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Strategies for Sustaining Success in Small Businesses in Nigeria

Mina Johnson-Hart
Walden University

Walden University

College of Management and Human Potential

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Mina Johnson-Hart

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Review Committee
Dr. Edgar Jordan, Committee Chairperson, Doctor of Business Administration Faculty

Dr. Yvonne Doll, Committee Member, Doctor of Business Administration Faculty

Chief Academic Officer and Provost
Sue Subocz, Ph.D.

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Abstract

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Mina Johnson-Hart

LLM, University of Lagos, 1998

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Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

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Abstract

Enterprise owners in Nigeria who need more entrepreneurial skills and an understanding of the business environment may need help sustaining their market share. Nigerian small business owners are concerned with the need for entrepreneurial growth strategies because it could reduce business profitability sustainability and lead to entity failure. Grounded in the entrepreneurial orientation theory, the purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies Nigerian small business owners implement for sustaining success beyond 5 years. The participants were three small business owners in the professional services sector who developed strategies for sustaining success beyond 5 years. Data were collected from semistructured interviews, organizational documents, and artifacts. Through thematic analysis, four themes emerged: setting strategic business direction to guide firm activities was critical to achieving the firm's objectives, implementing entrepreneurial strategies was essential to create competitive advantage, using key internal resources was necessary for building capabilities for improved productivity, and managing challenges in the business environment was crucial for firm survival. A key recommendation is that owners leverage digital technology to acquire knowledge of the business environment to influence strategy construction and reconfiguration of resources for sustaining success. The implications for positive social change include the potential for owners to improve their implementation of strategies modeled for enterprise growth and increase employment in the community.

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Dedication

I dedicate this study to my best friend and partner, Andy, whose advice and unwavering support made this journey possible. I also dedicate my study to my brother, Owuna, my late niece, Abie, my sisters, and my nephews for their encouragement. Finally, I dedicate this doctoral study to my late parents, Patrick and Ekanem Johnson, who instilled a love for learning in me.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study

Small businesses play an important role in the formal and informal sectors of the Nigerian economy. Small businesses collectively represent a viable vehicle for self-sustaining industrial development and an indigenous enterprise culture (Aladejebi, 2020a). Such entities are vital to economic development due to their significant contribution to employment generation and poverty reduction (Endris & Kassegn, 2022). Although small businesses are responsible for 97% of Nigeria's economic activities, 80% of these companies failed within the first 5 years (Gumel, 2019a). A general lack of entrepreneurship skills and poor management practices might contribute to business failures within this sector (Akeke, 2020). Therefore, small enterprise owners should understand their business environment to enable risk-taking, innovation, and autonomous proactive implementation of competitive strategies necessary to sustain market share. The study was to explore strategies Nigerian small business owners implement for sustaining success beyond 5 years in this region of the world.

Background of the Problem

Small businesses emerged in Nigeria during the 19th century, with agriculture as the mainstay of the local economy. Farmers sold their agricultural products in local and regional markets (Okafor et al., 2021). With the discovery of oil, Nigeria's economic growth became increasingly dependent on oil rather than agriculture. This overdependence came at the expense of small businesses and entrepreneurial development (Ezu & Osakwe, 2023). The number of successful small businesses declined, invariably impacting income and wealth generation. Poverty affects nearly 70%

of the population in Nigeria (Jaja & Agumagu, 2019). Consequently, the small business sector in Nigeria has not fulfilled the goal of contributing to economic growth by generating wealth through employment to eradicate poverty.

Researchers have identified a trend of small business failure. Studies reveal that most small enterprises in Nigeria fail within the first 5 years of operation (Ade et al., 2020; Igwe et al., 2018). These studies present causal factors such as a lack of leadership and managerial skills hindering the creation of competitive advantage for business growth. Difficulties in gaining access to financing, poor entrepreneurial policies, and inadequate public infrastructure are contributory factors (Onifade et al., 2020). In this study, I focused on ascertaining strategies and skills that owners of small firms in Nigeria could implement to support effective decision-making and aid sustained business success beyond 5 years.

Problem and Purpose

Small enterprises are critical for economic growth in Nigeria because these entities provide employment for 84% of the total labor force and represent nearly 96% of all Nigerian businesses (Ibidunni et al., 2020). However, the Small and Medium Enterprises Development Agency of Nigeria (SMEDAN) reported that 80% of small businesses within the country do not survive their first 5 years of operation (Ade et al., 2020; SMEDAN, 2015). The general business problem was that small business owners in Nigeria do not explore new opportunities nor implement entrepreneurial strategies toward entity growth. The specific business problem was that some Nigerian small business owners lacked strategies to sustain success beyond 5 years.

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies Nigerian small business owners implement toward sustaining success beyond 5 years. The targeted population comprised three successful owners of small firms operating within the professional services sector of Nigeria who have instituted strategies leading to sustained business success beyond 5 years. The implications for positive social change include the potential for owners to improve their implementation of strategies modeled for enterprise growth, sustainability, and profitability (Ekon & Isayas, 2022). The study could also provide useful information to consultants, policy makers, and government agencies for formulating policies to promote sustainable practices among small business owners toward entity growth, increased employment, and improved economic development.

Nature of the Study

The methodology for this study was qualitative research. This method incorporates open-ended questions to understand the socially constructed and subjective perspective of a phenomenon under study (Hamilton & Finley, 2019). In contrast, a quantitative method allows the use of closed-ended questions to examine relationships among variables through numerical measurements and statistics to analyze hypotheses (Taherdoost, 2022). A mixed method involves the concurrent or sequential collection and analysis of qualitative as well as quantitative data in a single study (Shoonenboom, 2023). As this study did not involve testing the significance of relationships between variables, I did not need to use the quantitative or mixed method to examine strategies implemented toward sustained small business success beyond 5 years. Researchers use the qualitative method to gain improved insight into the "what," "how," and "why" of complex social issues (Hamilton & Finley, 2019). Consequently, I used the qualitative method because of the need to explore strategies used by successful business owners.

The following four research designs are applicable to a qualitative study: (a) ethnography, (b) grounded theory, (c) phenomenology, and (d) case study. Ethnography is the study of various aspects of a population culture to understand the influence of culture on behavior (Danford, 2023), which was inappropriate for this study that was not focused on exploring the business culture. With its roots in sociology, grounded theory is used to develop theoretical explanations of behavioral patterns within social interaction grounded in real-world observations linked to a phenomenon (Danford, 2023). Consequently, this design was also unsuitable for this research that was void of this intent. The phenomenological approach supports the exploration of personal meanings behind lived experiences (Taherdoost, 2022), which also did not apply to this study.

The qualitative case study design is the most useful for analyzing a contemporary phenomenon within its real-world context in a specific geographical area and time frame (Yin, 2018). The case study design is best applied in the study of varied perspectives and using multiple sources of evidence for a robust as well as broad understanding of the event under investigation (Yin, 2018). Researchers can use the single case study approach to explore a specific phenomenon emerging from a particular entity or a multiple case study design for a more comprehensive exploration of the phenomenon (Heale & Twycross, 2018). I used the multiple case study approach as the most appropriate for exploring strategies Nigerian small business owners implement toward sustaining success beyond 5 years. The study's findings could be useful for formulating policy changes invaluable to improving managerial practices of Nigerian small businesses toward long-term operational success.

Research Question

What strategies do Nigerian small business owners implement toward sustaining success beyond 5 years?

