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Strategies to Sustain Small Businesses in the Texas Retail Fashion Beyond 5 Years

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Abstract

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Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

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Abstract

Owners of small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) confront different hurdles, including difficulties with business registration, a lack of government support, and bureaucracy, thus, may require different strategies to achieve business longevity. The strategies that SME owners use to sustain their businesses past 5 years, a critical benchmark, are not fully understood, the purpose of this study was to explore strategies SME owners use to sustain their business operations beyond 5 years. The conceptual framework consisted of systems theory and the Six Sigma define, measure, analyze, improve, and control model. The participants were five SME senior-level managers at five fashion retailers in Northcentral Texas. Data were collected through semistructured interviews and reviews of organizational documents and analyzed using a five-step thematic data analysis approach. The themes that emerged were creative innovation and testing new markets, improvement in quality, production hub and training centers, human relationships, and government support through social change initiatives. A key recommendation to SME owners in the fashion retail sector are to adopt creative innovation and consider expanding their businesses to African countries, inculcate the paradigm of human relationships into organizational culture, and maintain close alliances with government agencies and local communities for potentially favorable policies. The positive social change implications include potential job creation and increased tax revenue for the government to provide essential services to the people.

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Dedication

I dedicate this work to my wife and the love of my life, Idy. You stood beside me all through the sleepless nights, and you were my succor when I felt like giving up. The countless encouragement has finally paid off. I also thank my kids, Ijagla, Ijanada, Adariju, and Ijudigal. Daddy's room is now accessible. My desire has always been to set an example for each of you, I am happy to say that goal has been achieved. Each of you sacrificed time and resources so that I could pursue this dream, and it would not have been possible without you. I also dedicate this study to my parents and siblings; thank you for being in my corner. Finally, to the King eternal, the Almighty God, I worship you for the strength you bestowed on me to complete this journey.

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First, I thank God for ordering my steps along this path. He deserves all the glory for allowing me to finish this journey. Thank you to my chair, Dr. Tim Truitt. I appreciate your unwavering support, patience, guidance, and responsiveness toward completing my degree. I would not be where I am today without your commitment to me. Thank you to my second committee member, Dr. Jim Glenn, and my university research reviewer, Dr. Judy Blando. Your willingness to provide feedback made the completion of this research an enjoyable experience. Thank you to Dr. Samuel Aikhuomogbe for consistently mentoring and guiding me along this path. Thank you to my fellow doctoral colleagues who have encouraged and supported me throughout this educational journey. Special thanks to Dr. Oyebola Akande; I remember vividly when she walked into my office and introduced me to Walden; the rest is history. I appreciate your guidance all through this journey. Many thanks to my parents and siblings for being there. Dad and Mum, I made it. Finally, thank you to my wife and kids; when I felt like giving up, you nudged me to keep moving, and you gave me the push I needed. God bless you all.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study

Small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) is an independent business having fewer than 500 employees (U.S. Small Business Administration, 2021). SMEs create more job possibilities and contribute to a country's national economy than other types of businesses. This is true in the United States, where small businesses are necessary for new products, employment, and strong economic growth (Li & Nguyen, 2017). Small businesses are also significant suppliers, innovators, and sources of growth in free-market economies around the world (Snider, 2015; U.S. Small Business Administration, 2020). Many SME businesses in tourism and hospitality have suffered challenges during periods of turbulence, such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Bledsoe-Gardner, 2021). As a result, many SME leaders have had to rethink how they can make their businesses survive in such unprecedented times (Bledsoe-Gardner, 2021). Some of the issues facing small business owners include the leaders' lack of leadership, innovation, and relevant growth strategic plan (Mallett, 2019). Other problems include lack of sales, investment, financial assistance, marketing, and staff (Back, 2019; Lane et al., 2018). Some of the challenges small businesses face include high operational costs, high turnover, and bureaucracy (Ertel, 2019). The purpose of this qualitative multiple-case study was to explore strategies that some SME owners use to sustain business operations beyond 5 years.

Background of the Problem

SME owners confront different hurdles, including difficulties with business registration, a lack of government support, and bureaucracy, than do owners of other types of businesses (Zainuddin & Sulaiman, 2016). Small businesses rely heavily upon capital streams for revenue and job creation, which in turn creates a healthier economy (U.S. Small Business Administration, 2020). SME owners face challenges in obtaining raw materials, have limited technological capabilities, and face costly administrative procedures. SME owners also lack access to key business information and policies and are subject to restrictions that promote market share (Dawar & Singh, 2022). Other challenges that sometimes confront SME owners include the inability to access loans, challenges with regulatory licensing and taxes, high costs of production and manufacturing, limited managerial skills, and a lack of innovation and creativity (Dawar & Singh, 2022). Further research to determine successful business strategies and leadership skills may contribute to SME success by providing business leaders with tools they can use to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years.

Problem and Purpose

SMEs comprise 99.9% of all firms in the United States (Al-Ahmadi & Kasztelnik, 2021) but have a high failure rate, with 51.12% failing in their first 5 years of operation according to SBA, 2020 (U.S. Small Business Administration, 2020). The general business problem was that SME owners who do not implement effective strategies to remain competitive may experience business failure. The specific business problem was that some SME owners lack strategies to sustain business operations beyond 5 years.

The purpose of the qualitative multiple-case study was to explore strategies SME owners use to sustain their business operations beyond 5 years. The targeted population consisted of five SME owners of fashion retailers in Northcentral Texas who had sustained their company for more than 5 years. I used the purposive sampling method to obtain five participants from the target population. The data sources for the study include interviews with participants, document reviews, and financial reports from the organizations involved in the study. Successful businesses benefit local citizenry through increased employment and improved supply of goods and services in the community; employment and access to goods and services improve individuals' standard of living and support societal welfare (Hariastuti et al., 2021). The sustainability initiatives may lead to a reduction in societal unemployment and promote the prosperity of local families and communities.

Population and Sampling

The study population comprised SME owners at fashion retailers in Northcentral Texas who had successfully sustained their fashion company for more than 5 years. The sample or target population consisted of five senior-level managers from five fashion retailers in Northcentral Texas of the United States who had been successful in business for over 5 years. The inclusion criteria included (a) fashion retailers and supply firms with at least $1 million in revenue, (b) that were located in Northcentral Texas in the United States, and (c) had engaged in fashion retail operations for at least 5 years. I used the purposive sampling method to obtain a sample of five participants from the target population. The data sources for the study included interview data from participants and reviews of documents (i.e., financial reports) from the organizations involved in the study.

Nature of the Study

The three research methods are qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods (Strijker et al., 2020). The qualitative method is appropriate to explore individual and group understanding by collecting data regarding participants' experiences (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). I used a qualitative approach to explore strategies small business owners implement to sustain their businesses. Because I relied on nonnumerical data collection methods such as interviews, document analysis, and focus groups to understand the underlying reasons for a problem, the qualitative research approach was the best fit (Anguera et al., 2018). I chose the qualitative method for this study because I identified and explored common themes and extracted data from the participants' natural environment by asking *what* and *how* questions.

Quantitative researchers examine variable characteristics, relationships, or group differences to address their research question and test related hypotheses (Tecun et al., 2018). I did not need to test hypotheses to identify relationships among variables; therefore, the quantitative method was not necessary to answer my research question. Yin (2018) noted that the mixed-methods researcher uses a combination of both qualitative and quantitative aspects. This approach is time-consuming because it requires two different forms of data collection. It is inappropriate for this research study because the qualitative method was sufficient to answer the research question.

I considered three principal qualitative designs in this research: (a) case study, (b) phenomenological, and (c) ethnographic. I used a case study design for this study. Yin (2018) described a case study as an empirical inquiry used to investigate contemporary phenomena within its real-life context. Researchers use the phenomenological design to understand the personal meaning of participants' lived experiences related to the study purpose (Yin, 2018). The limitation of exclusively focusing on lived experiences made this approach inappropriate for this study because I did not look at the personal experience of the participants. Keränen and Prior (2019) noted that researchers use the ethnographic design to immerse themselves in and explore the culture of groups of people in their natural settings over a prolonged period. The ethnographic design was not suitable for this study as understanding group culture did not address my research question.

A single-case study was unsuitable because of the need to explore several fashion company owners for an in-depth understanding of the research phenomenon. By conducting a multiple-case study, the researcher was able to focus on multiple groups and provide a more extensive description and explanation of the phenomenon, thereby improving the rigor and reliability of findings by comparing results across the cases (Yin, 2018). The multiple-case study design was appropriate for this study, and I was able to obtain sufficient and relevant information from participating SME leaders.

Research Question

What strategies do SME owners use to sustain business operation beyond 5 years?

Interview Questions

I developed and followed an interview protocol (see Appendices A and B) to provide structure for the interviews. The eight questions I posed to participants were as follows:

1. What strategies did you use to sustain business beyond 5 years?
2. How has your organization used the strategies to improve corporate strategies and return on investment capital?
3. What were the primary barriers to implementing your strategies?
4. How did you overcome the barriers to implementing your strategies to sustain business?
5. What adjustments have leaders had to make to business procedures to sustain the business?
6. How did you categorize management functions and strategic sourcing in your organization?
7. How did the pandemic in quarantine affected supply chain strategies?
8. What other information would you like to share regarding the strategies and system you developed and implemented in your organization?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study was systems theory (ST), which was developed by von Bertalanffy (1972), and the Six Sigma's define, measure, analyze, improve, and control (DMAIC) model, which was developed by Bill Smith in the 1980s (Monday, 2022). The importance of synergy in organizational development, personal groupings, personality, and technological gadgets is confirmed by the application of ST (von Bertalanffy, 1972). The combined ST/DMAIC framework was suitable for this study because of the strategies used by small business owners, considering that small business owners execute diverse, effective business strategies to extend sustainability beyond 5 years (see Daniel et al., 2022; Turner & Endres, 2017). ST is a set of concepts for holistically studying complicated situations (von Bertalanffy, 1972). von Bertalanffy noted the following constructs of ST: (a) system-environment boundary, (b) input, (c) output, (d) process equilibrium, (e) state, (f) hierarchy, (g) goal-directedness, and (h) information. ST is useful for understanding the ever-changing business environment and applying the different day-to-day business operations components for business survival.

A system consists of different components, and each section is significant for sustaining the small business. System thinkers' primary purpose is to show the wholeness and connectivity of multiple distinct parts (Handiwibowo et al., 2021). By using ST, business leaders can increase their personal and professional effectiveness and transform their organizations (Brieger & De Clercq, 2019). Leaders who apply ST principles gain insights into a business's nature and how managerial techniques and performance are measured (Volkova et al., 2021). Mella and Gazzola (2019) identified three primary principles of ST:

- System thinking must be applied when there are few symptoms to avoid problems from arising or appearing too soon.
- The symptoms are not the problem but a sign that some problem has caused them.

- In problem solving, it is necessary to always consider the decision in the context of some systems of an individual or organization whose network or processes must be specified through the construction of a meaningful concept.

System thinkers link business owners' behavior to their environment (Katrakazas et al., 2020). Researchers use system thinking as a control element to recognize problems in small businesses (Tani et al., 2018).

DMAIC is an organized and systematic method for strategic process improvement and new product and service development that relies on statistics to reduce customer-defined defect rates dramatically (Madhani, 2022). The ideas underlying DMAIC consist of stages that relate to each other that include: (a) defining the goals and the requirements, (b) measuring the current process, (c) analyzing the results and possible solutions, (d) improving the process and implementing changes, and (e) controlling the improved process and monitoring results (Dey et al., 2020). Using a composite conceptual framework of ST and DMAIC, I gained further understanding of the nature of the problems affecting small business sustainability. Identification and understanding of the strategies of small business owners led to insightful knowledge regarding sustainability.

Operational Definitions

Enterprise resource planning (ERP) *system*: A platform used by business leaders to oversee and coordinate the vital aspects of their operations (Kenge & Khan, 2020).

Fishbone diagram: A graphical method for displaying the several causes of a certain occurrence. The fishbone diagram is used as a cutting-edge form of graphical representation to locate, investigate, and evaluate the sources of innovation, particularly for general-purpose technology (Coccia, 2020).

Kaizen method: A process meant to foster constant improvement in all spheres of life, whether they be social, domestic, or professional. The culture of kaizen, which is ingrained in Japanese society's way of life, has an impact on people's general patterns of conduct (Prayuda, 2020).

Production hub: A combination of experts who are enmeshed in production, becoming a team that identifies gaps in the market on the production line and ensures that production aligns with market needs (Hervas-Oliver et al., 2020).

Six Sigma's define, measure, analyze, improve, and control model (DMAIC): An organized and systematic method for strategic process improvement, new product, and service development that relies on statistics to make dramatic reductions in customer defined defect rates (Madhani, 2022).

Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) *analysis*: A strategic examination of a business, resources, and environment (Ashutosh et al., 2020).

Superior inventory: A share of any class or series of stock of a corporation that has a preference over Series A Stock in terms of dividends or assets, as well as any instrument or security that can be exchanged for Superior Stock (Petropoulos et al., 2019).

System thinkers: People who operationalize system thinking to ensure that individuals see the true meaning of phenomena; a broader goal is to elevate society intelligence (Mella & Gazzola, 2019).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

Assumptions

Assumptions are beliefs that researchers hold true about a study but cannot verify (Vergne & Wry, 2014). I had three assumptions in conducting this research. The first assumption was that the participants would give honest, thoughtful, and comprehensive responses during the interviews. The second assumption was that the participants selected for this study would provide information regarding the strategies they used to sustain small businesses beyond 5 years. The third assumption was that the sample of participants in the study would be sufficient to reach saturation.

Limitations

Limitations are potential weaknesses that a researcher has no control over and that are closely associated with the chosen research design and other factors (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). The first limitation of this study was that the interview participants might misrepresent or misinterpret concepts and provide misleading information knowingly or unknowingly. Second, the findings may not apply to other types of SME businesses. Another limitation is that the study was limited by the interviewees' honesty and forthrightness and their willingness to share documentation. The choice of qualitative method and case study design was also a limitation. The last limitation was the possibility that the participants would be unwilling to share experiences related to the strategies they used to sustain small businesses beyond 5 years.

Delimitations

Delimitations are conditions or parameters that a researcher imposes to limit the scope of their study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). The location of the study and the selection of interviewees were the delimitations. I excluded SME businesses outside northcentral Texas. The study included only SME owners who had developed and implemented successful strategies that sustained their business.

Significance of the Study

Contribution to Business Practice

The proposed study's findings may be valuable to SME owners seeking to identify new operations strategies to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years. The examples of strategies that may emerge from this study may help empower aspiring entrepreneurs toward innovation, which may catalyse small businesses survival. The research findings may have the potential to identify a business problem and apply solutions from existing literature on strategies SME owners used to sustain their business operations beyond 5 years in the fashion industry.

Implications for Social Change

The study's results may contribute to positive social change by providing SME owners the opportunity to increase their communities' contributions for the betterment of their citizens. The findings could serve as a guide for SME owners to sustain operations and create more revenue through taxes leading to better community services such as better roads, schools, and other public services. An associated implication for positive social change from the proposed study could enable business leaders to donate money to support activities in their local communities and nonprofit charitable organizations.

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

In this literature review, I describe the ST and DMAIC composite framework, as well as opposing and supportive theories. The primary source of the professional and academic literature was Walden University Library databases, including ScienceDirect, SAGE Premier, Emerald Management Journals, and EBSCOhost. I also used the search engine Google Scholar, via Walden University Library, to identify relevant articles. Keywords used in searches included *small medium enterprises*, *small medium enterprises strategies*, *small business owners*, *success rates*, *systems theory*, *DMAIC model*, *complexity theory*, *entrepreneurs*, *operations strategies*, *fashion industry peculiarities*, *current strategies and failure in SME*, *current conditions for SME ownership*, and *key success factors for SME business.* The literature review begins with an overview of ST and the DMAIC model. The literature review of this doctoral study consists of 168 references, of which 149 have a publication date between 2018 and 2022. These 149 references correspond to 88% of the total references (see Table 1).

