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## Strategies for Sustaining the Profitability of Small Businesses During Covid-19

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# Walden University

College of Management and Technology

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Veronica Lee

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Walden University  
2023

Abstract

Strategies for Sustaining the Profitability of Small Businesses During COVID-19

by

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MS, University of Phoenix, 2005

BS, Orlando College, 1998

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Business Administration

Walden University

January 2023

## Abstract

The covid-19 pandemic had a significant impact on small businesses. Small business leaders have been challenged to maintain profitability during a global crisis. Small business owners are concerned with the covid-19 pandemic because they faced profitability losses and business closures during the prolonged crisis. Grounded in authentic leadership theory, the purpose of this multiple case study was to explore strategies some small business leaders used to remain profitable during the Covid-19 crisis. The participants were four business leaders in Tampa, FL, who have remained profitable despite the pandemic. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis; five themes emerged: CDC guidelines, changes in the world, challenges, survival, and profitability. A key recommendation for a small business leader is to have a preparedness plan consisting of engineering and administrative controls for social distancing and housekeeping, such as cleaning, disinfecting, and decontamination. The implication for positive social change includes the potential for small business leaders to remain profitable while providing employment opportunities.

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## Dedication

This dissertation is in loving memory of my father, John Henry Lee. I know he is smiling down on me. I can hear him say, "You go, Gal."

## Acknowledgments

I like to give honor to God, my Lord, and Savior. This would not have happened without the Lord in my life. Thank you to my Pastor, Dr. Godwin Prospere, for keeping me uplifted and motivated. To my best friend, Angie, and my twin sister, Vickey, thank you for constantly getting on me to ensure I was doing my work and not wasting time. Thank you to my family for understanding when I couldn't attend a family gathering, trip, or simply a visit. Lastly, Sharon Walker, thank you for the Bahama Breeze happy hour and for getting me away from it all.

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## Section 1: Foundation of the Study

The coronavirus pandemic first appeared in China and has affected more than 188 countries (Kalogiannidis, 2020). The coronavirus has affected businesses worldwide and the global economy, leading small business leaders to temporarily close their businesses because they faced immense losses during the prolonged crisis (Kalogiannidis, 2020). According to Bartik et al. (2020), the fate of 48% of American workers who work in small businesses is closely related to the resilience of the small business ecosystem to the massive economic disruption caused by the pandemic. Leaders faced many challenges during 2020, and they increased due to the nature of the pandemic.

### **Background of the Problem**

The novel coronavirus disease outbreak was a challenge for the entire world, affecting millions of people (Rakshit & Paul, 2020). According to Shu et al. (2021), a large-scale novel type of pneumonia caused by coronavirus disease (COVID-19) began in Wuhan, China. At the end of 2019 and as early as June 2020, the disease affected many countries and regions worldwide. Research shows that the outbreak could trim the world's economic growth by at least 0.5% to 1.5% (Khan et al., 2021). At the time of the epidemic, which the World Health Organization declared a pandemic on March 12, 2020, there were 10,694.28 confirmed cases, 516,905 deaths, and 5,480,394 recoveries globally on July 2, 2020 (Kuofie, 2021).

Rakshit and Paul (2020) shared that the rapid spread of the coronavirus impacted different sectors of the economy, thus limiting their business operations and leading to the disruption in the economic activities of several industries that thrive in growth. Even

though the COVID-19 instantly ushered the global workforce into the future of work, organizational leadership has some challenges in unprecedented ways. The radical shift from a year ago, due to the unpredictable time of the pandemic, has changed how we work and do business (Thompson, 2020).

### **Problem and Purpose**

The COVID-19 pandemic has posed novel challenges to global health and the world economy (Alstadsaeter et al., 2020, p. 805). The Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) reported that over 20 million payroll jobs were lost in April 2020, and the unemployment rate spiked to over 14% (BLS, 2020). The general business problem is that COVID-19 has created challenges for small business leaders to maintain profitability during a global health crisis. The specific business problem is that some small business leaders lack the strategies to remain profitable during the COVID-19 crisis.

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the strategies some small business leaders have used to remain profitable during the COVID-19 crisis. The target population consisted of four small business leaders in Florida whose companies have remained profitable despite the pandemic. The implication for positive social change includes the potential for small businesses to remain profitable and help improve and sustain the quality of life of local communities' citizens during current and future global crises.

### **Population and Sampling**

Data were collected from four purposefully sampled small business leaders in Tampa, Florida, who will be interviewed using a semi-structured interview. Eligible

participants were small business leaders who remained profitable during COVID-19 pandemic. I reviewed the company documents for relevant information and triangulation.

### **Nature of the Study**

The three research methods include qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods (Sutter et al., 2020). Qualitative researchers use open-ended questions to discover what has occurred (Durmic, 2020). In contrast, quantitative researchers use closed-ended questions to test hypotheses about variables' characteristics and/or relationships (Hashim et al., 2017). The quantitative method research was not appropriate for this study because I did not need to test statistical hypotheses to address my study's purpose. As mixed methods research includes both a qualitative and quantitative element, the mixed-method research was not appropriate for this study because addressing the proposed study's purpose will not require using the quantitative method (Maraqaa et al., 2021). For this study, I will not be testing hypotheses but exploring small business leaders' strategies that have enabled them to survive the COVID-19 pandemic.

I considered four research designs that could be used for a qualitative study on small business leaders' strategies during COVID-19: ethnography, phenomenology, narrative, and case study. The ethnography design would focus on observing cultural behaviors during the pandemic to understand behaviors within a particular social group; however, this study is not designed to explore participants' cultural behavior. The phenomenology design entails exploring the personal meanings of the experience of those who participated in the phenomenon (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). The phenomenology design is not appropriate because the focus of this study is not to explore



the lived experience of participants. Narrative researchers seek to relate personal stories about participants who share their life experiences with the researcher; therefore, the narrative design is inappropriate because the participants will not share their stories about personal life experiences. A multiple case study design is appropriate for this study because the researcher can explore what, how, and why small business leaders remain profitable during a pandemic. According to Crowe et al. (2011), a multiple case study allows for comparisons across several cases and/or replication. A single case study was inappropriate because the focus is not on the strategies deployed by a single business leader but on multiple leaders.

### **Research Question**

What strategies have some small business leaders used to remain profitable during the COVID-19 crisis?

### **Interview Questions**

1. What strategies have you used to remain profitable during the COVID-19 crisis?
2. What key challenges did you face in implementing these strategies?
3. How did you address the key challenges in implementing these strategies?
4. How have these strategies prepared you for future health crises?
5. As a small business leader, how did you measure the effectiveness of the strategies during COVID-19?
6. What strategies were most effective in helping you remain profitable during the pandemic?
7. How did the pandemic influence the development of your strategies?

8. What else can you share with me about developing and implementing your organization's strategies for profitability during a pandemic?

### **Theoretical or Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework that was used is authentic leadership theory (ALT). The authentic leadership framework was developed by Bill George (2004). Authentic leadership is about being your own person; having your own unique style, stewardship; being aware of your weaknesses; and developing as a leader (Marshall & Heffes, 2004). The key propositions underlying ALT are: (a) understanding your purpose, (b) practicing solid values, (c) leading with your heart, (d) establishing relationships, and (e) self-discipline in getting results (Marshall & Heffes, 2004). In addition, authentic leaders have an elevated level of emotional intelligence, optimism, and compassion for others (Covelli & Mason, 2018). Authentic leadership theory applied to this study because it provides a potential lens for me to view and understand the strategies the small business leaders used to survive the COVID-19 crisis.

### **Operational Definitions**

*Authentic leadership*: Encompasses the amalgamation of the interests of the greater good and is not focused on exploiting the self-interest of the leaders or the followers (Vitale & Cull, 2018).

*Balanced processing (being fair-minded)*: Leaders who show that they objectively analyze all relevant data before coming to a decision. (Walumbwa et al., 2008; Yamak & Eyupoglu, 2021).

*Internalized moral perspective (doing the right thing)*: Self-regulatory guided by moral standards (Walumbwa et al., 2008; Yamak & Eyupoglu, 2021).

*Relational transparency (being genuine)*: Presenting one's authentic self (as proposed to a fake or distorted self) to others. (Walumbwa et al., 2008; Yamak & Eyupoglu, 2021).

*Small enterprises*: An enterprise with fewer than 50 employees (Bhatt, 2018, Walumbwa et al., 2008).

### **Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations**

#### **Assumptions**

Assumptions are facts considered true, but which the researcher cannot verify (Armstrong & Kepler, 2018). In this multiple case study, the first assumption was that business leaders would supply a detailed narrative of their strategies to remain profitable during COVID-19. The second assumption was that small business leaders would provide truthful, impartial, and reliable information during their interviews. The third assumption was that the data collected from the small business leaders could be used to determine the gaps in leadership strategies.

#### **Limitations**

Limitations refer to potential weaknesses of the study that are out of the researcher's control, and are closely associated with the chosen research design, statistical model constraints, funding constraints, or other factors. (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). The first limitation of this qualitative case study was the researcher's inability to generalize the study findings to the broader population. The second limitation

of this study was the use of purposeful sampling (small sample size). The third limitation was the language barrier between the interviewer and participant. The last limitation was excluding transformational and transactional leadership in this study.

### **Delimitations**

Delimitations refer to the bounds or scope of the study (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). The scope of this study was to explore the strategies that small business leaders used to remain profitable during COVID-19. The study aimed to explore small business leaders with 50 or fewer employee's strategies during COVID-19. I did not include businesses that employed more than 50 employees as participants. Geographic location was another delimitation of this case study. There were only four participants in the pool for this study.

### **Significance of the Study**

COVID-19 had affected small business leaders economically, socially, and environmentally. COVID-19 has caused some small business leaders to experience challenges in remaining profitable during the pandemic. Challenges are important to business practice in that they may provide a practical model for small business management to develop and implement strategies during a pandemic or other business crisis. The implication for positive social change is to sustain and build a more substantial, more profitable small business in the local communities to create job opportunities and help maintain a stable workforce.

### **A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature**

A professional and academic literature review led to critical analysis and synthesis of previous research (Snyder, 2019). The literature review provided an overview of the research problem by building on the conceptual study framework (Snyder, 2019). The literature review helped to synthesize the characteristics of the authentic leadership theory (Scott et al., 2020).

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the strategies some small business leaders used to remain profitable during COVID-19. The basis for the literature review relied upon the conceptual framework of authentic leadership theory, which also informed the arrangement and structure of the literature review. Authentic leadership starts with an overview of how and what it takes to be an authentic leader.

The literature review consisted of 100 journal articles, of which ten were published before 2017, and 90 were published after 2017 (see Table 1). In building the literature review, I conducted a strategic professional and academic search starting with Google Scholar, Walden University Library Databases, Hillsborough County Public Library Cooperative, and Mendeley. These search engines allowed me to review both peer- and non-peered reviewed journal articles. Many were published after 2017, downloaded, and printed from the following databases: ProQuest ABI/INFORM, EBSCOhost, Gale Academic OneFile, and Gale OneFile Business. The keywords that directed this database search were *authentic leadership*, *leadership strategies*, *leadership theories*, *small and medium-sized enterprises*, *profitability*, and *COVID-19*.

**Table 1***Summary of Literature*

| <b>Category</b>   | <b>2017 and later</b> | <b>Earlier than 2017</b> |
|-------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------|
| Peer reviewed     | <b>90</b>             | <b>10</b>                |
| Non-peer reviewed | <b>2</b>              |                          |
| Total             | <b>92</b>             | <b>10</b>                |

*Note:* % of journals peer reviewed 2017 and later = 90%. % Of peer-reviewed journals = 100%

This literature review included a critical analysis and synthesis of the theoretical/conceptual framework literature. The literature review led to the descriptive background of the research topic. I organized the literature review based on leadership theory, leadership strategies, leadership and COVID-19, leadership and small businesses, profitability, and COVID-19.

**Authentic Leadership**

Authentic leadership requires a special kind of person that recognizes their self-awareness to become a great leader. According to Gill et al. (2018), authentic leadership describes the relationship of a leader with others in the work environment, as well as a mode of influence in the form of leadership. Bill George, the author of *Authentic Leadership*, has studied its impact on leadership over the years (George, 2003). His theory was that leaders who gained self-awareness were more likely to becoming authentic leaders (Zu, 2019). Balogun (2020) reports that self-awareness alludes to a descriptive nature under authentic leadership. A leader's descriptive character includes an awareness of their strengths and weaknesses; relational transparency refers to a leader's ability to speak openly about their feelings and thoughts while being guided by an internalized moral perspective expressed through values and self-reflection. According to

Zu (2019), Bill George's approach to leadership, which is based on self-awareness and authenticity, is widely considered the gold standard in the field.

One quality of an authentic leader is being unique (George, 2004). According to George (2004), authentic leaders must demonstrate five qualities: understanding their purpose, practicing solid values, leading with heart, establishing connected relationships, and demonstrating self-discipline. The five qualities of authentic leaders develop over time. Additionally, acquiring the five dimensions of an authentic leader is not a sequential process; instead, leaders develop them continuously throughout their lives (George, 2004).