Interview Questions

1. What strategies did you implement to sustain business success beyond 5 years?
2. What strategies have you used to attract, satisfy, and retain new customers to your business?
3. What key challenges did you encounter in the formulation and implementation of your strategies, and how were you able to mitigate them?
4. What key resources did you use to sustain your business beyond 5 years?
5. Based on the experience within your organization, what other key issues did you determine as contributing to your sustaining business success beyond 5 years?
6. What additional information can you share concerning your experience with strategies implemented toward sustaining long-term success during the first 5 years of your business operations?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study was entrepreneurial orientation (EO).

Miller (1983) developed the EO concept, which comprised the constructs of innovativeness, risk-taking, and proactiveness. Building on the work of Miller, Covin and Slevin (1989) described entrepreneurship as a strategic posture by top-level business management characterized by frequent technological and product innovation, aggressive competitive orientation as well as a strong propensity to risk-taking. Lumpkin and Dess (1996) expanded the EO construct to include competitive aggressiveness and autonomy. EO refers to organizations' processes, practices, and behaviors that act entrepreneurially to exploit opportunities for improved performance (Chen & Miller, 2015). Therefore, through the lens of EO, a contextual foundation was formed to understand how entrepreneurial characteristics can enhance business performance.

The EO model was suitable for this study due to the research question and the purpose. EO is a concept applied to enhance business competitiveness, growth, success, and performance (Ilesanmi et al., 2022). The concept focuses on behaviors that small businesses could use to manage challenges and enhance enterprise growth (Neneh & Van Zyl, 2017). EO has been regarded as a useful model for gaining a clearer understanding of business capabilities pertinent to sustaining successful performance trajectories (Amah & Onuoha, 2022). Business owners who adopt the EO approach tend to formulate novel ideas for new product development, participate in appropriately risky projects, and identify new market opportunities for increased competitiveness, leading to profitability within a dynamic business environment (Ilesanmi et al., 2022). I selected the EO model as a foundation for this study to understand how the participating enterprise owners implement successful business strategies toward sustaining success beyond 5 years.

Operational Definitions

Business failure: Business failure refers to the closure of an independent business within 5 years of its establishment (Bunyaminu et al., 2019).

Business strategy: Business strategy refers to the plans of a small business owner to guide the firm on structure, process, and environment to achieve goals and objectives that will influence business performance (Ajagbe et al., 2016).

Business success: Business success refers to a continuous firm operation for 5 years or more while maintaining a reasonable profit (Gumel, 2019b).

Entrepreneurial skill: Entrepreneurial skill refers to the ability of a small business owner to weigh and willingly take appropriate risks with regard to exploiting ideas from presented opportunities to achieve specific business objectives (Ibrahim & Masud, 2016).

Entrepreneurial strategy: Entrepreneurial strategy refers to the plans implemented by small business owners related to processes and resources to increase competitiveness for long-term success (Khan et al., 2019).

Small business: A small business is an enterprise with total assets (excluding land and building) above ₦10 million but not exceeding ₦100 million with a workforce of between 10 and 49 employees (SMEDAN, 2017).

Small business owner: A small business owner is an individual who establishes and manages a firm with total assets worth between ₦10 million and ₦100 million with a workforce of more than 10 but less than 49 employees (SMEDAN, 2017).

Small and medium enterprises (SMEs): SMEs are businesses with total assets worth between ₦5 million and ₦500 million with a workforce of between 10 and 199 employees (Mpi, 2019).

Small and Medium Enterprise Development Agency of Nigeria (SMEDAN): The SMEDAN is a body established by the government of the Federal Republic of Nigeria to promote the development of micro, small, and medium enterprises in Nigeria (Gumel & Bardai, 2021).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

Assumptions

Assumptions are used to allow for conclusions and identified to reduce misunderstanding. Assumptions constitute what researchers accept as true without concrete data confirming absolute accuracy (Ellis & Levy, 2009). This study was conducted with reliance on four assumptions. The first was that the research findings may reveal valuable insights into small business owners' strategies to sustain success beyond 5 years, thereby reducing failure rates. The second was that the qualitative method and the case study design were appropriate to provide the depth as well as breadth of data required for analysis in the study. The third was that the planned sample of three small business owners represented a cross-sectional sampling of this target Nigerian population to achieve saturation and data sufficiency. The final assumption was that owners of small enterprises who participated in this study provided truthful, accurate, and reliable responses related to their business practices.

Limitations

Limitations are inevitable in research due to unavoidable circumstances. Limitations are potential weaknesses outside the control of researchers that may be associated with the research design, study population, or sample size (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2019). Those associated with this qualitative study included the choice of only three participants from the professional services sector in Nigeria, which may weaken the generalizability of the findings to other businesses within and outside the country. The use of interviews for data collection and discomfort with disclosing sensitive information on their businesses could have emerged through participant bias. Additionally, the limited sources of evidence, such as observation and serial interviews, to complement and triangulate the interview data collected from the participants could have produced a limiting effect.

Delimitations

Delimitations are specific boundaries and limitations of a study. Researchers consciously set deliberate limitations as boundaries to narrow the scope of their studies (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2019). The first delimitation of this study was the SMEDAN (2017) definition of a small business based on the perimeters of the workforce and total assets of the enterprise. The study group encompassed firms with an operation history of over 5 years with annual sales of between ₦500,000 and ₦1 million. Another delimitation of the study was the geographical region of the research. The study included solely participants who are small business owners located in Nigeria. The research also did not include enterprises from every business sector. Participants were limited to owners in the professional services sector with the requisite knowledge and skills for sustaining business success.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant for business practice because the findings could provide invaluable insights into the strategies of Nigerian small business owners that contributed to sustaining success beyond 5 years. Owners' understanding of techniques that can enhance the efficient and effective use of resources may significantly improve business performance and profitability (Orogbu et al., 2017). Successful small business owners could also identify opportunities to promote entrepreneurship and catalyze comparative advantages in innovation as well as technology (Funmilayo et al., 2022). Thus, the strategies collected and reported in this study could help owners sustain business success and improve employment, reducing poverty across the country.

The implication for positive social change includes the potential to provide strategies small business owners could implement to stimulate job creation for poverty alleviation, improved living standards, and the development of communities (Ade et al., 2020). Policymakers and governments could use the information to formulate policies promoting small business development. The study might also provide valuable insights for designing governmental programs supporting small enterprises' long-term growth and success for Nigeria's economic development.

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

A literature review presents a crucial summary of knowledge surrounding a research phenomenon within the applied conceptual framework. The literature review is the foundation of quality research, addressing the study's background, relevance, analysis, and professional standards (Maggio, 2016). The review conducted for the study was a comprehensive summary of the conceptual framework, Nigerian small businesses, entrepreneurial strategies, and the rationale behind the research question. An overview of small businesses, the challenges, and the success factors within the Nigerian environment were presented to support the evaluation of the research findings. The literature review included analyzing and synthesizing existing literature from peer-reviewed journal articles, government reports, research books, and doctoral dissertations.

This review of existing literature was organized into subtopics related to the study, including EO, alternative theories, entrepreneurial strategies, small businesses in Nigeria, business challenges, and business success strategies. Several sources of relevant literature were assessed. The Walden University online library served as the primary source, with searches conducted using the library's technology, business and management databases, including Business Source Complete, AB/Inform Complete, EBSCOhost, SAGE Premier, and Google Scholar. Useful peer-reviewed articles on the phenomenon for the study were drawn from other sources, such as government databases and doctoral dissertations, all of which strengthened the literature review.

Key search terms and phrases used for the database searches included *EO, entrepreneurship, entrepreneurial strategies, small businesses, small businesses in Nigeria, small business strategies, small business success,* and *small business failure*. The literature review comprised 250 references from 240 peer-reviewed journals, four government reports, three books, and three doctoral dissertations. Of the referenced sources, 202 (84%) were published within 5 years from the expected completion date of the study, and 38 (16%) were published more than 5 years from that anticipated date.

