfully or surviving in small towns where economic difficulties remain a problem.

Traditional physical small business survival may be contingent on the leaders regularly auditing everyday situations in small towns where the economy is weak. Constantly monitoring every situation necessary to renew strategies on unpredictable developments is advantageous (Cortellazzo et al., 2019). Changes in strategies may require increasing innovation, acquiring knowledge, and creating and managing partnerships to access support and carry out core business (Cortellazzo et al., 2019). Therefore, brick and mortar small business leaders must continue to monitor the changes

in the economy and learn various survival strategies necessary for these changes and survival in a post-recession small town.

Small business survival also depends on multiple factors, including marketing, financial capital, management skills, and regional and national economic conditions (Byun et al., 2020). Knowing the different factors that can affect small business survival, especially in a small town, could be beneficial. Placing the factors that affect success in a category that pertains to those specific to the business, entrepreneur, industry, region, or the combination of these factors is essential (Byun et al., 2020). In addition to these factors, leadership errors can also limit the growth of small businesses. Small businesses often encounter barriers as they grow, but pivotal options are available that leaders can use to break the barrier (Howard et al., 2019). Small business leaders must remain aware of barriers that can affect survival in post-recession small towns. Making every effort to obtain knowledge of the factors that can affect survival could be advantageous when working on eliminating or minimizing errors in leadership and determining which leadership style fits the current situation.

Additionally, several different leadership styles exist, and small business leaders must monitor the situation and determine which styles are a better fit. All organizations, regardless of the type, are in immediate need of transformational leadership as well as experience and trust (Juhro & Aulia, 2018). These transformational leaders must have the courage and skills to reinvent and build organizations capable of succeeding despite the dynamic changes and scarce resources in the economy (Lepkowska-White et al., 2019; Murphy et al., 2019). Small business leaders in small towns must obtain as much

knowledge as possible on different leadership skills, especially transformational leadership, as this can be advantageous for small business survival. Efforts as simple as following the rules of a game could be a benefit to obtaining knowledge on specific leadership skills. Integrating concepts from transformational leadership and organizational development can increase the chance of success (Lewis et al., 2017). Small businesses also have a more robust chance of success when leaders take on more of a personal effort to meet the business's goals (Howard et al., 2019). Leaders may take more than one avenue to heighten the awareness of the different leadership skills necessary to successfully continue operating a brick and mortar small business in a post-recession small town. Taking more than one avenue will allow small business leaders opportunities to grow and be successful in small towns still struggling from the 2008–2009 recession.

Leadership Theories and Styles

Theories built on leadership styles began to become attractive in the 1950s. Closely following the works of Dale Carnegie, these leadership theories began to develop (Aalateeg, 2017; Asrar-ul-Haq & Anwar, 2018; Reynolds, 2021). Regardless of the type of small business, historians base these theories on their views and beliefs that leadership styles are the leading factors in determining the degree of leadership success and small business success (Vidal et al., 2017). Small business leaders must remain aware of the different leadership styles that work for their business regardless of the current situation.

Introducing different leadership styles to determine which one will work in the current situation for a brick and mortar small business in a small town is beneficial. Small

business leaders must make every effort to be better than others to remain competitive in a global market (Kasapoğlu, 2018). Brick and mortar small business leaders today must take the lead and thrive on being better than past leaders by becoming experts in technology, service, and quality while pleasing and earning the trust of the customers (Kasapoğlu, 2018). These small business leaders must also possess an advanced level of skills also in conceptual, people, and social skills (Guzmán et al., 2020). Small business leaders must take several steps, including conducting research on effective leadership styles, increasing socializing activities, and maintaining skills to continue to grow successfully in a changing environment.

Adjustments in Leadership

Because of changes in the environment and small business leaders experiencing stressful situations, some of these leaders have faced more significant challenges than before. Using a five-point scale Likert-type tool and a correlation analysis for their study, Donmez and Toker (2017) demonstrated from the results that knowledge of the different leadership styles is important because they vary across cultures. More than one technique of leadership skill may be essential for small business survival. Obtaining knowledge through research on leadership can be a significant advantage for leaders of brick and mortar small businesses in small towns (Karadag, 2017). These leaders could use the data or results available from the research to conduct their study on the different techniques and leadership skills necessary to survive in a small town. A necessary leadership skill may consist of relationships with followers to ensure all are on board with the same ideas.

The survival of traditional small businesses operating in small towns may depend upon the leadership styles and the condition of the environment. Survival may also depend on the relationship between the leaders, followers, or the employees responsible for meeting the goals. In addition to leadership styles, leadership behavior is the focus of the study by Titus and Ocholi (2013), who stated that leaders influence followers' behavior, beliefs, and perceptions. Small business leaders and followers must do everything possible to work jointly to ensure their goals align with the business goals to remain successful and competitive.

The purpose of Titus and Ocholi's study was to explore the practices of the leaders and determine the influence of their actions and why different reactions were present in certain situations (Titus & Ocholi, 2013). Titus and Ocholi employed a binomial logit analysis for their study and concluded that although age and gender impact leadership behavior, various leadership styles have a significant effect on leadership behavior (Titus & Ocholi, 2013). Small business leaders can employ efforts through training and self-evaluations to determine their leadership styles and behavior styles. One leadership style significantly that has a link to leadership behavior is delegative leadership.

Delegative leadership is a top choice by many leaders who place a significant amount of faith in their employees' abilities (Titus & Ocholi, 2013). Gaining knowledge of what leadership is and the different types of leadership can be beneficial to small business leaders seeking ways to survive in a small town still experiencing economic troubles. Leadership is a technique that one or more persons of authority have the control

and power to influence individuals to achieve specific objectives (Asrar-ul-Haq & Anwar, 2018). These individuals are stakeholders or followers incapable of making decisions or reaching goals solely on their own but can emerge as leaders with proper training (Cheng et al., 2019; Peters & Haslam, 2018; Schwarzmüller et al., 2018). Proper training and remaining knowledgeable on various leadership styles to use in different situations can benefit leaders and followers.

These followers also tend to have more confidence in leaders who put the interest of others ahead of their interests (Hughes et al., 2018; Lord et al., 2017). Small business leaders and followers must continuously seek knowledge of leadership styles and techniques that coincide with small business survival in a small town. By continually seeking knowledge, leaders could make different strategies work even during changing and challenging times.

When dealing with change, successfully maintaining a leadership role for change in a brick and mortar small business is imperative yet can be difficult when different individuals are a part of the change (Mirocha et al., 2013). These individuals may not be readily susceptible to change, which leaders must explore. Therefore, adequate leadership skills and techniques are necessary for working with others on revitalizing small businesses.

Comprehending the need for change, ensuring individuals can adjust to changing conditions, and establishing the processes and methodologies necessary for making changes is essential (Mirocha et al., 2013). Change is essential for brick and mortar small business growth in small towns. One change that may become necessary is the need for

cultural change. Because of the variety of different individuals and responsibilities associated with operating a small business, a one size fits all leadership strategy will not suffice (Hoffmann, 2013). Therefore, small business leaders operating in small towns need to understand why change is necessary and which leadership style works better in different cultures.

Small business leaders must be ready to participate in nontraditional training efforts to maintain a thriving small business culture even during challenging times, whether in a formal or informal situation. However, to be successful, these efforts must include multiple tools such as webinars, coaching, mentoring, and internal and external expert support (Hoffman, 2013; Mirocha et al., 2013). Therefore, because no one leadership strategy may suffice for the different brick and mortar small businesses struggling to survive in the same environment, knowledge of the many strategies could be advantageous for small business leaders and followers.

Leaders can use different methods to assist in cultural change and developing successful small business leaders. For change to be successful, these leaders must be willing to explore and explain to everyone within the small business the reasoning behind a change, all steps necessary in making the change, and what these individuals can expect from the modifications (Hoffman, 2013; Mirocha et al., 2013). In his study, Hoffmann employed a tool in the form of an online survey called the Culture X-Ray (Hoffman, 2013). With the Culture X-Ray tool, leaders can analyze the current culture of all aspects of the small business to help influence cultural change (Hoffman, 2013). Small business leaders can use the Culture X-Ray tool to increase their knowledge on different areas of

the business that require change and how these changes can improve the business operations.

Mirocha et al., on the other hand, employed the DELPHI technique for their study to reach a consensus on the leadership development strategies they deem successful and to determine what leadership strategies small business owners can use to develop leaders residing in a particular geographic area (Mirocha et al., 2013). With a Delphi technique, researchers use the mixed method to collect data from experts on a specific issue (Vidgen et al., 2017). The study results indicated that although leadership efforts occur over short and long terms, small business practitioners must acknowledge leadership development complications, which require an intense level of skills that can only materialize over a lengthy period (Mirocha et al., 2013). Leadership development strategies suitable for the small business culture and individuals and assisting people with adapting to a changing environment must take precedence over attempting a vast number of methods (Mirocha et al., 2013). Because several issues can play a role in the survival of brick and mortar small businesses in small towns, the techniques from this study can be beneficial for leaders to use, whether as long-term or short-term strategies for survival.

The connection between carrying out a task and leadership styles remains unstable. Thus, the contingency theory is gaining the attention of other leadership scholars (Vidal et al., 2017). Under the contingency theory, to determine the type of situation an individual becomes a successful leader, an evaluation of the relative position of an individual is necessary (Howell, 2018). Scholars strongly emphasize that leaders will not be effective in all situations (Vidal et al., 2017). Ohlsson et al. (2020) further

emphasized that leadership must materialize over a period. This development depends on the work and the circumstances surrounding the tasks. Thus, leadership patterns depend on the situation (Ohlsson et al., 2020). Small business leaders must explore the current situation, research, and apply the necessary leadership skills appropriate to be successful.

Transformational Leadership Theory

Several types of transformational leadership styles exist, which include delegative, consultative, participative, and directive leadership (Sarla, 2020; Titus & Oholi, 2013). Transformational leadership is rooted in charismatic leadership. Some researchers view transformational leaders as inspirational leaders and require specific behavior skills to be effective leaders (Juhro & Aulia, 2018). Unlike contingency leadership, which is a combination of leadership styles and the situation, the focus of transformational leadership is more on the behavior skills of leaders regardless of the leadership style (Asrar-ul-Haq & Anwar, 2018; Vidal et al., 2017). These behavior skills are vision builder, developer, advocate, and integrator. These skills are a measure of their influence on others (Sow & Aborbie, 2018). Breevaart and Zacher (2019) indicated from the results of descriptive statistics during their research that transformational leadership styles are the most common and effective leadership styles in small businesses. For small business success and accomplishing business goals, transformational leaders are essential.

James M. Burns developed the transformational leadership theory in 1978. In 1985, Bernard M. Bass extended his stance of Burns's work (Hughes et al., 2018). Burns believed leadership skills are the focus of transformational leadership, and with these

skills, leaders possess more of a determination to advance an organization to the next level (Juhro & Aulia, 2018). However, Fielder's (1960) viewpoint about leadership skills is not solely on the skills leaders possess, but on the conviction that no single way to lead or manage a small business exists (as cited in Asrar-ul-Haq & Anwar, 2018; Hunt & Fedynich, 2018). Regardless of the situation, small business leaders must possess adequate leadership skills and know which skills are necessary in a certain situation for business survival.

Bass (1985), on the other hand, further extended on transformational leadership when he stated that these types of leaders should have skills, including showing encouragement and providing support for other individuals (as cited in Juhro & Aulia, 2018). Bass stated that transformational leaders motivate others through inspiration, building closer relationships, and motivation (as cited in Juhro & Aulia, 2018). According to Asrar-ul-Haq and Anwar (2018), specific objectives are the primary goals of transformational leaders. Taking all this research into consideration, various steps in leadership skills are essential for small businesses in small towns in all situations.