### ***Understanding your Purpose***

According to George (2004), a fundamental question of leadership is, "What is the purpose of becoming a good leader?" He reports that many people want to become leaders without giving much thought to their purpose (George, 2004). There are three key features of leaders who find their purpose: understanding oneself, understanding one's passions, and understanding one's underlying motivations (George, 2004). The first purpose is to be unique about oneself and one's work.

### ***Practicing Solid Values***

A lifetime of experience shapes the authentic leader's personal beliefs, which are further developed through study, introspection, and consultation with others (George, 2004). Many fundamental values are crucial for a leader to possess; however, integrity is the core value of every authentic leader. George (2004) believes that only the crucible will you learn how to cope with pressures to compromise your values and dealing with

personal conflicts between them.

### ***Leading with Heart***

According to George (2004), your life experiences open your heart to compassion for the most difficult challenges people face along life's journey. The COVID-19 challenge provided the ultimate test for vulnerable and authentic leadership (Couris, 2020). The ability to be open to all life experiences comes from developing one's heart by following one's path (George, 2004). Leaders can make sound decisions in the most challenging of times with a compassionate heart. Further, human beings can become authentic through the development of compassion (George, 2004).

### ***Establishing Enduring Relationships***

One mark of a leader is the capacity to develop close and enduring relationships (George, 2004). Before employees give themselves entirely to their jobs, they demand more personal relationships with their leaders (George, 2004). In these settings, employees require full access to their leaders at any time, which will help build the relationships on trust and commitment. Connectedness and a shared purpose of working toward a common goal are what enduring relationships are built on (George, 2004).

### ***Demonstrating Self-discipline***

The essential quality of an authentic leader is self-discipline (George, 2004). According to George (2004), authentic leaders must have the self-discipline to do everything they can to demonstrate their values through their actions. Authentic leaders must show self-discipline by staying cool and calm when pressure hits (George, 2004). Many years of demanding work, some pain and suffering, and the wisdom that comes



from life experiences at their fullest are all characteristics of an authentic leader (George, 2004). Balogun et al. (2020) reported that leadership could cultivate, nurture, and develop over a lifetime and trigger significant life events.

Martino (2019) recognized that authentic followership is central to the development of authentic leadership, thus reinforcing the relationship between leaders and followers. The authenticity of the one promotes the authenticity of the other. Followers of authentic leaders act in part to serve the interests of a mutual vision of an organization's values and mission (Martino, 2019). Authentic leaders and their followers work together to bring the vision and mission of an organization to life. Authentic leadership development is the long-term performance that consistently exceeds expectations (Martino, 2019).

According to Mohammadpour et al. (2017), authentic leadership theory is the most recent and complete leadership approach proposed. According to Mohammadpour et al. (2017), a manager's leadership style affects organizations' increased efficiency, effectiveness, and productivity. There are four elements – self-awareness, balanced processing, internalized moral perspectives, and rational transparency – that make up authentic leadership theory. An effective leader in the organization is the main factor in creating sympathy and empathy (Mohammadpour et al., 2017).

Authentic leaders are also genuine leaders that promote positive behavior in a healthy work environment. Authentic leaders are unique people who present honesty towards their employees, thus maintaining transparency in an organization that helps develop a trusting relationship (Khalil & Siddiqui 2019). Authentic leadership of line

managers would strengthen through the relationship between actual high-performance work systems (HPWS) and the employee-perceived HPWS (Cao et al. 2020). The main factor of leadership plays a significant role by providing a vision and guidance to develop employees that create an environment where employees engage with what is going on (Khalil & Siddiqui, 2019). The essential role of leadership is the main driving force in fostering such an environment (Khalil & Siddiqui, 2019).

A 2019 study by Maximo et al. reflected that authentic leadership is the basis of three factors: trust in the supervisor, psychological safety, and work engagement. Studies show the link between authentic leadership with specific behavioral outcomes (Maximo et al., 2019). Further, authenticity increases when subordinates perceive their supervisor as authentic (Maximo et al., 2019). Trust in leadership ultimately stems from supervisors understanding their subordinates' expectations, needs, and wants (Maximo et al., 2019).

Authentic leadership has been a debate in the management area that initially arose among the practitioners and then gained space in the academic field (Pioli, 2019). According to Iqbal et al. (2020), authentic leadership has emerged as a positive relational leadership approach that has gained the attention of academicians and practitioners by stimulating a healthy work environment. influencing employees' relationships on organizational behavior, authenticity plays a vital role (Iqbal et al., 2020). The organizational behavior of employees centers around authentic leader self-awareness. Employees' positive corporate relationships play a significant role in shaping organizational reputation and contribute to achieving organizational aims boosting employee effectiveness (Iqbal et al., 2020).

Covelli and Mason (2018) shared that authentic leadership is a positive form of leadership in transformational, ethical, charismatic, and servant leadership. The idea is to connect theory to reality and develop applications for leaders and organizations to implement into their training of tomorrow's leaders. Leaders will find cooperation in their organization through unity and not division. Leadership strategies such as role modeling inspire charismatic and authentic leaders (Covelli & Mason, 2018).

Similarly, Nubold et al.'s (2020) research showed that there is limited research on the personal antecedents of authentic leadership and effective means to enhance it. According to Nubold et al. (2020), authentic leadership training requires a comprehensive approach that accounts for the whole person, including one's character, values, and preferences. The true self is the leaders' basis for protecting and promoting genuine care. As such, authentic leaders are self-confident, optimistic, reliable, and trustworthy (Nubold et al., 2020).

### **Leadership Theory**

Greenwood (1996) suggested that leadership theory goes back to the roots of trait theory. Asrar-ul-Haq and Anwar (2018) revealed that trait theory began in the 1920s and 1930s. Leadership centered around the trait theory, or the early idea that leaders possessed certain traits more than non-leaders (John & Moser, 1989). Great men theory came out of the trait theory with the idea that individuals could revolutionize history or bring change in society (Asrar-ul-Haq & Anwar, 2018).

A new movement of trait theory began with the development of contingency and situational models (Greenwood, 1996). Over time leadership theory has evolved into

other ideas that have produced much data. The speculation about the scale and importance of leadership in human evolution revolves around the role of leadership in solving both coordination and collective action problems (King et al., 2019). In today's organization, theories and practices evolved into the norms, attitudes, and understanding of leadership (Donkor & Dongmei, 2018).

The rise of leadership theories have given past research on various aspects of leadership context and outcomes (Asrar-ul-Haq & Anwar, 2018). Different studies showed the distinction between the characteristics and qualities of leaders (Asrar-ul-Haq & Anwar, 2018). The influence of followers and an organization as a unit evolved around the leadership components; power, traits, and behaviors (Donkor & Dongmei, 2018). Vitale & Cull (2018) believed that leadership exists; there must be a minimum requirement of a leader and a follower instead of a manager and a subordinate. The leader must engage the follower and not merely direct them on what to do (Vitale & Cull, 2018). Major leadership theories and outcomes still need review, which the present study has tried to do.

Extensive research on leadership has evolved over the past decade (Lee et al., 2019). Mango (2018) reveals that leadership theories cover five domains: character, characteristics, people practices, institutional practices, and outcomes. There seems to be an abundance of leadership theories that are overcrowding the field of leadership. Given too many leadership theories, it is not easy to have focused research in the area (Mango, 2018). Leadership description is a complex and multifaceted topic that defies easy and simplistic descriptions (Harris, 2018).

Badshah (2012) noted that leadership is a subject that attracts enormous interest and attention. From 1970 to the present day, leadership and statistics show that published books and articles about leadership reveal exponential growth (Badshah, 2012).

Leadership theory comes from different perspectives and camps. Four whole groups categorize leadership theories: leadership theories based on traits, leadership theories based on behavior, situational leadership theories, and contemporary leadership theories (Miloloza, 2018). The term leadership has existed since the 1700s (Badshah, 2012).

Schruijer and Vansina (2002) mentioned that the conceptualization of leadership function can be shared where the relational quality of leadership becomes its focus. According to Patrick (2018), leadership quality is a critical determinant of organizational and managerial behavior that influences one person or others. Authors use leadership self-efficacy to characterize personal and individual judgments to exert leadership (Schruijer and Vansina, 2002). Schruijer and Vansina (2002) believed that leadership can develop through a host of variables; the belief persists that leadership can develop through exclusively increasing one's emotional intelligence, one's self-confidence, learning to win support, and overcoming resistance to change.

Hopen (2010) revealed that the basic construct of leader and follower has existed throughout recorded history. There is a difference between being a leader and a follower; when they cross each other, there are many role changes (Hester, 2019). Changes in leaders, followers, and situations are a dynamic process of leadership suggested by empirical studies (John & Moser, 1989). Decision-making is central to how leaders play in an organization based on their authority (Hopen, 2010). Businesses operated

differently from the past due to COVID-19 (Hopen, 2010). Several factors are changing the face of leadership: technology, global reach, knowledge workers, workforce composition, social responsibility, and partnerships. As organizations and situations change, so do the role and practices of leadership (Hopen, 2010).

Throughout time the attention has been on the civilization and emergence of leadership to shape leaders and leaders who can shape culture (Landis et al., 2014). Leaders have been successful because leadership theories teach them how to be influential leaders. During the 20th century in the United States, numerous experiments evaluated the importance of leadership in organizations (Landis et al., 2014). The success of an organization comes from the critical component of leadership theory (Landis et al., 2014).

Patterson's (1996) study showed that the early emergence of organizational psychology paradigms traces to today's leaders. The characteristics of leaders are the basis of morphological, physiological, or behavioral traits that help leaders coordinate problems within their organization (King et al., 2009). Industrial psychology and organizational behavior fields come primarily from the development of leadership theory (Patterson, 1996). Leaders may need to pick different tools from their behavioral repertoire (Bywater et al., 2021). The emergence of these paradigms has become dominant in the leadership field. Predominant names such as servant, transactional, and transformational leadership theory have traditionally come from the micro-level organizational literature (Patterson, 1996). According to Patterson (1996), in the new leadership theories, the followers view the leader as one bestowed with the gift of seeing

beyond the status quo to a better state. Leadership is a complex task for which outcomes are often neither immediate nor concrete (Popper & Lipshitz, 1993).

### **Leadership Strategies**

Mal et al.'s (2019) research revealed that developing economics' history shows that strategies are the key factor in business improvements. The importance of strategy in business leads us to investigate and discuss the employees' behavioral impact on the company's development and how these behaviors affect the risk assessment and mitigation process (Mal et al., 2019). Business strategies help to assess the improvements in an organization. The current study aimed to determine the importance of strategy to be established and followed in business. (Mal et al., 2019).

Rahman et al.'s (2018) study showed that strategic leadership has undergone many changes over the past 20 years. It takes a good business leader to identify and overcome challenges practically. According to Rahman et al. (2018), great leaders' judgment comes from what they leave behind rather than what they achieve during their tenure. It takes an exceptional leader to have the strategic thinking in managing strategies to overcome obstacles that may come their way. Rahman et al. (2018) proposed that strategic competencies give companies an advantage to survive by formulating and executing their strategies successfully in an uncertain and turbulent era. Harunavamwe (2020) reported that organizations still struggle to design and implement strategies to enhance work engagement.

The combination of self-leadership strategies, psychological resources, and JE has a statistically significant favorable influence on work engagement (Harunavamwe, 2020).

Harunavamwe's (2020) study revealed that self-leadership may form the basis of understanding how individuals identify, develop, and use various personal and social resources to make the best of their work. According to Megheirkouni (2018), there are three primary self-leadership strategies: behavior-focused, natural reward, and constructive thought pattern. The three dimensions promoted employee well-being, so they feel part of the organization, thus increasing work engagement.

McClanahan's (2020) research is the basis for the dual-strategies theory, which has thus far developed without significant cross-fertilization from the larger body of research on leadership in organizations. According to McClanahan (2020), the dual-strategies theory of social rank focuses on individuals' psychological and behavioral strategies to attain and maintain a position of high social status and the implications of these strategies for the group. Dual-strategy theory looks at the person in charge, the leader, and not the leadership. McClanahan (2021) reflected that it is typical to use the word leader to mean a person with high social ranks; thus, leadership refers to a complex in the social, psychological, and anthropological research on hierarch.

According to Burke (2021), strategy is what you do; it happens in the present, allowing individuals to be engaged in insightful dialogue. Burke (2021) considered strategic and business planning as only espoused strategies and is not a strategy in action. Thinking evolves from strategy to act (Burke, 2021). The uncertainty of strategic decisions is irregular and long-term. The realm of strategic leadership capabilities leads to future thinking that moves people (Burke, 2021). Strategies are not something that comes naturally to a leader but requires thinking. Burke (2021) believed that linking



organizational culture with learning, strategy, and leadership is critical in shaping the future by providing direction and vision. Hall et al. (2019) reported that the organization's core values are one aspect of leadership strategy.