This qualitative case study was to explore strategies small business owners in Nigeria implement for sustaining success beyond 5 years. Small enterprises in Nigeria could support the country's economic growth; however, the high failure rate of these businesses precludes this contribution (Okafor et al., 2018). Although factors in Nigeria affect their performance (Akinyemi & Adejumo, 2017; Ayodele, 2018; Eniola, 2021; Jayeola et al., 2018), only a few qualitative studies have been conducted on success strategies for these businesses (Aladejebi, 2020b; Akinso, 2018; Gumel, 2017a). Applying EO theory in this research revealed useful strategies for sustaining such enterprises.

Entrepreneurial Orientation

The conceptual framework for this study was based on EO. The EO model can be traced to research by Mintzberg (1973) on the entrepreneurial mode of strategy creation. Mintzberg proposed that entrepreneurial strategy creation represents policies and practices guiding entrepreneurial decisions as well as actions. The concept of EO gained scholarly attention with related research conducted by Miller in 1983. Building on the entrepreneurial approach to strategy, Miller emphasized the importance of strategic decisions and their relevance to entrepreneurship. Covin and Wales (2012) considered EO a prominent construct in exploring the organizational pursuit of entrepreneurial activities in management research. The construct is useful in understanding the capability of a small business to maintain growth trajectories while others fail (Garba et al., 2019) and the relationship between business activities and performance (Henshaw et al., 2022). Researchers have applied the theory of EO using different conceptual models in their studies.

Investigators have developed several conceptual models defining the dimensions of the EO construct differently. Miller (1983) presented a unidimensional aggregation of the three EO dimensions proposed that must be exhibited by entrepreneurial firms. These foundational dimensions are innovativeness, proactiveness, and risk-taking. Covin and Slevin (1989) supported the Miller view, considering a firm with an EO to engage in innovation, risky ventures, and acting proactively to gain market share over competitors. Conversely, nonentrepreneurial firms fail to innovate, are highly risk-averse, and do not promote activities in a proactive manner to increase market share. Lumpkin and Dess (1996) questioned this unidimensional concept and contended that the dimensions of EO might vary independently given the context. These researchers advanced the multidimensional approach, adding autonomy and competitive aggressiveness to the dimensions of EO. Consequently, firms with EO exhibit the propensity to act autonomously, are innovative, willing to take risks, proactively leverage market opportunities, and otherwise aggressively compete.

Other researchers have introduced their perspectives on the constructs of EO. For example, Anderson et al. (2015) suggested that the multidimensional construct comprises two sets of noninterchangeable entrepreneurial behavior. This suggestion introduced a new perspective to the multidimensional approach and extended related dialogue. Although other views exist, the Miller (1983) perspective and the Lumpkin and Dess (1996) original multidimensional approach dominate research surrounding the EO framework (Lomberg et al., 2017; Wales et al., 2020). This study focused on these two prevailing views.

Researchers have discussed the suitability of both leading perspectives on the dimensions of EO. For instance, Gupta et al. (2018) viewed the unidimensional measure as more appropriate because it was the original EO perspective. In contrast, Clark and Harrison (2019) contended that research results from unidimensional measurements were superior. Shan et al. (2016) challenged the suitability of the unidimensional model, claiming that the approach was best suited for examining business processes and their impact on performance. Similarly, Luu and Ngo (2019) argued that the unidimensional, nonlinear effect of EO on business performance could not apply to firms in transitional economies. Chabaud and Sattin (2019) suggested that the multidimensional approach would increase small business owners' understanding of how EO contributes to entity success. The multidimensional perspective included the influences of other factors on business processes and practices.

Although discussions on the appropriate nature of each conceptualization continued, researchers argued that both concepts were useful for research. Wales (2016) suggested that the two conceptual approaches were relevant for studies within the EO framework. Both perspectives adopted an EO with processes, methods, and styles that organizations implemented to act in an entrepreneurial manner (Pittino et al., 2017). Both conceptualizations focused on entrepreneurship with EO as a top-level management style with organizational configurations or new initiatives as complementary attributes (Wales et al., 2020). Wang et al. (2020) contended that researchers had no compelling reason to adopt one conceptualization over the other. Regardless of conceptualization, there seems to be a general agreement that EO is the basis for entrepreneurial decisions and actions.

The EO model can be applied as a conceptual framework in the study of small business success strategies. Chelliah et al. (2023) described EO as a strategy-creation process for defining a small business' vision to achieve and sustain its competitive advantage. EO is useful for investigating organizational entrepreneurial activities, behaviors, and dispositions (Stambaugh et al., 2017). Small businesses could use the EO model to develop strategies for responding to change and improving performance in a dynamic environment (Laskovaia et al., 2019). Therefore, the EO model was useful for researching strategies for small business owners toward sustaining success beyond 5 years.

Multidimensional Approach

The multidimensional perspective of EO encapsulates success strategies from essential elements of organizational behavior during the entrepreneurial process. Dimensions of EO describe business activities demonstrating innovativeness, proactiveness, risk-taking, competitive aggressiveness, and autonomy (Loong Lee et al., 2019). The influence of the five dimensions of EO has been more evident in small businesses with limited resources (Gupta, 2018). The EO dimensions could be central to understanding how small businesses pursue success strategies because each construct could influence entrepreneurial behaviors and actions differently within the business environment (Anwar & Shah, 2021). The multidimensional approach could be useful for examining the impact of EO on small firms within dynamic business environments. Therefore, the conceptual framework for this study was the multidimensional construct of

EO and the influence of each dimension on strategies to sustain firm success designed for small business owners.

Innovativeness, the first dimension of the EO construct, is the propensity to innovate. Innovativeness is considered the driver of growth and profitability (Putnins & Sauka, 2020). The term refers to the ability to introduce novel products, services, systems, or technologies for improved business performance (Bamfo & Kraa, 2019). The innovation process also includes an inventive mindset (Funmilayo et al., 2022) and combining platforms to create business value (Bogers et al., 2018). In dynamic business environments, innovativeness could be vital for introducing new products or services and redefining market position to expand a customer base to gain a competitive advantage over rivals for improved performance (Turulja & Bajgoric, 2019). Owners of small businesses could use innovation strategically to create value and effectively compete for superior performance.

The second dimension of the EO model is proactiveness, a forward-looking perspective often related to innovative business activities. Proactiveness conveys the ability of a small business to identify, anticipate, and manage future market changes in the interest of growth (Amah & Onuoha, 2022). Proactive firms rapidly respond to environmental change and customer needs (Utami & Wilopo, 2018). Such firms create new or improve existing products, detect market needs, and leverage opportunities (Olowofeso et al., 2021). Proactiveness is a goal-directed behavior involving anticipating and creating changes before rivals to achieve a competitive advantage. An owner of a small business could act quickly to grasp new opportunities to effectuate firm survival.

The third dimension of EO is risk-taking, which is a certain business factor. Risk-taking involves exploring the unknown, moving beyond validated procedures, and aggressively positioning new products or services (Semrau et al., 2016). Risk-taking encompasses venturing into new areas, committing assets, and massive borrowing (Linton, 2019). Small business owners should be willing to undertake risky investments in the current dynamic business environment to manage changing customer demands and gain a competitive advantage (Olowofeso & Ale, 2019). Although risk-taking may involve losses, committing resources to seize market opportunities could earn additional revenue.