Situational Leadership Theory

The situational theory, developed by Paul Hersey and Ken Blanchard in 1977, is part of the categories of theories known as contingency or behavior theories (as cited in Ghazzawi et al., 2017). Situational leadership and contingency leadership are remarkably similar in that they follow the same approach that no single leadership style is suitable for leaders and followers in each situation (Ghazzawi et al., 2017; Uslu, 2019). Situational leadership also share other similarities with contingency leadership in that they are both a

part of a behavior leadership class, and the accomplishments of the leaders will depend on the internal and external factors of the business and the maturity level and skills of the followers (Ghazzawi et al., 2017; Uslu, 2019). Therefore, small business leaders in small towns must understand several internal and external issues and how behavior can affect business operations.

Just as these two leadership theories are similar, brick and mortar, small business leaders need to understand that these are two different leadership theories. Contingency leadership focuses more on the leader's effectiveness, which is dependent on the leadership style, skills, and the current situation. On the other hand, situational leadership depends more on the task and relationship behavior characteristics of the leaders and the effect these characteristics will have on followers in each situation (Ghazzawi et al., 2017). The tasks leaders set out to accomplish and the followers' readiness is situational leadership characteristics. The maturity level of the followers plays a significant role in the type of leadership styles useful for situational leadership. In other words, the theory is contingent upon the skills-relevant maturity level of the followers (Ghazzawi et al., 2017). Small business leaders must remain aware of how important leadership skills are in order to work effectively with their followers.

The only significant distinction between the two is that the leadership style under situational leadership is quite flexible but not flexible under the contingency theory (Ghazzawi et al., 2017). With a flexible leadership style, leaders may adjust their behavior better and adapt to the current situation, whereas this may be difficult for leaders with inflexible leadership styles. With situational leadership, the results of the

situation will depend heavily on the willingness, skill level, maturity of the followers, and their ability to adjust to the flexible leadership styles of the leaders (Ghazzawi et al., 2017; Uslu, 2019). Small business leaders and followers must be flexible behavior and maturity level wise and adjust to the current situation to operate successfully in a post-recession small town.

Four different leadership styles and four different maturity levels for followers share an association with situational leadership. These leadership styles and maturity levels must be highly relatable for leaders to be effective (Uslu, 2019). The leadership styles include (a) telling (directing), (b) selling (coaching), (c) participating (supporting), and (d) delegating (Ghazzawi et al., 2017; Uslu, 2019). The maturity levels of the followers include (a) low readiness level (M1), (b) moderate readiness level (M2), (c) high readiness level (M3), and (d) extremely high readiness level (M4; Uslu, 2019). The ultimate responsibility of situational leaders is to ensure their leadership styles coincide with the maturity level of the followers (Uslu, 2019). Telling leadership styles should match low readiness levels. Selling leadership styles should match moderate readiness levels. Participating leadership styles should match high readiness levels. Delegating leadership styles should match extremely high readiness levels. If this happens, the chance for high effectiveness of the leader is possible (Uslu, 2019). Small business leaders and leaders together can benefit from maintaining knowledge on these leadership styles and maturity levels so that businesses can operate successfully.

Every individual within a small business can play a role in planning for success and survival. Relationships between leadership styles and job satisfaction among

employees in small businesses are the focus of a study by An et al. (2020). Although small business leaders are ultimately responsible for their success, ensuring strategies for survival come more from employee suggestions than from management can be a step in the right direction for survival (Sun & Bunchapattanasakda, 2019). Therefore, ensuring and employing competent employees with high-level skills can be a significant asset to small businesses and the leaders who place a significant amount of confidence in the ability of their employees (Schwarz Müller et al., 2018; Titus & Ochoi, 2013). Regardless of the employee's position, the possibility of implementing strategies that include information from every employee can be a significant contribution to survival for traditional small businesses in small towns. Knowledge of more than one possible strategy for brick and mortar small business survival can be favorable for the leaders and the community.

Small Town Potential for Traditional Small Businesses

The potential of small towns has long been an interest to some researchers who state that others view these towns as less critical than larger cities or urban areas and that they also lack a sound basis. Small towns were a significant part of the environment for small businesses, especially those operating as retailers as early as 1955 (Sheppard, 1955). The population of small towns then indicated to be above 60 million, with small businesses reporting steady increasing sales of over 24 billion dollars (Sheppard, 1955). This amount is more than what small businesses in urban areas reported, even with retail businesses starting to decline during this period in the economy (Sheppard, 1955). Therefore, the potential for small business survival in small towns is feasible. Small

businesses relocating to more extensive areas may not be practical because of increased marketing efforts and chances of competition increasing.

Although a decline in the small-town population, the interest in small towns has remained significant, with research indicating that about 46.1 million residents or roughly 14% of all the U.S. municipalities population still prefer to reside (Powe, 2018; Toukabri & Medina, 2020; U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2020). The decline is mainly because of a downturn in the economy (Grunwell & Ha, 2014). During this time, many small businesses shut down mostly because of a drop in the population and the loss of local commerce (Li et al., 2019; United States Environmental Protection Agency, 2017). In his study, Besser (2012) discussed how some scholars believe small towns are not relevant in this new and changing global era. This irrelevancy contrasts with Rybaczewska and Sparks (2020), who stated that small towns remain the ideal location to live during this globalization era despite the decline in the economy. Therefore, the potential for successfully operating a small business in a small town still exists.

In small towns, the mixture of operating small businesses along with family and personal time is standard (Besser, 2012). Most of these leaders of small businesses often leave the business for a brief period during operating hours to make social and personal contributions to their community while also using their business resources for community events (Besser, 2012). With small towns being a desirable area to reside, this may be an opportunity for brick and mortar small business leaders to consider focusing on different strategies for growth and surviving in a small town.

In many instances, small businesses are vital and represent many businesses operating in small towns (Besser, 2012). Rybaczewska and Sparks (2020) agreed that although small towns or rural communities can be challenging environments, they have remained the ideal location for local small businesses because of the substantial support the community receives from these businesses and vice versa. These environments can be challenging for small businesses because of issues with a modest population, low financial capital, and lack of technology (Li et al., 2019). Although these challenges are present, creating new jobs and local wealth, bringing the community together through social engagement, and community building through financial support from small businesses are a few of the benefits of conducting business in a small town (Rybaczewska & Sparks, 2020). Therefore, attaining knowledge about the community and the condition of the local environment in which the small businesses operate could be a part of a strategy for survival in a small town.

Small Town Location

Although small businesses depend primarily on the leadership and skill qualifications of the employees and small business leaders, the community in which the businesses operate plays a crucial role in the survival of small businesses (Pato & Teixeira, 2018). Besser (2012) stated that many small businesses could survive better in small towns because big businesses tend to block the visibility of small businesses in larger cities. Another reason many small businesses can survive better in small towns is that small business leaders can better perform socially through engagement with other leaders and small chambers of commerce, which can create a prosperous future for small

towns (Besser, 2012). The better chances of small business survival in a small town can be contingent upon not only leadership skills but on several other factors, including the location of the town and small business.

Survival Strategies For Small Town Traditional Small Businesses

Even with the advantages of better survival in a small town, small business owners are still ultimately responsible for building and growing their own business (Murphy et al., 2019). With the economy constantly changing, a focus on adopting different strategies is imperative in small towns. Various strategies are necessary if small brick and mortar businesses expect to move successfully beyond the 2008 recession and prosper economically (Grunwell & Ha, 2014). Incorporating different strategies could be beneficial because more than one solution for traditional small business survival could be necessary. One of these strategies could include marketing and branding products, services, and places.

For more than a decade, embracing the idea of marketing and promoting places through the notion of branding is still an increasing concern for many small business leaders (Ryu & Swinney, 2013). Leaders in small towns have a limit on the number of resources they can use for their marketing strategies and development activities. The contingency for small business survival could also rest on the leadership skills and styles of the town leaders. Small business leaders must learn how the efforts, which may not necessarily work for one small business, could work for their business. Changes may be necessary for strategic alignment. These changes could start with branding their products and services.

Branding consists of the efforts to reestablish life into an aging brand to attract customers once more and establish trust between the customers and the business (Dellarmelin et al., 2018; Donnelly et al., 2020; Zhao et al., 2018). Just like small businesses use branding to add value to their product or set themselves apart from competitors to attract customers, the consideration for applying the same concept for small towns to heighten attractiveness to the area is crucial. Strengthening the attractiveness of small towns would be a significant benefit for small business leaders (Artz et al., 2020; Ryu & Swinney, 2013; Wahlberg, 2016). Hence, the potential for small towns to become productive places where brick and mortar small businesses have better opportunities to prosper is possible. The contingency for survival could rest upon the leaders who continue to stay knowledgeable on what other leaders in small towns do to enhance foot traffic to the area, which could be a significant benefit.

Enhancing Small Town Attractiveness

The focus on revitalizing small towns and enhancing their attractiveness to increase the opportunities for traditional small businesses to thrive and survive has been the focal point in several studies. No one strategy may work for survival. Therefore, this focus is just one of several possible avenues that brick and mortar small business leaders can use to gain knowledge of their surroundings and potentially be able to make sound decisions on survival. The main shopping center and the downtown area of a small town are the focus in three different studies, one of which is by Ryu and Swinney (2013), another by Gribb (2015), and another by Wahlberg (2016).

Exploring the core locations such as the downtown area or main shopping center where a significant amount of all economic and social activities take place could be an opportunity for small business success. Delving into these areas to ensure they have remained the central location for consumption activities for revenue-generating and employment purposes is also another opportunity for small businesses to seek knowledge (Gribb, 2015; Ryu & Swinney, 2013; Wahlberg, 2016). Knowledge about the benefits of the downtown area and what efforts the town leaders take to stimulate traffic to this vital area could be essential for small businesses operating in the downtown area where the opportunity to increase profits is favorable.

Pull Factors

Pull factors are the alluring characteristics of an area that aid in drawing consumers from outside regions and attracting them to the area (Calvo-Porrall & Levy-Mangin, 2018). For their study, Ryu and Swinney (2013) used the pull factor as a course of action to determine if place branding in small towns is useful for attracting outside consumers to the area while keeping the current consumers. Attracting more consumers to the area would be favorable for small businesses by increasing the customer base (Ryu & Swinney, 2013). According to the results of 167 surveys from small business owners in 17 different small communities in a Midwestern state with a high pull factor, Ryu and Swinney (2013) reported that the owners view place branding as a useful measure for further improving their business profits. Brick and mortar small business leaders could use pull factors as a strategy for survival in a post-recession small town. Because no one strategy may suffice for operating a small business in the downtown area, pull factors are

just one of several strategies that could work. However, further research on other strategies could be beneficial. Small business leaders must conduct research on the area and determine what pull factors are effective with increasing the area's attractiveness. The results could provide details on how small businesses can survive in small towns.

Besides pull factors, Gribb (2015), on the other hand, wanted to determine if the shortage of parking spaces in the downtown area of a small town by the name of Laramie, Wyoming played a significant issue with drawing new businesses and more people to the area. Gribb used on-street surveys to gather data from 280 random participants regarding their parking experience and to consider addressing revitalizing efforts for the downtown area as a strategy to lure people and new businesses to the area. The survey results indicated that the parking situation needs analyzing and implementation of strategies need to be in place to ensure that suitable parking space is available for attracting new businesses and people to the downtown area (Gribb, 2015). Further research on what other leaders do to curb the parking issues can benefit small business leaders operating in the downtown area where parking is an issue. Most downtown areas in small towns have limited parking space which could create an issue with business operations. Small business leaders can use the results of this study to explore what other areas are doing to combat the issue with the shortage of parking spaces downtown while operating a business.