The tribal gaming industry implemented various leadership strategies to move their organization forward and maintain corporate responsibility. Hall et al. (2019) aimed to explore the tribal gaming leader strategies used toward sustainability, an action that leads to tribal economic development and stability. Based on Hall et al. (2019) research, the tribal gaming leaders acknowledged emotional intelligence as a common leader strategy. Another strategy used in the tribal organization is leading by example; willingness and upward employment mobility are essential strategies in their organization (Hall et al., 2019). The solid foundation of organizational leaders centered around enhancing skills and techniques that provide a clear understanding and benefits for the future (Hall et al. 2019).

Young et al.'s (2020) research assessed how R&D leaders gather insights and develop strategies and plans for long-term time frames. It does not matter the R&D activities; business units determine where to invest and what the priorities are (Young et al., 2020). Young et al. (2020) reflected that companies are more satisfied with their strategy processes focus on more extended time frames in planning. Companies that spend more time with the time frames of planning are usually successful with their strategies.

Sull et al.'s (2017) description of strategy favors complexity, but executing it requires simplicity. The execution strategy must guide leaders with enough flexibility to

seize novel opportunities, mitigate unexpected risks, and adapt to local conditions (Sull et al., 2017). The first thing with this simplicity is to boil a complex set of choices down to a handful that matters the most (Sull et al., 2017). According to Sull et al. (2017), complex strategies, particularly those that include detailed plans, tend to be long on guidance but are short on flexibility.

**Leadership Strategies and COVID-19.** Forster et al.'s (2020) study revealed that leadership is not bound to those at the top of the organizational chart, but we all lead daily. A great leader anticipates and plans for significant disruption (Foster et al., 2020). Leaders need to avoid a top-down leadership style during a crisis (Forster et al., 2020). Leaders need to be flexible to new directions as conditions change (Forster et al. 2020). It is always good to act decisively to get it right (Forster et al., 2020). Strategies implemented during a crisis need empathy, whereas leaders should react with effective communication. According to Otache (2020), strategies to cope with the effects of the pandemic may vary from one country to another. Strong leaders are in demand, especially after the recovery phase of a crisis (Forster et al., 2020).

A study by Crayne and Medeiros (2020) revealed that in times of crisis or uncertainty, people look to various leaders and attempt to discern which characteristics are best for addressing the problem. World leaders responsible for managing COVID-19 would align with a more consistent and stable sensemaking pathway (Crayne & Medeiros, 2020). Leaders provided a framework for the public to understand and interpret the COVID-19 crisis and subsequently motivate actions that include social distancing, mask-wearing, or seeking medical treatment (Crayne & Medeiros, 2020).

According to Crayne and Medeiros (2020), there are three sensemaking pathways to successful leadership in times of crisis: charismatic, ideological, and programmatic leadership (Crayne & Medeiros, 2020). These sense-making pathways determine how the leader responds and acts during an emergency. The authors name three leaders that fall under these categories, describing their leadership characteristics and behavior during the COVID-19 pandemic. Incorporating and understanding sensemaking into our broader societal discussion of leadership, we can predict how a leader will respond to a crisis such as COVID-19 and, in turn, anticipate issues arising from this sensemaking approach to developing effective responses (Crayne & Medeiros, 2020).

Stoller (2020) invited the reflection on the best leadership practices during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Cleveland Clinic has articulated practices during COVID-19 such as, being proactive in anticipating events with contingency plans has been a critical leadership competency in the coronavirus pandemic (Stoller, 2020). Second, clarify governance for the crisis, which means testing the adequacy of existing governance structures and requiring the deployment of new ad hoc roles (Stoller, 2020). Third, act quickly by forming an incident command center that reflects the awareness that decisions will need to be made rapidly and provides the organizational infrastructure (Stoller, 2020). Fourth, communicating will allow for a successful response to a crisis is the ultimate team effort because all team members must align in service of a common goal (Stoller, 2020). Optimistically we will emerge from the crisis and back to a state of normality, thus being realistic and acknowledging the contributions of the team (Stoller, 2020). These practices and actions by leaders will help facilitate the need to return to

some normalcy. Stoller (2020) concluded that a crisis heightens the need for outstanding leadership and underscores needed leadership competencies through success and failure in their absence.

Bebbington (2021) shared that universities face such an array of challenges that the leadership role has never been more challenging because of the immediate threats of the pandemic. University leaders put the health and well-being of their staff and students first (Bebbington, 2021). Video conferencing is one of the delivery methods for students, especially those that resist digital learning tools. Leadership practitioners decided to transition to remote education and prompt social distancing practices (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020). Drawing online learning into the core will profoundly affect the way forward, thus avoiding the consideration of strategies leaders will need to consider for the long haul (Bebbington, 2021). These strategies consider taking a bottom-up approach that begins with the attributes we want to inculcate in each student's modes of delivery and the nature of the support we offer them, reviews the structure and schedule of the programs, and implications for the physical campus and the staff establishment (Bebbington, 2021). Universities have a daunting task in redefining the structural environment after the post-pandemic. In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic signaled a once-in-a-generation opportunity for a strategic transformation in universities toward more differential character and missions for each university and a resizing of each university and its resources to fit new, more focused goals (Bebbington, 2021).

Fernandez and Shaw's (2020) study showed that in academia, those holding leadership positions in schools, colleges, and universities, have responded to COVID-19

by closing campuses and residence halls, canceling commencements, and moving educational and associated activities online. In the world of academia, academic leadership hastily organized workshops to familiarize faculty with modern digital teaching and learning tools (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020). Authentic leaders can still motivate faculty of the ambivalent majority that previously resisted any form of technology-enhanced teaching. The pandemic has caught the academic world by surprise, where educational leaders were scrambling to revert to online learning full-time during the pandemic crisis. Quick response allowed leaders to facilitate best practices that are effective during the disruption of the crisis. Academia leaders who commit to these leadership best practices will emerge from crisis to rebuild their credibility and brand untarnished and even enhanced (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020).

**Leadership strategies and small business enterprise.** Businesses used generic methods that align with the company's different elements to facilitate better business performance. Ogot (2020) stated that generic strategies are applicable across industry, firm type, and size. Small business enterprises (SBE) may apply strategies that exploit competency and collaboration elements to become more competitive, leading to better business performance (Ogot, 2020). Differentiation aimed to set an enterprise's products and services apart from its competitors within a localized market (Ogot, 2020).

SBEs struggle to recruit external investors and maintain net cash flows, thus, engaging in strategies to support their long-term survival (Park et al., 2019). Defender Strategy is a stable and allow for cost-saving through the economies of scale (Par et al., 2019). According to Park et al. (2019), their study is different from prior research on

management strategy as a critical factor influencing future performance and potential growth (Park & et al., 2019).

Lee and Seo (2018) reported that general strategies for a firm's sustainable business development or growth can be recognizable by several definitions and concepts, such as utilizing collaborations with external partnerships, enhancing innovation activities, etc. In SBE, they cannot afford to build a system or organization for responding to new market conditions and facilitating strategy management (Leo and Seo, 2018). SBE's issue is the lack of awareness in addressing strategies to create sustainable growth in their organization. According to Lee and Seo (2018), the most crucial matter is how they can realize the strategy for their sustainable business models and the enormous and irregularly scattered information.

Haseeb et al.'s (2019) study aimed to ascertain the influence of a management control systems (MCS) package on a firm's sustainability with the help of mediating variables such as differentiation and cost leadership strategy in Malaysian small and medium (SMEs) businesses. SBEs play an essential part in the growth of every economy (Haseeb et al., 2019). According to Haseeb et al. (2019), SBEs served as a promoter of economic delivery and national development. SBEs with performance problems are powerless to achieve a high level of performance effectively. SBEs positively affected economic growth and increase the gross domestic product (Haseeb et al., 2019).

Ndambuki et al. (2017) shared that the business strategies of Telkom Kenya are small and are helping the company gain market share. SBEs contributed valuable economic and social contribution because of their product and administrative innovations

(Husti & Mahyami, 2019). Their research showed that strategies such as culture change, retrenchment, product differentiation, product modification, and aggressive marketing campaigns have significantly impacted the company's market share (Ndambuki et al., 2017). This study gave an overview of how management at Telkom Kenya can improve on critical issues outlined in the author's paper (Ndambuki et al., 2017). The takeaway from this study concluded that managers of Telkom Kenya are aware of the strategies to respond to such challenges (Ndambuki et al., 2017).

Omar et al.'s (2020) research showed that lockdown, confinement, limited movement order, and social distancing are among the preemptive government's efforts to safeguard public health. According to Omar et al. (2020), the objectives of this article are to scrutinize the implications of the COVID-19 Movement Control Order (MCO) on Small businesses and identified survival strategies based on the owner's perspective. The survival strategies are the basis for the impact of COVID-19. The COVID-19 coronavirus spread has regrettably borne out downside scenarios to the global economy and people's activities (Omar et al., 2020).

### **Leadership and COVID-19**

Nobody has escaped the consequences of COVID-19, which dramatically impacted the world economy, social functioning, and health (Antonakis, 2021). Abrams et al. (2021) shared that people turn to their leaders for guidance amid uncertainty and challenging times. The urgency of leadership will get us through these difficult days (Antonakis, 2021).

Young et al.'s (2020) research showed that the COVID-19 pandemic and managing multiple generations are the two challenges leaders face during this crisis. Effective followership has become increasingly important in the workplace because of COVID-19 and the different generations (Young et al., 2020). Followership skills played a significant role in the workplace as leaders adjust to the day-to-day changes of the organization. The distinction between leaders and others centers around the ongoing exploration of the leader's capabilities of what they can do (Butner, 2019). Influential leaders who understand the complexities of a rapidly changing global environment are effective in today's organization (Nanjundeswaras & Swamy, 2014).

Frederiksen (2020) showed that during COVID-19, leadership is one of the eleven ways to reboot business. COVID-19 is an unpredictable trend that will allow them to cultivate and have openness among leadership and employee. While leading the way for the employees in their organization, leaders struggle to forge a path in their own lives (Schumacher, 2020). According to Frederiksen (2020), we were halfway through 2020; the unprecedented time does not begin to describe the magnitude of change small businesses such as CPA firms must navigate for themselves, firm, employee, and their clients.

Shufutinsky et al.'s (2020) research reflected that an effective leader is considered one of the most pivotal resources for organizations in times of normalcy and crisis. However, international criticism has flared about national, state, local, corporate, and policy leadership in this COVID-19 environment of discontinuous change. Sanchez et al. (2019) shared that business managers face the challenge of leading in a complex and



demanding environment, conditioned by a loss of trust attributable to years of greed-driven misconduct often associated with environmental disasters, financial scandals, and ruined lives. There are distinct crises in which pandemics can create widespread, extremely complex disruption (Shufutinsky et al., 2020). This disruption has caused leaders to implement new policies and procedures to conduct business. Amid the chaos of the pandemic, the world began to recognize that leaders worldwide are not prepared to deal with discontinuous events (Shufutinsky et al., 2020).

Goode et al. (2021) shared that adaptive leadership enables change to thrive. Working in challenging circumstances requires adaptability, flexibility, and resilience. (Goode et al., 2021). The adaptability allowed leaders to have the opportunity to communicate effectively with their educators' concerning circumstances or issues they are facing because of the pandemic. According to Goode et al. (2021), stress fatigue and the pervasive universal lockdown experience began to take their toll as the crisis evolved. It became increasingly evident that resourcing wellbeing was paramount (Goode et al., 2021).

Lagowska et al.'s (2020) study showed that leaders' influence in their position during these challenging times received an increased amount of attention and scrutiny. Leadership skills and practices work in a more stable and predictable environment, but they are no longer sufficient (Fang & Whitelaw, 2020). Leaders need to work on the perceptions of their organizations to manage people's expectations and motions to guarantee cohesive and effective communication flow (Lagowska et al., 2020). During a crisis, leaders need to open the line of communication, so the flow of information is less

harmful to their organization, thus reducing the perception of the problem. The way people react and respond to crises determines how commentators make statements about great or woeful leadership, heroes, culprits, angels, and saviors (Bassett & Stanley, 2020). Lagowska et al. (2020) believed that leaders should methodically generate response options, create sound criteria to evaluate them, and consequently act instead of freezing under pressure. Coulson-Thomas (2020) shared that asking the right questions can be a crucial leadership skill for determining focus and progress.

### **Leadership and Small Businesses**

Birbirsa and Lakew (2020) shared why some small businesses succeed while others fail to grasp learning strategies, leadership knowledge, and skills used by successful small business leaders (SSBLS). The attributes of a leader depend on their performance rather than the organization's performance (Kowo & Akinbole, 2019). Transactional and transformational skills are the skills small business leaders need to be successful. Birbirsa & Lakew (2020) shared researchers did not do well in investigating the relationship between leadership style and small business leadership; therefore, leadership style is the basis of the organization's goals and objectives. According to Birbirsa and Lakew (2020), small business leadership demands a robust leadership style that can balance transactional and transformational approaches. It is essential that small business leaders engage themselves in day-to-day strategic and management operations (Birbirsa & Lakew, 2020). Small business leaders should know what type of leadership style best describes them. Birbirsa & Lakew (2020) share that small businesses must understand their leadership styles to be successful.