Table 1

Frequency of the Study Sources

Source	2018–2022	2017 or before	Total *n*	Total %
Peer-reviewed journal article	144	19	163	97
Other periodical	4	0	4	2
Doctoral dissertation	1	0	1	1

Total	149	19	168

Systems Theory

The theorist von Bertalanffy (1972) introduced ST to explore the complexity of the world's problems. ST is useful for understanding the ever-changing business environment and applying the different day-to-day business operations components for business survival. ST is a set of concepts for studying complicated situations holistically, as well as an interdisciplinary theory that includes systems in nature, human society, and science (Javanmardi & Liu, 2020; Scott, 2019). von Bertalanffy suggested that the contribution of a functioning system comes from all parts of the entity. Instead of individual patterns, ST enables researchers to identify interrelationships and parts of a system (Scott, 2019). von Bertalanffy used ST to examine coexistence between events and components.

Variables such as company size, the business climate, the usage of technology, and the personal traits of the owners or managers drive decision-making processes and the installation of accounting systems (Abernethy & Wallis, 2019; Ruiz & Colazzo, 2021). Microbusinesses are especially essential in emerging markets because they provide an alternative to traditional employment or the potential to produce additional revenue (Abernethy & Wallis, 2019; Ruiz & Colazzo, 2021). Al Mamun et al. (2018) identified that stakeholder focused organizational systems that address the integrated economic, environmental, and social components of performance over short- and long-term periods within the boundaries are enterprise accountable.

Valentinov and Hajdu (2021) identified three key elements of ST as (a) structures of organizations, (b) open systems, and (c) interrelated subsystems. Organizations consist of several subsystems alternately interconnected, interrelated, and interdependent (Javanmardi & Liu, 2020). SMEs are as ecosystem with interrelated and interdependent operations (Kasim et al., 2018). Open systems interact with the environment, and closed systems have boundaries that limit interactions with the environment (von Bertalanffy, 1950). Open systems are those that influence larger environments while interrelated subsystems function within a continuous response loop comprising inputs/outputs, feedback, and transformation (Javanmardi & Liu, 2020). According to van Tulder and Keen (2018), SME sectors complement one another to achieve sustainable development.

von Bertalanffy (1972) noted the holistic approach of the ST by implying that systems consist of interrelated parts, and it is impossible to isolate the connections from the rest of the system by reviewing a single component. The holistic system approach involves use of set boundaries to understand problems, while understanding the relationships within natural systems to avoid unwanted consequences (Monat & Gannon, 2018). von Bertalanffy found that components, when linked together, are greater than or equal to the sum of their smaller parts. The objects, their attributes, accompanied internal relationships, and the environment of the systems are all essential components of ST. One key feature of ST is the concept of reversible and irreversible processes (Turner & Baker, 2019).

Popescu (2018) focused on ST as two overlapping systems, internal and external, which small business owners respond to as part of maintaining their business. Hafiz et al.

(2022) emphasized that ST provides a foundation for exploring the distinction between an individual's perception and conception. Hafiz et al. noted four factors of this exploration: (a) the elements of the system, (b) the properties of the system, (c) the internal relationship of its objectives, and (d) the environment. Consequently, the interactions among employees and management partially determine the ultimate behavior and performance of business (Jung & Vakharia, 2019). Through internal relationship of business objectives, elements of the business system, and business environment of the SME, the employees as well as the SME owners could pursue sustainability goals for the business enterprise (Fröhlich, 2019). The ST organization is a social system with subunits that interrelate harmoniously for the organization to be effective (Teece, 2018). In the case of an open system such as SME, for example, ST encompasses the system's interactions with its environment (Teece, 2018).

Evolution of Systems Theory

ST originated in the 1940s providing an alternative to *reductionism* (Laszlo & Krippner, 1998). von Bertalanffy (1949) stated that a complex organism is the sum of its parts; therefore, understanding can be deduced from its components. By contrast, ST is centered on *holism*, which suggests that a system is more than the sum of its parts. Systems produce behaviors that are not directly attributable to individual elements, but which instead emerged through interactions between those elements (Laszlo & Krippner, 1998; von Bertalanffy, 1949)

According to Teater (2019), ST originated in the works of pre-Socratic philosophers and evolved through different philosophic entities until formally accepted in the early 1900s. ST's evolution exhibits three development phases (Mella & Gazzola, 2019). The first phase is called systems science, or the scientific exploration and theory of systems in various sciences (Mella & Gazzola, 2019). From the 1940s to the 1960s, ST was a paradigm for universal scientific theory (Teater, 2019). ST lost its relevance in the 1970s because of theoretical and political criticisms in the core social sciences, from which ST never fully recovered (Teater, 2019). ST reemerged in several new forms in the biosocial and social sciences over the last three decades, such as dynamic systems theory, complexity theory, chaos theory, autopoietic (or self-organizing) systems theory, and emergentism (Cea, 2020). Several small systems work together to form the whole of small businesses (Teater, 2019). A business is also a system with parts such as employees, assets, products, resources, and information that form a complex system (Patton & McMahon, 2021).

Systems of all types share certain common characteristics to permit a generic description, which is not inherent to any particular discipline, domain, or sector (Hammond, 2002). The systems in ST are self-organizing functional units that differentiate themselves from their environments through a unique composition of interactions and relationships (von Bertalanffy, 1972). ST does not comprehensively represent the complete system in the form of a massive supermodel, but instead derives constructs or abstractions that facilitated an understanding of observed phenomena (Bernard, 2006). ST permits multiple perspectives, thus acknowledging that different constructs or abstractions may offer a variety of similarly valid viewpoints on the same system (Bernard, 2006).

ST evolved in the work of physiologies who treat system to depend upon ideas (Badcock, 2012). ST is described as interdependence of parts or variables with assumptions such as (a) the system components are given in advance, before its constitution, and (b) changes in a system are placed on the side of environment (Badcock, 2012). Given that people are biological systems, it follows that psychologists should focus on several connected levels of analysis that are centered on Tinbergen's (1963) four issues: (a) adaptive function, (b) phylogeny, (c) ontogeny, and (d) mechanism. The paradigms are arranged in layers of explanation around evolutionary psychology, evolutionary developmental biology, and developmental psychobiology, which, when combined, are the basis for evolutionary system theory with developmental psychology, and psychology's overall subfields, in that order (Badcock, 2012).

Six Sigma's Define, Measure, Analyze, Improve, and Control Model

Six Sigma is an organized strategy from a business perspective that enabled industries to effectively recognize the customer desires, eliminates the variability within the production, and reduces all non-value-added activities (Kumar et al., 2021). The ideas underlying DMAIC consists of stages that relate to one another. These are (a) defining goals and requirements, (b) measuring the current process, (c) analyzing the results and possible solutions, (d) improving processes and implemented changes, and (e) controlling the improved process and monitoring results (Dey et al., 2020). DMAIC includes Lean and Six Sigma. Use of the Six Sigma approach improves customer satisfaction by focusing on the customer's needs (Sengupta, 2020). Managers have used Lean and Six Sigma to achieve success in the health care, construction, and education industries

(Madhani, 2022). The Lean Production System framework was developed in the 1950s by Taaichi Ohno, a Toyota engineer, for waste reduction and product improvement (Ahmed, 2019). The name changed to Lean Six Sigma in the 1990s, and Xerox corporation managers implemented the lean production system into their supply chain (Ahmed, 2019). The purpose of Lean Six Sigma purpose is to promote quality improvement, reduced cost, and eliminated errors to achieve sustainable business with growth and new development (Ahmed, 2019).

Company managers in the health care industry have subsequently used Lean Six Sigma to improve patient satisfaction (Madhani, 2022). Sengupta (2020) posited that Lean and Six Sigma gained a foothold in many industries because leaders wanted a means of enhancing processes and eliminating waste. The Six Sigma approach includes strategies for quality improvement (Someh et al., 2019). The Lean and Six Sigma approach enhances business performance by achieving a fast and flexible flow of goods and illuminating issues that affect the quality of a product or service (Someh et al., 2019).

The Six Sigma DMAIC model is an advanced process that applies to stipulation and search for additional advancement (Chyon et al., 2020). Lean Six Sigma and DMAIC include collaborative solutions that assist organizational leaders in improving their processes (Madhani, 2022). The tools are (a) design of experiment; (b) value stream mapping; (c) supplier, inputs, outputs, and customers; and (d) the 5 Whys, which are steps to improve problems (Chyon et al., 2020). The DMAIC model features Lean tools to benefit the customer. Leaders in the health care industry and other sectors have adopted the Lean Six Sigma DMAIC model to gauge employees' perspectives on each phase of the process (Chyon et al., 2020).

The fundamental goal of the Six Sigma DMAIC model is to apply a strategy based on measurement and course improvement that minimizes abnormalities (Aichouni et al., 2021). The Six Sigma DMAIC model is suitable for improving a competitive, demanding, and constantly changing environment (Chyon et al., 2020). Implementing the DMAIC model is an excellent process for improved customer satisfaction, which leads to sustained industry (Madhani, 2022). Guo et al. (2019) studied the DMAIC model in the auto industry to measure customer requirements through a case study by issuing questionnaires to analyze product performance. Guo et al. identified the process as using critical quality and management evaluation elements by defining, measuring, analyzing, improving, and controlling product quality. Guo et al. concluded that customer satisfaction and business profit are improved through perfect quality, service, product design, manufacturing, and service quality, leading to sustainable operation.

To successfully implement the Six Sigma DMAIC model, understanding the barriers and motivating factors of the Six Sigma DMAIC model was necessary (Guo et al., 2019). The DMAIC model is a highly disciplined approach that helped industrial world leaders focus on developing perfect products, processes, and services (Chen et al., 2022). Six Sigma DMAIC includes and eliminates defects or failures in product features concerned SME owners that affected processes or the performance of systems (Gupta et al., 2018). The DMAIC model is a problem-solving approach that reduces process variation and associated defects (Aichouni et al., 2021). The existence of tools that can improve the decision-making processes and the strategies controlling the business operations of SME owners can improve resource consumption efficiency while identifying any bottlenecks that may hamper progress (Palkhe, 2020). The process requires the development of the capacity to benchmark business and production related operations (Gupta et al., 2018). Company leaders used simulation methodologies to reduce waiting times and optimize resource allocation and usage through Six Sigma DMAIC model applications to sustain business operations (Ahmed et al., 2020).

DMAIC is suitable for extensive problem-solving tasks, requiring all the components of problem definition, diagnosis, and the design of remedies (Bates et al., 2019). The model is less suited for problem tasks of a smaller scope. Six Sigma is a generic method with versatile advantages, some of these advantages include eliminating product or process defects, cost reduction, quality improvement, and profitability increase through stable processes (Bates et al., 2019). Quality improvement often results in lower production costs but can also result in improvement in customer service and satisfaction (Ahmed et al., 2020; Timans et al., 2016). Task domain specific methods also benefit from advanced specific domain knowledge, which is absent in generic accounts of Six Sigma (Bates et al., 2019). Domain specific elaborations such as health care and financial service operations of DMAIC partly overcome these weaknesses inherent to general methods (Aichouni et al., 2021). DMAIC is not a suitable model for less extensive problem-solving processes, such as solution known projects and design problems (Bates et al., 2019).

The fundamental goal of the Six Sigma DMAIC model is to apply a strategy based on measurement, focused on course improvement, and minimizes abnormality (Aichouni et al., 2021). For successful implementation of the Six Sigma DMAIC model, one must understand the barriers and motivating factors of the Six Sigma DMAIC model (Bates et al., 2019). The DMAIC model is a highly disciplined approach that helps organizations focus on developing perfect products, processes, and services (Chen et al., 2022). Six Sigma DMAIC identified and eliminated defects or failures in product features concerned SMEs that affect processes or performance of the system (Gupta et al., 2018).

The DMAIC model is a problem-solving approach which reduce process variation and associated defects (Aichouni et al., 2021). The existence of tools that improved the decision-making processes, as well as the strategies controlling the business operations of SME, has improved resource consumption efficiency, while also identifying any bottlenecks that may hamper progress (Ahmed et al., 2020). The process requires the development of the capacity to benchmark business and production-related operations (Patel & Patel, 2021). Ahmed et al. (2020) corroborated these findings by stating that companies use simulation methodologies to reduce waiting times as well as optimize resource allocation and usage through application of Six Sigma DMAIC model.

DMAIC Elements

Smętkowska and Mrugalska (2018) stated that DMAIC cycle consists of five stages that relate to each other. The stages are: (a) define the project objective, (b) identify the problem, (c) measure the base line of the information and process, (d) analyze the information collected which determines if there is more than one issue and plan for several postulations, (e) improve the process by conducting experiments and confirmation runs to find the best solution to the problem stated, and (f) to control the performance once the project has been implemented by stating policies that guarantee the changes will continue to be used by other people (Smętkowska & Mrugalska, 2018).

DMAIC is a philosophy or concept (Ali, 2021). Using DMAIC as a philosophy helps with changing the world and transformation of an enterprise, treating DMAIC as a strategy ensures development and increases the position of a company (Ali, 2021). The model applies the Six Sigma stages, which should be implemented in companies that want to develop and increase their position on the market (Hernadewita et al., 2019). The first stage is concentration on the customer, where every action taken should agree with customers' specifications and requirements (Hernadewita et al., 2019). Six Sigma is real data and facts, which performs a detailed analysis (Smętkowska & Mrugalska, 2018). Six Sigma is about continuous process improvement of all aspects of functioning development in the organization as well as proactive management and cooperation without boundaries at every level in enterprise (Bates et al., 2019). Six Sigma is not only an approach for solving the problems with manufacturing but also business processes (Bates et al., 2019; Ishak et al., 2019).

Define Phase. Bates et al. (2019) opined that the objective of this phase is to define the scope and goal of the improvement project in terms of customer requirements and to develop a process that provides these requirements. In this stage, managers verified the actions taken to solve the problems with the priorities and support from management and the availability of required resources (Ahmed, 2019). Leaders serve as a pivotal part in the define stage (Ahmed, 2019). Understanding between the team and the leader is important in the define stage (Patel & Patel, 2021).

In identifying a problem, a leader needs to understand the relationship between corporate strategy, return on investment capital (ROIC), and measuring success that leads to a solution with an understanding of the issues with clear evidence of leadership (Ahmed, 2019). Ahmed (2019) indicated that understanding the strategies and the relationships between ROIC are necessary for service organizations. Managers use a process map to measure success by identifying the boundaries in each process step (Patel & Patel, 2021). Multiple ways exist to identify a project's improvement to sustain operations (Wang, 2018).

For example, in the health care industry, leaders became involved by stating the objectives for management to follow and determine the customer's needs (Agarwal, 2021). An error occurs in any part of the process if team members' concerns remained neglected (Ahmed, 2019). In addition, the team leaders ensured the team members had the training, knowledge, and engagement in the process (Antony et al., 2021; Rehman & Anwar, 2019). The team leader of the business operations should communicate the function of the defined objective (Antony et al., 2021). Ahmed (2019) indicated that the DMAIC process is risky, and some managers preferred a nonformal process to improve problems in the organization.

Managers use the DMAIC model when a situation is complex. For example, in manufacturing and in service sectors, the application of this tool has not only reduced the rate of defects but has also simplified processes in the areas of product development, customer retention analysis, cycle time optimization, productivity improvement and market share (Ahmed, 2019). For instance, changing from one banking software application to another could involve the use of DMAIC for a smooth cross over without losing data, customers, or staff.

In health care logistics, managers used Six Sigma DMAIC to identify and remove expired products and drugs (Sirshar et al., 2019). Some logistics systems in health care become difficult because products are classified based on patient care (Sirshar et al., 2019). Managers use Six Sigma DMAIC to simplify health care logistics, reduce defect rates, and support productivity. Sharma et al. (2021) stated that Six Sigma does not work well with a project feasibility study or risk analysis; rather, it understands the project and details the customer expectations.