Wahlberg (2016) used the service quality approach to explore the main features of the shopping center of a small town in Sweden. Determining how these elements can strengthen the area's attractiveness was the focus of the study (Wahlberg, 2016). With the

service quality approach, Wahlberg also wanted to learn what service qualities are essential for the visitors' shopping experience, the effect these service conditions have on enhancing the shopping area, and the impression the visitors have with strengthening the attractiveness of the shopping center. Using an alternative convenience sampling method to distribute surveys, the results from the surveys indicated that 295 participants preferred an array of different and independent shops within the shopping center (Wahlberg, 2016). The finding could be beneficial for brick and mortar small business leaders when researching what residents or visitors desire for some post-recession small towns. This study may also be useful because some of these small towns do not have an array of choices in goods and services. Some small business leaders can explore what other small towns do to attract businesses and visitors and mimic the same activities to identify if they will also work in their favor.

Because no one strategy for survival will be right in every situation, the need for small business leaders to keep abreast of the many strategies necessary for survival in small towns is necessary. Just like place branding can be as effective as product branding, using anchor stores as an example could also be useful (Clark & Rice, 2019; Donnelly et al., 2020; Kiriri, 2019; Ryu & Swinney, 2013). Anchor stores have a great ability to yield significant value in their progress and growth, play a pivotal part in improving the economy, and can be an example for other brick and mortar small businesses to mimic (Clark & Rice, 2019; Kiriri, 2019). Small towns mainly consist of small businesses. Therefore, using an anchor store to attract customers may require extra efforts, especially for some small towns with a smaller population. Small business leaders must conduct

proper research on these areas to determine what anchor stores are beneficial for small business success.

Wahlberg (2016) stated that localizing shops is a strategic move that can draw visitors to the shopping center of a small town. He also stated that as another strategic move, having a supermarket in the local shopping center can increase the value and attractiveness of the area. Evidence has proven that placing a supermarket on both ends of a shopping center can serve as anchor stores for other shops to mimic and increase the traffic flow to other stores in between the supermarkets (Kiriri, 2019; Wahlberg, 2016). Gathering data and gaining knowledge through additional research can be beneficial and serve a significant purpose in the plans small business leaders operating in small towns can use for success and survival in a small town. To broaden their knowledge of the different methods small business leaders can use to gather information on attracting visitors and promoting small business growth in small towns, these leaders may want to consider researching similar topics in small towns. By doing so, the leaders might become more aware of similar studies and better able to compare the different findings of the studies. The results of these studies could be a considerable advantage to small business leaders seeking strategies for small business survival in a small town.

Benefits of Research for Small Businesses Operating in Small Towns

Small businesses are generators of new ideas, transformation, and economic growth (Turner & Endres, 2017). In the United States, small businesses are for-profit organizations with fewer than 500 employees and are responsible for 65.1 % of job creation (Ritz et al., 2019; SBA, 2020). The SBA notes that since the 2008 recession,

these small businesses have continued to outperform large businesses (SBA, 2019).

Although some of the effects of the 2008 recession remain an issue, small businesses continue to recover at a steady rate and expand economically (Byun et al., 2020; SBA, 2019). Because of the various challenges, such as small business failure, that some leaders face when operating in a small town, knowledge regarding these challenges is essential for business survival. Many advantages for leaders of small businesses in a small town may arrive as a result of conducting further research and implementing some of the applied approaches as a strategy for success.

When researching strategies and generating ideas for survival in a changing economy, leaders of traditional physical small businesses operating in small towns may find implementing a strategic plan to be valuable. A strategic plan can require multiple steps or approaches including formation, implementation, and strategy control and evaluation (Arend et al., 2017; Gomera et al., 2018). By conducting research, these leaders will discover that no single way of preparing a strategic plan is sufficient for all situations, and these plans can vary depending on the need and business type (Williams & Aaron, 2018). Because small businesses differ in many ways, leaders must strongly consider different strategies to have a better chance of survival and growth (Williams & Aaron, 2018). By implementing a strategic plan, the small business leaders can better visualize the future of their business and be more capable of making sound choices regarding business goals and adjusting for any unforeseen circumstances (Arend et al., 2017; Williams & Aaron, 2018). Thus, to reap the full potential of being a successful

brick and mortar small business, strategic plans can include different strategies on situations pertinent to that specific business.

Brick and mortar small business leaders must put in the time and effort to prepare and ensure a solid strategic plan for business success. Even with an effective plan, attractive results can only be successful if these leaders adequately prepare and create a strong will to advance their businesses (Mjaku, 2020; Weber et al., 2015). Therefore, these leaders must be aware of the different strategies for survival that can be put into action when implementing a strategic plan.

Brick and mortar small business leaders cannot succeed unless they understand the need to embrace a complete change (Mason, 2018). This change includes taking a different approach to running the business by recognizing the most effective management style and focusing more on working on the business and not just micromanaging the business and employees (Castro, 2020). These leaders need to be aware of the different strategies essential for small business long-term survival to embrace this change.

In their study, Weber et al. (2015) presented a growth/success matrix analysis to gear data towards small business owners who desire growth. Weber et al. conducted a quantitative study to determine if a significant relationship between what some small business owners interpret as success and the preparedness of small business owners to grow their business. The study results indicated no correlation between the perceived success score and the growth preparedness of the business (Weber et al., 2015). Therefore, researching strategies for survival in a small town are essential, but the eagerness for brick and mortar small business leaders to be successful must be even more

evident. Several strategies and knowledge on the ones beneficial for survival are essential.

Brick and mortar small business leaders must remain knowledgeable on all aspects of the business to survive, especially in a post-recession small town. Despite the desire for growth, small business leaders may also address factors that could hinder the success of small businesses and cause them to fail. One of the strategies for successfully running a traditional physical small business in a small town is to pinpoint the areas causing the business to fail. After identifying the failing areas, the business leaders may be able to begin the process to grow the business successfully.

Reasons Behind Small Business Failure

The factors some brick and mortar small business leaders may address can include economic downfall, lack of technology, or inadequate knowledge on economic issues (Murphy et al., 2019). In their study, Suddaby and Jaskiewicz (2020) presented evidence to prove that even factors such as family ownership can negatively influence small businesses. Small business leaders can use the results of this study to identify some factors causing business failure. Regardless of what is causing the failure, small business leaders may want to include strategies that address the potential failure issues. Addressing failure-causing issues could be a massive benefit because these leaders can understand what it will take strategically to market and increase their customer base in a small town. When using various strategies as a pathway to survival, small business leaders may stand a chance to be successful during turbulent times.

Different leadership and small business success skills could evolve from the experiences of brick and mortar small business failures. Small business failures could result from different issues. These issues may range from inadequate management skills, no plans for expansion or innovation, lack of funds, and poor service and commitment (Murphy et al., 2019). The opportunity for failure increases anytime small business leaders lack knowledge of their business operations (Karadag, 2017; Murphy et al., 2019). Therefore, staying abreast of why small businesses fail is essential for brick and mortar small business leaders operating in post-recession small towns and for future growth.

For future growth and to minimize the chances of failure, small business owners must be willing to learn from their errors (Mason, 2018). However, despite small business contributions to the economy, small business failure is still a concern (Turner & Endres, 2017). Howard et al. (2019) stated that over 80% of small businesses fail within the first 18 months of launching. However, SBA (2019) believed the number of start-ups failures to be closer to 20% within the first year and nearly 50% by five years because fewer owners possess the proper skills and leadership styles to operate a successful business (SBA, 2019). Because of the rate of failure and limitations on resources for small businesses in small towns, small business leaders must continually seek strategies for survival.

A similar study by Quansah and Hartz (2021) indicated that small businesses continue to fail because of new challenges and changing roles leaders face with their businesses. Despite these obstacles, some researchers still see small businesses as the

driving force behind innovation, the growth of the economy, and the generation of employment (Turner & Endres, 2017). The creation of 65.1% of jobs resulted from small businesses operating in the United States (SBA, 2020). Because of this job creation, small businesses represent about 27.8 million or 49% of the workforce in the United States (Byun et al., 2020; Williams & Aaron, 2018). Leaders of traditional small businesses seeking long-term success may find it beneficial to remain aware of the issues behind business failures and the appropriate strategies available to prevent these issues.

Many researchers explore small business failures and factors that can contribute to negative organizational process flows. Heinze (2013) also stressed the imperativeness of this knowledge when Heinze stated that because failure is the reversal of success, introducing strategies to prevent failure are often a secondary product of success strategies. Hence, placing these strategies at the forefront and promptly addressing them is necessary for small business survival (Heinze, 2013). Brick and mortar small businesses might also have a better opportunity for survival by learning the different types of strategies necessary for determining which will work in a particular situation. No one strategy may be useful in the same situation. Therefore, the consideration of multiple strategies is necessary.

The small business leader's social environment and lived experiences of their failures can also influence their decision-making process (Heinze, 2013). Heinze (2013) used an interpretive phenomenological analysis to find information on the importance of recognizing the failure and the emotions of the leaders after the failure. The results indicated that business leaders attempt to make sense of the failure by looking for

benefits as a result of the failure to cope with their emotions. The results also indicated that adverse reactions from close persons within the business leader's social environment could interfere with the decision-making process and the ability to learn from the failure (Heinze, 2013). This issue recalled the previous discussion on the importance of the behavior and relationship between the leaders and followers regarding small business success. Small business leaders must be aware of the many leadership styles, techniques, and other factors that affect surviving in a small town where economic issues remain present.

Heinze (2013) found that some of the reasons behind the failures range from struggles from the 2008 recession, family and friend controversies, and bad investments. Learning from past experiences may lead to positive results for developing and implementing different success strategies for leaders of traditional small businesses operating in small towns. Developing strategies over time and continually making changes to diminish the chances of small business failure is crucial for operating and survival in small towns still struggling because of the 2008 recession.

Research on numerous topics, including attracting new small businesses and improving opportunities for more individuals to visit small towns, can be beneficial for brick and mortar small businesses. Both can significantly improve the economy and small business survival in a post-recession small town. Opportunities can be plentiful even with many small towns and their small businesses' continuous efforts to move beyond the setbacks from the 2008 recession (Grunwell & Ha, 2014). Many small business leaders operate in environments with abundant opportunities for learning (Turner & Endres,

2017). Therefore, gaining knowledge of the different approaches to implement as a strategy to attract visitors to small towns and increase customer bases could be advantageous for small business survival in a small town.

Advantages of Various Marketing Strategies

The probability of traditional small business survival in small towns can be contingent not only on community involvement but also on the processes related to developing small businesses. The only way these businesses can survive in a small town is that their leaders need to recognize their potential by reflecting more on the customers' priorities (Kapooria & Karnik, 2020; Khan et al., 2020). Therefore, obtaining and becoming knowledgeable about the different marketing strategies for survival is essential for small business leaders.

Traditional marketing includes all marketing activities that do not include digital marketing. Digital marketing, another name for online marketing, uses digital technology to promote products and services (Soares et al., 2019; Ritz et al., 2019). Traditional marketing includes newspaper and magazine advertisements, billboards, television commercials, radio, and several print forms such as flyers and business cards (Davranova, 2019). These traditional marketing efforts still play a significant role in reaching local customers and remain efforts that many customers are highly familiar with (Davranova, 2019). Therefore, eliminating traditional marketing may not be beneficial for brick and mortar small businesses in small towns. Instead, using traditional marketing along with other marketing strategies, including click and mortar and Omni-channeling, could be a significant advantage for small businesses in small towns. A click and mortar

are brick and mortar businesses that also incorporate online activities as a part of the business operations (Wollenburg et al., 2018). Omni-channeling is a strategy that businesses use to enhance the shopping experiences for customers by providing services through multiple and cross channels, including online, brick and mortar, catalog, or phones (Berman, 2019; Yrjölä et al., 2018).