Leadership styles and other drivers such as entrepreneurial growth and leadership stimulate commitment and performance, leading to strategy improvements (Qadir & Yesiltas, 2020). Inspiration and advancement of employees' work-related effectiveness show the leaders' organizational performance and commitment (Qadir & Yesiltas, 2020). Leaders positively affect their employees, but they are also a motivating factor in strengthening the organization (Qadir & Yesiltas, 2020). Leadership styles are essential in (SBE) organizations because they tell what type of leaders are directing their organization and providing a strategic plan. Leaders who have people-oriented styles effectively influence organizational performance in SBEs (Qadir & Yesiltas, 2020). Qadir and Yesiltas (2020) found that these SBEs' owners and chief executive officers have sought to improve their leadership skills to facilitate growth. Knowledge management and leadership essentials are two critical factors for a successful business (Howard et al., 2019).

Miftari (2018) conducted a study to reveal the acceptance of the new role in the SBEs and in a market where the changing business environment has transformed leadership skills and strategies of doing business. In the routine of doing business in transitional countries such as Kosovo, leadership is faced with two processes: establishing a new business culture and transforming leadership (Miftari, 2018). According to Miftari (2018), in transitional countries, the way of doing business is historically influenced and directed by an economy-run state and is moving toward a market-led system. SBE's leadership challenges transformed the business environment into an environment where leaders need to connect leadership with communication.

Fachrunnisa et al.'s (2020) study revealed that small business enterprises have experienced changes in digitization. SBEs in Indonesia and Malaysia must operate with limited internet access and low digital-literate levels (Fachrunnisa et al., 2020). Significant changes in various facets of the company are due to the expectation of SBE's development in the digital era (Fachrunnisa et al., 2020). The recent problems they face will require a leader's significant role in making decisions (Fachrunnisa et al., 2020). The role of an agile leader is to prosecute the enhancement of the digital transformation business environment (Fachrunnisa et al., 2020). An elegant and sensitive leader needs all aspects of leadership in this crisis era (Fachrunnisa et al., 2020).

### **Profitability**

Retailing during the COVID-19 focused on increasing sales and profits, generating an unsafe and hazardous work environment (Hadjisolomou & Simone, 2021). Retailers of non-essential goods, such as apparel and footwear, are facing a significant drop in sales (Roggeveen & Sethuraman, 2020). According to Grossman (2020), being open for business is almost as hard as being closed; thus, companies face higher costs to keep workers and customers safe and an indefinite suppressed demand. Companies are navigating an even-narrower plan to profitability by cutting services and jobs (Grossman, 2020). Small businesses' stakes are higher because they operate with thinner profit margins and smaller cash flow.

Fuertes-Callen and Cuellar-Fernandez (2019) reported that business growth and profitability have piqued the interests of researchers for decades. Binomial growth-profitability is the essence of business practice (Fuertes-Callen & Cuellar-Fernandez,

2019). Firms that grow at the expense of their profits seek external financing because of inconvenient financial situations (Fuertes-Callen & Cuellar-Fernandez, 2019). The author's paper's objective is to know how a firm's growth and profitability adapt to adverse market conditions (Fuertes-Callen & Cuellar-Fernandez, 2019). For all firms, research into the persistence of profit (POP) affirms that profitability converges at a particular level, and no company can maintain profitability above the average overall (Fuertes-Callen & Cuellar-Fernandez, 2019). According to Fuertes-Callen & Cuellar-Fernandez (2019), companies must adjust their strategies to the environmental challenges to gain a competitive advantage and survive during an economic crisis. The development and competitiveness of enterprises in the SBE sector provide the ability to adapt to changes in the economy, the creation of new jobs, the development of competitive advantage, and the effectiveness of achieving goals (Stanczyk, 2020). In an economic crisis, sales growth leads to profits, whereas previous profits are not required to achieve growth in sales (Fuertes-Callen & Cuellar-Fernandez 2019). Firms need to adjust their strategies to increase sales growth to take advantage of the competitive edge. Firms need to do this because it allows them to survive during an economic downturn. The dependency on how firm addresses hostile conditions is the basis of the adverse economic context, which does not prevent business growth (Fuertes-Callen & Cuellar-Fernandez, 2019).

One of the researchers' primary concerns was to identify profitability factors (Alarussi & Alhaderi, 2017). Alarussi and Alhaderi (2017) defined profitability as the earnings of a company that generates revenue after deducting all expenses incurred

during a given period amid a crisis. Companies that attempt to preserve their financial status by undertaking risky measures lack experience and worsen their economic situation (Alarussi & Alhaderi, 2017). Researchers investigated five factors contributing to profitability: firm size, working capital (WC), company efficiency, liquidity, and leverage. Companies need to know the internal and external factors that may significantly impact profitability (Alarussi & Alhaderi, 2017). The five factors mentioned in the article have a positive association with profitability. Each element measures the Return on Equity (ROE) and EPS (Earnings Per Share; Alarussi & Alhaderi, 2017). When a company is not profitable, it cannot survive; however, a highly profitable business can reward its owners with high returns on their investment (Alarussi & Alhaderi, 2017).

Due to the modern economy's social, economic, and political importance, small enterprises are operational factors in the dynamic, and knowledge-based economy (Lucian et al., 2018). Return on Equity (ROE), return on Assets (ROA), and return on Sales (ROS) these ratios are based on SBE's performance on how good or bad the business has done (Lucian et al., 2018). The study showed that the influence of working capital requirement positively is due to the profitability and sales growth; on the other hand, the negative impact is due to asset tangibility, financial leverage, and operating cash flow (Lucian et al., 2018). SBEs shared a crucial part of the economy, whereas their performance in investing is a way that profitability will increase.

Du and Cai (2020) reported that SBEs' core business income in China reached 579 trillion Yuan, accounting for 56.7% of the regular business income. Transaction costs, information asymmetry, inferior position, and greater risk in operations are issues

SBEs have more than larger enterprises because they face financing barriers (Du & Cai, 2020). Small businesses have turned to the government to help them during this economic crisis. Programs existed for small businesses due to COVID-19, such as the paycheck protection program (PPP) and the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, as well as the administered Small Business Administration (SBA) loans (Beauregard & et al., (2020).

### **COVID-19 History**

According to Harapan et al. (2020), research showed that on December 31, 2019, the China Health Authority alerted the World Health Organization (WHO) to several cases of pneumonia of unknown etiology in Wuhan city in Hubei Province in central China. Zhang (2020) reports that the coronavirus outbreak has lasted for over half a year, with the virus referred to as the novel coronavirus in China and COVID-19 worldwide. The disease was named coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) by WHO (Harapan et al., 2020). Van der Leeuw's (2020) research shows that the world has not seen a health crisis since 2000 until the current COVID-19 situation. The Covid-19 pandemic is the third major crisis in 20 years concerning human health (Van der Leeuw, 2020). COVID-19 has caused a detrimental impact on the world economy, socially and economically. Our global system showed major fracture lines that are no accident (Van der Leeuw, 2020).

Alstadsaeter et al. (2020) reflected that the detrimental impact of the COVID-19 pandemic posed novel challenges to global public health and the world economy. The challenges caused lockdowns, businesses to close, and services relying on physical proximity overnight (Alstadsaeter et al. 2020). According to Brulhart et al. (2020), a

time-limited forced shutdown of large parts of the economy followed by a potentially long-lasting drag on contact-intensive activities presents economic policymakers with monumental challenges. The lockdown of businesses has caused businesses to do things out of the norm that they would not do before the lockdown, such as social distancing. The shock of social distancing depicted the current situation, affecting labor supply and economic activity (Vasilyeva et al., 2020).

According to Zang (2020), under some circumstances, an economy maintained a growth trend when exposed to external shock; thus, it will rebound and recover. The economy has taken a slight spiral dive because of the pandemic. Vasiev et al. (2020) share that China's economic growth provides ample room for coping with external shocks to achieve high-quality development. Zhang (2020) shared wars and natural disasters, such as earthquakes, and tsunamis, have a tremendous impact on the economy.

As with several crises, the repercussions of the coronavirus impacted the global economy and financial markets (Vasiev et al., 2020). Vasiev et al. (2020) reported that China's global economy connection is through trade, investment, and tourism; therefore, any slowdown or persistent travel and transportation restrictions are likely to pressure the global economy. China controls a much more significant part of the global economy than it did 17 years ago (Vasiev et al., 2020). China's economic growth has prepared them for future disasters, especially COVID-19.

The first two months of 2020 described the impact of COVID-19 from a financial market context (Estrada et al. 2020). According to Estrada et al. (2020), the coronavirus's recent events had consistent, considerable, widespread short-term severe financial



disruptions and medium-term economic growth and development consequences.

Industries financially affected by the coronavirus, retail, energy, and transportation experienced crucial losses. Across geographical space, outbreaks and epidemics are rare and extreme events, highly diverse and volatile over time (Estrada et al. 2020).

Buklemishev (2020) shared a combination of the general decline in incomes and consumer activity transfer through the demand channel. As a result, many companies are forcing closure, striking the suppliers, consumers of their products, and employees. The pandemic has caused many companies to close, striking the suppliers, consumers of their products, and their employees (Buklemishev, 2020). In turn, a reduction in profits and wages caused the intertwining of the supply channel (Buklemishev, 2020).

Akbulaev (2020) revealed that the COVID-19 pandemic caused a long-term impact on the world economy, but the European Union will continue to combat the pandemic's consequences. According to Akbulaev (2020), the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs predicted that this year, due to the coronavirus pandemic, the global economy, instead of the expected 2.5%, could decline by 0.9%. The decline in the economy has reduced the workforce, left people unemployed, and services at a standstill. The pandemic affected people and societies worldwide and will have a lasting impact on the global economy and trade (Akbulaev, 2020).

**COVID-19 impact on small businesses.** Khan et al. (2020) shared that the highest costs of the COVID-19 outbreak are due to economic, social, political, and psychological impacts. The research showed that the long-run prices of COVID-19 include distortion of distinct types of economic activity and decreased productivity. The

result of the outbreak affects the tangible and intangible costs economically in other countries' different channels as the impact of coronavirus can be seen as more severe in Europe and America than in Asian economies (Khan, 2020).

Small businesses had a devastating effect because of the upheaval caused by the spread of COVID-19 (Liguori & Pittz, 2020). Kalogiannidis (2020) believed that COVID-19 affected small businesses because they lacked funds to manage or prepare for such a long-term disturbance. Small business owners who face enormous losses over a long time will permanently close their businesses due to the pandemic. Small businesses struggled to remain open during the pandemic, which resulted in employee layoffs. Downturns for entrepreneurs and business owners lack a keen eye for the needs of their customers (Liguori & Pittz, 2020). The impact of COVID-19, other business-like construction, personal services, hotels, restaurants, and transportation decline in the number of active businesses (Kalogiannis, 2020).

Bartik et al. (2020) surveyed 5,800 small businesses, and several themes came out of the survey. According to Bartik et al. (2020), the results suggested that the pandemic had already caused massive dislocation among small businesses just several weeks after its onset and before the availability of government aid through the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act. The study showed that over 70% of respondents were hesitant to receive assistance from the CARES Act and Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) because they were worried about meeting the eligibility criteria. The mass economic disruption of the pandemic caused small business workers to connect to the small business ecosystem (Bartik et al., 2020).

Shafi et al.'s (2020) research revealed that micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) are the backbone of many economies worldwide that provide income and employment generation to many people around the globe. The unavailability of laborers, slow production, shortage of raw materials, and transportation restrictions will significantly impact these businesses (Shafi et al., 2020). SBEs cannot recover from such a crisis, especially in developing countries like Pakistan, with extreme poverty rates and economic and political stability (Shafi, 2020).

### **Transition**

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the strategies some small business leaders used to remain profitable during COVID-19. The conceptual framework supported the literature review of authentic leadership, strategies, profitability, small enterprises, and covid-19. Section 1 covered the foundation of exploring strategies that some small business leaders use to remain profitable.

Section 2 covered the reasoning for choosing a qualitative case study design and the critical role of the researcher. This section included the participants, method, population and design, ethical research, data collection instruments and techniques, data analysis, data organization, and the steps to determine the reliability and validity of the study. Section 3 covered the findings, application of professional practice, and implications for positive social change. Also included in Section 3 are the recommendations for action and further research, reflection, and conclusion. At the end of Section 2, I have included the transitional statement to Section 3.

## Section 2: The Project

Section 2 of the project covers the purpose statement, which is re-iterated from Section 1. I will also discuss the role of the researcher and the impact it has on the research. Section 2 also includes a discussion of the participants, including the eligibility of and criteria for selecting participants. The research method and design elaborated further details on the nature of the study. Section 2 includes notes on the research ethics, data collection instruments and techniques, organization techniques, and data analysis. Lastly, reliability and validity and the transition and summary will close the section.