Once implemented, firm wide, Six Sigma is not easy to change, alter, or improve. For instance, new innovations such as industry 4.0 are not introduced into the project when using Six Sigma (Sharma et al., 2021). Industry 4.0 is a concept better known as the 'smart factory' (Maia et al., 2023). In an Industry 4.0 factory, machines are connected as a collaborative community to collect, exchange, and analyze data systematically (Maia et al., 2023). Six Sigma DMAIC applies to business processes that generate measurable outputs such as calls handled per hour or customer wait time (Sharma et al., 2021). When combined with CRM Six Sigma does greatly improve customer (Davidson et al., 2020).

Huang et al. (2021) stated that not all products or operations need to meet Six Sigma quality standards. Medical manufacturers and aerospace companies should meet Six Sigma quality standards because lives depend upon the reliability of their products.

They further noted that while cell phones and computers that meet Six Sigma quality standards are more reliable than the competition, they may be more expensive (Huang et al., 2021). Six Sigma is an excellent model to implement in any given organization, but it is not necessarily imperative for the survival of any given organization (Davidson et al., 2020).

Measure Phase. In the measure phase, practitioners evaluated the key process characteristics and quantified the problem through data collection and analytics (Aichouni et al., 2021). Valid and reliable standards determine to monitor advances towards project purposes (Aichouni et al., 2021). Some factors such as parameters and places of measurements define, measure, and classify (Wang et al., 2019).

A statistical perspective on processes and problems related to them must evaluate the projects (Wang et al., 2019). In the measure phase, a process map of the actual situation is created with failure mode and effect analysis performed, which indicates the place of possible risk (Wang et al., 2019). The main issue of the measurement phase is that the data collected and analyzed is used in the control phase to show the differences and assess the progress made (Huang et al., 2021). Instruments used by leaders in the measurement phase include histograms with scatterplots, Pareto charts, and measurement sheets (Ahmed, 2019; Akonkwa et al., 2022). A significant error in this phase includes team members misusing data to validate false points (Ahmed, 2019). To rectify the problem, the team leader became actively involved by helping the team with decisions about data collection and how to measure customer needs (Ahmed, 2019)

In this phase, the voice of the customers (VOC) collected during surveys was followed by making a project charter (Svikruhova et al., 2021). A project charter is a formal statement that defines a project's scope, objectives, and participants to authorize the project officially and ensure that everyone involved knows its purpose and objectives (Ahmed, 2019). There are many ways to collect customer data; understanding the VOC is one of the most critical issues in the defined stage (Svikruhova et al., 2021). When choosing tools, one needs to keep in mind the specific needs and goals of individual projects, as well as the procedural maturity of the company (Svikruhova et al., 2021). A fishbone diagram identifies the causes of the problem that occur in an organization (Guo et al., 2019). DMAIC is often described as a problem-solving approach that applies to practical problems ranging from well-structured to semistructured problems (Chakrabortty et al., 2013).

Six Sigma projects yielded no cost savings (Huang et al., 2021). Improved product quality generates capital and long-term overhead costs regarding quality personnel (Huang et al., 2021). Chakrabarty and Kay Chuan (2009) identified some challenges in different companies that adopt Six Sigma, and most reported difficulty in gathering data, prolonged effort, difficulty in determining process specifications, and complexity. Grida and Zeid (2019) found that a lack of sufficient knowledge about Six Sigma is the most significant Six Sigma barrier. Chakrabarty and Kay Chuan (2009) identified challenges in different companies adopting Six Sigma. The most reported difficulty is gathering data, prolonged effort, difficulty determining process specifications, and complexity. Grida and Zeid (2019) opined that a system consists of several parallel sections that may be shared with multiple departments. While introducing measurement as a step, the ST is applied to allow parallel measurement in several departments with unified feedback and reports channeled to the head of operations.

Analyze Phase. In this phase, data were collected to generate a prioritized list of sources of variation, such as semistructured interviews, document reviews, surveys, and field notes (Singh et al., 2019). The stage sets new goals and route maps for the target performance level, a vital component of any defect-reducing program (Kumar et al., 2021). The relationship between the causes of defects and process variability sources was analyzed, and afterward, a potential list of the problems was narrowed to vital cases (Wang et al., 2019). The relationship between input and output directly affecting issues becomes visible and possible causes of process variability are verified (Yusof et al., 2020).

Researchers identified delays, waste, and poor quality in the analysis phase using scatter plots, diagrams, and the five whys analysis of the Lean Six Sigma approach (Singh et al., 2019). Team leaders introduce customer value analysis (Singh et al., 2019). Customer value analysis includes focusing on the customer value or customer value added, business value added, and non-value- added aspect of business operations (Ahmed, 2019). The customer value added, and non-value-added metrics are beneficial because the customer analysis result helps the business recruit more customers and retain existing customers to create value for the organization (Ahmed, 2019). A trained leader identifies problems and determines how the non-value-added aspect work for the customers, leading to sustainable business operations (Singh et al., 2019).

In the analysis phase, data analysis tools and process analysis techniques are used to identify the root cause of the problem (Sajjad et al., 2021). The main tools are parameter estimation and hypothesis testing (Sajjad et al., 2021). Parameter estimation is the process of using observations from a dynamic system, such as the angular speed of the earth's rotation or the earth's gravitational acceleration, to develop mathematical models that adequately represent the system characteristics (Sidhu & Kok, 2020). Deniz and Çimen (2018) revealed a key component of Lean Six Sigma: Unique infrastructure features green belts, champions, and black belts for leading and implementation.

Researchers argue that when the Six Sigma DMAIC model applies to business processes such as performance reviews or processing purchase orders, the recommended solution is often called 'bureaucracy busting' (Deniz & Çimen, 2018). The business process is rigid, which contradicts innovation and kills creativity (Deniz & Çimen, 2018). Dentoni et al. (2020) argued that one of the main criticisms of Six Sigma DMAIC is that it simply repackages traditional principles and techniques related to quality. On the other hand, Kwak and Anbari (2006) pointed out that organizations need to realize that Six Sigma is not the universal answer to all business issues. It may not be an organization's most essential management strategy to understand and implement.

Lack of insight into Six Sigma's advantages and poor communication regarding the need for change at all management levels of employees was a typical challenge for the organization. Deniz and Çimen (2018) found out that the problem with Six Sigma differs at each management level. For instance, top managers found that inadequacy of knowledge about Six Sigma and beliefs regarding the complexity of Six Sigma was the most significant challenge. Similarly, middle-level managers considered their dearth of comprehension of Six Sigma the most significant challenge (Deniz & Cimen, 2018). First-level managers discovered they did not have enough time for Six Sigma projects (Subagyo et al., 2020). A limitation of Six Sigma relates to the ratio between the effort and cost of Six Sigma implementation and the accruing benefits (Foster, 2007). Several practitioners and researchers argued that the effort required to implement Six Sigma is comparatively higher than the benefits from complex projects that consume resources and time (Chakrabarty & Kay Chuan, 2009; Foster, 2007; Gupta et al., 2018).

Dentoni et al. (2020) introduced the socio-ecological systems that described how an organization could cope with change and unforeseen disturbances while safeguarding the ecological systems on which human activity depends. Dentoni et al. inferred that by using ST, an organization could collaborate with public and nonprofit actors in understanding and protecting the socio-ecological system for the benefit of the business. In contrast to DMAIC's step-by-step approach, ST involves a collaborative and interdependent approach to management.

Improve Phase. In the improvement phase, practitioners present and implement business solutions on processes to improve the identified problems (Aichouni et al., 2021). This stage focuses on determining a solution based on the uncovered problem in the first three phases (Antony et al., 2021). The main goal of the Six Sigma methodology is the continuous improvement of processes to sustain the desired level of quality (Singh et al., 2019). In this stage, the measurement system and potential verification process are repeated to corroborate the progress of the process (Aichouni et al., 2021; Holston-Okae & Mushi, 2018).

SME owners employ the best strategies to satisfy customers while maintaining successful business operations (Ahmed, 2019). The team leader monitored the process by identifying problems and determining why the problems occurred by implementing an action plan strategy (Ahmed, 2019). The team leader is pivotal in this phase because they keep an open line of communication with the team by reiterating the project's goals (Patel & Patel, 2021). SMEs have limitations when employing the Six Sigma DMAIC model for the business owner and other barriers, for instance, organization culture, the structure of the new business, and strategies adopted. Chakrabarty and Kay Chuan (2009) identified that the limitations differ among companies that adopted Six Sigma. Leaders reported difficulty gathering data, prolonged effort, difficulty determining process specifications, and complexity. The companies that had not implemented Six Sigma mentioned that their decision was based on unfamiliarity, irrelevance, or a lack of interest (Subagyo et al., 2020). Six Sigma may impact customer satisfaction negatively if not implemented properly.

Two global U.S. corporations (3M and Home Depot) abandoned their Six Sigma program because of negative influence on customer satisfaction. Peterson et al. (2021) evaluated the ST to involve system thinking of complex interdependences of an organization rather than being limited to improvement as a single factor in the organization. Using ST in appraising marketing, the organization will engage in activities such as (a) marketing system, (b) the impact of marketing systems in society, and (c) the impact of society in marketing systems (Peterson et al., 2021; Wasieleski et al., 2020).

Control Phase. The control phase of the Six Sigma DMAIC cycle occurs after implementing the proposed solutions (Aichouni et al., 2021). The control phase in DMAIC is about controlling the variables identified during the earlier phases (Aichouni et al., 2021). In the control phase, the team communicates the updated procedure to all organization members (Ahmed, 2019). The team ensures process performance through guidelines (Ahmed, 2019). The functions include: (a) recording the process, (b) obtaining cash by contacting the finance department, (c) focusing on improvement, monitoring the system, (d) organizing, and (e) setting up a control plan (Ahmed, 2019). The team used control charts to identify potential problems in the control phase (Maia et al., 2023).

Enforcing the Kaizen method is pivotal in the control phase (Ahmed, 2019). The Kaizen method is a process improvement step through small steps leading to more robust results for longevity (Ali et al., 2020). Six Sigma offers reliable methods for testing conjectured causes, but only limited methodological support for identifying candidate causes (Ali et al., 2020). DMAIC offers scant strategic guidance for ensuring the efficiency of the diagnostic search (Ahmed, 2019). The core principle of lean is based on resource efficiency and waste minimization. Non-standardization procedures in the certification process of black and green belts are a limitation in this phase (Rathi et al., 2020). A black belt professional aims to provide project leadership. Black belts are highly trained to improve results using lean concepts and advanced statistical analysis techniques. Black belts understand the team dynamics and can assign roles and responsibilities to team members. Black belts have a thorough understanding of all aspects of the DMAIC model in accordance with Six Sigma principles (Hollingshed, 2021).

The skills and expertise developed by black belts are inconsistent across companies and are dependent to a great extent on the certifying body (Rathi et al., 2020). Antony et al. (2019) determined that more than 60% of Six Sigma initiatives fail to deliver desired results. Many companies implementing Six Sigma enjoy its benefits in the first two to three years but cannot demonstrate a lasting impact over time. The implication is that the initial enthusiasm and momentum diminish after a certain period, with many organizations quickly falling back into the old habits of executing things (Rapp et al., 2020). Efficient use of resources is mandatory for successful Six Sigma implementation. More resources (financial, human, etc.) is a big challenge for many organizations (Grida & Zeid, 2019).

Subagyo et al. (2020) used the ST to involve organization effectiveness, where control is a subset of the entire act of effectiveness. Effectiveness entailed ideating ideas, planning, implementing, and ensuring customer satisfaction (Subagyo et al., 2020). While the DMAIC has control as a step in the process, leaders use ST to take care of the controlling process and other functions to ensure the business is sustained even in complex, volatile, and uncertain circumstances (Subagyo et al., 2020). For instance, using a system dynamics model in a medium sized hospital, different patients are served using the same limited resources (Grida & Zeid, 2019).

Small- and Medium-Sized Enterprises

SMEs contribute significantly to the development of local economies, accounting for two thirds of employment opportunities in most Western economies, thereby stimulating these economies and increasing their growth (Owusu et al., 2022). SMEs play an essential role in many economies, especially in developing countries. SMEs represent 90% of the world's businesses and more than 50% of the employment (World Bank, 2020). SMEs contribute up to 40% to the gross domestic product (GDP) in developing economies (World Bank, 2020). Owusu et al. (2022) opined that small businesses are the mainstay of every economy. Albuquerque et al. (2016) identified small businesses as a mix of organizations offering goods and services across various industries, making them difficult to classify. Small business owners and entrepreneurs are the most influential drivers of economic growth (Owusu et al., 2022). Sustaining SMEs has helped to stimulate economic activities such as employment and increased standard of living.

Business survival is a priority for leaders, especially regarding higher exposure to risk and the impact of competition among small businesses compared to larger firms. Bates et al. (2019) recognized that small business owners face various challenges restricting their growth and survival. Small business owners need help attempting to create and sustain their business ventures. Leaders need access to valuable resources because they have a limited market presence and depend on a niche customer base (Ikrama, 2019). Calme and Polge (2018) found that small business economic performance and economic indicators are difficult to track because such entities may not borrow from financial institutions.

Small businesses are vulnerable to troubled environments due to limited financial and human resources, making them more susceptible to local cyclical troubles (Ikrama, 2019). Competition is one obstacle for small businesses (T. Zhang et al., 2021). As a dominant component of economic growth, the resilience of small businesses following a crisis is essential for global market success (Ikrama, 2019; Rahman et al., 2018). Strategic planning by small business owners is essential to ensuring success (Al-Ahmadi & Kasztelnik, 2021). Ikrama (2019) identified a relationship between strategy and business performance, implying that small business owners may implement effective strategic management. Most small business owners serve as owner-managers responsible for most daily operations. The owners are busy attending to the short-term challenges of running a business, limiting the resources available for long-term planning. Effective small business owners and managers use strategic planning to identify long-term goals and evaluate the ability to achieve these goals (Ghezzi et al., 2021). Small business owners and managers could collaborate to consider and weigh strategic options in all aspects of the business to conduct effective strategic planning.

Operations Strategies for Small Businesses

Operations strategies can best be described as a collection of activities in SMEs that involve administration, marketing, procurement, logistics, and other details carried out to serve a customer and ensure the smooth running of the organization (Ikrama, 2019). Aruna Apte et al. (2018) recommended category management and strategic sourcing for products and services for SMEs. The use of category management and strategic sourcing for product and service procurement is one component of purchasing's evolution to a strategic function (Aruna Apte et al., 2018). The management of a specific category of products and services is concerned with ensuring that the policies, sourcing, and use of such products and services satisfy corporate-level strategic objectives (Ikrama, 2019). Category management is a continuous activity focusing on value factors other than price reductions. It is part of category management to engage stakeholders, thoroughly understand their product and service requirements, gather market knowledge on market trends, cost drivers, and risks, and design a sourcing strategy that aligns stakeholder expectations with market realities.

Another strategy was that SME owners leveraged the cost focus or product differentiation in offering their products or services. Rising labor costs and intense global competition force are significant reasons Chinese businesses shifted from a cost-focused to a differentiation-focused business strategy (Sun et al., 2021). China has had a massive ecommerce development, as evidenced by the widespread usage of the Internet and mobile shopping platforms throughout the country. Differentiation strategy's unique qualities, such as brand name awareness, has become critical to a company's success. As a result, many business leaders opted for the differentiation strategy. Using the differentiation strategy, SME owners can present several products and services for a significant market rather than focusing on one product and service (Sun et al., 2021).