Marketing Beyond The Small Town

Many small business owners might want to start focusing more on new ways to advance their business because of the rise in local and global competition and economic issues. Traditional small business owners in small towns must look beyond the local area to survive (Pinho et al., 2017). Because the internet's availability broadens the scope of competition, this can cause brick and mortar small business leaders to experience difficulties with managing the growth potential of their small business (Ferreira de Lara & Guimaraes, 2018). Therefore, leaders of these businesses must implement plans to determine and comprehend the strategies necessary to operate successfully (Howard et al., 2019; Mjaku, 2020). Small business leaders in small towns must constantly focus on new ways to compete and grow the business.

Regardless of all efforts to increase foot traffic, brick and mortar small business leaders in small towns must use more than one marketing strategy for survival. The current condition of the economy and the constantly changing environment are forcing small business leaders to consider conducting business globally (Pinho et al., 2017). Therefore, the small business leaders operating in small towns must remain aware of the

economic situation, the status of the business, leadership styles, employee motivation, and other relative factors if they plan on expanding locally or going global.

The opportunities for global expansion are available for all businesses regardless of their sizes, levels of industry experience, or available capital. Because of globalization, fast-moving consumer products, and the influx of competition through the internet, small businesses everywhere can begin to compete more with small, medium, and large businesses destined for growth (Papa et al., 2017). Vast opportunities for freedom to compete in an open market are possible in a global market (Ferreira de Lara & Guimaraes, 2018). These opportunities could be beneficial for small business leaders who stand a chance of losing their share of the market because of various businesses doing business globally (Ferreira de Lara & Guimaraes, 2018). Addressing any threats to the survival of traditional small businesses and implementing strategies by their leaders is necessary.

Pinho et al. (2017) stated that only small business leaders who desire to grow, remain competitive, increase their returns on investments, and create more job opportunities would have better chances of success (Pinho et al., 2017). Determining what marketing efforts are practical and knowing the return on investment is a must for increasing the customer base and remaining competitive globally. These efforts can also be advantageous for small business leaders operating a brick and mortar in a small town. These small business leaders must seriously consider investing in innovation when making decisions about going global to conduct business (Pinho et al., 2017). Staying up to date on any changes within the environment in which small businesses operate may

lead to keen strategies for marketing the products and services globally to survive in a small town.

Thoroughly examining the environment is crucial for small business survival in a small town. Conducting a SWOT analysis is one technique small business leaders can use to analyze the environment (Burns & DeVille, 2017). A SWOT analysis is one of the originating analytic techniques small business leaders can use to identify the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats when planning and operating a small business (David et al., 2017; Gurel, 2017). External factors such as economic conditions, big-box competition, a decrease in demand for a product, the rise in the cost of raw materials, and limited supply chain access also present challenges to small businesses (Gilboa & Mitchell, 2020). Internal factors such as poor management skills, ineffective policies, and strategic plans lacking vital information often keep small businesses from getting ahead of the competition (Sanchez-Badin et al., 2018). By conducting a SWOT analysis, brick and mortar small business leaders can gain knowledge on how to market and perform in a turbulent or competitive environment (David et al., 2017). A SWOT analysis can be a valuable tool for small business leaders operating in small towns.

Because of the constant changes occurring in the environment and economy, small business leaders must identify better marketing strategies necessary to increase their market share, foot traffic to the business, and customer base. Kuo et al. (2017) recommended that small business leaders introduce marketing strategies on maintaining and increasing demand for their products and services (Kuo et al., 2017). To remain competitive, small business leaders must consider gaining access to unique and different

markets (Benedetto, 2018). Because of the limitations with resources and low population in small towns, small business leaders must make every attempt to market services outside of the area to remain competitive and increase growth.

For brick and mortar small business leaders wanting to build market share, maintain their competitive edge, and increase their chances of survival in a small town, considering the ‘bottom of the pyramid’ (BoP) population as a potential marketing strategy can be favorable (Benedetto, 2018). The BoP market represents more than three billion of the poorest and underserved individuals in the world population (Benedetto, 2018). These people often have difficulties acquiring goods and services, mainly because the framework, technology, and physical components that can provide these goods and services are absent (Benedetto, 2018). These small business leaders can consider implementing marketing strategies to secure means for this group to obtain their goods and services without any trouble doing so. BoP marketing can be an enormous opportunity for traditional small businesses to increase the percentage of products on the market as well as chances of survival in a small town still experiencing economic problems. These marketing strategies could include the use of social media.

Social Media

Small business leaders are quickly adopting social media as a critical role in their marketing efforts (Lundgren & Johansson, 2017; Schlagwein & Hu, 2017). Although more intricate than any other traditional form of media, social media is an online network service individuals use to communicate with others over the internet (Ananda et al., 2019; Lundgren & Johansson, 2017). Trembley et al. (2017) stated that there is a creation of

new opportunities for global expansion for small businesses because of the internet. The reduction of entry barriers and access to invaluable data concerning the markets gives small business owners more freedom to identify target markets in different geographic locations, improve network connections, and better serve their customers (Trembley et al., 2017). Of the online users who spend time on social media sites, 89% are young adults between 18-29 (Benson et al., 2019). Social media marketing can play a pivotal role in how leaders of traditional small businesses in small towns can reach more customers.

Because of the materialization of social media, the possibilities of attracting more customers and motivating them to purchase products are boundless for brick and mortar small business leaders (Kim & Choi, 2019; Omolloh & Lao, 2020). To build relationships and keep track of these target customers, small business owners can begin to assimilate social media marketing as a part of their marketing strategies (Schlagwein & Hu, 2017). Social media is imperative for small business leaders operating in small towns where the results of the 2008 recession are present. These small business leaders must use several strategies to increase their presence in the market.

Social media is becoming a replacement for traditional marketing activities and the primary source for reaching and retaining target customers (Schlagwein & Hu, 2017). Social media activities are essential mainly because of continuous increases in advertising expenses. Therefore, an attentive approach to measuring the return on investment for social media is essential (Papa et al., 2017). Unfortunately, several small business owners still experience difficulties measuring the return on investments (ROI)

for their social media marketing activities (Kim & Choi, 2019). This issue can be a potential threat to small business leaders with limited marketing resources (Kim & Choi, 2019; Wu et al., 2019). Critical to the success of brick and mortar small businesses in the long term, investing in social media marketing can be an enticing part of a marketing plan (Bauman, 2020). Hence, focusing strategically on measuring the ROI and determining which social media marketing efforts are successful can be a focal point for small business leaders and their marketing strategies (Papa et al., 2017; Wu et al., 2019). Implementing a social media marketing plan to remain competitive is ideal for small business leaders operating in small towns. Small business leaders need to identify which social media plan is effective for survival. Small business leaders also need to determine if eliminating traditional marketing plans is sound judgment.

Using social media and even setting up a web page can help attract local customers and customers visiting the area (Jones et al., 2015). Brick and mortar small business leaders who have a web page for their business stand a chance of being able to increase their sales consistently for local, regional, or global customers (Jones et al., 2015). Jones et al. conducted a case study on the importance of social media and websites by small business owners in Maine's western lakes and mountain regions. The study results indicated an increase in the small business owner's understanding of the value of using social media and websites to build better relationships with current and potential customers. The results also indicated that social media and the web are vital for increasing sales and marketing/brand awareness locally and globally to remain competitive (Jones et al., 2015). Small business leaders can use the results of this study to

conduct research to determine which social media activity is most effective and find if they can obtain similar results in their area.

Jones et al. stated that managers of a bed and breakfast (B&B) business often observe potential customers standing before their business but never go inside. Jones et al. stated that the reason behind this behavior is because the web provides an opportunity for these potential customers to use their smartphones or other electronic instruments to obtain data (Jones et al., 2015). By using social media and the web, small business leaders increase their opportunities for building more significant relationships with current and potential customers (Jones et al., 2015). Small business leaders in small towns may benefit from this study by using the web and different social media platforms to find the most advantageous for survival in a small town.

Jones et al. surveyed 26 small businesses and interviewed five small business owners from the western lakes and mountain regions in Maine regarding the strategies they use for their marketing efforts (Jones et al., 2015). The Maine state tourism and economic development department characterized this region as underserved (Jones et al., 2015). Underserved is a term that generally means the region is an economically depressed area where the businesses often have difficulty surviving (Jones et al., 2015). Regardless of the challenges and the effects of the recession remaining an issue, to survive in turbulent environments, small business leaders must quickly shift their business and strategic leadership focuses, embrace new ventures, be flexible, and make innovative moves (Yang et al., 2020). Therefore, focusing on different efforts as a strategy for survival in a small town could be advantageous for small business leaders.

Knowing information on just one strategy for survival in a small town will not be sufficient. Therefore, brick and mortar small business leaders must be aware of the many strategies for survival in a small town.

Transition

Brick and mortar small business survival in a small town can be a struggle when economic difficulties are an obstacle. Because small business leaders face various challenges in small towns with economic difficulties, no one survival strategy or leadership style will suffice. Becoming familiar with demographic trends in small towns can be crucial for small business owners seeking to increase their customer base and implement new strategies (Kuo et al., 2017).

Presenting knowledge from multiple sources regarding the significance of using different strategies for small business survival is a part of the literature review in Section 1. Section 1 included a review of the literature with emphasis on the contingency leadership theory and the importance of implementing different leadership strategies for brick and mortar small business survival in small towns. Section 1 also included the (a) foundation of the study, (b) background of the study, (c) problem and purpose statements, (d) nature of the study, (e) research question and interview questions, (f) conceptual framework, (g) operational definitions, (h) assumptions, limitations, and delimitations with the study, and (i) significance of the study. I addressed a subject using applied research. These topics are essential for shaping the study and establishing how to use the applied research for this project.

Section 2 includes (a) the role of the researcher, (b) the selection of the participants, (c) population and sampling, (d) ethical research, (e) data collection techniques, (f) organizing and analyzing the research data, (g) the research method and design, and (h) reliability and validity of the research. Section 3 includes the research findings, application to professional practice, the implication for social change, recommendations for actions and further research, and reflections on the research experience.

Section 2: The Project

Section 2 includes the purpose of this multiple case study and my role as the researcher. The section includes an expansion of the nature of the study, details on the selection of participants, and ethical considerations. I also discuss the research method and design, data collection processes, data analysis, reliability, and validity.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies some leaders of brick and mortar small businesses can implement for survival in a post-recession small town. The targeted population consisted of brick and mortar small business leaders with 5 or more years of successfully operating in post-recession small towns in southern Alabama. The implication for positive social change includes the potential for small business leaders to preserve and create more jobs in the community to improve the economy.

Role of the Researcher

In this qualitative multiple case study, my role as the researcher included conducting ethical research, selecting participants who could be valuable assets for the study, and performing quality data collection and analysis. Though these roles are essential for research, researchers should have experience with collection analysis, interviewing, and observation (Wolff et al., 2019). These roles should be imperative when conducting any type of research.