### **Purpose Statement**

This qualitative multiple case study explored the strategies some small business leaders have used to remain profitable during the COVID-19 crisis. The target population consisted of four small business leaders in Florida whose companies have remained profitable despite the pandemic. The implication for positive social change included the potential for small businesses to remain profitable while helping improve and sustain the quality of life of local communities' citizens during current and future global crises.

### **Role of the Researcher**

In a qualitative researcher framework, the role of the researcher is to ask questions, collect data, and identify patterns and themes under a qualitative paradigm; the researcher's concurrent objective is to interpret meaning(s) and report findings (Lahm, 2021). According to Shufutinsky (2020), as the researcher, I am the central instrument in collecting, analyzing, interpreting, and reporting the study findings. Data collection in a

case study includes but is not limited to documents, interviews, and observations (Tomaszewski, 2020).

The basis for this research relied upon the experience of a consumer. COVID-19 has changed how we do business and shop. For one, the lockdown has caused or reduced business operations for small business owners. Places such as beauty salons closed for several months before reopening with specific protocols. Some restaurants closed, while others only provided takeout orders. These actions caused changes and altered lifestyles according to what was happening. The survival of small businesses in this climate was of great interest, causing many to wonder how the businesses survived.

As a researcher, I am legally and ethically responsible for treatment of the research participants (Peterson, 2019). As described in the 1979 Belmont Report, the basic ethical principles governing human subjects' treatment applied to this study. The three principles outlined in the Belmont Report are respect for persons, beneficence, and justice. The Belmont Report also noted the boundaries between practice and research, inferring that it is essential to identify the distinction between biomedical and behavioral research. However, the behavioral aspect dealt with small business leaders' strategies for surviving COVID-19. The report identified the need to assess the scope of the research, informed consent, and provide the participants with an understanding of the research. Understanding the experience as a consumer will help mitigate bias while enduring conscious responses from the respondent (Peterson, 2019). Consumer behavior, criticism, and opinions did not influence the participants.

The interview protocol (Appendix A) was the same for all the participants (Peterson, 2019). The interview protocol setup allows it to feel like a conversation, thus allowing me to collect all the necessary information for the study (Roberts, 2020). The interview protocol also enabled reviewers to judge the open-ended interview questions (Peterson, 2019). Due to the pandemic, participants had the flexibility to do face-to-face, telephone, Facetime, Zoom, or Google Duo interviews (Mirck, 2019).

### **Participants**

The participants met the eligibility requirements within the scope of the population in that they were all small business leaders who used successful strategies to remain profitable during COVID-19. The criterion for this research relied on the size of the organization (less than 50 employees); small business leaders who have owned their business for at least five years and successfully survived the COVID-19 pandemic; and are available and willing to participate in this study (Alves et al., 2020).

Strategies for gaining access to participants included (a) identifying potential participants, (b) contacting, and (c) gaining commitment (Maramwidze-Merrison, 2016). To identify the potential participants, web searches were conducted through the City of Tampa database, Chamber of Commerce, and the City of Tampa Minority Business listings to gain insights about the company. These searches allowed me to choose whose characteristics that are suitable for answering the research questions (Maramwidze-Merrison, 2016).

There are multiple ways to reach business leaders, letters, email, or telephone. The second strategy was to contact the small businesses directly to inform them of the

research purpose (Maramwidze-Merrison, 2016). According to Maramwidze-Merrison (2016), after receiving the initial communication from the respondents, the researcher should introduce persons to the research by sending information packets that include an introductory letter. I did this, providing an information sheet that clearly stated the purpose of the study, a consent form listing their rights, ethical issues, and my contact information.

The last strategy was gaining their commitment to conduct the research (Maramwidze-Merrison, 2016). My learning about the chosen company showed interest in the participant's business and acknowledgement of their struggles during the COVID-19 crisis. According to McGrath et al. (2019), building rapport and establishing comfortable interaction in the qualitative interview situation is essential and is preferably done well in advance of the interview, as well as during the interview. It can also be easier to build a rapport with respondents if the researcher knows them outside of the study (McGrath et al., 2019).

### **Research Method and Design**

Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods are the three primary methodologies used in research (Draper et al., 2021). Rutberg and Bouikidis (2018) shared that qualitative research methodology is often employed when the problem is not well understood, and there is an existing desire to explore the problem thoroughly. Qualitative research is about the specifics rather than the general, which involves human actions and interactions (Kelly, 2017). According to Nassaji (2020), qualitative research is systematic, involving a careful process of identifying the problem, collecting, analyzing,

explaining, evaluating, and interpreting the data. Therefore, qualitative research provided the chance to interview SBE leaders to gain insight and knowledge, as well as to have personal connections as seen from the SBE leader's perspective. The case study design aimed to examine real-life actual research problems and phenomena in detail (Turhan, 2019).

### **Research Method**

According to Mukoka et al. (2021), there are three quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-method research methods. Hamilton and Finley (2019) shared that qualitative methods commonly include individual and focus group interviews, participant observation, ethnography, and several other approaches. In qualitative research, the researcher is both subject and object (Queiros et al., 2017). A qualitative methodology was appropriate for this study because the intention was to explore the strategies small business leaders used to remain profitable during the COVID-19 crisis (Kelly, 2017).

The selection of the qualitative research methodology allows for in-depth details on a particular topic (Rahi, 2017). Orel and Mayerhoffer (2021) explained that qualitative research methods could add context to the investigated subject dynamics and reveal data that would not be obtainable with a quantitative approach. Also, the qualitative approach allows scholars to observe, record, and capture the changing attitudes related to the selected subject (Orel & Mayerhoffer, 2021).

According to Basias and Pollalis (2018), quantitative research involves a systematic and empirical investigation of phenomena through statistics, mathematics, and numerical data processing. A quantitative approach was not appropriate for this study. I



did not test hypotheses but explored business leaders' strategies that enabled them to survive and remain viable during the COVID-19. Researchers used standardized questionnaires or experiments to collect numeric data (Rutberg and Bouikidis, 2018). The basis for quantitative research determines the relationships between variables and outcomes (Rutberg and Bouikidis, 2018). As such, Queiros et al. (2017) explained that quantitative research focuses on objectivity and is especially appropriate when there is a possibility of collecting quantifiable measures of variables and inferences from samples and populations.

The mixed-method approach used words and numbers, as it is not limited to just one data collection method (Rutberg & Bouikidis, 2018). The mixed-method research was not appropriate for this study because addressing the proposed study's purpose does not require using the quantitative method (Maraqaa et al., 2021). According to May et al. (2017), mixed-method research involves a single study incorporating quantitative and qualitative data collection and data analysis techniques. The mixed method allows the researcher to use open and closed-ended questions in response to the research question (Zuma & Khumalo, 2020).

I ensured data saturation to establish rigor, quantity, and quality research. According to Peterson (2019), at the point of saturation, communication has become repetitive, new themes are not likely to emerge with additional participants, and data gathering can cease. In this study, an interview protocol was in place. Each respondent had the opportunity to respond to the same interview questions until the completion of data saturation.

## **Research Design**

Four primary research approaches are commonly used in a qualitative study: case study, ethnography, narrative inquiry, and phenomenology (Tomaszewski, 2020, Pathirana, 2020). In qualitative research, interpreting and applying distinctive designs of its flexible structure are critical components of its approach (Turhan, 2019). The multiple case study design selection allowed me to explore what, how, and why small business leaders remain profitable during the pandemic. According to Heale and Twycross (2017), using a multiple-case research study allowed for a more in-depth understanding of the cases as a unit by comparing similarities and differences embedded within the research.

Ethnography, narrative, and phenomenology research designs do not address the basis of the research. The ethnography design would focus on observing cultural behaviors during the pandemic to understand behaviors within a particular social group; however, this study does not explore participants' cultural behavior. Turhan (2019) shared that this design defines the human behaviors and cultural and symbolic dimensions of these behaviors. At the same time, researchers using this design can observe behaviors directly and designate them accordingly (Turhan, 2019). The narrative researcher seeks to relate personal stories about participants who share their life experiences with the researcher; therefore, the narrative is inappropriate because the participants will not share their personal life experiences (Tomaszewski, 2020). The phenomenological design entails exploring the individual meanings of the experience of those who participated in the phenomenon (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). According to

Turhan (2019), phenomenology asks questions about life experiences and defines a specific phenomenon, rather than generalizing it. Phenomenology was not appropriate for this study because, in this study, I did not focus on an event.

I ensured data saturation in this study to establish the research's rigor, quantity, and quality. Johnson et al. (2020) explained that data saturation occurs when no new information is emerging from data collection, new coding is not feasible, and no new themes are emerging. According to LaDonna et al. (2021), confusion about saturation makes it difficult to determine when (or if) it is reached. Each respondent responded to the same interview questions until the completion of data saturation. Peterson (2019) suggested that it would be wise to continue interviewing beyond saturation because one or more articulate, insightful interviewees may yet appear, contributing to rich and different data.

### **Population and Sampling**

Rahi (2017) defined population as all people or items that one wishes to understand, while sampling selects a population segment for investigation. The population for this multiple case study included small business leaders in Tampa, FL. According to Tomaszewski et al. (2020), there is a commonality among the cases in a multiple case study that enables researchers to analyze and find specific differences that are replicable or transferable to similar contexts. There were four small businesses to research because of their leadership, survival during COVID-19, financial adaptability, and interaction with the community. Rahi (2017) shared that the selection of the sampling method depends on the nature of the research study.

According to Rahi (2017), there were two types of sampling: probability and non-probability sampling. Probability sampling is a sampling approach in which each unit has an equal chance of selection (Rahi, 2017). The non-probability sampling will not provide a basis for any opinion about the likelihood of some aspects of the universe included in the study sample (Ebeto, 2017). The four categories under probability sampling are simple random sampling, systematic random sampling, stratified random sampling, clustering sampling, and multistage sampling. Alternately, non-probability categories include convenience sampling, snowball sampling, quota sampling, and judgment sampling (Rahi, 2017). For this multiple case study, non-probability sampling was used. In numerous case studies, purposive stratified random sampling is one of the most popular sampling methods (Campbell et al., 2020). In stratified sampling, selecting specific types of participants includes them in the final sample (Campbell et al., 2020).

The selection of the sampling method depends on the nature of the study (Rahi, 2017). According to Rutberg (2018), selecting a sample population in qualitative research begins with identifying eligibility to participate in the study based on the research question. According to Sharma (2017), researchers used sampling to select smaller individuals from a defined population. The purposive sampling method is appropriate for this selection of participants. According to Johnson et al. (2020), purposive sampling reflected the intentional choice of research participants to optimize data sources to answer the research question. Pathiramage et al. (2020) noted that data triangulation involved similar findings from several sources to validate the results, and it is the most used in case study research. The sample size consisted of four research participants combined

with the strategy of member checking triangulation to ensure data saturation is complete (Nassaj, 2020). According to Sandu (2018), theoretical saturation is when the introduction of new data (e.g., new interviews) doesn't generate new semantic categories, such as codes and topics. To ensure theoretical saturation, new respondents can be added to the research to ensure the completion of new interviews. Purposive samples are defined based on the study's purpose (Andrade, 2021). Using purposive sampling enabled the researcher to explore the strategies of selected small business leaders and how they remain profitable, particularly the chosen small business leaders with a successful strategy for surviving a crisis.

### **Ethical Research**

The researcher has a crucial role in protecting the participant, as the researcher's legal and ethical responsibility is related to participant relationships (Peterson, 2019). According to Ross et al. (2018), occidental philosophical traditions that hold individual rights paramount are the moral underpinnings of human research participant protections in the United States. According to Ross et al. (2018), consent includes consideration of the requirements of the codes, laws, ethics, and cultural sensitivities of the community in which the research is to study.

There is a process of informed consent when approaching a prospective participant. According to O'Sullivan et al. (2021), informed consent often involves building rapport and trust with the prospective participant. It should also respect cultural and societal norms, such as involving family members and friends. For the study at hand, once the connection was made, and the participants understood the study, they decided

whether they wanted to participate (O'Sullivan et al., 20021). If the participant chose to participate, they will have an informed consent form to sign. The informed consent form described the study's purpose, voluntary nature, risks and benefits, and privacy rules. I used informed consent as a vehicle to protect research subjects, which is the first step to building a rapport and a trusting relationship (Hart-Johnson, 2017). Msoroka and Amundsen (2018) spoke on how the researcher must ensure the research subjects freely give informed consent, preferably in writing.

Researchers run into an ethical dilemma when participants withdraw from the study after already signing up (Othman & Hamid, 2018). It is the responsibility of the researcher to meet with the participants and explain the ethical part of the research. I relayed information to participants, advising them that participation is voluntary, and they had the right to withdraw without penalty. According to Lynch (2019), the fact that research participants have the legal and ethical right to withdraw from a study without harm is a longstanding and widespread principle of ethical research ethic. For this study, the participants could withdraw through written notice or by phone.