Competitive aggressiveness is the fourth dimension of EO and depicts the aggressive posture of a small business for survival. This element refers to the tendency to gain market entry or strengthen market position (Olowofeso et al., 2021). Small business owners could engage in competitively aggressive behaviors to outperform rivals or mitigate uncertainty within the external business environment (Olubiyi et al., 2019). This dimension reflects a willingness to aggressively respond to business trends to gain market share and realize organizational goals. Owners could create value and grow their firms through competitive aggressiveness.

The fifth dimension of EO is autonomy, which involves the independence of the business owner and employees. Autonomy is the capability and motivation to take self-directed actions to exploit market opportunities (Chelliah et al., 2023). This dimension could render business owners strong leaders who make independent decisions and influence the overall vision of their firms (Verbano et al., 2019). Autonomy includes empowering employees to champion creative and novel ideas (Gabriel & Kobani, 2022). Autonomy and individual creativity thrive in firms with an organizational culture free of constraints (Yu et al., 2019). Business owners and employees could take self-directed actions to encourage creativity toward sustained entity success.

Although the EO model was prevalent as a construct in entrepreneurship research into business behavior, scholars have criticized its conceptual ambiguity. Randerson (2016) advanced that variations in EO definitions as an entrepreneurial behavior or managerial attitudes, along with different conceptualizations affected the measurement and design of the construct. Wales (2016) noted that some researchers viewed the proliferation of constructs as negatively impacting the rigor and relevance of EO research. However, Wales argued that EO captured a family of constructs vital for comparative study. Wales et al. (2020) suggested grounding EO research on clearly defined constructions and fundamental assumptions for clarity. Despite criticism, EO has remained regarded as a suitable framework for business studies.

Several researchers have validated the EO construct as an appropriate framework for studying small business success strategies. For example, Yaru (2017) found that the attributes of EO influenced the management and actions of small business owners seeking sustained success beyond 5 years. Kosa et al. (2018) applied the EO as a framework to examine the performance of small firms within various business sectors and locations throughout the country, validating this construct for the exploration of success strategies. These studies confirmed that the EO model was central to the strategic development of business success and was suitable for this study.

EO Theory Application to Business Strategy

EO theory is a conceptual framework for studying behaviors that inform specific strategic decisions within a business environment to enhance performance potential. EO could support business owners in discovering and exploiting opportunities that could implicitly affect firm performance (Okoi et al., 2021). Small business owners should be entrepreneurially oriented to remain consistently alert to continually evolving strategies to surmount challenges toward sustaining success in the current competitive environment (Arisi-Nwugballa et al., 2016). EO is a useful strategy for small business owners with scarce resources seeking short and long-term performance improvement (DeepBabu & Manalel, 2016). The EO model is useful in autonomous decision making, taking risks with appropriate innovation, aggressive activity toward competitors, and proactively exploiting market opportunities for sustained business success (Montoya et al., 2017). Owners who are "forward thinkers," independent, and highly creative, with the impetus to take risks, could compete aggressively to achieve long-term success by using the EO model for strategic decisions.

The EO model is typically associated with business profitability and growth. The general view was that firms adopting a high EO performed better than those with less EO (Omisakin et al., 2016). Wales (2016) argued that to produce positive business results in high-EO firms, business owners should match personal characteristics with conviction in their entrepreneurial actions. Furthermore, Wales contended that performance outcomes could vary from failure to success, even in firms with an active EO. Owners of firms with an active EO require the necessary aptitude to manage variances in performance outcomes. High EO alone did not guarantee business success without the sustained commitment of the owner.

Formulate Entrepreneurial Strategies. Owners of small enterprises could improve business performance by formulating appropriate entrepreneurial strategies. Research evidence has suggested that entrepreneurial techniques improve business performance and sustain competitive advantage to create wealth (Omotosho & Anyigba, 2019). Entrepreneurial strategies aid in planning future markets, using opportunities, reducing operational costs, and increasing the customer base (Khan et al., 2019). Small businesses with relatively limited resources could implement entrepreneurial strategies with the substantial influence of change within the external business environment to survive. With an EO, such firms could view changes in the business environment as sources of opportunities and use their resources strategically to improve performance. Thus, entrepreneurial strategies grounded in the EO model could support Nigerian small business owners' planning and effectively managing resources toward sustaining success beyond 5 years.

Individual Behaviors. The concept of EO relates to individual behaviors and attributes as small business owners apply the dimensions to business practices to determine performance outcomes. The construct is a strategy-creation process encompassing individual owners' actions, intentions, and choices toward achieving desired organizational goals (Gabriel & Kobani, 2022). Ljungkvist et al. (2020) conducted a qualitative single-case study, and the findings revealed that the attributes of business owners determined their configuration of EO. The dimensions of EO adopted depended upon the cognitive persuasion of the owner because each construct connoted a behavior or attitude. Such personal attributes were not the result of a single action but the consistent and sustained behavior supporting entrepreneurial activities (Gupta, 2018). The impact of an individual behavior was reflected in a particular action sourced in EO when success was achieved. Owners of small businesses in Nigeria should exhibit a willingness to innovate, take risks, operate autonomously and proactively, and aggressively compete to gain a competitive advantage.

Firm Resources. Firm resources might impact the attitudes of small business owners toward implementing practices from EO. Their strategic decisions depend on resource availability. The resources available in a company determine whether pursuing entrepreneurial strategies would result in superior performance (Gupta, 2019). Sobirin and Rosid (2016) conducted a multiple case study of small firms, and the findings revealed that their implementation of EO dimensions was low due to resource limitations. Enterprise owners could use their limited resources effectively while adopting entrepreneurial strategies to achieve positive outcomes. Some might be reluctant to take risks or commit resources to entrepreneurial activities as they seek to avoid loss. Small business owners could avoid losses by evaluating the EO of their firm against their constrained finances to prioritize available resources to properly meet organizational objectives (Shirokova et al., 2016). Owners of small enterprises in Nigeria could use EO skillfully to allocate or creatively combine limited resources to exploit opportunities within their business environments, conducting periodic reviews to make necessary adjustments to manage adverse outcomes.

Business Environment. Early researchers on the EO theory established the concept from within the context of mature economies, leading to questions regarding its relevance in emerging economic environments. Current investigators have argued that institutional variances might restrict the applicability of the EO model to emerging economies because the concept involves critical circumstantial assumptions surrounding the business environment of developed countries. Gupta and Batra (2016) reported empirical evidence suggesting that concepts and theories originating within the business environment of developed economies did not necessarily fit those of emerging economies. Other researchers have argued that the EO concept applied to these emerging business environments. For example, a study showed that small firms used the dimensions of EO for higher returns in the turbulent African market with weak institutions and underdeveloped infrastructure (Isichei et al., 2020). Similarly, another research revealed that EO could be adapted to a developing country to foster improved performance results by small businesses (Hossain & Al Asheq, 2019). A previous study also showed that the impact of the dimensions of EO on small firm performance was sustained in countries with emerging economies (Soares & Perin, 2019). Such findings indicate that the EO concept could be applied by owners of small enterprises within Nigeria and other economies, regardless of institutional context, to manage detrimental effects or adverse circumstances in the business environment.

Factors within the respective business environment could influence small business owners' adoption of EO strategies. Inhospitable business environments might depress entrepreneurial behaviors and practices (Kreiser et al., 2019). Researchers have suggested that entrepreneurial behaviors do not always represent a collectively sound strategy. For example, research revealed that owners' use of EO strategies affected performance that could vary across business environments (Gautam, 2016). A study also showed that owners demonstrating conservative and nonentrepreneurial behaviors could achieve high-performance outcomes within stable or hostile business environments (Kreiser & Davis, 2010). Conversely, Pulka et al. (2021) argued that owners who adopted strategies from EO in high-growth and hostile environments achieved superior performance compared to those who pursued such strategies within low-growth and less hostile markets. Although there is no universal agreement on the impact of strategies grounded in EO among varied business environments, small business owners could strategically apply the EO dimensions to sustain the success of their enterprises.