As with any research, ethical conduct by the researcher is also vital. Eliminating any risks or harm associated with interviewing participants and their welfare is essential

(Harriss et al., 2017). Equally important is framing questions participants can comprehend, and the researcher can comfortably analyze the answers (Kross & Giust, 2019). To further state, the National Commission set forth guidelines and fundamental ethical principles on human subjects in the *Belmont Report*. These guidelines and principles are set up to protect human subjects to ensure researchers adhere to and comprehend the imperativeness of the role and responsibility of the researcher (Gordon, 2020). I have certification training on protecting human research participants, which is required for conducting the research. In any research, ethical behavior should be at the forefront, especially with human participants. Because of the researchers' moral, legal, and professional injunctions, any ethical behavior should become a top focus while conducting research (Harriss et al., 2017).

The role of the researcher is essential because of their experience, skills in reflexivity, and capacity to be useful in making a sound judgment on the research (Field & Derksen, 2021; Rose & Johnson, 2020). I am a small business owner and live and work in the area where the research happened. Because this area is a small town, many of the residents are familiar with each other. Being objective, avoiding leading questions, and influencing participants during the research are imperative for mitigating bias. Choosing participants with whom I had little affiliations and limited knowledge of the participants' establishments helped minimize bias.

I collected data by conducting interviews using an interview protocol. With an interview protocol, researchers have a significant opportunity to collect robust and in-depth data necessary for addressing the research question (Majid et al., 2017; Roberts,

2020). The framework of an interview protocol consists of four phases: (a) making sure that the interview questions align with research, (b) devising a discussion using an inquiry-based approach, (c) obtaining feedback from the interview protocol to strengthen reliability and gain information on whether or not the participants comprehend the interview questions, and (d) conducting the interview in real conditions using a pilot interview approach that will allow the researcher the opportunity to obtain a realistic sense on how long it will take to conduct the interview and ensure the participants comprehend the questions (Majid et al., 2017; Yeong et al., 2018).

Participants

The participants for the study consisted of brick and mortar small business leaders with 5 or more years of operating in post-recession small towns. The small business leaders may also be city leaders as well. By selecting these participants, I had a better opportunity to gather data that answered the research question. With several years of experience successfully operating small businesses in a small town, small business leaders may give sound data that provide strategies for survival in a small market.

I expected to gain access to the participants by mail, email, virtual face-to-face contact, and phone. Virtual face-to-face contact was my preference because of the opportunity to expound on the purpose of the study with prospective participants while also allowing them the opportunity to ask questions. Face-to-face contact with the participants can effectively improve their understanding and expound more on the purpose of the research (Magliano et al., 2018). However, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, traditional face-to-face contact was not possible because of social distancing

mandates (Lobe et al., 2020). Because the location of the study is a small town that I am quite familiar with, initially contacting the participants face-to-face seemed to be a better fit. But because of issues with the pandemic, initial contact had to either take place by phone, email, or social media via Facebook. All follow-up contact had to be either be virtual face-to-face, phone, or by email.

Research Method and Design

Research Method

When organizing a study, researchers use the qualitative, quantitative, and mixed method to conduct the research. Researchers using the quantitative method focus on testing hypotheses or examining relationships, whereas using the qualitative method is more for understanding the experiences and lifestyles of study participants (Aspers & Corte, 2019; Bansal et al., 2018). Researchers use both qualitative and quantitative methods when conducting mixed method studies (Shorten & Smith, 2017; Tunarosa & Glynn, 2017). Because I was not testing theories or examining relationships, the qualitative method was better for this study because the main focus was to explore the experiences of the study participants.

Researchers must know which research method is best when conducting a study. When deciding which research method is appropriate, researchers cannot base their decision on the most popular method or one that they feel is better, but preferably on the best way to answer the research question (Asenahabi, 2019). I chose the qualitative method because answers to the research question are better when using the participants' experiences. Some researchers question whether qualitative research is acceptable for

academic writing (Morse, 2020). The reasons behind the questioning are because of misconceptions that this type of research lacks rigor, is not generalizable, and is not as scientific as quantitative research (Morse, 2020). However, researchers emphasize these beliefs less because of changes in qualitative methods over time. Researchers must gain an understanding of the benefits and different ideas on what qualitative and quantitative research can offer (Morse, 2020).

Researchers must also choose a strategy that will elicit detailed responses from participants when choosing the words for interview questions (Roberts, 2020). This strategy can be done using an interview guide as support (Roberts, 2020). Therefore, I asked driving questions using a question map or interview guide, which allows researchers the opportunity to use a more indirect approach to obtain answers (Kross & Giust, 2019; Roberts, 2020).

Research Design

Although deciding which method is appropriate when conducting a study, knowing which research design is appropriate is just as imperative. Researchers must use the design appropriate for the study and research questions (Asenahabi, 2019). I conducted the study using a multiple case study design because of the option to gather data on multiple cases during the research. Researchers can better understand the subject when using a case study design (Yin, 2018).

In addition to case study designs, qualitative research can involve other designs, including phenomenological, ethnography, and narrative research. Narrative research is storytelling with an emphasis on the lives and experiences of the participants.

Researchers then gather and present the data in a narrative format (Wolgemuth & Agosta, 2019). Although I sought to gain information about the experience of successful small business owners, I chose not to present the findings as a narrative. Therefore, narrative research was not fitting for this project.

With phenomenological designs, the focus of the research is not on the participants themselves but more on examining the essence of the participants' lived experiences (Abdulrehman, 2017; Hammersley, 2018). According to the Doctor of Business Administration policy at Walden University, a minimum of 20 participants is required for the phenomenological design. Acquiring twenty participants would have been difficult because of the limit on the number of potential individuals who fit the criteria to participate in the study.

Researchers choosing the ethnography design focus more on individuals with communal cultural circumstances (Abdulrehman, 2017; Hammersley, 2018). Ethnography researchers usually focus more on the surroundings and experiences of the participants (Abdulrehman, 2017; Hammersley, 2018). Ethnography was not appropriate because a cultural group who shares a natural environment was not the focus of this study.

Each of these designs has different strategies depending on how to conduct research, data collection, data analysis, population, the views, beliefs, and experiences researchers seek from the participants (Abdulrehman, 2017; Clark & Veale, 2018; Hammersley, 2018). Case studies involve more of an in-depth understanding of the specific event and data collection, including individual interviews, focus groups,

observations, and documents (Yin, 2018). The decision to choose the multiple case study over the other designs was because of the number of ways to collect data and conduct a comprehensive and thorough investigation of the case.

Choosing the appropriate qualitative design for a study is vital but reaching data saturation is just as important regardless of the researcher's design. Data saturation occurs when there is no new information from the participants (Hagaman & Wutich, 2017; Nelson, 2017). I conducted enough interviews with the participants and went more in-depth with the interview questions to ensure data saturation. Numerous interviews should eliminate any risks of not reaching data saturation (Haven & Van Grootel, 2019; Malterud et al., 2017). To reach a reasonable conclusion on reaching data saturation, continual interviewing of participants will be necessary until the data from the participants becomes unnecessary (Haven & Van Grootel, 2019; Malterud et al., 2017).

Population and Sampling

The brick and mortar population was appropriate for this study because I wanted to collect data from these small business leaders on strategies for survival in a post-recession small-town economy. The population target consisted of successful small business owners operating in post-recession small towns in southern Alabama. This population of small business leaders also had 5 or more years of small business success. One strategy for purposeful sampling is identifying and selecting participants who meet the predetermined criteria for research (Ames et al., 2019). The purpose was to ensure these participants could provide sound data from operating and surviving in a troubled economy. Thus, the participants for this study included three brick and mortar small

business leaders with 5 or more years of success in a small town during and after the 2008 recession. The decision to select three participants was limited by the number of small business leaders who met the criteria, had knowledge on the subject, and were available for the study. The number of participants researchers choose for a study depends on a few factors (Nyumba et al., 2017). These factors can fall within and outside the control of the researcher. Some of these factors could be participant availability, the requirement of the number of participants for the study, the amount of time to complete the study, and the skill level of the researcher (Nyumba et al., 2017).

No one guideline for sample sizes exists in qualitative research (Hennink et al., 2017). Qualitative researchers often use smaller samples instead of larger samples, typical in quantitative research, to yield a better statistical outcome. Large samples are generally unnecessary in qualitative studies because the main objective for researchers is to gain an in-depth understanding of the problem, which is better done using small samples (Vasileiou et al., 2018). Although sample sizes are essential, reaching data saturation is equally critical. Data saturation occurs when there is no new information from the participants (Nelson, 2017; Saunders et al., 2018). Conducting several interviews with participants is essential to ensure data saturation. Performing numerous interviews should eliminate any risks of not reaching data saturation (Hennink et al., 2017). The researcher offered to provide a private and comfortable office setting free of any distraction to participants who wished to use the office. Choosing this setting decreased the opportunities for distractions.

Ethical Research

Ethics in any research is crucial. Researchers have the ultimate duty to ensure any minimization or elimination of unethical issues when human participants are a part of the study (Childress & Thomas, 2018). Everyone who agreed to participate in the study received an informed consent form. The informed consent form provided pertinent information regarding the study, a description of the study, participant identity protection, and the rights of the participants. The informed consent form provided notification for the participants that indicated they might withdraw from the study at any time without any repercussions. The form also included a notification informing participants that all participation is strictly voluntary and they would not receive any incentives for participating.

With all research, protecting the identity of the participants is essential (Hariss et al., 2017). Therefore, adhering to guidelines set up for protecting the identity of the participants can eliminate harm to the participants. Set up by the U.S. Department of Human Services, a code of Federal Regulations is currently in place to protect human participants in a research project (Code of Federal Regulations, 2020). These regulations are also in place as a guide for researchers to help minimize the risks and harm of the participants (Code of Federal Regulations, 2020).

Ethical problems are bound to occur when publishing studies as a requirement for academic research (Abrizah et al., 2019). Ethical research involves a standard of behavior researchers must use as a guideline to determine what conduct is acceptable to human participants (Childress & Thomas, 2018). Proper training can be an essential tool for

gaining knowledge on conducting ethical research using human participants. I received training from the National Institute of Health on protecting human research participants. Once I received approval from the institutional review board to proceed with the research project, the option for initial contact for all potential participants was either by mail, email, virtual face-to-face contact, or phone to discuss the purpose of the study. The approval number assigned by the institutional review board is 06-25-21-0386346

Protecting the identity of the participants is paramount (Hariss et al., 2017). Participants received a notification regarding data storage for confidentiality purposes. The notification included a statement about storing all data, including their names, business names, and interview responses, in a safety deposit box at an undisclosed location for at least 5 years. The notification included a statement regarding data destruction after the 5 years, an explanation on the consideration for any ethical issues, and assigning pseudonyms or special codes to protect the identity of the participants. To protect participants during any study, continuous efforts to remain knowledgeable on what constitutes ethical research are essential (Hariss et al., 2017).

Data Collection Instruments

During a case study, researchers can explore and collect data in-depth and over a long period using several data collection instruments (Yin, 2018). These instruments include interviews, focus groups, existing formal and informal documents, archives, and observations (Van den Berg & Struwig, 2017). I was the primary instrument collecting data through semistructured interviews using a virtual face-to-face strategy and open-end questions. Depending on the researcher's objective, the interviews can be structured,

semistructured, or unstructured (Kopp et al., 2017; Silverman, 2017). Semistructured interviews are the most common because of the flexibility of using open-ended questions and the opportunity to explore the subject in a more in-depth fashion (Kopp et al., 2017; Silverman, 2017; Wolff et al., 2019).