Malmqvist (2019) shared a widespread concern that money may persuade people to enroll in a study against their better judgment or undermine the voluntariness of their consent. Identifying the risks of undue influence payments might induce deception among participants (Gelinas et al., 2018). Coercion or undue influence is not helpful in convincing participants to participate in this study. Additionally, the use of pressure may lead to participants being unable to resist the temptation of a large sum of money offered, and thus failing to choose whether to enroll in the study voluntarily (Malmqvist, 2019).

The participants of this study all volunteered to be part of this research. No incentives were offered or given to the participants.

During the interviews, I showed respect and dignity to both the participants and the research process ((Johnson et al., 2020). The confidentiality was relayed to the participants before they signed the informed consent, which protected them from any harm relating to issues of respect and dignity (Johnson et al., 2020). I ensured their identities were unknown and utilized an alphanumeric code such as SBL1 (small business leaders1) to SBL4 to assure them that their identities would be anonymous. I established a climate of trust because I had created a safe space for the respondents to share information (Hart-Johnson, 2017). Keeping the data on removable storage for five years is the allowable storage retention that Walden University allows.

### **Data Collection Instruments**

According to Shufutinsky (2020), the researcher is the main instrument of the research, collecting, analyzing, interpreting, and reporting the study findings. The researcher is the instrument, and data are constantly analyzed to identify the start of the study (Rutberg & Bouikidis, 2018). In qualitative research, data collection tools consisted of documents, interviews, observations, field notes, and diaries (Tomaszewski et al., 2020, Nassaji, 2020). Barrett and Twycross (2018) stated that the standard qualitative research method is the semi-structured interview, in which core elements of the phenomenon study inquire about the interviewer. Using open-ended semi-structured interview questions allows for the gathering of participants' responses. The responses from the participants served as the secondary data collection for the research. In this

qualitative study, an open-ended question design approach is most suitable for data collection (Durmic, 2020).

To address the research question, qualitative research interviewing is a tool that is useful in a range of methodological approaches (McGrath et al., 2019). Conducting semi-structured interviews allowed for the opportunity to obtain quality data from the participants. According to DeJonckheere and Vaughn (2019), conducting compelling semi-structured interviews requires; a) rational focus, including active engagement and curiosity, and (b) practice of the skills of interviewing. There are three things a researcher wants during the semi-structured interview; a) collective qualitative data and open-ended data, 2) to explore participant thoughts, feelings, and beliefs about a particular topic, and 3) to delve into personal, sometimes sensitive issues (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019).

Audio recording is another instrument to use during the interview. Before the audio recording begins, permission from the participants should have happened to record the interview. According to DeJonckheere and Vaughn (2019), participants' awareness of audio recording is essential in data collection, and they can refuse to be audio-recorded should they prefer. Video conference is another instrument to consider in gathering data from the participant. The participants can do a video conference since there are concerns about the pandemic. Platforms such as Skype, Zoom, and Google Duo offer the ability to communicate in real-time with geographically dispersed individuals via computer, tablet, or mobile device (Archibald et al., 2019).

Member checking enhanced the reliability and validity of data collection.

Transcribing and analyzing the data collected through video or voice recording will



ensure accuracy. By doing so, the respondents had the opportunity to review the transcribed data for validity and reliability. In member checking, the participants reviewed the researchers' interpretation of the interview data (Johnson et al., 2019). According to McGrath (2019), member checking, also known as respondent validation or participant validation, can be used as part of the trustworthiness in qualitative data-driven explorations.

### **Data Collection Technique**

This multiple case study explored the strategies some small business leaders used to remain profitable during the COVID-19 crisis and to answer the research question: what strategies did some small business leaders used to stay profitable during the COVID-19 crisis? Tomaszewski et al. (2020) stated that one must investigate the perceptions of diverse participants, collect multiple types of evidence, and pay careful attention to the context in which all aspects of the study are embedded; in other words, triangulate data. According to Turhan (2019), the data collection technique used for the five research designs is observation, interview, and document analysis. Other data collection techniques include video conferencing and audio recording. There are several methods to collect data in qualitative research. The interview is the most common method, and it has two popular forms: structured and semi-structured (Turhan, 2019).

Letters was sent (Appendix B) to participants inviting them to participate in the study. The inclusion of the informed consent form (Appendix C) with the letter allowed the participants to fill out the form ahead of the interview. Those who returned the responses received a follow-up phone call or an email to confirm the interview's time,

venue, and date. Per DeJonckheere and Vaughn (2019), the interview schedule will be pre-arranged, and it was at a convenient time and location. The interview location was private, ideally behind closed doors rather than in a public place (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). Quietness during the interview is essential because the respondents can speak without interruption, and it is quiet enough to hear and record the interview (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019).

Before the interview begins, I explained why the respondents participated in this study. I informed the participant that the interview will be audio-recorded or recorded through a social platform such as Zoom or Google Duo. The participant could deny or accept the recording. Each respondent will receive a copy of the informed consent form, the acceptance letter to participate in the study, and the interview questions. At the end of the interview, their identities were kept anonymous.

Interviews can present several challenges to researchers (Barrett & Twycross, 2018). According to Barrett and Twycross (2018), most interviews are recorded and need transcribing before analyzing. Also, interviews present the problem of bias; the researcher needs to avoid leading questions or providing non-verbal signals that might influence the participants' responses (Barrett & Twycross, 2018). Zoom challenges, such as call connectivity, audio or video reliability, and quality, can hinder the participant interview. The critical advantage of Zoom is the ability to securely record and store sessions without recourse to third-party software (Archibald et al., 2019). Convenience is a benefactor of video conferencing that allows participants to do video conferences from home, business, or anywhere (Archibald et al., 2019). Time effectiveness allows the

participants to use the platform between their busy schedules. Zoom challenges, such as call connectivity, audio or video reliability, and quality, can hinder the participant interview. The respondents will review the audio and video transcripts for reliability and validity in member checking.

The advantage of the data collection technique is that it allowed an effective way to collect open-ended questions through interviews (Dejonckheere & Vaughn, 2018). Video conferencing gives a rapport between the interviewer and participant and its convenience and simplicity. Another advantage of videoconferencing is that it is more user-friendly than web conferencing, such as Skype (Archibald et al., 2019). The disadvantage to the data collection technique is that it is hard to engage in conversation, or the participant is reluctant to share information (Dejonckheere & Vaughn, 2018). Another disadvantage is not having a well-developed interview guide (Dejonckheere & Vaughn, 2018). The last drawback is that transcribing data can be time-consuming (Barrett & Twycross, 2018).

### **Data Organization Technique**

According to Pathiranage et al. (2020), the data organization technique used for this study involved establishing and filing electronic data in a secured external data storage. I transcribed the recorded interview and responses in the Office 365 Microsoft Word document and save the documentation on an external hard drive. To further organize the data, spreadsheets served as a multipurpose tool for data entry, storage, analysis, and visualization (Broman & Woo, 2018). Office 365 Excel spreadsheet served

as a log to hold the information from the interview, including identification numbers of the respondents for this study, time, venue, and participant responses.

Furthermore, I ensured the data transcripts are similar, they all will have the same format (Watkins, 2017). Also, the interview data created themes that the excel spreadsheet will serve as a log for this data. The external drive for the soft and hard copies served as storage. According to Walden University, data will be stored and kept for five years. Any documentation saved on the computer memory and deleted, and hard copies and any physical evidence will also be shredded.

### **Data Analysis**

According to Ebneyamini (2018), data analysis involved examining, categorizing, tabulating, or otherwise recombining the evidence to address the initial propositions. In addition, Tomaszewski (2020) shared that there are four approaches to the research design when conducting the data analysis. Researchers need to code, sort, and identify themes and relationships from data. There are several approaches to identifying themes: group discussion of salient themes, comparisons of coded data to develop elegant themes, combining related codes into pieces, or extracting themes from codes.

Qualitative data analysis describes as a non-linear process (Lester et al., 2020). A qualitative case study uses a few different techniques to generate knowledge from the qualitative data (KeKeya, 2021). I provided a logical and sequential process from the data collected through semi-structured interviews (Kocoglu & Tekdal, 2020). Interview hours or focus groups, pages of observational notes, and countless documents are retrievable during the data collection. I used the data analysis outlined by Creswell and Creswell

(2018): Organize and prepare the data for analysis, read, and start coding all the data, generate descriptions and themes, and represent the description and themes.

There are four types of triangulations: Data triangulation, triangulation of observer, triangulation of method, and triangulation of theory (KeKeya, 2021). KeKeya (2021) referred to data triangulation as multiple data gathered from more than one place, with many participants, over a more extended period, to see the reliability, while triangulation of observer concerns many researchers and their observations of the same phenomenon of the study. Stenfors et al. (2020) stated that the credibility of the research demands that the methodology chosen should be clarified and justified. I used the triangulation method (Korstjens, 2018). Korstjens (2018) shared that method triangulation is used by gathering data utilizing different data collection methods such as in-depth interviews, focus groups and discussions, and field notes.

### **Preparing and Organizing the Data for Analysis**

Designing and managing the data analysis involved gathering all the audio- or video-recorded interview files into one location, converting observational notes to electronic format, and scanning documents retrieved in paper form. I transcribed the audio and video recorded interviews in the NVivo Software (Dehgani, 2020).

Transcription is an opportunity to become familiar with a data set (Lester et al., 2020).

### **Read or Look at All Data.**

According to Lester et al. (2020), researchers must become familiar with the collected data. Once data is organized and transcribed, it is clever to become familiar with the corpus of data so that a researcher knows the limitations or gaps in the collected

information (Lester et al., 2020). Bijani et al. (2021) reflected that reading the transcripts several times will understand the participants' statements according to the study objectives. The reading of transcripts involved reading word by word with great care and patience (Bijani et al., 2021).

### **Coding the Data**

Researchers are required during the data analysis to review notes and begin to code data for categorization (Renz et al., 2018). Lekan (2021) shared that coding is reduced into manageable units and categorized for meaningful uses. I used a variety of approaches in combining the data analysis. The method involved combining CAQDAS (NVivo) with traditional materials of coding (colored pens, paper, and display boards) (Maher et al., 2018). According to Maher et al. (2018), the visual analysis and mapping of modes of interaction and cognition afforded by the different approaches highlighted the increased opportunity for imperative insight leading to a more rigorous analysis procedure.

### **Generate Descriptions and Themes**

According to Morgan (2018), themes are the most usual format for reporting results. In speaking, researchers construct themes to present the core patterns they interpret data (Morgan, 2018). According to Lekan et al. (2021), topical areas emerge, and themes are formed by collapsing and expanding categories. Once the themes have emerged, two steps involve; 1) the researcher must bring together various related categories which recognize the similarities, differences, and relationships across categories; and 2) with these acknowledgments, the researcher then assigns a statement to

these categories called themes (Lester et al., 2020). I ensured that the themes aligned with the conceptual or analytical goals of the study; and are designed in response to the study's primary research questions or focus (Lester et al., 2020). The focus of the key themes is to extract them from the interviews to meet the primary goal of this study, unveiling and interpreting the lived experience of small business leaders' strategies during COVID-19 (Jamil et al., 2021).

### **Representing the Description and Themes**

Johnson et al. (2020) stated that the discussion should close the loop by integrating study results and analysis with the original conceptual framework. I interpreted the data collected (interviews) and, from the content, determined the pattern (themes, concepts) by using emergent context to answer the research question and achieve the primary purpose of the research endeavor (Johnson et al., 2020). In addition, the interpretation of the study results will enhance the understanding of the targeted phenomena.

NVivo software provided a workspace for researchers to store, manage, query, and analyze unstructured data, including text, images, audio, video, and other data types (Phillips & Liu, 2018). According to Alam (2020), NVivo is known for its flexibility in categorizing the rich-text data and improving the generated results' quality. NVivo saves time and effort in analyzing data manually (Alam, 2020).

### **Reliability and Validity**

Validity and reliability are two critical factors when evaluating the logical statements of a research design (Pathiranage, 2020). Reliability and validity are indicative

characteristics when conducting rigorous qualitative research (Eldh et al., 2020). Maher et al. (2018) shared that trustworthiness is considered a more appropriate criterion for evaluating qualitative studies. Therefore, I will review the interview questions for validation to ensure reliability and dependability.

### **Reliability**

According to Collingridge and Gant (2019), reliability in qualitative research typically refers to adopting research methods acceptable by the research community as legitimate ways of collecting and analyzing data. Collingridge and Gant (2019) also shared those reliable qualitative methods consistently produce detailed and meaningful descriptions of phenomena. It is important to note that the qualitative concept of reliability does not minimize the importance of finding equivalent results given similar research settings (Collingridge & Gant, 2019). Reliability refers to how one will address dependability. Some ways to enhance the study's trustworthiness are member checking of data interpretation, transcript review, pilot test, expert validation of the interview questions, interview protocol, focus group protocol, direct or participant protocol, etc. (Collingridge & Gant, 2019). Hayashi et al. (2019) reflect that reliability assesses the consistency of results over time.