Current Strategies and Challenges in the Fashion Industry

The retail value chain is undergoing a dramatic transition in the global retail scene. Traditional brick and mortar store-based businesses are facing threats from all angles as new retail business models and competitors emerge. The threat is mostly because of the rise of e-commerce causing digitalization's increasing effect (Yeo et al., 2022). Narayan Rao et al. (2021) reported that during the first months of the lockdown, prices at fashion businesses, electronics stores, furniture stores, and restaurants dropped dramatically. Fear of COVID-19 and lockdowns resulted in new consumer behaviors, while people are confined to their homes. Groceries, apparel, home décor, and workout equipment are all available for purchase online (Yeo et al., 2022). Roggeveen and Sethuraman (2020) revealed that the coronavirus epidemic has altered how we consume information and interact with the world. Even before the health crisis, a shift in consumption pattern was noticed and the pandemic only accelerated some of these changes. Corporations are prone to making significant adjustments to their business procedures in this regard (Justus-Oni et al., 2020; Nair, 2020). Many firms' operations and processes had to go virtual (Yeo et al., 2022).

Prior to COVID-19, in 2018, the Malaysian fashion industry addressed the issue of sustainable fashion as several multinational brands took practical actions to address the environmental impact (Ali et al., 2020). Malaysian fashion customers are still unaware of sustainable fashion consumption and its environmental implications (Ali et al., 2020; Rosli, 2018). The rapid growth of fast fashion, a phenomenon that began in 2000 and based on the fashion industry's low-cost strategy, has resulted in a lack of understanding of sustainable fashion consumption (Ahmad et al., 2020). Companies in the fast fashion apparel sector routinely provide low-cost, trendy clothing to the market to attract customers (Ali et al., 2020; Rosli, 2018). While e-commerce is adopted as a strategy in the fashion industry by SME leaders because of COVID-19, several fashion companies could not continue in business because of the significant investment required in the technology to set up e-commerce; therefore, such fashion companies failed in business (Ali et al., 2020).

Development of a Sustainable Competitive Advantage Through Superior Inventory

Leaders desire to achieve sustainable competitive advantage over competitors and often engage in innovative activities to outperform their competition and remain relevant in the marketplace. Superior inventory in form of supply chain management is one area a firm provides unique services to their client and remain distinguished in their performance. The ability of a business to carry out its operations in a unique fashion that others cannot duplicate is what is referred to as having a competitive edge (Fazal et al., 2022). Organizational resources have several possible benefits for businesses, including cheaper costs, higher efficiency, improved quality, a larger market share, rising profitability, and increased success. Because logistics facilitates the free flow of commodities and services necessary for the operation of industry and the economy, logistics is the foundation of any economy (Sharma et al., 2020).

India's logistics industry expanded quickly despite confronting significant obstacles. Supply networks and logistics have become more vulnerable as the COVID-19 epidemic spreads (Sharma et al., 2020). Health supply chains have been interrupted, including effects on active medicinal ingredients, transportation, purchases, finished medical items, and more (Sharma et al., 2020). For a firm to have a sustainable competitive advantage, such firm must have a long-term plan that could resist any disruption such as the COVID-19 pandemic that resulted to a lockdown in many economies. Business sustenance involves a consistent research and development in providing unique services to current and prospective customers.

Supply Chain Management

The management of the supply chain is a source of competitive advantage. Building new capabilities for participating businesses that will provide them a competitive edge over rivals has long been a critical objective of SCM (Cahyono et al., 2023). In this regard, Gezgin et al. (2017) claimed that even in the digital economy, business and technical capabilities are driven by a defined supply chain strategy that aligns with the strategic goals of participating enterprises. A company's supply chain capabilities have changed from layer-by-layer integration of forecasting, planning, and execution operations to seamless data management from the beginning to the end of the supply chain because of constant visibility (Min et al., 2019). Business leaders should combine their technology and people management capabilities to benefit from data management.

SMEs must collaborate with suppliers and use cutting-edge smart technology to compete and succeed in the global market (Benitez et al., 2021). SMEs utilized technology to improve effective and efficient operations and performance, reduce risks, and achieve competitive advantages. Such advanced technologies include artificial intelligence, the Industrial Internet of Things (IoT), big data analytics, and blockchain technologies to drive business activities and enhance business process innovation (Akpan et al., 2020). Big data analytics is the technology designed to economically extract value from massive volumes of a wide variety of data by enabling high-velocity capture, discovery, and analysis (Akpan et al., 2020). SMEs are becoming increasingly significant in the domestic and global markets because of the considerable contribution of SMEs to the national or global economy (Gonçalves et al., 2019). Because SMEs center on serving domestic consumers, their sales could be more extensive on the global market.

ERP systems try to adapt to all business models, whether industrial, commercial, or service-oriented (Aljawarneh & Alomari, 2018). Because different divisions of the organization cannot operate independently without integration and effective connectivity, which occurs through an efficient integrated information system that increases the efficacy of the organization's information system ability and manages business processes, ERP systems effectively link the available resources of these organizations with one another and create a kind of integration and flow of information between their different sections (Aljawarneh & Alomari, 2018). ERP can be described as a strategic tool that synchronizes, integrates, and streamlines an organization's data and operations into a unified system to obtain a competitive advantage in an uncertain by environment by assisting in achieving the organization's aims and objective (Jayamaha et al., 2023).

Key Success Factors for Small- and Medium-Sized Enterprises

Key success factors are the elements or items that are favorable to the business that may ensure sustainability (Elkhairi et al., 2019). In Pakistan, the factors identified are the entrepreneur's characteristics, internal business environment, external business environments, and supportive factors (Shakeel et al., 2020). Entrepreneurial characteristics included self-efficacy, locus of control, innovative mindset, risk-taking ability, and the personal need for achievement. The external business environment include the political, economic, social, technology, legal and environmental factors that shape the business. The internal environment is the strength of the business, the weaknesses, the opportunities to leverage and the threats that may hinder the growth of the business. The supporting factors are the government support, the family and friends support, and the customer patronage (Ali et al., 2020).

Sukathong et al. (2021) identified strategy, organization, top management, environment, and technology as success factors for SME sustainability. Strategy is the identification of short- and long-term goals of the organization and the directions and resources required to achieve the goals (Grainger-Brown & Malekpour, 2019). The top management is the decision body of the firm, where such decision as expansion, employment and product segmentation are made (Grainger-Brown & Malekpour, 2019). The environment is the location of the business and how competition is tensed or favorable, and technology is the infrastructure that is used to support the business to service customers both virtual, and brick and mortar (Ali et al., 2020).

Business Sustainability

Sustainability is a structure created to prolong the existing survival of any operation especially in business (Hanaysha et al., 2022). Actions related to sustainability include volunteering, predefining a system of regulation, methods used in the environment for preservation, and the systemic behavior of a business (Hanaysha et al., 2022). Evaluating business sustainability began with accepting the concept of how to incorporate innovation and implement a process of products and service to a future generation and to a community of customers (Al Mamun et al., 2018; Hanaysha et al., 2022).

The creation and promotion of new approaches to address severe concerns about unsustainable business practices is generally a commendable development (Hanaysha et al., 2022; Imbrogiano & Nichols, 2021). Hanaysha et al. (2022) elaborated that the promotion of management approaches that ought to enable sustainability performance in businesses is problematic. A fallacy about the effectiveness of concurrent management approaches to business sustainability does not rest on due diligence practices alone but also involves other tools and mechanisms promoted by the sustainability service industry (Imbrogiano & Nichols, 2021). For instance, the extent to which sustainable supply chain management programs are conducive to achieve sustainability objectives remains unclear (Imbrogiano & Nichols, 2021).

Critical Analysis of Systems Theory Concepts

Kannengiesser and Gero (2019) identified fundamental constructs in ST to include function, behavior, and structure. Function is the teleology ascribed to the artifacts that establishes a connection between the goal and the measurable effects of the artifact (Teater, 2019). Behavior is described as the measurable performance criteria for comparing different artifacts, while structure is the components and their relationships (Teater, 2019).

von Bertalanffy (1950) promoted ST that supports a holistic approach to solving everyday practical problems, such as SME survival strategies in business beyond 5 years. von Bertalanffy appraised interactions of components in a system, not individual components, and determined the properties and functions of that system. The fundamental principles of ST comprise a holistic approach, interconnections of parts, and the need for controlling the system (von Bertalanffy, 1972). In ST, the idea of wholeness came about from aiming at uniting the parts to form a whole, taking cognizance of the influence of the external environment on the system (Javanmardi & Liu, 2020). Using ST, a researcher could develop interactions among entities to evaluate how such system may produce a desired result (Javanmardi & Liu, 2020).

Systems theorists provide real-world explanations and solutions to everyday practical situations (Brandt & Sleegers). Systems theorists argue that a system reduced to parts will cease to exist. Altering one part affects system performance, and the success of enhancing one part depends on the interactions between this part and other parts of the same system (Javanmardi & Liu, 2020). The application of ST is common in qualitative and quantitative studies (Pype et al., 2018). ST prepares managers to deal with multiple interacting systems in an organization to sustain performance (Gear et al., 2018). ST sheds light on the dynamics of the process and the environment (Elliott & Davis, 2020). ST adopts the understanding of manager’s control of businesses.

When responding to the ST debate, Hassan et al. (2019) appraised that theorizing does not begin when hypotheses or propositions test or validate. As the superset to reasoning, theorizing is as natural to human beings as thinking, and it is this rich natural capability endowed in all human beings that characterizes the activities within the context of discovery well before any claims are considered. Instead of focusing on the context of discovery by taking advantage of all plausible avenues to explain the phenomenon, research practice tends to limit thinking to the clean, rationalized reconstructions found in published works (Hassan et al., 2019). In addition to digging deeper into the insights and creative thinking that characterize the context of discovery, researchers use the natural human capabilities they are endowed with and have a certain level of willingness to question and even forget previous thinking to engage in original research in ST (Hassan et al., 2019).

Complimentary Theories for Systems Theory

Human Capital Theory

The human capital theory is a helpful way to explain how employees enhance their value in organizations, leading to improved skill, autonomy, and socioeconomic well-being (Gerhart & Feng, 2021). The human capital theory implies that employees should bear the costs and benefits of their investment for the organization (Gerhart & Feng, 2021). For instance, pilots protested that their system ultimately meant they were forced to flee because they would not be paid otherwise, even if unwell or fatigued. So, the pilots collectively drafted a safety petition, arguing that the status of self-employment and the use of zero-hours contracts, where workers are paid only for the hours they work, which is not guaranteed in the event of low demand, jeopardize passenger safety (Gerhart & Feng, 2021).

The human capital theory supports the individualization of the labor force (Gerhart & Feng, 2021). Many forces are behind the individualization of the labor force, including the growing power of large organizations, the decline of unions, and even the genuine desire for freedom among workers (Gerhart & Feng, 2021). Gerhart and Feng

(2021) considered that treating human beings as property or marketable assets might seem distasteful to the average person. More importantly, Human capital theory provides the ultimate neoclassical retort to the Marxist slogan that workers should seize the means of production. Employment relationships inspired by the human capital theory are lucrative to individual workers if their skill is scarce and demand is high (Gerhart & Feng, 2021). In most cases, contract-based independence puts downward pressure on income because of competition and the asymmetrical power relationship between firms and workers (Gerhart & Feng, 2021).

Resource-Based Theory

The resource-based view (RBV), or resource-based theory (RBT), is a classical and influential theory in the field of SME. Individual business owners have various management styles and strategies to avoid barriers and acquire resources for success (Donnelly, 2019). A strategic management specialist, Barney et al. (2021) published the seminal work on RBT, the second part of the conceptual framework. Barney et al. discussed that small business owners could earn reasonable revenues with adequate resources. Resources were scarce and limited and thus needed appropriate mechanisms to regulate and monitor the businesses (Barney et al., 2021).

Barney et al. (2021) built RBT from the works of scholars such as Ricardo in 1817, Porter in 1980, and Nelson and Winter in 1982. These earlier scholars wanted to determine the economic value of resources and anticipate the potential resources needed to support the success of businesses (Barney et al., 2021; Davis & DeWitt, 2021). Researchers perform a SWOT analysis to assess the sustainable competitive advantage in businesses before the development of RBT (Barney et al., 2021). The SWOT analysis model assumes all businesses have the same traits, and small business owners could optimize internal strengths by responding to external opportunities (Barney et al., 2021).

The RBT has become one of the most salient theories in human resource management that provide a new view on sources of sustained competitive advantage. The RBV theory is relevant in assessing SMEs' strategies to sustain a business for some years (Barney et al., 2021). The RBV framework implies that human resources may be of greater significance for smaller firms, as they often must do more with fewer resources to remain competitive (Mupani & Chipunza, 2019). RBT posits that the success or failure of a business lies in the caliber of its employees and the quality of their working relationships (Godwell & Krishna, 2020). The service industry uses RBT, including small businesses, where the business's success depends on its employees (Mupani & Chipunza, 2019).

RBV helps to examine the competitive environment facing small businesses because of its focus on the role of the internal environment in guaranteeing SME performance (Mupani & Chipunza, 2019). The theory identifies a business's internal resources, core competencies, and distinctive capabilities as necessary to formulate resource strategies to achieve critical organizational outcomes (Beamish & Chakravarty, 2021; Zubac et al., 2010). The theory regards an organization's internal resources as crucial to positive business performance. One reason the RBT is essential for small businesses is its focus on the internal environment of a business to manage business uncertainties rather than merely capitalizing on the business opportunities presented by the turbulent external environment (Barney et al., 2021).

However, the RBT framework does not explain how SMEs develop and deploy resources to gain a competitive advantage. In a qualitative study, Barney et al. (2021) applied the RBT conceptual framework to explain factors that empower SMEs to survive and grow in highly competitive markets. Barney et al. explored the relationship between enterprise orientation, resources, and the environment with the growth of SMEs. Barney et al. used the case study research methodology to study three small firms. The study's findings indicated that the availability of redundant or slack resources could influence the growth of SMEs.

The focus on RBT is solely on the internal attributes of a small business, such as business skills, steady cash flow, and the ability to secure the required capital (Day, 2014). Owusu et al. (2022) argued that small businesses could remain resourceful, successful, and profitable to sustain their businesses. Thus, the success of small business practices depends on the owners' efforts to harmonize and sustain the steady flow of resources for business success. Valuable and irreplaceable resources can make the organization more efficient and competitive (Botha et al., 2019). A company must have the necessary resources to compete in the market. The strategies needed to succeed in business become significant to this research study because future potential small business owners might benefit from the findings.

Transition

Section 1 provided a summary of the foundation of the study and the background of the problem. Section 1 introduced the significance around the concept of business sustainability of small business owners. The literature review section provided information on small business enterprises, small business owners, business sustainability and ST. Section 2 includes the project, purpose statement, role of the researcher, participants, research method and design, population and sampling, and ethical research. I concluded Section 2 with information on data collection instruments, data collection technique, data organization technique, data analysis, reliability and validity, and transition and summary.

Section 2: The Project

Introduction

In Section 2, I review my role as the researcher, the participants' criteria for eligibility, and how I gathered information. I explain the use of the qualitative multiple-case study design and justify the plan I used to reach data saturation. Additionally, I restate the purpose of the study and discuss research method and design, including population and sampling, ethical procedures, data collection instruments, data collection techniques, data organization techniques, data analysis, and reliability and validity. Section 3 includes the presentation of findings, applications to professional practice, implications for social change, recommendations for action, recommendations for further research, reflections, and conclusion.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of the qualitative multiple-case study was to explore strategies SME owners use to sustain their business operations beyond 5 years. The study population consisted of five SME owners at fashion retailers in Northcentral Texas who had successfully sustained their company for more than 5 years. I used the purposive sampling method to obtain five participants from the target population. The data sources for the study include interviews with participants and document reviews of financial reports from the organizations involved in the study.

Role of the Researcher

I was the primary instrument for data collection in this qualitative study. Yin (2018) confirmed that the researcher is the focal instrument in a qualitative study. The data collection for this study involved (a) the use of multiple sources of evidence; (b) creation of a case study database; (c) maintenance of a chain of evidence; and (d) the exercise of reliability in using data from electronic sources of evidence, such as social media, as identified by Yin. Yin identified sources of data collection such as (a) interviews, (b) direct observation, (c) participant observation, (d) focus groups, (e) company document analysis, (f) archival analysis, and (g) reflective journal.