After collecting data from the participants during the interviews, I used member checking and triangulation to address the reliability and validity of the data. Issues with reliability and validity of the research can come into question because of the possibility of not obtaining competent or reliable data from the participants (Santos et al., 2017). The participants had the opportunity to check the data for accuracy. Allowing the participants to review the data for accuracy and provide further input is member checking (Sechelski & Onwuegbuzie, 2019). Triangulation uses two or more methods for collecting data to enhance the validity of the research and generate more substantial support for the results (Abdalla et al., 2018; Fusch et al., 2017). These collection methods can include interviews, focus groups, observations, or documents (van den Berg & Struwig, 2017). I also collected data using documents, including marketing data, newspaper articles that contained relevant data on some small business strategies, and business reports such as financial reports. The use of multiple methods of collecting data is necessary to enhance validity (Zahle, 2018). Multiple methods for data collection enhance validity, but it also strengthens the credibility of the study. Using an interview protocol to conduct the interviews is imperative. The interview protocol, presented in the appendix, includes an interview question section and other information on the data collection instruments.

Data Collection Technique

An imperative stage in qualitative research is data collection (Adhabi & Anozie, 2017). The value of the data the researchers collect depends on the method researchers use to collect the data (Adhabi & Anozie, 2017). Because of the COVID-19 pandemic and social distancing requirements, researchers should consider new approaches for data collection techniques and procedures (Burke & Patching, 2020). Researchers can use various types of methods to collect data. These methods can include Skype and Facebook Messenger (Frydenberg, & Andone, 2018). When restrictions on time and places interfere with collecting data using traditional face-to-face methods, video/audio messaging through Skype and Facebook Messenger provides a free, convenient, and flexible online method accessible for researchers and participants with Internet access (Frydenberg, & Andone, 2018). Regardless of what techniques researchers use to collect data, disclosing details within the study of every step taken allows individuals a better opportunity to understand the study (Fusch et al., 2017).

I recorded these interviews using Zoom Video Communications for audio recording. Most qualitative research involves collecting data using hand notes as well as audio recordings. Collecting data using these methods increases opportunities to catch any added complications that may arise during the interview (Zahle, 2018). After collecting data from the participants, I used member checking to address the reliability and validity of the data. With member checking, participants review the interview interpretations to verify and counter the data they provide during the interview (Sechelski & Onwuegbuzie, 2019).

Data Organization Technique

Using a methodical data organization technique is crucial for adequately analyzing qualitative data (Fusch et al., 2017). I transcribed all data in Microsoft Excel® and Word® then uploaded the data to NVivo®. Usage of a reflective journal and audit trails will be valuable data organization techniques. Audit trails are meticulous records of the collection of all data and should also reflect a full and rich description of the research scene (Daniel, 2018). The reflective journal contains documentation of all records regarding data collection, any influence on the data collection process, and the effect the influence had on the results of the study. When using a reflective journal as additional support for the audit trails, researchers have a better opportunity to gauge the rationale of the conclusion (Fusch et al., 2017).

Transcribing the data using different codes is essential. Using different codes is necessary for classifying data in a fashion that is useful when analyzing the data and strengthening the validity and reliability of the data analysis (Azungah, 2018). Organizing the data happened using code words or pseudonyms related to the data in Microsoft Excel® with details of what each code means.

All documents about this study, including audio recordings, interview notes, and USB drives, will be stored in a locked safe at an undisclosed location for five years. Destruction of all data using a fine paper shredder or a smashing device will happen after 5 years. Confidentiality is an enormous risk in qualitative research that includes human participants. Therefore, extensive efforts to protect all data collection from human participants are necessary (Kue et al., 2018).

Data Analysis

Data analysis is the interpretation of the research, using steps that include regularly reviewing transcripts, identifying trends, including management and leadership styles, and coding data (Clark & Veale, 2018; Ziskin, 2019). Knowing the appropriate data analysis process for qualitative research is essential. Methodological triangulation is a data analysis process that is common in qualitative research (Yin, 2018).

Methodological triangulation is the use of two or more methods for collecting data (Yin, 2018). This type of methodological triangulation is what researchers refer to as the “with-in method” because of the use of at least two data collection techniques (Fusch et al., 2017).

Establishing themes from coding data is also a part of data analysis (Clark & Veale, 2018). I used an inductive analytical approach to coding and analyzing the data. An inductive analysis creates themes from reading numerous transcripts and categorizing them (Azungah, 2018). When developing codes later in the data analysis process versus earlier, researchers can further analyze the data, include more elements from the framework, and explain the importance of the themes and how they correlate to the research framework (Azungah, 2018). I categorized the themes according to small business owners’ leadership and success strategies in post-recession small towns.

Coding the data is essential for heightening the trustworthiness of data analysis (Clark & Veale, 2018). Coding is a repetitive process because researchers continuously establish codes, generate definitions, and apply these codes to data many times, allowing them to emerge on their own when researchers analyze the data for themes (Azungah, 2018). I began by thoroughly reading all the data several times to understand the data

transcription better, establishing, categorizing, and defining codes, and developing themes from the categories. Data analysis and data collection are akin and can happen simultaneously (Johnson et al., 2020; Kross & Giust, 2019). Because of the various paths researchers can use to collect data, they have more of an advantage during the data analysis stage in selecting what data is beneficial for the analysis (Yin, 2018).

I analyzed the data using the systematic three-stage coding process. These three stages are open, axial, and selective coding (William & Moser, 2019). Open coding occurs during the first stage, where data analysis begins with reading, comparing, and contrasting the data (William & Moser, 2019). Axial coding is the second stage where researchers begin to look for codes and develop and concentrate more on themes than on details from the first stage (William & Moser, 2019). The development of themes occurs during the coding process for recognizing common threads from the categories created during coding (Azungah, 2018; Clark & Veale, 2018). Researchers use selective coding in the third stage when going back and forth between the first two stages and identifying differences in the themes from stage two (William & Moser, 2019).

Software packages such as NVivo, Atlas.ti, and Microsoft Excel and Word are prime for managing data because of the option available for researchers to promptly categorize and pinpoint data for determining themes (Azungah, 2018). I entered the data in Microsoft Excel then uploaded the data to NVivo for coding, mapping, and identifying key themes from the literature and the conceptual framework. For this study, the themes included contingency leadership and other styles of leadership, brick and mortar small business survival in small towns, and marketing strategies for the leaders of these

businesses. Themes presented in the literature review included leadership styles, issues with the economy related to the 2008 recession in small towns, enhancement or changes in strategies for small business owners operating in a post-recession small town, and market positioning.

Reliability and Validity

The reliability and validity of qualitative research can come into question because of a variety of reasons. The reasons could include participants not being truthful during an interview, the potential of bias, or the researchers' interpretation of the data collected (Santos et al., 2017). Trustworthiness in research is essential regardless of which research method researchers use (Cypress, 2017). Using different standards to determine the accuracy and scientific rigor of qualitative research is essential for eliminating or reducing any problems with reliability and validity (Santos et al., 2017). Rose and Johnson (2020) and Cypress (2017) both stated the four concepts essential for determining the reliability and validity of the data. These include dependability, credibility, transferability, and confirmability (Cypress, 2017; Lemon & Hayes, 2020; Rose & Johnson, 2020).

Reliability

Reliability refers to the ability of independent researchers to imitate or mirror a study and either uphold or discredit the results (Rose & Johnson, 2020). Resnik and Shamoo (2017) also refer to the process of mirroring a study as reproducibility. Reproducibility means the results of the research are reliable and free of bias (Resnik & Shamoo, 2017). In close relation to reliability, dependability is the stability of the

findings over time. Dependability occurs when participants evaluate the data to ensure they support what the researcher presents (Varpio et al., 2017). I addressed dependability using member checking and audit trails. With member checking, participants review the interview interpretations to verify and counter the data they provide during the interview (Sechelski & Onwuegbuzie, 2019). I used member checking before analyzing any interview data. Participants may face fewer challenges with interpreting and verifying the data, primarily if synthesis occurs earlier (Sechelski & Onwuegbuzie, 2019). Audit trailing is the process of maintaining meticulous records of all data (Daniel, 2018). To demonstrate the reliability of a study, documentation of all steps and procedures needs to be strongly supported so that other researchers may accomplish similar results with their research (Rose & Johnson, 2020).

Validity

Along with reliability, validity is essential for building credibility and ensuring the quality of the research (Zahle, 2018). To ensure quality and advanced accuracy in qualitative studies, researchers must use distinct or separate techniques than those they use for quantitative research (Varpio et al., 2017). To enhance the validity of this study, I addressed credibility, transferability, and confirmability in the research.

Credibility, transferability, and confirmability are imperative for evaluating accuracy in qualitative research and as a strategy to determine rigor (Abdalla et al., 2017; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). I used member checking and methodological triangulation to address credibility. After collecting data from the participants, I provided a summary of the data with the participants to check for accuracy. Allowing the participants to check

the data for accuracy and provide further input is member checking (Sechelski & Onwuegbuzie, 2019; Varpio, 2017). Candela (2019) stated that member checking could be a disadvantage for some researchers if participants cannot comprehend the data analysis or disagree and request a change in the information. Researchers who experience this must make a sound judgment on what is right versus the participants' opinion (Candela 2019). Using two or more methods for collecting data to enhance the validity of the research and generate more reliable support for the results is triangulation (Varpio et al., 2017; Zahle, 2018). Different approaches for data collection can include interviews, focus groups, observations, or documents (Barrett & Twycross, 2018; Van den Berg & Struwig 2017; Yin, 2018). I used interviews and company documents as data. Just as multiple methods are imperative to enhance validity, disclosing their significance and contribution to the research can further enhance the validity (Fusch et al., 2017).

A connection between triangulation and data saturation exists because of the multiple methods that exist for collecting data. Therefore, triangulation is an acceptable method to ensure data saturation (Fusch et al., 2018). Data saturation occurs when no new information exists or is collectible from the participants. Data saturation is vital in any research, regardless of the research is the qualitative, quantitative, or mixed method (Fusch et al., 2018; Saunders et al., 2018). Collecting data from interviews is one way to reach data saturation. Researchers cannot conclude the fulfillment of data saturation simply because of the exhaustion of all resources (Fusch et al., 2018). Conducting numerous interviews is necessary to eliminate any risks of not reaching data saturation

(Haven & Van Grootel, 2019; Malterud et al., 2017). I conducted enough interviews with the participants to ensure data saturation.

I used a reflective journal and audit trails to address confirmability and transferability to help strengthen validity. Confirmability is the outlook and influence that a researcher can have on the research project (Abdalla et al., 2017). The reflective journal contains documentation of all data collection records, any influence on the data collection process, and the effect the influence may have on the results of the study. A reflective journal can be additional support for the audit trail so individuals can gauge the rationale of the conclusion from the researcher (Daniel, 2018; Fusch et al., 2017). The researcher is the one source for all data collection in qualitative research (Daniel, 2018). Emotions, professional background, and personal experiences of the researcher can intensify the validity of the results (Daniel, 2018; Fusch et al., 2017). Knowingly or unknowingly, the researcher will ultimately be the individual who will have the most influence on the analysis and collection of the data (Daniel, 2018).

Transferability is the likelihood the conclusion will transfer to another framework (Daniel, 2018). Audit trails are meticulous records of all data collection and should also reflect a full and rich description of the research scene (Daniel, 2018; Fusch et al., 2017). A thick description refers to the quantity of data, while a detailed description refers to the quality of the data (Fusch et al., 2017). Both thick and rich descriptions are imperative, and thorough documentation of such descriptions must be present in the study to decrease the possibility of bias from the researcher (Fusch et al., 2017). These descriptions can be

beneficial when other researchers begin to transfer the research to their scene (Daniel, 2018).