Dimensions of EO could exhibit varying levels of relationship with firm performance, depending on the influence of the business environment. Although earlier studies suggested that small enterprises with high levels of EO achieved superior performance compared to those with low levels of EO, recent research revealed that business environments could impact such outcomes. For example, Arisi-Nwugballa et al. (2016) found that a high level of competitive aggressiveness within the Nigerian business environment was necessary for improved performance, and a low level of autonomy could reduce losses. Conversely, Isichei et al. (2020) advanced that increased innovativeness and autonomy improved performance, whereas risk-taking negatively impacted the business. Enterprises might display relatively high or low levels of any dimension of EO in their strategic direction to achieve competitive advantage

(Hernandez-Perlines & Rung-Hoch, 2017). Nigerian small business owners should determine the most effective configuration of EO for competitive advantage and sustainable success in their business environments, rather than seeking the highest levels of all dimensions of EO.

Strategic Flexibility. Strategic flexibility could influence how small business owners apply the dimensions of EO. Strategic flexibility is the ability of a firm to detect uncertainties or changes and the speed with which the organization commits resources in response to such variability (Aladejebi, 2018). In a dynamic business environment, owners would require the ability to develop new strategies or modify existing processes to cope with changes. The impact of EO was more significant in firms whose owners were quick to adjust their business objectives to manage changing conditions (Aladejebi, 2018). Organizations need greater agility to become proactive and innovative to exploit viable opportunities to respond to related challenges (Omotosho & Anyigba, 2019). Owners of small firms in Nigeria with strategic flexibility could easily employ EO to adapt to or manage a changing business environment for long-term sustainability.

Alignment with Competitive Strategies. Small business owners should align the dimensions of EO with competitive strategies to improve firm performance. Small firms could achieve greater financial returns and growth by implementing competitive strategies for increased loyalty to capture greater market share (Anwar & Shah, 2021). Business owners could include competitive strategies in entrepreneurial actions to manage costs, innovation, quality, and adaptability. Owners could combine several dimensions of EO with competitive strategies such as differentiation, cost leadership, and a mixed strategy to achieve superior performance. A differentiation strategy involves offering customers unique products or services to create sustainable value (Shah & Ahmad, 2019). Cost leadership includes attaining cost structures to achieve economies of scale or improve processes for low-cost positioning (Ngugi & Waithaka, 2020). A mixed strategy entails pursuing a blend of cost leadership and differentiation with unique products for target customers (Onyeaghala & Odiba, 2018). Enterprise owners could adopt these competitive strategies for a larger market share and sustainable business success.

Owners of small enterprises could employ competitive strategies to manage customer demands. Researchers have reported that a strategic choice could create value and influence the survival of a small business. A study of small firms in Nigeria showed that developing competitive strategies was critical to creating and sustaining competitive advantage (Dakare, 2019). Researchers have continued to discuss the best competitive strategies for small businesses. For instance, a researcher advanced that the differentiation strategy was preferred for resource-constrained small firms due to lower investment requirements and accessibility than cost leadership (Lechner & Gudmundsson, 2014). Another researcher reported that differentiation improved the performance of small businesses, whereas a low-cost strategy caused harm (Galbreath et al., 2020). Conversely, Anwar and Shah (2021) argued that differentiation, either by itself or combined with cost leadership, could be a suitable strategy for small firms, depending on the entrepreneurial conditions. However, recent research has suggested that organizations could combine competitive techniques to control costs and exploit additional opportunities for entity growth (Larbi, 2019). Small firms in Nigeria could determine the competitive strategy that was the best fit for their EO configuration to meet customer expectations and sustain firm success. Moreover, with the current dynamic business environment, owners should constantly review their competitive strategies to determine their relevance.

Innovativeness is crucial for small business owners to offer customers differentiated products or services to increase performance. Firms with innovative capabilities could provide unique products or alter processes to achieve flexibility and speed for enhanced customer satisfaction (Gupta, 2017). With continually changing demands in a competitive business environment, owners should be innovative to satisfy customer needs and improve firm performance (Turulja & Bajgoric, 2019). Creating a unique offering was a crucial entrepreneurial strategy for sustaining success, particularly in a dynamic business environment (Anwar & Shah, 2021). However, Semrau et al. (2016) argued that although differentiation was a critical success strategy, performance potential would vary with customer appreciation of novel solutions. Small firms in Nigeria could improve their performance through competitive activity with customers who valued and were willing to pay a premium for new products or solutions. Understanding customer demands was crucial for a focus on competitive strategies to improve business performance.

Emerging Business Strategies

Adaptable, flexible, and innovative strategies could ensure long-term sustainability in a dynamic business environment. The essence of innovation is to adapt firm behavior to changing trends to enhance performance levels (Acciaro & Sys, 2020). The current short product life cycle trends and increasing market share competition offer new opportunities for firm sustainability. Small business owners could adopt innovative strategies to exploit new market opportunities for growth. However, owners are cautioned to assess the relevance of entrepreneurial strategies within the external environment, focusing on eliminating innovative approaches that might cause harm in unstable business environments (Gupta & Sebastian, 2017). Nigerian owners could modify their innovative techniques to suit the changing market and customer needs to create value toward sustaining success beyond 5 years.

Proactive innovativeness ensures that owners are typically successful in acquiring the first-mover advantage. Proactive firms gain this advantage by capitalizing on new opportunities to introduce novel products or services into the market before competitors. A small business owner might use the first-mover advantage to charge a premium for new products for financial gain. Small firms profit from first-mover advantage by combining proactive activity with innovative strategies (Kallmuenzer et al., 2018). Owners should proactively monitor market trends to identify and evaluate opportunities to use the first-mover advantage to gain market share ahead of competitors (Zhang & Song, 2020). Rapid market entry ahead of competitors is more crucial to sustaining firm success than being the first to create the product, given that imitators, who are second to the market, could outperform innovators (Gupta, 2018). However, owners should note that emphasizing proactive strategies to identify opportunities could decrease innovation speed and delay product launches, resulting in the loss of the first-mover advantage (Shan et al., 2016). This advantage was determined more by entry speed than by being the first to enter a market. Small firms in Nigeria should rapidly launch their products or services to obtain benefits.

Owners of small enterprises should be willing to take risks to seize market opportunities for improved firm performance to sustain business success. Despite the likelihood of loss, they could undertake risky projects to meet changing customer demands, seize opportunities, and challenge the prevailing market order (Amah & Okoisama, 2017). Small firms could take risks by investing in or increasing commitments and willingly absorbing losses to achieve business objectives (Martinez-Serna et al., 2017). Risk-taking should be a deliberate action by owners to obtain higher investment returns (Ighomereho et al., 2022). Although risk-taking was beneficial during high market uncertainty, enterprise owners should know that risky investments could generate low returns and increase the likelihood of firm failure in a turbulent economic environment (Boso et al., 2017). Consequently, owners should undertake calculated risks in the appropriate economic environment to gain a competitive edge and market share for sustainable business success.