I developed six interview questions grounded in the conceptual framework. My intention was that the responses to interview questions would provide data to answer the research question stated in Section I. Saunders et al. (2018) recommended eight to 10 questions as sufficient questions for a case study design. As the researcher in this study, I selected participants who had experience and training as SME owners, arranged interview appointments, and synthesized the information for further member checking on the study.

I used the registered small business website in the United States (https://www.zoominfo.com). I used the business registration report available on the website to identify five SME fashion owners in Northcentral, Texas. SMEs that operated for more than 5 years were my focus. I sent a letter of expression of interest (see Appendix C) to all the identified SME owners. I obtained the consent of the five SME owners by having them sign a consent form. I scheduled a Zoom interview for the five owners, in which I asked questions using the interview protocol (see Appendix B). The Zoom interview was auto recorded and transcribed for data analysis.

Because they serve as the main instrument of their study, a qualitative researcher should consider the possibility of researcher bias. Researchers should have a systematic method of interpreting the data collected without introducing biasness (Berger, 2015; Dasgupta, 2015). One problem is researcher prejudice factors that can prevent researchers from obtaining unbiased findings (Berger, 2015; Yin, 2018). Keeping in mind one's potential biases is crucial. I considered and used evidence-based strategies to lessen the potential for bias, such as avoiding closed-ended or prejudicial questions in the interview process. Although having a personal lens may be inevitable, taking basic precautions might lessen its negative impacts.

Yates and Leggett (2016) stated that there are numerous strategies to reduce prejudice in research. To reduce any potential for personal bias, I made sure that the procedure utilized to collect semistructured interview responses and to organize, analyze, and interpret data was transparent. I used an interview protocol that contained the same interview questions for all the participants. The participants were people with whom I did not have any personal or business relationship. The study's observations and other components are reliable and accurate, I believe. It was necessary to adhere to a trustworthy interviewing procedure that was thorough, simple to comprehend, and address every facet of the research topic to guarantee that the information gathered satisfied the study goals and was of high quality (see Yeong et al., 2018). As a result, a similar technique such as audio recording was used for the semistructured interviews.

Semistructured interviews were a key source of data in this study. A researcher who uses this data source must also ensure that the participants' opinions are truthful, reliable, and well-expressed (Burkholder et al., 2019). Reflexivity, or the act of being critical of oneself, and member checking, or the obtaining of participant input on data analysis, are further techniques for reducing researcher bias (Burkholder et al., 2019). The extra precautions reduced the danger and outcome of researcher bias, I believe. I strictly adhered to ethical guidelines and avoided preconceived notions during the interview process and beyond (see Yu et al., 2014). I respected the confidentiality of each participant and complied with the ethical standards for research involving human participants outlined in the *Belmont Report* (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1979). The principles of respect, benevolence, and justice in the *Belmont Report* required that participants clearly understood the intent of the research and its potential risks or benefits and that they voluntarily consented to participate in the study.

Bias may affect the reliability and validity of a qualitative research. To reduce bias, I did the following:

1. Asked consistent questions across all interviewees using the interview protocol.
2. Kept detailed records of all interviews.
3. Incorporated data in the study in separate folders.
4. Synthesized finding from the original source, the Zoom transcribed document, and note-taking.
5. Requested company documents that corroborated participants' statements.
6. Conducted member checking.

Member checking is the researcher's interpretation of the interviewee's responses. It provides maximum benefit for reliability and validity and is preferable to transcript review. Member checking in this study involved (a) conducting the initial interview, (b) interpreting what the participant shared, and (c) sharing the interpretation with the participant for validation. I used member checking to ensure the participants' thoughts aligned with the emerging themes.

Participants

The population included five SME owners at fashion design organizations in Northcentral Texas who had successfully implemented strategies sustaining their businesses beyond 5 years. Through the public domain website, I identified five participants who were SME owners and who had founded their businesses within the fashion industry in Northcentral Texas. I adhered to the Walden University Institutional Review Board's (IRB) guiding principles and research protocol identified in the *Belmont Report*. The inclusion criteria for recruitment were as follows: (a) SME owner, (b) operated business beyond 5 years, (c) have a verifiable website, and (d) business located at Northcentral Texas.

Yin (2018) suggested screening participants to verify eligibility by using existing documentation or well-informed persons. I contacted my potential candidates through telephone and email as obtained from their website. In the initial contact, I introduced myself and explained the reason for the contact and discussed the potential participant's interest and qualification criteria. I then inquired if the candidate was willing to participate in a voluntary interview. I sent an expression of interest letter through their email and fixed an appointment after receiving positive feedback of their willingness to participate in the data collection process. I interviewed the participants through the Zoom meeting and followed up to find out if there was any documentation to support some of the claims as contained in the inclusion criteria.

Research Method and Design

The three research methods are (a) qualitative, (b) quantitative, and (c) mixed methods (Strijker et al., 2020). The qualitative method is appropriate to explore individual and group understanding by collecting data pertaining to participants' experiences (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). A qualitative researcher uses semistructured interviews, document analysis, focus groups to gain an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon (Maher et al., 2018). I used the qualitative method for this study because I identified and explored common themes and extracted data from the participant's natural environment by asking *what* and *how* questions.

Research Method

Quantitative researchers measure variables and test hypotheses for examining variable characteristics, relationships, or group differences to address the research question (Tecun et al., 2018). I did not need to test hypotheses to identify relationships among variables; therefore, the quantitative method does not answer my research question. Yin (2018) noted that the mixed-method researcher uses qualitative and quantitative aspects in the same study. I did not use mixed-method research because I did not need the quantitative aspect to address my research question.

Research Design

The three principal qualitative designs I considered are: (a) case study, (b) phenomenological, and (c) ethnographic (Yin, 2018). I used the case study design for this study. According to Yin (2018), a case study is an empirical inquiry used to investigate contemporary phenomenon within real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clear. Researchers use the phenomenological design to understand the personal meaning of participants' lived experiences related to the study purpose (Yin, 2018). The phenomenological design was not appropriate for this research, as I focused on the personal meanings of individuals who share the same experience. Keränen and Prior (2019) noted that researchers use the ethnographic design to immerse in and explore the culture of groups of people in their natural settings over a prolonged time. The ethnographic design was not suitable for this study because understanding groups' cultures did not address my research question. I chose a multiple-case study design to explore a phenomenon bounded by place and time. Although with a single-case study, my focus was on one specific organization, I conducted a multiple-case study to focus on multiple groups to provide more extensive descriptions and explanations of the phenomenon, thereby potentially improving the rigor and reliability of my findings by comparing results across the cases.

Case studies are the preferred strategy researchers employ when asking how or what questions (Amerson, 2011; Yin, 2009). The studies identify operational links among events over time (Baxter & Jack, 2015; Yin, 2009). Case studies may be exploratory, explanatory, or descriptive and may involve one organization and location or multiple organizations and locations for a comparative case study (Amerson, 2011; Stake, 2006; Yin, 2009). Hancock et al. (2021) opined that the case study design is one of the most widely used methods due to its flexibility and opportunity to use company documents as data. The multiple-case study design was appropriate for this study because in-depth insight was required.

Data Saturation

Saunders et al. (2018) described data saturation to mean the instant in which additional data collection yields little or no alteration in the recorded themes or codes. Attaining data saturation will significantly impact the quality and content validity of the research study. Data saturation is about the depth and breadth of the data rather than the numbers (Saunders et al., 2018). The researcher should choose the sample size that provides the best opportunity to reach data saturation. Yin (2018) suggested that a population sample size of two to 10 participants may be sufficient to explore a phenomenon within a clear conceptual framework. In this study, I proposed five participants.

While data saturation may occur when analyzing the data attained from the interviews, the probability of achieving data saturation increases when exploring secondary sources such as a document analysis (Onwuegbuzie & Byers, 2014). Saunders et al. (2018) indicated that researchers use numerous strategies to achieve data saturation. One such strategy is to continue additional interviews with more respondents until no new data are revealed. Another approach for reaching data saturation may involve the member-checking technique, where each participant receives a summary of their interview, and the participants are requested to endorse the accuracy of the synthesis (Saunders et al., 2018). By analyzing, synthesizing, and verifying any new information gathered during the member-checking process, the researcher engages in an iterative process of data collection and member checking until no novel data appear (Saunders et al., 2018). I selected five participants to reach data saturation and answer the research question. I collected data from interviews, observations, and a review of financial documents that address the decision-making strategies of small retail business leaders with sustainability over 5 years.

Population and Sampling

I conducted a qualitative study and incorporated semistructured interviews, document review, and note-taking to obtain a representative sample from a targeted population. Majid (2018) suggested that researchers use sampling strategies to reach the targeted population. Researchers use probability and nonprobability as two sampling techniques in carrying out studies (Sharma et al., 2021). Probability sampling is a scientific method of obtaining a representative sample out of a targeted population, which is used to construct valid statistical inferences for a target population (Sharma et al., 2021). When using probability sampling, researchers use random techniques to collect participants from the targeted population (Sakshaug et al., 2019).

Researchers recruit individuals in the population differently to be selected for the interview process (Rafail, 2018). Researchers develop research samples based on the study participants' features (Rafail, 2018). Rafail (2018) found that nonprobability entails the researcher's subjective judgment, which could be biased because of the subjective nature of responses. The ideal participants for the study could be omitted using the nonprobability technique. When using nonprobability sampling selection, the researcher knows the research participants, which may lead to data collection bias (Wang, 2018).

Some organizations use nonprobability sampling for research because of its straightforward nature to execute (Ames et al., 2019). I used nonprobability sampling because it aligns with the purpose of the study. Some of the nonprobability sampling researchers use include: (a) convenience sampling, (b) purposive sampling, and (c) snowball or chain sampling (Ames et al., 2019). The convenience sampling technique involves available and willing participants in the study (Riley et al., 2019).

Although the convenience sampling technique is easy to use, its disadvantage is that it does not ensure a reasonable representation sample (Ames et al., 2019). The snowball sampling technique is a convenient sampling technique that qualitative researchers use when much effort is needed to access participants with the target qualities that only existing participants can identify in the subsequent participants (Riley et al., 2019). With snowball sampling techniques, researchers allow active research participants to select future participants due to their relations with them, which increase the chances of including new participants among the number of participants in the study (Riley et al., 2019). The snowball sampling technique may be suitable for this study since identified leaders can share their experiences and make referrers to suitable participants. The disadvantage of using snowballing is the fact that the findings of the study may be affected by unexpected challenges, such as unnecessary pressure in recruiting participants (Fuchs et al., 2018).

The purposive sampling technique is the deliberate choice of a participant due to the qualities the participants possess, such as ranks, experiences, or geographical location (Ames et al., 2019). Purposive sampling entails the researcher determining what information is required and putting in place a system to find people who can and are willing to supply it based on their expertise and experiences (Ames et al., 2019). In purposive sampling, researchers choose participants based on the information they are most likely to supply in response to the questions (Yin, 2018). For this study, I used the purposive sampling technique to select the participants who meet the criteria, such as: (a) SME owner, (b) operated business beyond 5 years, (c) apparent success to have a verifiable website and (d) business located at Northcentral Texas.

Using the inclusion criteria, I identified participants from Northcentral Texas from their website to identify who could be included as a participant. Purposive sampling is the most appropriate sampling method for this study because I interviewed individuals who have successfully implemented strategies that have sustained their businesses beyond 5 years. As the researcher in this study, I created the criteria that permit the successful collection of data and ensure data saturation. In qualitative research, sample size depends on the researcher's intention to explore (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). Moser and Korstjens (2018) recommended that researchers evaluate the study's context to determine the appropriate sample size.

Stake (2006) explained that multiple-case studies would have limited benefits if fewer than four cases are chosen, while more than 10 cases may yield better results. I interviewed five participants until data saturation was reached. Saunders et al. (2018) inferred that data saturation is achieved when no new data or new themes emerge during the data collection. After the initial interview of five participants, I did not recruit more participants and perform new interviews since I achieved data saturation by the lack of appearance of new themes or codes. Due to the potential for uncertainty regarding the point at which data saturation is achieved, qualitative researchers need to focus more on providing evidence of achieving data saturation than on concerns regarding the point at which saturation will occur (Yin, 2018).

Throughout the study, I focused on providing evidence of achieving data saturation. The procedure I adopted includes completing the initial interview, interpreting what the participants said, and sharing the interpretation with the participants for validation. The interview was via the Zoom videoconferencing tool. According to Stake (2006) and Yin (2018), a suitable environment for conducting interviews is one in which the participants are not constrained or uncomfortable. The interviews were conducted using the Zoom videoconferencing tool, which ensured a peaceful, private, and interruption-free environment, improving the quality of the encounter.

Ethical Research

In the process of designing and conducting research engaging human data, the researcher must consider the principles of ethical conduct (Kaewkungwal & Adams, 2019). As the instrument of this study, I ensured and respect that: (a) participants privacy was protected, (b) participants were protected from harm, and (c) the participant's informed consent was received. Yin (2018) noted the importance of the consent form and recommended that researchers obtain consent to maintain and respect research ethics. I requested and received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) from Walden University before engaging in data collection, with the approval number 02-15-23-0611697.

I also completed the human subjects training offered through the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI Program) as illustrated in Appendix D. Researchers need to follow rigorous procedures to protect human dignity and rights. These include heeding informed consent regulations and applying the principles outlined in the *Belmont Report* (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). The main concern in this doctoral study regarding the recommended informed consent form guaranteed that the risk that participants may face was minimized. The IRB is required to supervise any research involving human subjects to attain the subject's safety and privacy and to sustain the study process at the highest level (Biros, 2018). In human subjects, ethical research involves informed consent, which is a method to secure ethical rights for potential participants by researchers seeking to gain the participant's authorization or refusal to engage in research before conducting any data collection (Biros, 2018). Reid et al. (2018) explained that informed consent is a legal policy and contractual agreement between the public and researchers. The informed consent form is designed to document records of the researchers' intention of securing the confidentiality and integrity of participants' identities (Broesch et al., 2020).

The informed consent form includes: (a) the purpose statement of the study, (b) the topic under study, (c) the researchers' information, (d) the procedure of the study, (e) possible risk and benefits of the study, (f) voluntary nature of the study, researcher's document retention and security for privacy disclosure, and (g) disclosure statements such as gift, payment or refunds, and the statement of consent (Abaunza & Romero, 2014). As part of this ethical process, I gave a detailed explanation of the research study, the role of the researcher, the inclusion criteria, the strategies to protect the identity of the participants, and the confidentiality of the participants. Voluntary participation was required for this research study with no coaxing, and at any time, participants can withdraw if the participant wishes to do so, as contained in the consent form.

I ensured the confidentiality of participants by using pseudonyms such as P1, P2, P3, P4, and P5 to represent each of the five participants in this study, where P1- P5 represent Participant one to five. For the safety of the research recordings and electronic documents, I stored them on a personal computer with a secret password and encrypted Cloud drive format to protect them from any form of natural hazard. Moreover, I used the shredding machine to destroy any form of hard copy data and terminally delete all recording and electronic documents with Cloud drive data removal software 5 years after the research is completed. As part of ethical consideration, researchers must introduce themselves to the participants (Martínez-García et al., 2019). I introduced myself to the participants by providing detailed information regarding my background, the topic, the purpose of the study, explanation of the study content, informed content and responding to participants' concerns to guarantee their confidentiality and protection. In qualitative research, participants must be allowed to read and ask questions concerning the informed consent document before signing to accept to participate and approve the use of data recording instruments during the interview process (Newington & Metcalfe, 2014). I followed all the rules of engagement to ensure that ethical practice was respected. The participants were informed that they can withdraw at any time.

Data Collection Instruments

The researcher is the primary data collection instrument in a research study (Kandade et al., 2021). I was the data collection instrument in this study. Researchers use different methods such as semistructured interviews, focus groups, and examining company documents, such as date of registration, location of business, and size of business to collect data in qualitative research (Yin, 2018). In qualitative research, using numerous data sources such as reviewing a company report, interviews, and observations would enable researchers to compare present and past data and triangulate data (Hilkenmeier et al., 2020). Researchers must select the most suitable data collection method to achieve the purpose of the study (Yin, 2018). I carried out in-depth semistructured interviews using the interview questions (see Appendix B), but I adopted some flexibility regarding follow-up questions to the participants to give detailed spontaneous narratives and descriptions.