Transition and Summary

Section 2 included several discussions relevant to the study. The topics were (a) the role of the researcher, (b) the participants, (c) population and sampling, (d) ethical involvement with conducting the research, (e) approaches to collecting, organizing, and analyzing the research data, (f) the research method and design, and (g) reliability and validity of the research. In Section 3, I present the research findings, application to professional practice, the implication for social change, recommendations for actions and further research, and reflections on the research experience.

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies some leaders of brick and mortar small businesses can implement for survival in a post-recession small town. Although some small towns continue to have difficulties recovering from the 2008–2009 economic recession, the small business sector continues to expand economically (SBA, 2019; Small Business Committee, 2018). The participants for this study consisted of three different small business owners in southern Alabama. These business owners continue to operate in a small town recovering from the economic downturn and undergoing revitalization efforts. Individually, the participants have over 18 years of experience running a small business and provided similar and diverse data regarding their experience operating in a post-recession small town.

Brick and mortar small business leaders cannot succeed unless they understand the need to embrace change (Mason, 2018). These leaders need to be aware of the strategies essential for small business survival in a post-recession small town to embrace this change. These strategies include taking a different approach to running the business by recognizing the most effective management style and focusing more on working on the business and not just micromanaging the business and employees (Castro, 2020). I used the current version (March 2020) of Nvivo analysis software to analyze and code transcripts from three individual semistructured interviews. The resulting themes are (a) market research and competitive analysis, (b) supplementation to original product/service offerings, and (c) community engagement.

Presentation of the Findings

The overarching research question for this study was “What practical, effective strategies do some brick and mortar small business leaders implement for survival in a post-recession small-town economy?” I conducted virtual interviews with three small business owners who provided a wealth of information regarding their success in a post-recession small town. The interview consisted of seven interview questions. Although the main focus of this study was on small business survival during and after the 2008–2009 recession, the COVID-19 pandemic was also addressed. The participants indicated that they experienced little to no effects from the pandemic. The participants were able to offer curbside, carry out, or other virtual services to sustain the businesses during the pandemic.

To protect the identity of each participant, I assigned a pseudonym or unique code. Participant 1, Participant 2, and Participant 3 were used instead of the actual names of the participants. I used member checking, which allowed the participants to review the interview data for accuracy and provide further input. I also reviewed local newspaper articles, social media sites, and company websites for conducting methodological triangulation. The three themes that emerged from the data analyses were (a) market research and competitive analysis, (b) supplementation to original product/service offerings, and (c) community engagement.

Emergent Theme 1: Market Research and Competitive Analysis

All participants stressed the imperativeness of conducting research before opening a business in a small town. They all stated that small towns are unique and can be proper

places to start or maintain a business. Participant 1 stated that potential small businesses should not proceed without asking questions. The participants each stated that before starting a business, gaining knowledge on the small town, the existing small businesses, and what type of services are needed is important. If there are already several types of the same businesses in the area, this might lessen the survival chances of another business. Participant 1 stated that businesses that offer high-end products and services might not survive in a small town, particularly those that are still struggling or have a low poverty level. Participant 1 also stated that conducting surveys by reaching out to the community or local chamber of commerce could be a start. Conducting a SWOT analysis is one technique small business leaders can use to analyze the environment (Burns & DeVille, 2017). A SWOT analysis is one of the originating analytic techniques small business leaders can use to identify the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats when planning and operating a small business (David et al., 2017; Gurel, 2017). Research is essential because individuals have to know if their business will thrive in a small– town economy that is struggling. Information about competitors can be gained by conducting research on the market.

Another method of research used by all participants is networking with other small businesses and communities to learn what caused a failure or success, which could be advantageous. By networking, Participant 2 stated that other small businesses began approaching them to start a publication business even though there was one already established in the community for nearly a century. These small businesses wanted something different, and networking allowed Participant 2 to obtain knowledge on what

the community wanted. Access to invaluable data concerning the area can give small business owners more freedom to identify target markets, improve network connections, and better serve their customers (Trembley et al., 2017). Participant 1 stated that they began receiving referrals from larger companies in the area that also provide lodging services through networking. Researching can also help with finding a niche in the community to become aware of what the competitors are not offering. Participant 1 stated that through research, they found that other lodging businesses were not offering quality products/services and had acquired a bad reputation. Participant 1 made sure that their guests were offered quality services that were lacking in other facilities. Participant 2 stated they provided stories the community wanted to read that were not printed in other local publications. Participant 3 stated that although they purchased their business that already had a strong brand, research to ensure quality service, good customer service, and employee satisfaction was essential.

Research can especially be beneficial to a small business owner who does not have experience in the industry. Each of the participants stated that they started their business with no experience; however, they each had a desire and passion for starting the business and leaped out on faith. Research has played a pivotal role in the success of their business. Small business leaders who desire to grow, remain competitive, increase their returns on investments, and create more job opportunities have better chances of success (Pinho et al., 2017). From their desire, each participant developed a plan. Participants 1 and 2 created a written business plan. However, Participant 3 did not and instead chose to stick with their plan to focus entirely on customer service because the business was

already a staple in the community. Although Participants 1 and 2 started with a business plan, they did not follow it verbatim. Small businesses must find out what is going to work as the business continues. Even with an effective plan, results can only be achieved if these leaders adequately prepare and create a strong will to advance their businesses (Mjaku, 2020; Weber et al., 2015). Small businesses might not know what circumstances they will find themselves in before being forced to do other things to keep the business open; therefore, conducting research is essential.

Fielder's (1981) contingency theory was the conceptual framework for this study, which suggests that a successful leadership style in one situation may not be successful in another situation. Based on the theory, no one way to organize or manage an organization exists (Asrar-ul-Haq & Anwar, 2017). Small business success depends on several factors, including management styles, product quality, and the economy (Sanchez-Badin et al., 2018). Small business survival and success depend mainly on the employees, the business location, present economic conditions, and the distinct leadership styles of employees in critical positions (Sanchez-Badin et al., 2018). Small business leaders must do research to determine what leadership style will work in the current situation. As the situation changes, small business leaders must continuously research the situation to ensure good customer service, determine if new technology requires training for employees, and see who and what the competitors are doing.

Emergent Theme 2: Supplementation to Original Product/Service Offerings

All the participants indicated that adding to their existing service without changing what they started with has been one of the strongest strategies to keep their

business operating successfully. The most important strategy for each of the participants is ensuring the prices remain low. The small businesses were started with low prices and keeping them low even when additional services were added was imperative. Each participant stated that the small town's income level and economic condition are two of the reasons why the low-price strategy has stayed in place. They each also stated this was necessary to keep customers coming to the business. The participants all indicated the low-price strategy alone would not work even as the price of food and gas products increased. Something additional had to be added to the services and products offered.

As a strategy, social media is one of the services gradually added to what the participants already offered. They each stated that because most people are now using social media, this was beneficial for gaining more customers. Facebook is the main social media source being used by all participants. Participants 1 and 2 added a website to their business so more customers would have access to the services. Participants 1 and 3 agreed that the traditional form of marketing did not help their business. Traditional marketing includes newspaper and magazine advertisements, billboards, television commercials, radio, and several print forms such as flyers and business cards (Davranova, 2019). Because many of the customers are not local for participant 1, traditional marketing was not beneficial. Participant 3 relies more on word-of-mouth to keep customers coming to the business. Participant 3 stated that they once had a billboard but decided to discontinue the service because the board went unnoticed. Participant 3 also took advantage of free advertisement by being the focus of a video posted on social media by two customers ordering food. Participant 3 stated that although they purchase

spaces for their business to be advertised in a magazine created by the local schools for fundraising purposes, word-of-mouth is their main stream for reaching customers. Participant 2 considered traditional marketing to still be an important source of marketing in a small town and has urged businesses to this traditional marketing as well as social media to run their business. Participant 2 stated that there are still members of the community, especially older people, who prefer to pick up a newspaper or magazine rather than go online because many people do not own or use a smartphone or a computer. These traditional marketing efforts still play a significant role in reaching local customers and remain efforts that many customers are highly familiar with (Davranova, 2019). Therefore, eliminating traditional marketing may not be beneficial for small brick and mortar businesses in small towns. Instead, using traditional marketing along with other marketing strategies, including click and mortar and Omni-channeling, could be a significant advantage for small businesses in small towns. A click and mortar is a traditional business that also incorporates online activities as part of the business operations (Wollenburg et al., 2018). Omni-channeling is a strategy that businesses use to enhance the shopping experiences for customers by providing services through multiple and cross channels, including online, brick and mortar, catalogs, or phones (Berman, 2019; Yrjola et al., 2018).

The participants added other services as a strategy to keep current customers and increase foot traffic to the business. These services could be used as a branding strategy. Branding consists of the efforts to reestablish life into an aging brand to attract customers once more and establish trust between the customers and the business (Dellarmelin et al.,

2018; Donnelly et al., 2020; Zhao et al., 2018). Small businesses use branding as a strategy to add value to their product and set themselves apart from competitors to attract customers. All the services were added while keeping the prices low for existing services. Participant 3 added more items to their menu to allow the customers the option to select healthier options. Participant 3 also added an awning to the building so that customers could avoid standing in the rain or direct sunlight while waiting on their food. Participant 1 stated they restored an old barn on their property and created apartments so that customers would have the opportunity to stay long-term. Participant 1 stated they can now service customers long-term and short-term. Participant 3 stated they chose to add free copies of their periodicals for the customers with subscriptions.

Emerging theme 2 aligns with the conceptual framework in that what is effective in one situation may not be effective in another. In other words, the strategies these participants implemented before the recession had to be reinforced in the post-recession era because new services and enhancements were added to keep customers coming and the business operational. Because the small businesses are facing a different situation because of the recession, leaders must change their ways of thinking about what strategies are needed to keep the business successful. Under the contingency theory, an evaluation of the relative position of an individual is necessary to determine the type of situation an individual becomes a successful leader (Howell, 2018). Relative position requires new leadership strategies that fit the current situation. Because small businesses differ in many ways, leaders must strongly consider different strategies to have a better chance of survival and growth (Williams & Aaron, 2018). Small business leaders may

find many advantages to operating in a small town simply by conducting further research and implementing some of the findings.

Emergent Theme 3: Community Engagement

Community engagement is a third theme that emerged from the data. All participants agreed wholeheartedly that community involvement is necessary for small businesses operating in a small town. Getting involved with the community can begin with becoming a member of the local chamber of commerce, where significant knowledge about the community can be gained. All the participants are members of the local chamber of commerce. Participant 1 stated that getting to know the community through socializing is a must in small towns. Participant 1 stated they participate in community fundraisers by offering discounts or free items such as gift baskets or free lodging for a night. Participant 2 stated that getting to know the people and supporting the community is imperative and is the main strategy that has allowed them to remain successful. Participant 3 stated that their commitment to the community is a must, and they will continue to make every effort to ensure the community has their support. Many small businesses can survive better in small towns because these small business leaders often perform better socially through engagement with other leaders and small chambers of commerce, creating a prosperous future for small towns (Besser, 2012). In small towns, mixing family and personal time during normal operating hours is a common practice associated with running a small business (Besser, 2012). Most leaders of small businesses often leave the business for a brief period during operating hours to make social and personal contributions to their community while also using their business

resources for community events (Besser, 2012). Small businesses and the community can prosper economically with the support of each other (Besser, 2013). In a small town, the support of the community is crucial for small business survival. Therefore, small businesses must do everything possible to fulfill the needs of the community.