Small business owners require a measure of independence to make quick and appropriately risky decisions in response to change within the business environment. Autonomy was critical for gathering information and exploiting market opportunities for firm growth and success. A research outcome revealed that autonomy facilitated risk-taking, proactivity, and competitiveness for improved firm performance in small businesses (Ibrahim & Abu, 2020). Through autonomy, owners could take self-directed actions to exploit market opportunities, positively alter existing practices, and introduce novel products. Enterprise owners with autonomy could implement agile strategies and support employee initiatives for improved performance (Fadda, 2018). Firms that allowed employees to work autonomously were more likely to implement innovative strategies and take more risks for superior outcomes.

In a dynamic business environment with intense competition, owners of small enterprises should create an aggressive posture for survival. Small businesses could exploit competitive aggressiveness to respond to challenges to increase market share (Olowofeso et al., 2021). Competitively aggressive firms could change market rules, redefine industry boundaries, and achieve entry advantages (Uddin et al., 2015). Previous research on small businesses showed that firms with aggressive competitive stances outperformed their noncompetitive counterparts (Matchabe-Hove & Farrington, 2015). However, the business environment seems to play a pivotal role. A study on small firms in Lagos, Nigeria, showed that increased competitive aggressiveness improved business performance (Adebiyi et al., 2019). In contrast, another research revealed that competitive aggressiveness minimally influenced the performance of small businesses within Abuja, Nigeria (Ibrahim & Abu, 2020). Due to close social networking relationships, competitive aggressiveness might not be necessary within certain environments or industries, such as tourism (Peters & Kallmuenzer, 2018). Owners should understand the dynamics in their business environment to determine the EO element that would be applicable.

Owners of small enterprises should formulate specific policies and procedures that align with the dynamics of their firms to enhance their competitive advantage. Such policies and processes could influence entrepreneurial strategies employed for growth. Small business owners could implement EO as a strategic approach to manage critical resources, market turbulence, and fierce competition within their economic environments (Hossain & Al Asheq, 2019). As an organizational configuration, the EO model encompasses five dimensions to create processes, practices, and choices that foster entrepreneurial behavior to facilitate success (Wales et al., 2020). This model served as an effective intellectual lens for understanding the entrepreneurial strategies that Nigerian small business owners could implement toward sustaining success beyond 5 years.

Alternative Theories

The following alternative theories have also been introduced to support entrepreneurial business success: general systems theory, contingency theory, and the resource-based view (RBV). These theories could be suitable conceptual frameworks for small business success, including this study. General systems theory involves understanding the relationships among individual parts as a modeling platform for a complete system. Von Bertalanffy (1972) formulated the notion of this theory. Weissenberger-Eibl et al. (2019) applied the construct to study the interaction among company subsystems and their contribution to organizational success within complex business environments. The general systems theory has been criticized as a research framework for small business success strategies for its incohesive definitions (Rousseau, 2017). The theory limits the study of organizations to systems, precluding policies or practices. Small businesses could operate as single systems that collectively rely upon sales, services, and business processes, thereby rendering a study of its system parts unnecessary. General systems theory is an unlikely framework for research into strategies for small businesses leading to long-term success; consequently, this theory was unsuitable as a construct for application in this study.

Contingency theory is useful as a framework for research into the leadership styles of small business owners that lead to firm survival in a situational context. This theory concerns leadership styles as critical factors for business success (Fiedler, 1978). Although the contingency theory is valuable as a framework for exploring small business successes, its methodology and theoretical underpinnings were considered ambiguous (Vidal et al., 2017). Leadership style could be an essential aspect of this study; however, small business owners often delegate their responsibilities. More holistic research not solely focused on leadership style is critical for understanding strategies for sustaining success for small businesses. Therefore, EO was a more appropriate framework for examining small enterprises' behavior, decision-making, and practices.

The RBV is a construct focused on the ability of small business owners to manage enterprise resources optimally. Under this theory, firms achieve competitive advantage and success with rare, valuable, inimitable, nonsubstitutable resources or capabilities (Barney, 1991). The RBV equates small business performance with the ability of the respective owners to effectively use internal resources (Penrose, 1959). Researchers use the RBV framework to explain how human endowment and inimitable resources contribute to a small business's success (Al Mamun et al., 2019). However, some researchers consider the RBV unsuitable for research on small business success because the resources of small firms are not unique and likely to be commonly available (Tehseen et al., 2019). Despite criticisms, the RBV is still widely used in research on firm performance.

EO and the RBV are both valid constructs for studying small business performance. Although they seem related, the RBV concerns resource heterogeneity, whereas EO involves resource value heterogeneity through entrepreneurial strategies (Gupta, 2019). Under the RBV, resources are the basis for performance capacity, but under the EO construct, pursuing entrepreneurial strategies has been found to produce superior firm performance (Gupta, 2019). Modest empirical evidence supports the notion that rare, valuable, inimitable, and nonsubstitutable resources under the RBV are sufficient to achieve a competitive advantage for business success (Tehseen et al., 2019). The RBV is a valuable theory for studying small business performance; however, EO was more appropriate as a conceptual lens for exploring strategies for sustaining the success of Nigerian small businesses.

Small Businesses in Nigeria

Overview

Studies have shown that small businesses are critical to Nigeria's development. Small enterprises assist in dispersing industrial growth due to their labor-intensive activities, low-level technology, and local labor supply (Omagu et al., 2021). They are also useful for sustaining commercial activities by managing scarce resources and adapting quickly to environmental change (Octavia et al., 2020). These enterprises support communities by enabling equitable wealth distribution, stimulating national growth by participating in untapped markets (Aladejebi, 2020b; Amah & Okoisama, 2017), and providing specialized services to large-scale industries (Otika et al., 2019). Thus, small businesses also contribute to Nigeria's social development.

No universal definition exists for small enterprises due to global diversity and character differences. The characterization of small businesses is country-specific and based on their role in the respective economy (Folajinmi & Peter, 2020). They are defined in the context of firm size, employees, or total assets (Aladejebi & Oladimeji, 2019). Other measurements are firm capital, financial power, or a synthesis of both (Jayeola et al., 2018), the scale of operations, sales volumes, owner autonomy, the market size relative to the industry, and shareholder structure (Eze et al., 2021). The majority of definitions of a small business consist of quantitative parameters. In some European countries and Britain, the criteria used are the number of employees and the level of annual asset turnover (Eze et al., 2021). The United States and Canada categorize firms by economic activity, ownership structure, income, and the number of employees (Madani, 2018). In Japan, the criteria comprise the activity sector, paid-up share capital, and workers (Owualah & Ohazebere, 2019). Small business classifications based upon sectorial and national peculiarities have contributed to inconsistency in nomenclature such that a small firm in one country could have 500 employees, whereas a large firm in another nation could be composed of 200 employees.

The parameters for defining small businesses in Nigeria are set to support particular programs. Several agencies in Nigeria categorize small firms using business capital, turnover, number of employees, asset value, and profits (Oladimeji et al., 2017).

For example, the Central Bank of Nigeria describes a small business as an enterprise with an asset base of between ₦5 million and ₦500 million and a labor force of between 11 and 300 individuals (Tabet & Onyeukwu, 2019). Similarly, the Bank of Industry, Nigeria (n.d.) defines a small business as a firm with less than 50 but more than 11 employees, assets worth between ₦5 million and ₦100 million, and an annual turnover of less than ₦100 million. The lack of a general definition in Nigeria has caused banks to formulate program-specific criteria for describing small enterprises.

Other institutions established to support enterprises in Nigeria also have unique classifications for small firms. For instance, the Small and Medium Industries Equity Investment Scheme in Nigeria defines a small business as an enterprise with a total capital of between ₦1.5 million and ₦200 million (i.e., excluding working capital and land) and between 10 and 300 employees (Adegboyega et al., 2020). The SMEDAN (2017) classifies small enterprises as businesses with total assets (excluding land and building) above ₦10 million but less than ₦100 million and between 10 and 49 employees. This workforce criterion takes precedence over the value of assets. Small businesses in this study were described in line with the SMEDAN classification.