In this study, I reviewed the following documents to validate the participants' interview responses: (a) records, such as evidence of SME ownership and operation of business beyond 5 years; (b) internal meeting notes; (c) and websites. The variety of data sources reflects the case study approach I used. As Yin (2018) stated, use of the case study design enables researchers to collect data through interviews, observations, documents, archival records, and physical artifacts. A researcher should consider the types of documents and how organizational leaders use documents in their business activities (Yin, 2018). In the interviews, I used an interview protocol (see Appendices A and B). This is an essential tool that provides details of the interview process and fosters trustworthiness in a qualitative study. An interview protocol encompasses the wording of interview questions, details on the data collection process, and procedures for ensuring that participants answer the established questions (Yin, 2018).

Researchers use member checking to validate the credibility, verifiability, and accuracy of the data collection (Belinfanti & Stout, 2018). If researchers can connect with and listen to participants during the interview process, they may obtain a deeper knowledge of their perspective (Belinfanti & Stout, 2018). In qualitative research, the application of multiple sources of data (data triangulation) can influence data saturation, ensure data reliability, data validity, and accurate research result (Fusch et al., 2018). To ensure saturation was reached in the study, l continued to recruit participants until it became evident that I have achieved data saturation. Reliability is the extent to which a measurement of a phenomenon provides a stable and consistent result (Carmines & Zeller, 1979).

Using data from several sources to create a triangulated analysis is essential for creating a study that is both credible and practical. Making sure that the study's findings contain only trustworthy and correct data is essential. A researcher can employ triangulation in several ways to improve study dependability. Multiple approaches or sources used in triangulation help to lessen the impact of researcher bias (Burkholder et al., 2019). Methodological triangulation entails collecting data using several different techniques (Mills et al., 2010). The sources used to gather information from study participants may include interviews, archival materials, journals, observations, and data from government organizations.

Reliability in qualitative research is the ability of the researcher to produce consistent outcomes in the analytical processes. Reliability enables the researcher to ensure the credibility of their data finding (Srivastava & Misra, 2014). Kennedy et al. (2019) explained that the dependability, credibility, conformability, and transferability of research results in qualitative research validate the study. To obtain validity, researchers ensure that their research findings are correct and match the facts (Silva et al., 2020). To ensure reliability, I collected data from multiple sources to provide evidence and ensure that all participants review my interpretations of the interviews to achieve validity.

Data Collection Technique

I commenced data collection as soon as I received the IRB approval (# is 02-15-23-0611697). Using the inclusion criteria such as (a) SME owner, (b) operated business beyond 5 years, (c) apparent success to have a verifiable website, and (d) business located at Northcentral Texas, I contacted 25 participants, through company website that falls into this category with the letter of expression of interest (see Appendix C). I used an interview protocol (see Appendices A and B) to administer the interview process. Contacting the pool of potential participants included sending an email that included the study's objective and an informed consent request. Five responded as accepted, 20 did not respond to the email, and none rejected the invitation. After obtaining consent, the researcher scheduled Zoom audio-recorded appointments with participants. There was no need for requesting for permission as these individuals represented their respective organizations. The researcher acknowledges that participants received no form of incentive.

Yin (2018) appraised that collecting data involves gathering information from research participants. A researcher must determine the best method to collect data in a qualitative research study (Yin, 2018). Researchers collect rich and in-depth data to answer research questions through data collection techniques and interview protocol (Helgeson et al., 2021). The most common approach for collecting data among participants includes in-depth interviews, note-taking, document review, participant's observation, and audio recordings (Fusch et al., 2018).

The data collection technique I adopted consist of semistructured interview and review of company's documents documentation. I used a semistructured interview format in this study because it is the most appropriate method of obtaining rich data on participants' experiences. Researchers employ semistructured interviews due to the available use of already developed questions to ensure clarification of responses from participants (Yin, 2018). The advantage of using semistructured interviews is that researchers can use a comfortable setting to execute interviews with participants (Wiseman et al., 2019).

I used the expression of interest form (see Appendix C) to invite potential participants to signify their interest in participating in this study. I then sent the informed consent: If you feel you understand the study and wish to participate, please indicate your consent by replying to this email with the words, 'I consent'. I conducted Zoom interviews and ensured that the company documents of the selected participants are received for validation. The documents included: (a) records of company existence, (b) notes of meetings, (c) checklists, and (d) websites. The records of company's existence were verified through the letter of incorporation as shown during the interview meeting and was verified through the corporate affairs commission (CAC) website (https://www.cac.gov.ng), confirming the registration of the companies. The documents which were proprietary information served as evidence of business ownership and evidence of business operation beyond 5 years. An interview serves as the primary data collection method in a qualitative study (Lo Giudice et al., 2019).

I used an interview protocol (see Appendix B) to administer the interview process. The steps involve contacting the pool of potential participants through email and communicating the purpose of the study. I scheduled a Zoom meeting with the participants to discuss the study purpose. The recording was with iPhone 14 Zoom recording functionalities that allow access to record the interview. I ensured that selected participants are given an informed consent through email and to all the participants. Each participant received a copy of the research questions to ensure familiarization and address their concerns. Structured, unstructured, and semistructured are the essential methods researchers use to conduct interviews (Lo Giudice et al., 2019). A structured interview is used when researchers want to achieve a broader sample of participants (Yin, 2018). In a structured interview, the participants do not have the opportunity to explore interview questions in detail (Yin, 2018).

In qualitative research, researchers could use unstructured interviews with no format but open-ended questions (D. C. Zhang et al., 2018). D. C. Zhang et al. (2018) stated that unstructured interviews allow the researcher and participant to discuss during the interview, resulting in more time. An unstructured interview is unsuitable for this study because researchers and participants can divert attention from the main topic. Researchers explicitly ask questions regarding elements of the study using semistructured interviews (Barrett & Twycross, 2018). In this study, I used semistructured interviews to collect data.

Using a semistructured interview enabled the researcher to capture significant aspects of the study and allowed flexibility for research participants to share their personalities and perspectives in the interview discussion (Barrett & Twycross, 2018). After obtaining permission to record from the participants, I used iPhone 14 audio recorder during the virtual interview process. The interview questions attached to the protocols (see Appendix B) entail seven open-ended questions. To ensure accuracy in this study, I provided interpretations of the interview data to each participant to assure the authenticity and approve the validity and accuracy of the responses gathered during the interview. None of the participants made any changes to the transcript, as they all confirmed the true position of the transcript. The transcript represented what the participants said verbatim.

Data Organization Technique

The data collection instruments used in this qualitative multiple-case study include in-depth, semi-structured interviews and the review of the interviews. Researchers increase the accuracy of their research by collecting data through several techniques, various sources of information, and using different methods to analyze the data (Abdalla et al., 2018). Researchers use several data organization techniques such as attaching labels to participants' responses on audio-recordings of interviews to safeguard the originality of the data collected (Khan et al., 2019). The technique to collect data in qualitative research is important for researchers because of the significant role to analyze, review, and report interview results accurately because it involves human elements (Yin, 2018).

In this study, I used pseudonyms name such as P1, P2, P3, P4, and P5 to represent the one to five participants. For each interview question, I created a file in Microsoft (MS) Word and Excel documents to categorize and label transcribed data. I identified themes using code numbers to analyze and interpret data for effective data organization. NVivo is a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software commonly used by researchers to organize data in qualitative research (Livera et al., 2019). The advantage of using NVivo software is that it enables researchers to retrieve and manage data promptly for analysis. I used NVivo 12 software to organize the outcome of the interviews into themes or categories using thematic techniques. In a qualitative study, researchers are required to store transcribed recorded interviews data of participants in a safe place such as a personal password-protected and encrypted Cloud drive for the confidentiality of participants and to keep it safe from fire and any natural hazards (Swarnakar et al., 2021). The feedback of each interview was created and sent to the participants for review and feedback to gain information. The assigned alphanumeric code for participants includes: P1, P2, P3, P4, and P5 to protect participants confidentiality during the data collection and analysis process.

I stored the raw data of interviews, note taken, document review in a confined security cabinet at home for 5 years to comply with Walden University Institutional

Review Board (IRB) requirement. From the participant's privacy and confidentiality perspective, I secured data from the interview on hard copy, which I lock in a metal cabinet in a private room. I stored the electronic data collected in this research in a Google cloud technology and USB flash drive with a secret password. I will delete all electronic data and use a shredding machine to destroy all hard copy files after 5 years.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is an important stage in qualitative research (Raskind et al., 2019). Concepts such as ST, and Six Sigma was analyzed based on the data received from participants during the interview process. Data analysis is a process of developing data from participants and other sources to determine primary themes, patterns, and descriptions that provide answers to the study's research question (Yin, 2018). Methodological triangulation uses different data collection methods like interviews, observations, and reviews of company documents to ensure rich, reliable, and trustworthiness of research findings (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Using methodological triangulation in research can help researchers to ensure that biases that arise from using a single method of data collection are overcome (Noble & Heale, 2019). For this data analysis, I used methodological triangulation to compare raw data from interviews with data from the notes taken and documents reviewed. In seeking access to documents, researchers require legitimacy in line with the prevailing practice of the institution or relationship that exist (Alexander & Smith, 2018). The procedure of methodological triangulation is suitable for reinforcing data verification validity, and to achieve conformability (Yin, 2018). After the data collection using semistructured interviews, document reviews and field notes, and transcription, a researcher analyzed data for the study (Moser & Korstjens, 2018; Raskind et al., 2019).

After the five participant's semistructured interviews, document reviews (records of company existence, notes of meetings, checklists, and websites), and field notes (keywords written during the interview) were completed, I transcribed the interview and commenced data analysis. I began immediately after the last participant was interviewed. I used Yin's (2018) five-step data process to analyze data for emergent themes and patterns. Yin (2018) explained the following five steps to analyze data in qualitative research: (a) compilation, (b) disassemble, (c) reassembling, (d) interpreting, and (e) review the data to conclude. The compiling involves organizing data to create a database (Yin, 2018). Based on their similarities, I labelled and compiled data by grouping information from interview transcripts, document review, and notes from the interview process. I created a centralized database for all information collected and uploaded them into NVivo 12 software to code, organize, and interpret the data.

Researchers use NVivo software to achieve data analysis through coding and eliminating systematically collated data from interviews (Livera et al., 2019). The NVivo software 12, assist researchers to store and code data as well as help in the preservation of participant's confidentiality. The second step of the disassembling procedure was the next step in data analysis, which breaks down the compiled data into narrative segments (Yin, 2018). Researchers repeat interpretation that may enable the researcher to recompile the database differently (Yin, 2018).

The third step of data analysis was reassembling. The codes, to which each concept in phase two is mapped, form into context with each other to create themes (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). A theme captures some vital information about the data concerning the research question and represents some level of patterned response within the data set (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). I grouped data segments with related codes to identify themes in this phase of data analysis. I used Nvivo 12 to validate that the groupings of data are consistent with the raw data by establishing inter-coder reliability.

The fifth and last step of data analysis explained by Yin is reviewing the data to conclude. The step calls for concluding the entire study after data review is done and the researcher accesses the data connection to the research question (Yin, 2018). To simplify the data analytical process, Yin (2018) suggested using NVivo software. NVivo is a beneficial tool that enables researchers to identify essential themes, mind mapping, and coding in a study (Sotiriadou et al., 2014). Zamawe (2015) considered NVivo software as a tool that enables researchers to save time and reduce human errors that are likely to occur during manual coding and theme selection. Weighing the advantages and the disadvantages of data analysis tools, I used NVivo 12 to collect and analyze data effectively.

The conceptual framework on RBV and research question relates to the strategies that SME owners use to sustain business operations. This study's data analysis focusses on discovering new themes and correlating the findings with the literature review. The conceptual framework employed to explain the organizational activities of SME growth and survival strategies beyond 5 years after startup includes holistic perspectives of the

ST and DMAIC (Ashby, 1958; Drack et al., 2007; von Bertalanffy, 1950). I applied the data triangulation structure to develop the patterns and themes, report the findings and discuss the relationship of the emergent themes to the ST model for the small business model and the literature.

Reliability and Validity

The significant elements of reliability and validity are dependability, credibility, transferability, member checking, and confirmability in qualitative research (Houghton et al., 2013). Pietilä et al. (2020) considered that researchers confirm the validity of research in qualitative research through member checking and methodological triangulation. Conducting qualitative research requires the assurance of confirmability, credibility, and trustworthiness of the study that researchers undertake (Pietilä et al., 2020).

Reliability

Reliability is the consistency with which the research finding is obtained (Andrade, 2018). In qualitative studies, researchers obtain reliability by repeating the research questions in a similar setting to participants to achieve consistent results (Starcher et al., 2018). In qualitative research, reliability is when researchers obtain the same findings using the same method to conduct a study in the future (Starcher et al., 2018). Researchers agree to the reliability approach to evaluate dependability to reduce the possibility of research outcome biases (Assarroudi et al., 2018). During data collection and analysis, researchers must ensure the reliability of the study by repetitively performing the same data collection and analytical procedure in each case to handle data to avoid biases (O’Connor & Joffe, 2020).

I made sure I remain unbiased by using member checking to ensure dependability. Researchers can gain feedback by sharing data with participants to allow them to prove-check the interpretation made by the researcher (Yin, 2018). I reviewed the interviews with each participant, transcribe the interview feedback, interpret the feedback, and allow participants to validate the accuracy and validity of the processed documentation through the member checking process. After each participant interview, transcription, audio recording, I conducted member checking to improve the accuracy of the data collection process.

Validity

Validity entails the effectiveness of a research instrument's function (Andrade, 2018). Internal validity is used to examine whether the way a study's design allows trustworthy answers to the research questions (Andrade, 2018). Internal validity examines whether the approach employed by researchers to conduct, develop, and analyze research can produce reliable responses to a study issue (Andrade, 2018). To achieve the validity of a study in qualitative research, researchers need to use the available body of knowledge (Andrade, 2018). To achieve a study's credibility and validity, researchers need to collect data, interpret data, and provide accurate findings of the participant's view of the study (Yin, 2018). Researchers can achieve validity by presenting confirmability, transferability, dependability, and credibility of the study (Lincoln et al., 1985). Member checking is a strategy used by researchers to explore the accuracy, credibility, transferability, and validity (Madill & Sullivan, 2018).

I used member checking as a technique to explore the credibility and dependability of the study results. Another technique that researchers use to achieve validity in qualitative research is data saturation, which entails the consistency of participant's responses (Yin, 2018). Methodological triangulation involves using several sources of information to validate data from the interview and helps ensure validity in research (Harriss et al., 2019). Researchers need to achieve data saturation and will accomplish this if data saturation shows the reoccurrence of the same theme, with no new ideas appearing (Lowe et al., 2018). In data collection, I continued the interview process until no new themes emerged in this study.

To ensure transferability, researchers need to explain the nature of the population and share information about the boundaries of the population to the participant (Andrade, 2018). I used a systematic approach to provide information about the participants and the location of the study to comply with the transferability requirement. Moreover, I recorded the procedure and analyzed accurate data to ensure credible research finding. The participants represented five SME owners at fashion retail organizations in Northcentral Texas, who have successfully implemented strategies that have sustained their businesses beyond 5 years.

Regarding confirmability, the data representing the participant's response had a detailed description that participants use to explain emerging themes. In qualitative research, researchers might achieve confirmability by comparing the original data to the study's conclusion (Yin, 2018). I used a reflective journal or practice an audit trial to help establish confirmability in this study. Researchers keep reflective journals for future reference (Wallendorf & Belk, 1989). I confirmed the credibility of this study in several ways, including the use of data triangulation, semistructured interviews, member checking, and documentary analysis.