The contingency theory correlates with emerging theme 3. The probability of traditional small business survival in small towns can be contingent not only on community involvement but also on the processes related to developing a small business. The only way traditional businesses can survive in a small town is for their leaders to recognize their potential by reflecting more on the customers' priorities (Kapooria & Karnik, 2020; Khan et al., 2020). Small town business owners usually have more of a personal relationship or a close connection to the community (Johnson et al., 2017). With the community's support and the small businesses, small towns have a better opportunity to prosper economically (Besser, 2012). As some brick and mortar small businesses struggle to survive in small towns, the opportunities for success or survival are contingent on several conditions, including but not limited to leadership, honest business practices, and community support.

Applications to Professional Practice

The results of this study provided practical, effective strategies some brick and mortar small business leaders can implement for survival in a post-recession small-town economy. With the economy constantly changing, a focus on adopting different strategies is imperative for small businesses operating in small towns. Various strategies are necessary if small brick and mortar businesses expect to move successfully beyond a

recession and prosper economically (Grunwell & Ha, 2014). The strategies presented in this study can be used by other small businesses in small towns to operate successfully. The themes in the study are (a) market research and competitive analysis, (b) supplementation to original product/service offerings, and (c) community engagement. Small business owners must continue to educate themselves about different strategies and leadership styles and gain knowledge of their markets to be able to make sound decisions on survival.

Each of the participants described small towns as unique, especially those going through revitalization efforts. Rybaczewska and Sparks (2020) stated that although small towns or rural communities can be challenging environments, they remain the ideal location for local small businesses because of the community's substantial support from these businesses and vice versa (Rybaczewska & Sparks, 2020). The possibilities for small businesses to use the strategies in this study to increase foot traffic, brand awareness, and customer base for new and existing traditional small businesses and revenues for the town, can be impressive. These strategies could be part of a strategic plan for small business survival in a post-recession small town. Including a strategic plan in the context of the small business success strategy can allow the leaders to become more familiar with their business operations and the necessary to implement during challenging times (Arend et al., 2017). No one strategy may work for survival. The strategies in this study are just a few of several possible avenues that brick and mortar small business leaders can use to conduct their own research and implement as potential approaches for success.

Implications for Social Change

The implications for social change are favorable because the strategies presented in the study can be used to revitalize traditional small businesses and, by extension, the town. Brick and mortar small businesses, particularly in rural and small towns, are still advantageous to many customers who still choose to shop in a face-to-face environment (Demko-Rihter & ter Halle, 2015). About 30% of people 65 years or older in small towns consider traditional small businesses the only place to mix with friends and acquaintances socially (Demko-Rihter & ter Halle, 2015). These social mixes can considerably impact the community and their small businesses (Demko-Rihter & ter Halle, 2015). According to some statistics, the effects of small businesses on the economy are positive despite some setbacks from the recession still being an issue for many small towns (Demko-Rihter & ter Halle, 2015).

Community engagement is one of the strategies all participants stated is a necessity in a small town. Small businesses can be successful and help build better communities by creating more jobs. Creating new jobs and local wealth, bringing the community together through social engagement, and community building through financial support are just a few of the benefits of conducting a small business in a small town (Frazier et al., 2013; Grunwell & Ha, 2014). With an increase in revenues for the community, the opportunities for applying more funds to different programs to help build a better community can multiply. The opportunities for more interaction between city and small business leaders to work together on new projects for the benefit of the community

socially can also be an advantage. The increase in opportunities for more contributions to help fund education can be a significant service with help from small businesses.

Recommendations for Action

Traditional small businesses must be receptive to innovative strategies necessary for survival in post-recession small towns. The participants provided recommendations for other small businesses who have the potential to locate to small towns but may be hesitant about doing so because of the location and economic conditions of the town. Based on the findings I presented in this study, I recommend that current brick and mortar small business leaders continue to monitor the changes in the economy and gain knowledge on various survival strategies necessary to adapt to change and survive in a post-recession small town.

I recommend future small business owners conduct research on the area before opening a business. Conducting research is necessary for any locale, particularly small towns where the population and economy are struggling. I recommend aspiring small business owners seeking to open in small towns gain an understanding of what is needed and network with other small businesses who have survived and are still operating successfully. I also recommend that small business leaders get involved with the community and projects such as revitalization efforts to allow the community the opportunity to get to know them and their businesses.

The results of this study will be disseminated to all the participants. I will also submit the results through the ProQuest UMI database for publishing. A summary of the

results will be made available to city leaders, small business owners, and educational platforms who could use the data to further their research.

Recommendations for Further Research

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies some leaders of brick and mortar small businesses can implement for survival in a post-recession small town. As with any research, there are limitations which are potential weaknesses that may influence the study's outcome. One limitation of this study was the restrictions on meeting face-to-face with brick and mortar small business leaders to gather data. The second potential weakness was the possibility of not being able to eliminate all bias in the study. Restrictions on face-to-face contact were in place due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Interviews had to be conducted virtually. Small town traditional businesses generally prefer in person interaction when mixing with friends and acquaintances socially (Demko-Rihter & ter Halle, 2015). Although the participants understood the reason behind the virtual interviews, some potential participants disfavored doing an interview virtually but expressed a desire to still participate.

I would recommend further research be conducted when COVID-19 restrictions are lifted. By doing so, more small businesses may be more willing to participate. Face-to-face contact could also allow the researcher to collect more data, which could be beneficial to current and future small businesses operating in small towns. To address the issue with bias, I remained objective, refrained from asking leading questions, and avoided influencing the participants during the research. I chose participants with whom I have little affiliations and limited knowledge of their establishments to help minimize

bias. I recommend interviewing a larger sample of participants to increase the chances of eliminating any risks of not reaching data saturation. By performing numerous interviews, researchers can accurately estimate how likely the outcome will be for other participants (Cobern & Adams, 2020). I would also recommend conducting another study using the same research question but focusing on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic to compare the results with this study. Because the participants worked in different industries, I also recommend conducting research with participants from the same industry to seek specific strategies.

Reflections

Completing this doctoral journey has been one of the most challenging yet rewarding endeavors that I have experienced. Although challenging, I enjoyed every step of this research. I have gained a tremendous amount of knowledge on small businesses, data collection processes, and evaluating and choosing relevant literature for a research study. I worked with a highly skilled committee with diverse opinions and backgrounds who taught me how to handle constructive criticism better and offer help to others working on their doctoral journals. These are knowledge and skills I am confident will be advantageous as I continue my professional journey.

When I started this doctoral study, I focused on small business survival from the 2008-2009 recession. However, during this study, the COVID-19 pandemic emerged and affected the economy. Being from a small town and running a small business, I have seen the effects of the recession and the pandemic on the small towns and brick and mortar small businesses. I thought finding participants willing to share their experiences as small

business owners who have survived the recession, as well as the pandemic, would be easy. Instead, I found that not everyone is interested in participating in a study, even if doing so offers some benefit to their establishments, others, and the community. I remained steadfast in the process of finding willing participants and found three who gave a plethora of data on their experience. I learned so much from this journey, and I am ready to see how others can benefit from my research.

Conclusion

For this qualitative multiple case study, the purpose was to explore strategies some leaders of brick and mortar small businesses can implement for survival in a post-recession small town. The small town I chose to focus on is in southern Alabama, where revitalization efforts are in process to help improve the community. Small businesses account for about 30.7 million or 99% of all businesses in the United States (SBA, 2019). Small businesses are a vital part, and in many instances, most of the businesses operating in small towns (Besser, 2012). These small businesses are a crucial part of small-town communities because they enhance the community through job creation and support (Frazier et al., 2013). I chose the contingency theory articulated by Fred Fiedler in the 1960s as the conceptual framework for this study. The theory is based on the premise that no one way to organize or manage an organization exists. Under the contingency theory, an effective organizational leadership style in one situation may not be useful in another situation (Abba et al., 2018; Asrar-ul-Haq & Anwar, 2018; Vidal et al., 2017). I interviewed three small businesses operating in different industries to collect data on their strategies for survival. From the interviews, three themes emerged from the data. The

themes are (a) market research and competitive analysis, (b) supplementation to original product/service offerings, and (c) community engagement. The findings affirmed the conceptual framework for this study. Because no one strategy may suffice for operating in a small town, small business leaders must consider using several strategies. Gaining knowledge on the strategies beneficial for survival is essential. Although gaining knowledge on strategies beneficial for survival in small towns is essential, small businesses must be eager in their approach to be successful.

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Appendix: Interview Protocol

Location_____

Date/Time_____

No of People Attending_____

Researcher Conducting the Interview_____

Participant_____

My name is Jacqueline Rabb. I am a doctoral student at Walden University, and I am conducting this interview as part of a research study. I will provide you with a brief background of the research study and address any questions or concerns you may have before the interview begins. The purpose of this research study is to explore strategies some leaders of brick and mortar small businesses can implement for survival in a post-recession small town.

Although some of the effects of the 2008 recession, such as business closings and job loss, presently remain an issue, the small business sector continues to expand economically (SBA, 2019). Small businesses are a vital part, and in many instances, most of the businesses operating in small towns (Besser, 2012). Opportunities for small brick-and-mortar businesses to thrive in small towns are still favorable for survival if leaders apply the proper leadership and marketing strategies. More so, with the community's support and the small businesses, small towns have a better opportunity to prosper economically (Besser, 2012). The study results may also provide individuals with

additional knowledge on how these owners of brick and mortar small businesses can use the strategies to increase the customer base and improve the quality of the community both through increased foot traffic. Only the knowledge gained from the research and the research findings is publicly shared through publications so that further research can be conducted or interested persons can reap some benefits from the research.

You were invited to participate in this research study because of your connection and knowledge of the business community's involvements. Your experience as a small business owner and community supporter may have a better bearing on the interpretation of findings for the study. I want to reiterate and make sure you understand that your participation in this study is strictly voluntary, and you may withdraw at any time.

Before this interview, you were provided with a consent form via email that you signed with the words "I consent." This consent form included an introduction, a certificate of consent, and a researcher statement. A copy was presented to you to keep for your records. The researcher will also retain a copy. Do I need to provide you with another copy of the consent form? Do you have any questions concerning the consent form?

The interview will take place over 2 settings during the entire course of the research. These settings will include the initial interview and a follow-up interview required afterward to allow you the opportunity to review your answers, make corrections, and provide additional information if needed. The initial interview will take about one hour to complete. The follow-up interview will take about 30 minutes. Do you have any questions about the interview process?

Do you have any further questions before the interview begins? Feel free to stop me if you do not understand a question or address a prior question. To fully understand your responses, I may ask you to give an example or elaborate more on the topic. If you have no further questions, we can start the interview.

- Let us first begin the interview by introducing ourselves. Just a brief introduction is okay.
- My goal during this interview is to determine what strategies some brick and mortar small business owners can implement for survival in a post-recession small-town economy?
- Now we can start with the first question.
- What strategies did you use from the start to operate in a small town successfully?
- In what ways have these strategies changed as the economy has changed?
- What have been your biggest internal and external challenges for successfully operating in a small town?
- What strategies have you implemented to overcome these challenges and maintain success beyond five years?
- To increase traffic flow to the area, what strategies do you have in place to ensure your efforts are known to surrounding communities?

- What strategies have been successful or unsuccessful that you can inform leaders of small businesses who have the potential to locate to the area but may be hesitant about the location and economic condition of the town?
- What additional information can you share about small businesses operating successfully in a small town?

This concludes our interview. You will receive a summary of the interview questions, along with your responses within 14 days. I will schedule a follow-up interview with you to allow you the opportunity to review your answers, make corrections, and provide additional information if needed. I will conduct all follow-up interviews. Thank you for taking the time to contribute to this study.