Characteristics

There are several characteristics, such as ownership structure, financial capital, management style, and scope of activities peculiar to small businesses in Nigeria. Small enterprises could be sole proprietorships owned and managed by individuals, partnerships between two to 20 individuals, or private limited liability firms (Awoyemi & Makanju, 2020). Nigerians preferred establishing sole proprietorships out of necessity and the less stringent requirements (Adeosun & Shittu, 2022). Owners seek to generate income for survival. However, they are passionate about their products or services, have financial autonomy, or are determined to succeed as entrepreneurs. Although these businesses are established within urban and rural areas, those in rural communities localize operations, often with ties to extended family. These businesses usually are the primary source of livelihood and support for their owners as well as their communities.

These small businesses typically operate with limited financial capital. Owners obtain their financial capital primarily from personal savings (Kowo, Adenuga et al., 2019) or informal sources such as loans from friends, relatives, and local money lenders known as "Esusu" or Cooperative Societies rather than formal lending institutions (Awoyemi & Makanju, 2020). Banks and other formal financial institutions do not readily grant loans to small business owners in Nigeria because they are regarded as high-risk debtors and not creditworthy (Effiom & Edet, 2022). The SMEDAN (2017) survey report revealed that 68% of this population used their savings to finance their business operations, 14% obtained loans from family sources, and only 18% resorted to entering into financial arrangements with banks.

Nigerian small businesses are typically run with an informal management style. The titles, duties of ownership, and management were under the authority of an individual (Gololo, 2017). Owners tended to incorporate the traditional management style of handling all duties without consulting professionals or depending on limited support from specialist personnel (Adeola et al., 2021). As chief executives, these owners often made operational and financial decisions without proper knowledge of business management. Rather than hire experts or experienced personnel, most small business owners use relatives for company operations (Eze et al., 2021). Using relatives and non-professionals was a method to control operational costs because of limited resources.

Despite limited resources, owners of enterprises within Nigeria participate in various economic sectors. Small enterprises exist in the manufacturing and other significant services sectors (Akeke, 2020). The SMEDAN (2017) survey report revealed that small businesses were predominantly in education (27%), manufacturing (23%), wholesale and retailing (18%), human health and social work (10%), and accommodation and food services (8%). Others provide professional accounting, legal, media, and consulting services.

Small enterprises in Nigeria contribute to the country's economy in several ways. They create job opportunities for about 80% of the workforce, improving living standards for both semiskilled and unskilled workers (Omagu et al.,2021; Agbaje & Igbekoyi, 2018). These enterprises also support private-sector development by producing 50% of manufacturing output (Ogunmuyiwa & Okunleye, 2019; Ebitu et al., 2018) and using indigenous technologies to produce goods (Tabet & Onyeukwu, 2019). Small enterprises boost Nigeria's foreign exchange earnings by exporting semiprocessed agricultural products (Makinde & Agu, 2018). Nigerian small businesses contribute value to the country's economic development.

History

The exchange of goods and small industries has always played a role in contemporary Nigerian history. Managing successful small enterprises was a part of

Nigerian culture before the country's independence (Okafor et al., 2021). Nigerians were traditionally farmers, exchanging their surpluses by barter, and later became major exporters of agricultural products harvested within various regions across the nation (Gumel, 2019b). Nigerians in each region had peculiar skills (Ezu & Osakwe, 2023). The Northerners traded in crafts and woven materials. Southerners and Easterners were generally wholesalers and distributors of goods. The Westerners were craftsmen, with the women forming small cooperative groups selling agricultural products.

Before 1970, small businesses were significant contributors to Nigeria's economic development. These enterprises contributed to the Nigerian economy by exporting non-oil products, such as iron ores, columbites, hides, skins, and agricultural products (Ikon, 2019). Such products compose 80% of the Nigerian GDP (Aderemi et al., 2019), with small enterprises producing 50% of the national industrial output (Aderemi et al., 2019; Afolabi & James, 2018). These entities also contributed to technological growth, with small crafts shops creating indigenous techniques to support local industries (Okafor et al., 2021). The prevalence of these enterprises reduced urban migration because most farms were located in rural areas with vast expanses of land to grow agricultural products

Subsequently, oil replaced agriculture as Nigeria's primary source of foreign earnings. The focus of oil was because of the large reserves available (Adams, 2019). The government adopted the classical approach to economic development by using oil earnings to build large-scale industries (Ikon, 2019). This focus on large-scale industries undermined the growth of indigenous companies that were primarily small enterprises. By the early 1980s, oil prices collapsed, leading to a loss in foreign exchange earnings and, in turn, the devaluation of the Naira (Calgar & Titiloye, 2019). The dwindling oil revenue spurred a recession, scarcity of goods, increased unemployment, and poverty. The government revised its policies to reverse this situation and reduce its reliance on oil revenues.

In 1988, the Nigerian government changed its economic and industrial policies. The government formulated new policies that revised its focus from large industrialization to supporting small businesses (Adeosun & Shittu, 2022). The government was interested in using small enterprises as critical tools to revitalize the economy (Tabet & Onyeukwu, 2019). They were sources of employment and wealth creation to manage the increasing unemployment rate as well as poverty (Ngutsav & Ijirshar, 2020). The rationale was the capacity of small firms to use locally available materials, technologies, and labor for increased revenue.

The Nigerian government instituted programs to support small enterprises. These programs also encouraged small business ownership by youth and women (Akanfe et al., 2019). The support included legislation prohibiting certain imports, reducing taxes, and promoting environmental protection (Ibrahim & Mustapha, 2019). The government established specialized financial institutions to manage fiscal policy and microloans to grow such businesses. SMEDAN was created to provide financial and technical support to small enterprises. Despite these programs, policies, and agency development to support small businesses, many continued to fail (Ma'aji, 2019). Small businesses encountered challenges in the Nigerian business environment that hindered their growth.

Major Challenges

Small businesses faced numerous challenges within developing countries that impeded long-term growth and sustainability. Despite diverse geographical locations, these firms encountered similar difficulties, including fragile business environments, inadequate public infrastructure, and social problems (Otika et al., 2019). Nigerian small enterprises also experienced the same difficulty, contributing to their failure rate. Thus, 80% of small businesses fail within the first 5 years of business commencement (Gumel, 2019a). Several factors were responsible for the failure rates of small businesses.

Business Failure. There is no specific definition of business failure. Business failure has been defined as the point at which an organization ceases to exist within 5 years of its commencement (Amankwah-Amoh et al., 2018). It could also refer to closure by the owner due to an inability to generate revenue to cover operational costs (Bunyaminu et al., 2019) or the owner's inability to meet a set minimum threshold of economic viability (Boso et al., 2019) or unachieved expectations (Dias & Teixeira, 2017). Other definitions of business failure include financial distress or economic collapse (Mate-Sanchez-Val et al., 2018) and the halt of business operations due to bankruptcy (Gumel, 2019b). However, Dias and Martens (2019) contended that firm closure from bankruptcy or liquidation did not necessarily constitute business failure. Similarly, Asekunowo and Obembe (2016), argued that not all bankruptcy cases are business failures, as some firms declare bankruptcy to reorganize to prevent loss. Business failure could be the result of internal or external factors.