Transition and Summary

Section 2 included a restatement of the purpose statement, the research method and design, and the justification for eligibility of the participants for this study. I included the choice and justification of the research method and design. I provided detailed information regarding the population sample, a detailed discussion of the ethical research, data collection instrument, data collection technique, data organization, and analysis focusing on validity and reliability. I continued with the discussion on dependability, credibility, transferability, data saturation, and confirmability to ensure reliability and validity. In Section 3 of this study, I briefly introduce and restate the purpose statement. After introducing the research topic, I provided a detailed discussion on the following: (a) the findings of the study, (b) the study's application to business practice, (c) the study's implication for social change, and (d) the recommendations based on the result of the research. I concluded this study by offering suggestions for future research and stating my reflections.

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative multiple-case study was to explore strategies SME owners use to sustain their business operations beyond 5 years. The study findings resulted from interviewing and examining the documents of five SME owners at fashion retailers in Northcentral Texas who had sustained their company for more than 5 years. The data sources for the study included interviews with participants and reviews of documents, such as financial reports, from the organizations involved in the study. After using methodological triangulation, five themes emerged that are related to strategies that SME owners use to sustain business operations beyond 5 years: (a) creative innovation and testing new markets, (b) quality improvement, (c) production hub and training centers, (d) human relationships, and (e) government support through social change initiatives. In this section, I provide a comprehensive analysis of the five themes.

Presentation of the Findings

The overarching research question was, what strategies do SME owners use to sustain business operation beyond 5 years? I conducted semistructured interviews using an interview protocol (see Appendix B) and reviewed pertinent documents to address the research question. A total of 25 SME owners of fashion retainers were contacted through their private website to participate. The inclusion criteria were as follows: (a) SME owners, (b) operated business beyond 5 years, (c) apparent success based on information on their business website, and (d) business located at Northcentral Texas. Of the 25 individuals I contacted, five (20%) accepted the invitation, and 20 (80%) did not respond to the email; none rejected the invitation.

I collected data from all five participants to ensure data saturation. Saturation is achieved when no new theme or information is obtained (Fusch et al., 2018). To methodologically triangulate findings, I collected data by conducting semistructured interviews and document reviews. Triangulation refers to using multiple methods or data sources in qualitative research to develop a comprehensive understanding of phenomena (Abdalla et al., 2018). Data triangulation is crucial to strengthen the validity of the research and ensure researchers understand and properly analyze the data (Bergen & Labonté, 2019; Daniel, 2019). Member checking was used to confirm from the participants that the data collected were the proper responses they intended to say, as recommended by Marshall and Rossman (2016).

To transcribe the five interviews, I repeatedly played each Zoom recording and typed out every word I heard. This allowed for identification of codes and common themes. The common themes were identified using both hand-coding and the NVivo 12 software program. The process of data collection was stopped when no new information emerged. The process of saturation is achieved when no new theme or data emerge as the interview process continues (Fusch & Ness, 2015). The emergent themes included (a) creative innovation and testing new markets, (b) improvement in quality, (c) production hub and training centers, (d) human relationships, and (e) government support through social change initiatives (see Table 2).

Table 2

Themes

Theme	No. of respondents	No. of times participants addressed themes
Creative innovation and testing new markets	4	30
Improvement in quality	5	25
Production hubs and training centers	3	15
Human relationships	5	20
Government support through social change initiatives	4	16

Theme 1: Creative Innovation and Testing New Markets

The first theme that emerged from the participants' responses was creative innovation and testing new markets. Triangulated materials supporting this theme include the semistructured interviews, supporting evidence provided by the participants, and analysis of information on business websites. The responses of four of the five participants were the basis for this theme. This represents 80% of the participant size. P1 stated the following:

> In a competitive global environment where organizations have adopted the concept of flexibility and agility, only companies with a creative mindset and ability to grow into a new market can remain sustainable. In our fashion business, we do not imitate trends, rather we improve our research and development and ask questions to existing and prospective customers to understand their taste and income level which they intent to spend on

> fashion. Based on this information, we expand into new markets with innovations to satisfy lifestyle.

P2 mentioned the following: "Despite the fact that market look saturated with beautiful fashion and varieties, only with creative innovative mindset and ability to identify new markets and the strategy to penetrate, will companies remain in business for a long time." P3 and P4 corroborated that high level of creative innovation into a new market and existing market is a guarantee to business sustainability as strategy. After manually hand-coding the data, the NVivo 12 software was used to verify the theme, which revealed a total of four participants sources and 30 references.

P4 further stated that "creative innovation is a continuous process to stay ahead of competition and discovering the channels to make your products available in demanding markets is the bedrock of sustainability". Theme one confirms previous literature such as Taneo et al. (2020). It is essential that innovative ideas are speedily achieved and products that enter the market faster have greater opportunities to increase competitiveness through profit and productivity (Taneo et al., 2020). Taneo et al. (2020) described creative innovation for competitiveness as the ability of a company to (a) do something better than others, (b) do something difficult to imitate, (c) do something of value to customers, (d) do something that is difficult to replace, and (e) do something that has a greater profit potential than that of competitors.

Moon and Acquaah (2022) categorized innovation into (a) creative innovation, (b) imitative innovation, and (c) combination innovation. While imitative innovation is the ability to copy the original innovator's products attributes, creative innovation is to reconfigure or recombine the products into a distinctive characteristic (Moon & Acquaah, 2022). Participants responses and previous responses support the theme that using creative innovation and testing new markets, SME owners in the fashion retailers could sustain their business operation beyond 5 years. The company's training documents reviewed from the five participants indicated that the participants carry out market survey and testing new markets before launching products. Testing new market was also revealed on the website as activities carried out periodically. The notes taken during the interview section also capture some keywords such as sharing questionnaires among new markets.

Theme 2: Improvement in Quality

The second theme that emerged from the participants responses and data collection process was improvement in quality. After manually hand-coding the data, the Nvivo 12 software was used to verify the theme. Triangulated materials such as semistructured interview, document review and supporting evidence included participant responses, and public website. The total number of five participants from the five participants responses resulted in the emergence of the theme. This represents 100% of the participant size. P1 stated:

> Each year we define the business objectives which is followed by market growth overtime with increased customer base. There is more research, customer feedback, creating at least 10 new styles annually, more pop-ups, sales, sourced raw materials widely, improved quality. The quality of material goes with the cost, and this is mostly done through a pre-advice

> of how the cost relate to quality of product. In the fashion retailers such as our business, quality is both on the texture and the style of finishing. This is what quality represents to the customers. A quality material that does not look fitting into the customer's body is not seem quality. Therefore, the ability to match quality of material to sowing, is what brings sustainability and repeat patronage in the fashion world.

P2 mentioned: Quality improvement involves proper training of all staff to know the essence of quality in retaining customers. P2 also mentioned how they have a central procurement of fashion material from markets and traders who they have maintained a long-term relationship with over the years. P3 and P4 repeatedly narrated the importance of improved quality in fashion business in Texas where the seasons determine the nature of dressing people use during the season. P4 stated:

> During the winter for instance, quality varies when compared to summer period. The ability for the fashion to meet the peculiarity of the season is the quality to customers of P4. P4 pointed an instance when demand for simple dressing increases during the summer while thick cloths are of high demand during the winter season in Texas. Improvement in delivery is also put into consideration when examining why customers would remain and why the business will operate in perpetuity.

P5 stated "improving quality is an annual strategic pillar. This is the one way to increase customer's loyalty for the business". The participants responses that with improved quality SME owners in the fashion retailers could sustain their business operation beyond 5 years. After manually hand-coding the data, the Nvivo 12 software was used to verify the theme, which revealed a total of four participants sources and 30 references.

The second theme on improvement of quality aligns with previous literatures such as Hellberg and Fauskanger (2022). Hellberg and Fauskanger appraised organizations that use quality improvement to sustain their organizations. The effects of quality improvement are not achieved only through the application of various quality tools, rather, through the collaboration of the individuals concerned and their understanding of improvement (Hellberg & Fauskanger, 2022). Hellberg and Fauskanger identified some of the quality improvement method as lean tools, six-sigma, quality management techniques, and implementation processes theory.

Organizations leaders that had experienced business sustainability used six-sigma as tool to reduce process variation and enhance process control, while they used lean concept to reduce waste and promote work standardization and flow. Ershadi et al. (2019) described the concept of quality to be developed from product-oriented approach to the user-oriented perspective which is important source of quality competition, and a special tool for the long-term growth of an organization. Mättö (2019) analyzed the effectiveness of a quality improvement method as a potential means of innovation, specifically directed to improve organizational performance and to alleviate problems in organizational processes which lead to business sustainability. From the documents that were reviewed, company certification revealed quality measures demonstrated by the participants. The website and the notes taken revealed that improvement in quality is what the company pays attention.

Theme 3: Production Hubs and Training Centers

The third theme that emerged from the participants responses and data collection process was production hubs and training centers. Triangulated materials such as semistructured interview, document review and supporting evidence included participant responses, and public website. Three participants from the five participants responses resulted in the emergence of the theme. This represents 60% of the participant size. P1 stated:

> The bulk of the activities at a fashion retailers' business is production and training. The ability for your apprentices and staff to replicate your style for clients who have become your loyalist is important. Once that touch is maintained, you are sure of positive patronage and referral that would guarantee business sustainability. Also, employees who consider their human capacity as a priority for the top management tend to also demonstrate sense of loyalty to customers and fellow staff. Staff adequate training has been our strategy to turnover reduction as well as business sustainability.

P2 and P4 repeatedly mentioned that maintaining a large production hub and training separate from the product display and marketing unit create a sense of concentration for the employees as well as lead to effective coordination of employees. Focusing on the details, such as repeated training in fashion retainers is relevant to sustain existing market as well as attract new customers. After manually hand-coding the data, the Nvivo 12 software was used to verify the theme, which revealed a total of three participants sources and 15 references.

The theme about production hub and training center as a strategy for achieving sustainable organization aligned with previous literatures. Piantoni et al. (2023) inferred that while training workers, launching projects aimed at fostering social and economic results may imply initial cost and investment that may not have fast returns, the long-term effect of training workers is on the sustainability of the organization. As a result of increase for customized products from customers in the product complexity and production process in manufacturing, which requires more complicated and interdisciplinary decisions, resulting in a long-term impact on organizational growth, companies are resulting to modularity, flexibility, scalability, agility, and knowledge-based decision in creating smart factories and production hub to remain sustainable (Yildiz & Moller, 2021).

Hervas-Oliver et al. (2020) appraised a production hub as a means of providing sustainable learning culture for an organization, where their brand and style are retained for the preservation of their values to the customers. While production hub could be digital or brick and mortar, training is the practice that enhance and improve the workers to retain what they have learned to produce repeatedly without a regular intervention of the management (Hervas-Oliver et al. (2020). Participants response and previous literature supported that having a production hub and training center for fashion retailer is a strategy that SME owner in the fashion retailers could use to sustain their business operation beyond 5 years (Yildiz & Moller, 2021). The participants kept training records especially the training on production and services provided. Several of the terms on training were captured on the notes taken during the interview.

Theme 4: Human Relationships

The fourth theme that emerged from the participants responses and data collection process was human relationships. Triangulated materials such as semistructured interview, document review and supporting evidence included participant responses, and public website. Five participants from the five participants responses resulted in the emergence of the theme. This represents 100% of the participant size. P1 stated:

> Among all the skills acquired to recruit customers and retain such customers, the greatest of all is the human relationships that you maintain with your customers. There may be competitors or even experts that will become better than you or use more sophisticated machines to make cloths for customers in large quantities and faster than you are. But with a human relationship on your side, you will remain in business and hand that business over to the next generation to come.

P2 stated “learning to take complaints as gift is the knowledge towards building a positive human relation with your customers. The first and most important skills we teach every staff is that of human relationship; to deal with all customers with dignity”. P3 mentioned that maintaining human relationship with employees further leads to employees respecting the customers because they will see human relations as a culture of the organization. P3 added that the leadership of the organization determine the culture of such organizations, and they define what others emulate. P4 stated:

> Many people wonder why we have been in business for half a decade and still going strong even though we focus on women fashion alone. I tell them, the ability to manage the female gender for half a decade is the secret of business longevity. Human relationship and ability to know each of your customers taste, time management, style, and body language, gives you an edge over competition. This has sustained us for five years running.

P5 stated,

> Customers are not just king or princess, rather, they are the purpose of the business. We have had to compete on every other aspect of the business such as cost minimization, styles, cost reduction, customers identification and acquisition, however, we take the lead in managing the relationship over our customers.

After manually hand-coding the data, the Nvivo 12 software was used to verify the theme, which revealed a total of five participants sources and 20 references.

The documents on human resources that also include inter-departmental communication and knowledge sharing among the departments were spotted among the documents kept by the participants. On their website were also evidenced activities such as team bonding and events such as staff forums organized for employees. During the interview, some keywords that were captured on the notes include, human relations, employee's relationship, and inter-departmental support system. The theme on human relationships aligns with previous literatures; Giertz et al. (2022) discussed that although consumers favorable human brands can be used to improve corporate brand outcomes, organization rely deeply on consumers' relationship with the endorsing human brands.

Gaumer and Shaffer (2018) evaluated that current customers, suppliers, and employees must receive the attention they deserve to avoid negatively impacting hard-earned organizational brand equity. Failure to nurture supplier's relationships, neglecting customers relationships can cause great loss to the organization. An ineffective management of employee relationship could result in expensive turnover, loss of customers, and negative word of mouth (Gaumer & Shaffer, 2018). Gaumer and Shaffer (2018) evaluated the succession plan of businesses and claimed that the ability of an organization to succeed in the next generation lies on their ability to manage human relationship effectively, among all stakeholders. Using the participant response and previous literature, it is inferred that human relationship is a strategy SME owner in the fashion retailers could use to sustain their business operation beyond 5 years.

Theme 5: Government Support Through Social Change Initiatives

The fifth theme that emerged from the participants responses and data collection process was government support through social change initiatives. Triangulated materials such as semistructured interview, document review and supporting evidence included participant responses, and public website. The total number of four participants from the five participants responses resulted in the emergence of the theme. This represents 80% of the participant size. P1 stated:

> Irrespective of how much one tries to remain in business, if the government of the day does not support such business, it becomes difficult to survive. Taking the green revolution into perspective for instance. If the government decide to phase out a particular fashion of clothing from their society, that may have a negative impact in the business of fashion or on customers who patronize fashion. Also, most of our raw materials are sourced from African countries. Those countries need to be at peace before business transaction can take place. Therefore, it is important for government to support business growth as experienced in the western world as compared to Africa.

P2 mentioned that in periods such as COVID-19 pandemic, you need more of government support in Texas to remain in business. When the social distance became implemented, you hardly could maintain delivering products to customers irrespective of how perfect the supply chain mechanism you have in place. But with the government interventions in opening businesses through the use of palliatives, and vaccine, the business sustainability got restored.

P3 stated:

> government interventions through social change help businesses to survive tough policies in international businesses. Some of us rely on international patronages to remain in business. Texas is where the products hub exists, but the marketing and delivery is all over the world. Therefore, the government policies determine the extent of sustainability. Such policies

as inflation, devaluation, importation and exportation, inclusion list, and exclusion list of a country, has many ways it affects international business.

P5 mentioned that government factor plays a significant role in business sustainability. For instance, in Texas, the policies favor startups businesses in terms of tax and other levies paid to the government. Therefore, one must carefully evaluate the impact of government policies and interventions. After manually hand-coding the data, the Nvivo 12 software was used to verify the theme, which revealed a total of four participants sources and 16 references.

The theme about government support through social change initiatives aligns with previous literatures. Nurdin et al. (2022) described government role in sustenance of business is about integrating social, environmental, and economic responsibilities. Part of government intervention is e-government sustainability which involves the continuous optimization of service delivery, constituency participation, ongoing monitoring, and evaluation, sustaining political leadership and government improvement by transforming internal and external relationships through technology, the internet, and new media (Nurdin et al., 2022).