**Dependability.** According to Johnson et al. (2020), applying rigor and adherence to systematic processes well-documented in an audit trail is essential due to qualitative studies' creative illustration and contextually bound nature. Dependability in qualitative research indicated that the study should report so that others can arrive at similar



interpretations if they review the data (Nassaji, 2020). Also, dependability ensures the process sufficiently facilitates another researcher to repeat the work (Maher et al., (2018).

### **Validity**

Collingridge and Gant (2019) referred to validity as the extent to which research measures what it purports to measure. Qualitative study validity relates to the findings' credibility, transferability, and conformality. Strategies to ensure credibility consists of prolonged engagement, persistent observation, triangulation, and member checking (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Data triangulation is a technique used to establish a chain of evidence, and the researcher reviewed the case study to validate its credibility.

**Creditability.** Nassaji (2020) shared that the principle of credibility in qualitative research concerns the extent to which the research findings and conclusions reviews are believable. Biases and other confounders identify and address the process of demonstrating credibility (Johnson et al., 2020). Thereby, the researcher needs to ensure that their understanding of the research participants, context, and processes are as accurate and complete as possible and that the impetrations are inclusive (Nassaji, 2020). To ensure the credibility of the research, it will rely on the participant responses (Kekeya, 2021).

The second strategy is to use a member check to review the researcher's interpretation of the interview data. Stenfors et al. (2020) stated that saturation or data sufficiency are familiar terms to indicate credibility, suggesting that enough data identify all relevant aspects to answer the research question. In addition, in some studies, the analysis's credibility should be enhanced through member reflections, which means the

preliminary findings go to the participants for input and elaboration (Stenfors et al., 2020).

**Transferability.** Nassaji (2020) said that transferability concerns how researchers' interpretations or conclusions are transferable to other similar contexts. According to Peterson (2019), the researcher's responsibility is to provide enough information about context, participants, data gathering, and data analysis to guide other scholars in replicating the study. Therefore, this requires a thorough and rich description of the research activities (Nassaji, 2020). This implies that the reader, not the researcher makes the transferability judgment because they do not know their specific settings (Kostjens & Moser, 2018). To ensure transferability, I provided a comprehensive description of the subject of the study, the participants' characteristics, and methods of data collection and analysis, along with documented examples of the participants' quotes (Bijani et al., 2021).

**Confirmability.** Nassaj (2020) stated that conformability concerns how others confirm the researcher's interpretations and conclusions. However, in qualitative research, confirmability can be established by describing the data and the findings so that others can verify their accuracy (Nassaj, 2020). Confirmability included a judgment about the appropriateness of labeling themes or categories, the quality of the analysis, and how the findings fit the data. Pathiranage et al. (2020) shared that the data's conformability must validate by avoiding biases during the data collection process. I ensured data saturation by keeping an audit trail and rationalizing all the steps, data coding, and analysis (Nassaj, 2020).

### **Transition and Summary**

The research design and method show the rationale for selecting the case study design, which explores the strategies for sustaining the profitability of small businesses during COVID-19. The key points of Section 2 of the study included the description of the role of the researcher, participants, and the selection of the purposeful sample technique—the data collection process structures around the semi-structured interview questions. The emphasis on these questions relied on the reliability and validity of the research and the ethical aspect. Section 3 presented the research findings and implications for social change through professional practice. Lastly, I explained the data collection instruments, techniques, and data analysis of the study. Recommendations for action and further research rely upon the study research.

### Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative multiple-case study was to explore small business leaders' strategies to remain profitable during the COVID-19 crisis. The findings of this study revealed that small business leaders' strategies helped them survive the COVID-19 crisis. Through methodological triangulation and thematic analysis, five themes emerged from this study: a) CDC guidelines, b) changes in the world, c) challenges, d) survival, and d) profitability. A key recommendation from the results for small business leaders is to optimize strategies that will enable them to be profitable during a health crisis.

#### **Presentation of the Findings**

The overarching research question of the study is as follows: What strategies have some small business leaders used to remain profitable during the COVID-19 crisis? I used purposeful sampling to select the participants for this study and conducted four face-to-face semi-structured interviews with small business leaders. I achieved data saturation by conducting multiple interviews with research participants until new information was exhausted (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). The findings of this study confirmed that small businesses lacked the strategies for a health crisis prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Small businesses did whatever they could to remain open to meet their customers' needs.

I have conducted phone calls and visits to the small businesses I interviewed. The follow-up process consisted of reviewing field notes from each establishment. I also reviewed public company records provided by small business leaders. Member checking consisted of participants reviewing the excel spreadsheet where their responses were

recorded for reliability. The purpose of member checking is for participants to check for accuracy, and possibly to encourage an alternate interpretation (Candela, 2019).

Afterward, I used NVivo 12 to organize and code the data and used the Microsoft Excel spreadsheet to analyze the data resulting in five constructs from a thematic analysis shown in Table 2. Researchers used qualitative software to document reliability, rigor, and replicability when intentionally utilized (Allsop et al., 2022). Figure 2 shows the frequency of participants whose responses resulted in the five themes.

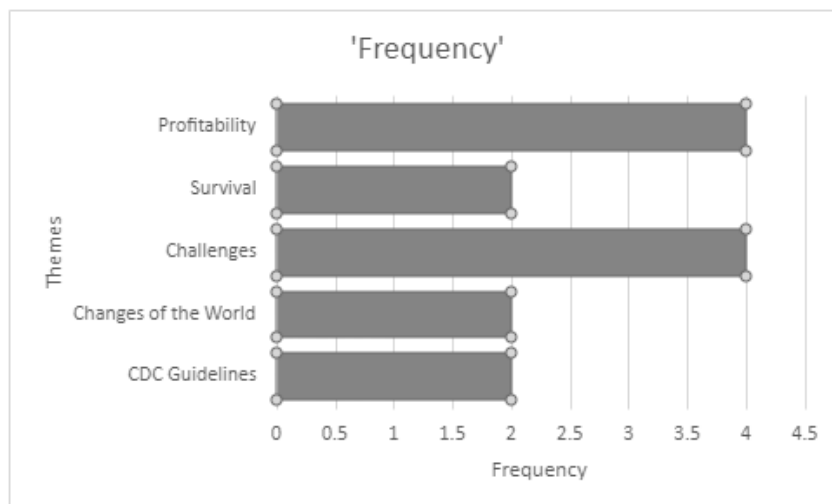
**Table 2**

*Emergent Themes, Key Words*

| <b>Themes</b>        | <b>Key Words</b>  |
|----------------------|---|
| CDC Guidelines       | Social distancing, sanitizing, mask-wearing                 |
| Changes in the World | Society, participant  |
| Challenges           | Time constraints, no employees, no parts, losing employees, |
| Survival             | Livelihood, focus, survival of the fittest                  |
| Profitability        | Money, profitability, diversification                       |

## Figure 1

### *Frequency of Themes*



The conceptual framework for this qualitative multiple case study was the authentic leadership theory developed by Bill George (2004). The authentic leadership theory was used to analyze the findings by its constructs and to identify themes for translation of the results (McPherson et al., 2022). During this pandemic, a practical explanation of the impact of authentic leadership on small business leaders indirectly affects hope during the COVID-19 trying times (Anwar et al., 2020). The response from the semi-structured interviews supports the literature that you must be authentic in your own way and are different from other types of leaders in certain aspects (Shahzad et al., 2021). For data collection through semi-structured interviews, and to ensure methodological triangulation, I used the CDC guidelines offered by each participant. Triangulation is a cross-validation technique that can enhance the trustworthiness of

research findings (Davidov et al., 2020). The different resources allowed me to understand the phenomena of each participant.

### **Emergent Theme 1: CDC Guidelines**

A thematic analysis of the participants' answers to questions 1, 6, and 8 revealed that participants followed CDC guidelines. Following these guidelines allowed them to stay open for business. This means that for them, following the CDC protocol was for themselves as well as their customers, even if the guidelines changed the way they do business. Small businesses incurred additional costs to provide their business premises and workplaces safe from COVID-19 infections for both customers and employees (Hu & Kee, 2022).

An authentic leader collaborates and co-creates with others to bring the changes needed to flourish in these difficult times (Vitello-Cicciu, 2019). For example, one respondent revealed that he “started making appointments for his customers.” This helped with social distancing and meant no one was waiting for service. Vasilyeva et al. (2020) explained social distancing affected labor supply and economic activity. Another participant indicated that he “only dealt with the people he had to do business with.” SBL2 revealed, “before he serviced a customer's car, he wiped down everything, and customers had to wear a mask.” Crayne & Medeiros (2020) explained that leaders used actions, social distancing, mask-wearing, or seeking medical treatment to keep their employees safe as well as workers. SBL3 revealed his business imposed “working from home to keep employees safe.” All the companies had CDC guidelines posted at their establishments to protect themselves, their workers, and their customers.

**Emergent Theme 2: Changes in the World**

SBL1 shared that “you must change with the world.” SBL2 shares, “as the world changes, you change.” This thought process was due to the way business was being conducted. Authentic leadership represents a focus on self-development where individual innovation behaviors and practices mirror with work of self-awareness (Kelly et al., 2020). SBL2 shared that “you must listen to the leaders in your society. They have your best interest at heart.” The participants did not elaborate on the changes in the world. According to Larsson et al. (2021), authentic leadership represents legitimate follower perceptions of a leader's authenticity, which are activated by moral judgment. As such, the leadership process begins with the leader's values which are expressed through behaviors (Larsson et al., 2021).

**Emergent Theme 3: Challenges**

The four participants came from four different industries, yet all faced challenges and found it difficult to do business in the present as compared to the past. Participants faced many challenges during COVID-19 in response to question #2. Alstadsaeter (2020) explained the challenges caused lockdowns, businesses to close, and services relying on physical proximity overnight. Each respondent's challenges were complex, despite what the world was facing. Authentic leaders' one true self calls for a balance of how they express something of the complexity of competing for emotional and bodily reactions, which is experienced as leaderly (Larsson et al., 2021).

SBL1 shared that “going to a business to pick up freight was difficult, especially going from one side of Florida to the other side of Florida.” He countered employees



were not working, and freight was locked up. This action caused the participant to call ahead before they reached their destination to ensure someone was there, and that freight would be accessible to them. Delivery of parts helps speed up the repair process, and the participant faced delays in getting the job done. SBL2 shared that auto parts were not being delivered in their line of business because there were no drivers to drop off parts.” This caused a delay in repairing a customer's vehicle. The participant also revealed that they “had to go to the stores and get parts. When they went to pick up parts, parts were not in stock”.

SBL3 shared that “losing employees was a challenge.” Losing employees caused the participant to do more in their establishment than ever. Additionally, the choice to let staff go was not an easy thing, especially knowing they needed their jobs and had families; however, at the time of COVID, the business was not actively receiving many new clients. SBL3 did not have any money to pay themselves. SBL4 shared that he had to “diversify the clientele.” They found this to be difficult because most staff worked from home. In addition, as a small business, they did not have the resources to provide distant training for employees adjusting to remote work. The participants’ sales models had always been built on personal connections and networking. Not attending events made finding new business difficult.

#### **Emergent Theme 4: Survival**

Even though the pandemic changed how businesses did things, they must continue striving and moving forward. Survival was the key to getting through the pandemic financially. SBL1 shared, “to get through these times, you must have the right

frame of mind.” SBL2 revealed he had no choice but to stay open; “that was his livelihood.” SBL3 shared that, “survival is of the fittest. The strong survive.”

Authenticity is demonstrated by ensuring that the action correlates with how it presents itself internally and externally (Bradford, 2021).

### **Emergent Theme 5: Profitability**

As far as profitability among these four small business leaders, some made a profit, and some remained the same. SBL1 shared that “no other freight companies were picking up or delivering. COVID-19 kept them home and safe.” SBL2 shared that he “could not shut down his business because that was the only means of support.” SBL3 did not make a profit; “they broke even.” SBL4 shared that “diversification to eCommerce was [their] key to profitability.” They also revealed that they looked at “who was open and close to drive up sales.”

To survive in the unprecedented times of COVID, businesses had to be profitable to achieve their objectives (Amoa-Gyarteng & Dhilwayo, 2022). Based on the literature, profitability depends on managerial decisions (Amoa-Gyarteng & Dhilwayo, 2022). During a crisis, authentic leaders can stay focused on long-term results, values, and mission as beacons in a storm (Schlak et al., 2021).

The findings also revealed that the participants do not want to go through another health crisis or any similar phenomenon. SBL3 indicated that “many people in [his] industry did not make it.” The participant also shared that, “strategies did not help businesses.” Overall, the critical factor for all these participants was to stay healthy and follow CDC guidelines.

### **Applications to Professional Practice**

The excellent business practice involved understanding and applying methods that align with small business leaders' decisions to ensure success and profitability during a health crisis. The specific business problem is that some small business leaders lack the strategies to remain profitable during the covid-19 crisis. Authentic leadership (AL) strategy is based on the leader's self-awareness, values, and causes (Iqbal et al., 2022). One approach is focusing on the CDC guidelines to ensure employees are healthy and able to work. Efforts should focus on creating a plan for future health crises that promotes profitability.