Samkin and Wingard (2021) identified stakeholder’s groups that determine the success of an organization as communities, governmental organizations, non-governmental organizations, environmental groups, customers, employees, shareholders, media, and donors. Samkin and Wingard (2021) analyzed that political factors must be considered when undertaking social and environmental accounting research in a developing country context. A decline in government funding can result to many leaders of organizations re-examining all sources of revenue (Samkin & Wingard, 2021).

Applications to Professional Practice

SME owners of fashion retailers can apply the findings of this study to implement strategies that assist them in sustaining their business operations in a challenging and highly competitive environment. Realizing the strategies may ensure long-term sustainability might help SME owners of fashion retailers and increase customer satisfaction. Strategies including creative innovation and testing new markets, improvement in quality, production hub and training center, human relationships, and government support through social change initiatives are available for SME owners to sustain business operations beyond 5 years. The marketing and customer relationship theme allows business owners to build a marketing strategy that directs their limited resources toward profitable opportunities to increase sales and gain a competitive advantage. Through networking, small business owners can expand the business, innovate, and develop relationships across their industry. Even though the focus of this study is on operations sustainability, sustainability comprises economic sustainability, which is related to the firm's ability to generate adequate cash flows to maintain liquidity position; environmental sustainability encompasses the firm's focus on reducing negative environmental impacts due to business operation and social sustainability which is related to adding value to society (Latif et al., 2023).

Implications for Social Change

The study's results may contribute to positive social change by providing SME owners the opportunity to increase their communities' contributions for the betterment of their citizens. The study's findings could guide SME owners to sustain operations and create more revenue through taxes, leading to better community services such as better roads, schools, and other public services. An associated implication for positive social change from the proposed study could enable business leaders to donate money to support activities in their local communities and nonprofit charitable organizations. The social change implications include innovations that could lead to employment and job creation, quality of products on health and climate change, training for an improved standard of living, social cultural development, and co-existence.

Recommendations for Action

The intent of the qualitative multiple-case study was to explore strategies SME owners use to sustain their business operations beyond 5 years. The study’s findings resulted from interviewing and examining the document of five SME owners at fashion retailers in Northcentral Texas who are sustaining their company for more than 5 years. The data sources for the study include interviews from participants, document reviews, and financial reports from the organizations involved in the study.

Recommendation 1: Creative Innovation and Business Expansion in African Countries

SME owners of fashion retailers could adopt creative innovation and business expansion to African countries such as Nigeria, Cameroon, Ghana, and the Gambia, as these countries share similar cultures in terms of fashion. Some of the participants in Texas shares similar origins and, therefore, could make their products and services borderless to sell across countries. By embracing creative innovation, fashion experts could quickly fill in the gaps in style and cost in African countries and the Western world. Ye et al. (2021) analyzed innovation as the idea of a creative leader who is not only visionary but can also articulate their vision in such a way as to incentivize employees to pursue the articulated vision.

Recommendation 2: Human Relationships as a Key Part of Organizational Culture

SME owners of fashion retailers should inculcate the paradigm of human relationships into organizational culture. Human relationship is the ability to manage the human element among all stakeholders. As established in this study, human relationship is the one element that cannot be delegated or stolen from competitors. Instead, it is found in the culture of the organizational players, or the absence of it can create a toxic business environment that has the potential to lead to high staff turnover, customer nonretention, and complex community relationships. Fashion retailers must invest in training their employees and everyone in their value chain on the importance of human relations.

Recommendation 3: Maintenance of Favorable Government Relations

SME owners in fashion retailer businesses need to maintain a close alliance with government agencies and the community for favorable policies. It was revealed in this study that in times of harsh business environments or uncertain periods such as the COVID-19 pandemic, only the government rules and policies determine the industry that remains in business and those that will fail. Piller (2022) described the fashion industry as the products with the most complex, convoluted, and lengthy supply chain among manufactured products. A lack of government policy, regulation, incentives, and infrastructure for collecting, sorting, and recycling textiles can create a significant barrier to SME owners of fashion retailers (Piller, 2022).

Recommendations for Further Research

In this multiple-case study, I explored strategies SME owners use to sustain their business operations beyond 5 years. The study findings resulted from interviewing and examining the document of five SME owners at fashion retailers in Northcentral Texas who have been sustaining their company for more than 5 years. The recommendation for practice includes creative innovation, finding new markets for business expansion across African countries, and human relationships, including managing stakeholders in the business cycle. The last recommendation is collaborating with the government for intervention for business continuity.

The current research is about the qualitative methodology, which explores SME owners' strategies to sustain business operations beyond 5 years. The first recommendation is that future researchers could adopt quantitative methodologies to study the relationship between the findings and the business performance of fashion retailers. Through this study, future researchers can indicate which findings will be worth pursuing regarding probability and which to drop. The other recommendation is that the study's number of participants and location should be different. The number of participants could be increased to 10, and the location should be in African countries. Changing the location may help future readers to compare the result findings.

Reflections

The doctoral study exposed me to a new vista of learning. It was terrific to start the new journey when discussions and assignments had deadlines. Adapting to this new change has given life a new meaning in my academic reasoning. When I commenced the program, the exchange rate was comfortable between the Naira and the dollar. However, the exchange rate disparity began to take an upward toll along the line. This new change in the exchange rate, coupled with the changes experienced in class, tested my resilience to life. Getting this journey this far is a significant milestone, as I can see the light at the end of the tunnel.

While in the Doctor of Business Administration program, I gained great insight into business strategies SME leaders use to sustain business in the United States and beyond borders. During the data collection, I had significant concerns and made every effort to minimize bias to the minimum. After obtaining Walden University IRB approval, the researcher closely followed the interview protocol. A significant challenge appeared in getting the participants at the data collection stage of the research, however I overcame this obstacle. Throughout the data collection process, I remained neutral and attentive to the role while making the interviewees comfortable. This journey enhanced my critical thinking, research, and writing skills. The achieved skills will be an asset in future endeavors, including academia and publishing. Walden University provided the necessary tools and resources to guide me through this qualitative multiple-case research.

Conclusion

The objective of the qualitative multiple-case study was to explore strategies SME owners use to sustain their business operations beyond 5 years. The study population consisted of five SME owners at fashion retailers in Northcentral Texas who have been sustaining their companies for over 5 years. The data sources for the study include interviews with participants, document reviews, and financial reports from the organizations involved in the study. After using methodological triangulation, five themes emerged which are related to strategies SME owners use to sustain business operations beyond 5 years: (a) creative innovation and testing new markets, (b) quality improvement, (c) production hub and training centers, (d) human relationships, and (e) government support through social change initiatives. The study findings provided practical recommendations such as creating innovation and expansion, maintaining human relationships among all stakeholders, and encouraging government support for business sustainability. These study findings have contributed to scholarship and filled gaps in the literature on strategies SME owners use to sustain their business operations beyond 5 years.

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Appendix A: Interview Script

Participants Pseudonym: ________________________________
Interview Date____________________________ Total Time__________________
Interview Location: Telephone, Zoom, Microsoft Teams

What to do	What to say (script)
1. Begin the interview by welcoming the participant to the interview session with greetings and then introduce yourself to the participant. Make sure the participants receive a copy of the consent form to read the content. Ask the participant if they have any concerns or questions. Address any questions or concerns before proceeding with the interview process. Let the participant know that you are about to start the interview and then switch on audio recorder.	1. Good afternoon Mr……………… My name is Musa Raymond, a doctoral student at the department of business administration of Walden university, conducting research on strategies to sustain small businesses beyond 5 years. .
2. At the beginning of the interview, ask available company sources like business reports, business plan, and organizational plan. Ask the participant to send me these documents via email. Start the interview with question 1 and end with last question.	2. You are required to understand the research well enough to decide about it and reply me via an email to Consent your desire to participate in this research. You will print or save a copy of this consent form. The duration of this interview will be 45–60 minutes. This Interview will be audio-recorded and. transcribed. I would like you to share with me any documents, like notes of meetings, records, checklists, and annual reports that you use to share knowledge with your employees. Do you have any question before we begin?
3. For more depth in data collection, follow with additional probing questions with participants. Discuss member checking with the participants to enhance the rigor of data by formally checking out the interpretation of data analysis from participants interviewed to ascertain the reliability and validity the end of the interview. Show appreciation by thanking the participant for honoring the interview. Share contact numbers with participants for follow up questions if the need arises. Wrap up the interview with participant and thank them for sharing their experiences.	1. What strategies did you use to sustain business beyond 5 years? 2. How has your organization used the strategies? 3. What were the key barriers to implementing your strategies? 4. How did you overcome the key barriers to implementing your strategies to sustain business? 5. What other information would you like to share regarding the strategies you developed and implemented?
4. Finally, schedule a follow up member checking interview	

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Participant Code: __________ Date of Interview: ________________________

Interview Mode: Zoom_____________ Videoconferencing________________

Telephone_______________ Others (please specify) ____________________________

Guidance notes:

- Explain the purpose of the study to the participant.
- Retrieve signed informed consent forms.
- Write the label assigned to the participant on top of the interview sheet to ensure confidentiality.
- Audiotape the interview and assign same label to identify the data.
- Watch for nonverbal cues.
- Ask follow-up probing questions to get more in-depth information.
- Wrap up interview thanking participant.

Research Question

What strategies do SME owners use to sustain business operation beyond 5 years after formation?

Interview Questions

1. What strategies did you use to sustain business beyond 5 years?
2. How has your organization used the strategies to improve corporate strategies and return on investment capital?
3. What were the primary barriers to implementing your strategies?

4. How did you overcome the barriers to implementing your strategies to sustain business?
5. What adjustments have leaders had to make to business procedures to sustain the business?
6. How do you categorize management functions and strategic sourcing in your organization?
7. How did the pandemic in quarantine affected supply chain strategies?
8. What other information would you like to share regarding the strategies and system you developed and implemented in your organization?

Appendix C: Invitation to Participate in the Study

My name is Musa Raymond a doctoral candidate at Walden University. I am pursuing a doctorate degree with a specialization in Finance. I am conducting qualitative research titled: Strategies to Sustain Small Businesses Beyond 5 Years. The background and purpose of this qualitative case study is to explore strategies that some SME owners use to sustain business operations beyond 5 years. Consequently, you have been identified as suitable participant to participate in interview with open-ended questions with three other participants in your organization for the purpose of data collection. Interviews will be conducted in person or, virtually or via telephone. I confirm that employees' participation will be voluntary and at their own discretion. In addition, I can also confirm that the participants' responses to the interview questions will be strictly confidential.

I am inviting you to participate in this research study. The consent form document will be given to you that will provide information so that you can make an informed decision concerning participation.

The remainder of this email will provide information so that you can make an informed decision concerning participation.

What Is the Research About?

The background and purpose of this study is to explore strategies that some SME owners use to sustain business operations beyond 5 years. I believed that sharing your experience will be a great contribution to the study. As such, I am reaching out to you if you might have an interest in participating in the study. The findings of this study may contribute to positive social change by providing public sector managers with effective strategies for implementing a change process for reducing costs and increasing revenues from business operations. Reducing cost overhead may lead to more revenue for the government and by extension to the economy, providing basic or expanded social services to citizens, such as clean water to improve the standard of living to North Central Texas.

Thank you in advance for your consideration.

What Does Participation in This Research Study Involve?

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to

- Participate in a telephone/virtual interview that will last for 45 minutes to one hour for data collection depending on your preference.
- Participate in member checking; where individuals that participated in the telephone/face-to-face interview will have the opportunity to go through the transcript of the recorded interview to be sure what was transcribed agrees with the interview.
- The member checking exercise will last for 45 minutes to one hour.
- That the interview will be audio recorded.

Guarantee of Confidentiality

All information obtained in this study is completely confidential unless disclosure is required by law. The results of the study may be used, at an aggregate level, in reports, presentations and publications. Individual participants will not be identified.

Confirmation of Participation

This email is used to elicit your interest to participate in the research. I hereby invite you by responding to this email, your willingness to be included in the study.

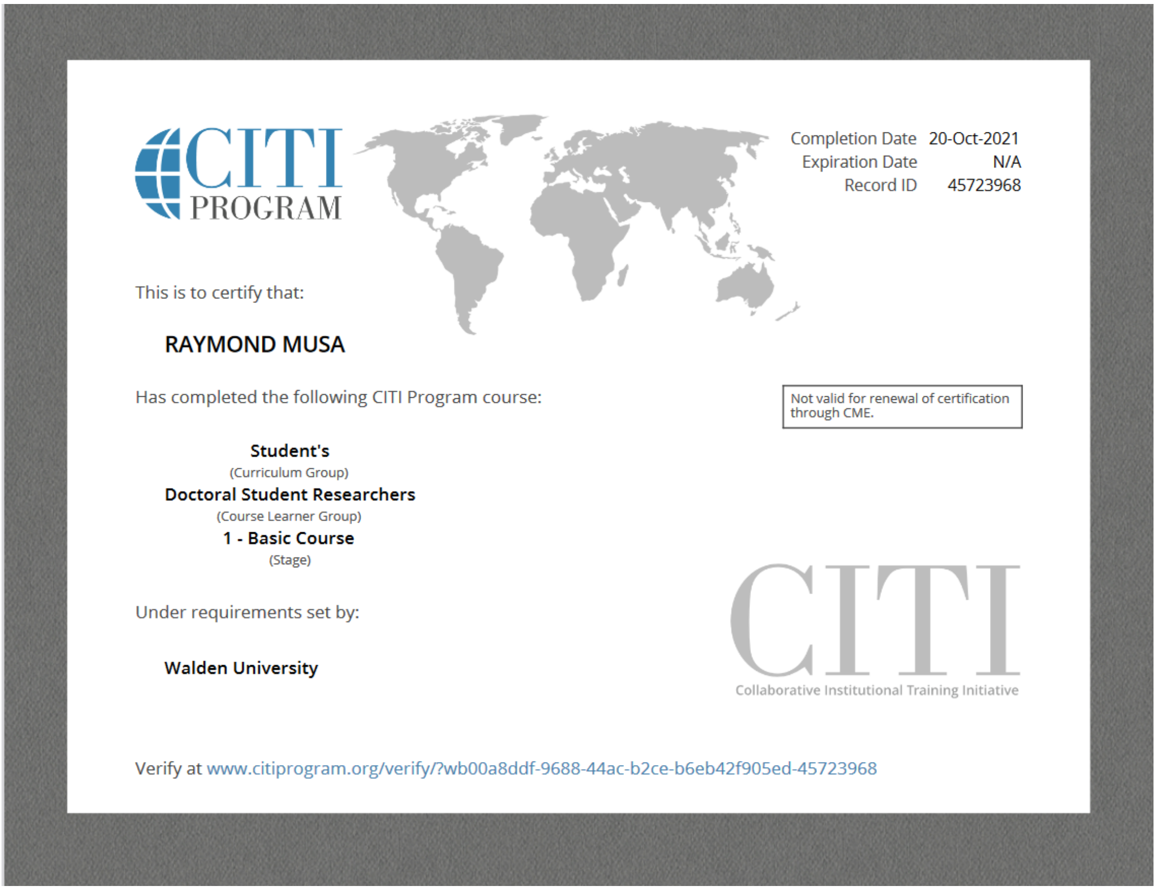
I am happy to respond to any questions or concerns you have about the research. I can be reached at [email address redacted]

Sincerely,

Musa Raymond

Walden University

Appendix D: CITI Program Certificate of Completion



CITI PROGRAM

Completion Date 20-Oct-2021
Expiration Date N/A
Record ID 45723968

This is to certify that:

RAYMOND MUSA

Has completed the following CITI Program course:

Not valid for renewal of certification through CME.

Student's
(Curriculum Group)
Doctoral Student Researchers
(Course Learner Group)
1 - Basic Course
(Stage)

Under requirements set by:

Walden University

CITI
Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative

Verify at www.citiprogram.org/verify/?wb00a8ddf-9688-44ac-b2ce-b6eb42f905ed-45723968