Strategies can help shape future evidence-informed policy decisions regarding optimal organization and management (Pulido-Fuentes et al., 2022). Business organizational structures should be reassessed to ensure adequate response to current and future pandemics (Pulido-Fuentes et al., 2022). The findings may enable business leaders to focus on their authenticity as leaders, which promotes self-awareness to identify effective ways to remain profitable.

According to Iqbal et al. (2022), effective leadership makes a difference between the success and failure of a business. Small businesses need to rethink their business-as-usual leadership toward new regular management practices for corporate sustainability to survive and thrive for future success (Suriyankletkaew, 2022). The findings of this study also underlined the importance of practical strategies and decisions leaders must make during a health crisis. This study served as future research works on authentic leadership strategies for maintaining profitability during Covid-19.

### **Implications for Social Change**

The Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in organizations closing their doors, filing for bankruptcy, laying off employees, and operating their businesses with challenges impacting their livelihood and customers (Cote, 2022). The implication for social change includes providing employment opportunities to the community. Small businesses are a source of employment, competitiveness, economic vitality, and innovation; they increase entrepreneurial capacity and expand professional skill sets (Delima, 2022).

The implication for positive social change included the potential for small businesses to remain profitable and help improve and sustain the quality of life of local communities' citizens during the current and local global crisis. The expectation is that small businesses increased their debt because government programs facilitate loans to support small businesses' lower operational activity. Findings from this study may help reduce employment rates and help communities recover their economy (Tang et al., 2022). Applying the strategies and actions from this study will enable business leaders to remain profitable.

### **Recommendations for Action**

Literature has revealed that the pandemic has heavily paralyzed the normal operations of various businesses (Nyoni & Kaushal, 2022). I identified three recommendations from this study that will benefit today's and future small business leaders. The recommendations include a) leadership, b) preparedness, and 3) effective strategies

The first recommendation is that small business leaders need to consider authentic leadership as a choice when dealing with a crisis. Leadership is vital in imparting a culture that embraces authenticity (Nyoni & Kaushal, 2022). The authentic leadership style will bring about a positive behavior that will re-enforce the follower relationship. The effectiveness of this leadership is critical to knowledge management as it encourages critical thinking (Nyoni & Kaushal, 2022).

The findings revealed that an exceptional leader must deal with employees and other issues during a crisis. The literature review and speaking to the participants indicate that authentic leadership is the right leadership style. Authentic leaders do not publicize their status as a leader, however; leaders value the interest of their subordinates (Iqbal et al., 2022). Authentic leaders are not passive recipients of environmental and social inputs (Iqbal, 2022).

The second recommendation from the findings is for small leaders to have a preparedness plan. Managers can actively shape and mitigate the pandemic's devastating effect through the right and timely decisions (Ammirato et al., 2021). Pandemic preparedness can improve businesses' comprehensive multi-level response plan that centers on equity (Cunningham-Evers et al., 2022). Small businesses must be equipped with the necessary information, resources, and organizational systems to assist in a health crisis (Cunningham-Erves et al., 2022).

Small business leaders' responses revealed that unpreparedness for a health crisis is due to a lack of strategies. Small business leaders must be more equipped with a robust

strategy to help guide and direct them through a crisis. Participants do not wish to go through another crisis like the covid-19.

The final recommendation is for small business leaders to have effective strategies for any global crisis. Strategies should be defined to support their small businesses, thus, revitalizing the economy (Dias et al., 2022). It is critical to select strategies best suited to the needs of their industries (Dias et al., 2022). Also, business leaders should adopt innovative business models and strategies for business survival, growth, and sustainability (Nani & Ndlovu, 2022).

The study findings showed participants had a unique way of dealing with the pandemic despite lockdowns, businesses closing, and workforce reduction. Small business leaders need to revisit their strategic plans to ensure their businesses are ready to face a future crisis. Business leaders need to optimize strategies that will enable them to remain profitable and stay afloat during a crisis.

I will disseminate the findings from this study through scholarly articles. I invited the research participants to read the complete doctoral research. I aim to take the information I have gathered and speak to potential small business leaders about strategies and preparedness for a global crisis.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

This multiple case study explored some small business leaders' strategies to remain profitable during the covid-19 crisis. The targeted population comprised four small business leaders in Tampa, FL. The participant in this study provided a wealth of information that was straightforward and to the point. The responses were interesting,

keeping me interested in what they had to say. I used methodological triangulation based on the participant's responses with reviews from updated peer-reviewed articles. The validation process concludes that there is room for further research studies.

Recommendation for further research included a more comprehensive analysis of authentic leadership theory. Future researchers should investigate authentic leadership theory and its effectiveness on small business leaders.

The limitation of the study consisted of a small sample size. The sampling may need to narrow down to one industry, not multiple sectors. Researchers should explore a focus group to observe the participants' reactions to how the pandemic affected them. Researchers may want to use the quantitative or mixed-method approach to get a more rigorous study.

### **Reflections**

In collecting the data and analyses, although I knew two participants outside of the study, I did not let personal bias or preconceived ideas and values influence my thinking under this study. I could focus on the research questions and be attentive to the responses. I encountered some challenges in getting the participant to participate in this study. I was unsuccessful when I sent out 20 to 30 emails, made phone calls, and even visited some business establishments.

I didn't realize my struggle was due to the PPP (Paycheck Protection Program). The PPP was a loan that kept businesses running and ensured employees received a paycheck. This program was through the federal government. In evaluating and assessing why participants did not want to participate, they probably thought I was from some

government agency trying to find out about their business. For example, one owner I called wanted to know how I got her number, who I was, and why I was reaching out. I have received many responses like this, concluding they all were afraid. In the end, a friend, a small business owner in the Tampa Bay area, ran interference for me.

Overall, I learned a lot throughout this study. I found a new respect for small business leaders in researching the literature. The small hardship that business went through to remain profitable was breathtaking. It takes consideration for an authentic leader to survive these unprecedented times.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the impact of covid-19 had a vast and traumatic effect on small business leaders and the world. Following the CDC guidelines allowed the four business leaders to remain profitable during covid-19. It allowed them to keep employees employed while staying in business.

Organizations strive to survive in this increasingly volatile environment. Two questions are pertinent to the researcher and practitioner (Xie et al., 2022). First question, how can employees' function under the pandemic threat? Second, what essential resources might enable business owners to be resilient in times of global danger (Xie et al., 2022)?



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## Appendix A: Interview Protocol

| <b>Interview Protocol</b>   |  |
|---|--|
| <b>What you will do</b>   | <b>What you will say—script</b>  |
| Introduce the interview and set the stage—often over a meal or coffee   | Script: Thank you for taking the opportunity to participate in this study. There are eight questions that I will ask during this interview. May I have your permission to take notes as we go along. The questions are pertaining to the strategies of small business leaders and how they remain profitable during covid-19.  |
| Ask the participant will it be okay to record this interview?   | I would like to record this interview. Do I have your permission to do so?   |
| Ensure the confidentiality of the study and ask the participant to sign the consent form.   | The study is strictly confidential, and any information obtained will be for that purpose.   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Watch for non-verbal queues</li> <li>• Paraphrase as needed</li> <li>• Ask follow-up probing questions to get more in depth</li> </ul> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What strategies have you used to remain profitable during the COVID-19 crisis?</li> <li>2. What key challenges did you face in implementing these strategies?</li> <li>3. How did you address the key challenges in implementing these strategies?</li> <li>4. How have these strategies prepared you for future health crises?</li> <li>5. As a small business leader, how did you measure the effectiveness of the strategies during COVID-19?</li> <li>6. What strategies were most effective in helping you remain profitable during the pandemic?</li> <li>7. How did the pandemic influence the development of your strategies?</li> </ol> |

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|  |   |
|--|---|
| Wrap up interview thanking participant       | What else can you share with me about developing and implementing your organization's strategies for profitability during a pandemic? Thank you again for taking the opportunity to speak with me discussing your strategies. |
| Schedule follow-up member checking interview | I would like to schedule a meeting or phone conversation to have you check and confirm that I have accurately captured all the answers you provided to the questions I asked. When would be a good time to meet again?        |

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## Appendix B: Participation Letter Invitation

Dear Potential Participant:

My name is Veronica Lee, a doctoral researcher at Walden University pursuing a Doctor of Business Administration degree in Self-Design (Leadership & Management). I am conducting study research on *Strategies for Sustaining the Profitability of Small Businesses During Covid-19*. The qualifications include the size of the business (50 or less employees), successfully survived the covid-19 pandemic, least in business for five years and who have a business in Tampa, FL.

I am requesting your participation in the research studies for *Sustaining the Profitability of Small Businesses During Covid-19*. This interview process will include:

- Face-to-Face, Zoom, Google Duo or Facetime. There are a minimum eight open ended questions aimed at exploring strategies leaders us to remain profitable during covid-19. The interview will be about 45 minutes to hour or less and audio recorded, or video recorded. The interview date and venue are at your discretion and convenience.
- Follow-up meeting will be by phone or face to face to share in the research findings with you and seek your opinion regarding the data collection process and the interpretation and conclusion of the findings.

In addition, I will send you a consent form that you will need to reply with the words, *I consent*, thus agreeing to the terms. Please understand, that your participation in this study is voluntary and there are no cash incentives for your participation. You may refuse to participate or withdraw from this study at any time with no penalty.

Any information obtained during the study will be confidential. I will not use your personal information for any purposes outside the study. To avoid disclosures of your identities, I will reference your name by codes.

Best Regards,

Veronica Lee

## Appendix C: Informed Consent Form

### CONSENT FORM

You are invited to take part in a research study about start strategies for sustaining the profitability of small businesses during covid-19. This form is part of a process called “informed consent” to allow you to understand this study before deciding whether to take part.

This study seeks four volunteers who are:

- Small business leaders who used successful strategies to remain profitable during covid-19
- Who has less than 50 employees

This study is being conducted by a researcher named Veronica Lee, who is a at Walden University.

#### **Study Purpose:**

The purpose of this study is to explore the strategies some small business leaders have used to remained profitable during the covid-19 crisis.

#### **Procedures:**

This study will involve you completing the following steps:

- take part in a confidential, audio recorded interview (phone option available, Zoom, Google Duo, or Teams Meeting) (1 hour)
- review a typed transcript of your interview to make corrections if needed (email option available) (10 minutes)
- speak with the researcher one more time after the interview to hear the researcher’s interpretations and share your feedback (this is called member checking and it takes 20-30 minutes, phone option available)

Here are some sample questions:

1. What strategies have you used to remain profitable during the COVID-19 crisis?
2. What key challenges did you face in implementing these strategies?

#### **Voluntary Nature of the Study:**

Research should only be done with those who freely volunteer. So everyone involved will respect your decision to join or not. \_\_\_\_

If you decide to join the study now, you can still change your mind later. You may stop at any time. **“Please note that not all volunteers will be contacted to take part.”**

**Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:**

Being in this study could involve some risk of the minor discomforts that can be encountered in daily life such as sharing sensitive information. With the protections in place, this study would pose minimal risk to your wellbeing.

This study offers no direct benefits to individual volunteers. The aim of this study is to benefit society by providing strategies to remain profitable during a health crisis. Once the analysis is complete, the researcher will share the overall results by emailing a summary.

**Payment:**

There is none.

**Privacy:**

The researcher is required to protect your privacy. Your identity will be kept confidential, within the limits of the law. The researcher is only allowed to share your identity or contact info as needed with Walden University supervisors (who are also required to protect your privacy) or with authorities if court-ordered (very rare). The researcher will not use your personal information for any purposes outside of this research project. Also, the researcher will not include your name or anything else that could identify you in the study reports. If the researcher were to share this dataset with another researcher in the future, the dataset would contain no identifiers so this would not involve another round of obtaining informed consent. Data will be kept secure by codes in place of names. Data will be kept for a period of at least 5 years, as required by the university.

**Contacts and Questions:**

You can ask questions of the researcher by email at [REDACTED]. If you want to talk privately about your rights as a participant or any negative parts of the study, you can call Walden University's Research Participant Advocate at 612-312-1210. Walden University's approval number for this study is [REDACTED]. It expires on [REDACTED].

You might wish to retain this consent form for your records. You may ask the researcher or Walden University for a copy at any time using the contact info above.

**Obtaining Your Consent**

If you feel you understand the study and wish to volunteer, please indicate your consent by signing below.

Printed Name of Participant

Date of consent

Participant's Signature

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Researcher's Signature

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## Appendix D: Interview Questions

1. What strategies have you used to remain profitable during the COVID-19 crisis?
2. What key challenges did you face in implementing these strategies?
3. How did you address the key challenges in implementing these strategies?
4. How have these strategies prepared you for future health crises?
5. As a small business leader, how did you measure the effectiveness of the strategies during COVID-19?
6. What strategies were most effective in helping you remain profitable during the pandemic?
7. How did the pandemic influence the development of your strategies?
8. What else can you share with me about developing and implementing your organization's strategies for profitability during a pandemic?