Several factors internal to the business organization could contribute to the failure rate. These challenges, related to entrepreneurial skills or knowledge, could inhibit business growth and cause small firms to fail (Ufua et al., 2020). Challenges include low technological expertise, inadequate entrepreneurial skills, and ineffective management techniques (Ajani & Oluyemi, 2016). Other contributory factors are a lack of effective strategies and a dearth of capital-management skills (Etim et al., 2022). Researchers also suggested that small firm owners in Nigeria often lacked the competency to appropriately plan, manage resources, and implement productive strategies toward meeting firm objectives (Ali et al., 2020). The absence of strategic entrepreneurial skills could contribute to small business failure within Nigeria.

Other researchers identified additional issues contributing to small enterprise failure within Nigeria. Faloye and Owoeye (2021) ascertained that insufficient infrastructure and limited access to capital for expansion were the most challenging factors hindering the growth of Nigerian small businesses. Folajinmi and Peter (2020) found that such enterprises failed due to inadequate infrastructure, entrepreneurial incompetence, obsolete technology, and inconsistent government policies. Weak public institutions and inefficient systems also impacted the sustainability of small business operations (Ali et al., 2020).

The issues affecting Nigerian small businesses could be grouped into categories of the unfriendly business environment, minimal access to capital, poor managerial skills, and no access to modern technology (Eniola, 2021). Other crucial challenges to these vulnerable enterprises include the lack of access to financing, inconsistent government policies, a weak public infrastructure, and a lack of entrepreneurial skills (SMEDAN, 2017). Additional issues that adversely impact small enterprises' successful performance comprise inadequate financial capital, poor entrepreneurial skills, non-use of modern technology, and an unfavorable business environment (Central Bank of Nigeria, 2018). Owners have to proactively manage these factors to avoid business failure.

Limited Access to Financing. Financial capital is a key business success factor. Small business owners require finances to establish and manage operations toward expanding their enterprises. Most small firms within Nigeria did not obtain their capital from commercial banks (Akanfe et al., 2019). SMEDAN (2017) reported that only 4.2% of owners accessed loans from financial institutions. This statistic represented an inability to source bank loans. This lack of capital is a significant challenge for Nigerian small businesses (Akanfe et al., 2019). A research outcome revealed that the lack of funds was a key challenge because it impacted the ability of owners of small firms to formulate strategies and identify novel opportunities for improved business performance (Khan et al., 2019). Inadequate financial capital adversely affected the potential for small firms to achieve expansion.

The Nigerian government recognized the importance of financial capital and established specialized institutions to support small enterprises with funds. The perception of the involved policy makers of the challenges of Nigerian small businesses underpinned the creation of these institutions that stipulated terms, conditions, and documentation necessary to provide financial support to such enterprises (Olayiwola et al., 2019). Most firms requiring support still could not access financial capital due to their inability to comply with specified conditions and documentation (Ugwu-Oju et al., 2020).

Endris and Kassegn (2022) contended that financial institutions hesitated to grant loans to these businesses because of the inferior quality of corporate documentation. Similarly, Chinonso and Zhen (2016) advanced that owners could not provide the detailed financial information required and had high default rates. Conversely, Gololo (2017) argued that owners were unwilling to divulge business information for loans due to their fear of tax investigation. Consequently, small enterprises continued to struggle to fund their endeavors despite the presence of financial institutions charged with eliminating this challenge.

Research has shown that small enterprises remained financially constrained despite the presence of specialized institutions. Some researchers advanced that small firms were discouraged from participating in the described lending program due to the institution's inflexible platforms and corrupt practices (Effiom &Edet, 2018). Additionally, owners lacked the financial skills to apply for loans (Ugwu-Oju et al., 2020). A contrary view is that the challenge might be related to the owner's poor fiscal management and fund misappropriation (Aladejebi & Oladimeji, 2019). Regardless, financing continues to constrain small business growth within Nigeria.

Unfavorable Business Environment. The Nigerian government instituted economic, financial, and monetary policies that negatively impacted small business performance. The fiscal and monetary policies of the government were unpredictable, inconsistent, and contradictory, resulting in unfavorable outcomes for small firms (Micah, Okafor, et al., 2017). Multiple policies from federal, state, and local governments on taxes have caused hardship to small enterprises (Ibrahim & Mustapha, 2019). The political instability and the diversion of funds by corrupt officials were regarded as the reasons for inconsistent government policies (Ebitu et al., 2018). Other researchers argued that public officers did not consider the impact of policy changes. For example, Akinbola et al. (2019) found that the government renewed subsidy policies without consulting the Enterprise Support Agencies, which only exacerbated existing problems. The amended policies negatively affected performance outcomes for some enterprises, causing them to change their operating models (Alabi et al., 2019). Therefore, small enterprises should manage contradictory policies and inconsistent practices to sustain success beyond 5 years.

A persistent unfavorable condition within the Nigerian business environment was the lack of adequate public infrastructure, which often adversely impacted small enterprises' performance and income (Mohammed et al., 2020). These firms require sufficient amenities for long-term success and productive contributions to the Nigerian economy. A suitable public infrastructure would support the growth of small businesses and encourage economic development (Tahir & Inuwa, 2019). However, the government failed to provide basic social amenities such as adequate supplies of electricity and water, a proper transportation system, as well as an adequate road system. The minimal public infrastructure are located in urban areas, though 80% of Nigerians reside in rural areas (Alonge et al., 2021). Consequently, owners incurred additional operating costs to circumvent the weak public infrastructure to avoid business failure.

Inadequate electricity is a major infrastructure problem within Nigeria. The power sector is among the worst in Sub-Saharan Africa, with an output of only 50% of the country’s needs (Alabi et al., 2019; Ekpo & Bassey, 2016). Public electricity supply has the greatest impact on small business success. About 94% of small enterprises are almost entirely dependent upon alternative power due to the unavailability of public supply (SMEDAN, 2017). The government provided electricity for 11 hours daily, with small firms generating 50% of the energy requirement, which resulted in 15.6% annual sales loss (Nwanakwere & Uzoeto, 2019). Using an alternative power supply increased the total costs for enterprises by 25% (Obokoh & Goldman, 2016). These businesses expended funds to acquire alternative energy; profitability and productivity remained adversely affected.

Other challenges to small enterprises related to infrastructure are inadequate road systems and unreliable public transportation. A research outcome revealed that the impact of inadequate infrastructural facilities in Lagos State, Nigeria (e.g., road systems, public transport, and lack of social-support amenities) contributed to small business failure (Akinson, 2018). The challenges of bad roads and insufficient transportation systems were most evident to small enterprise owners due to their need to transport finished products to urban markets (Bushe, 2019). Sparse road networks and unreliable public transportation facilities increased the cost of raw materials and transport to market (Alonge et al., 2021). Business Owners would have to manage these external factors in the business environment to improve performance.

Poor Entrepreneurial Skills. Nigerian small business owners are inexperienced and lack the entrepreneurial skills to appropriately manage their firms (Ifekwem & Adedamola, 2016). Entrepreneurial incompetency is a critical factor in business failure in

Nigeria (Gwadabe & Amirah, 2017). Ameh et al. (2020) found that the lack of entrepreneurial skills to manage their firms, leading to long-term success, was the greatest challenge for small business owners, not the absence of financing. Similarly, Alaka and Okogua (2022) elucidated that some owners lacked the entrepreneurial skills to adequately plan, control resources, and make decisions toward achieving enterprise goals. These owners also require the necessary skills to manage the firm resources and the surrounding business environment (Bushe, 2019). The owners' entrepreneurial skills could be vital in managing small firms in Nigeria.

Owners of small businesses within Nigeria require entrepreneurial skills to survive the turbulent market economy (Micah, Kassah & Andah, 2017). Such skills are critical to managing firms' resources, technology, and customer demands to avoid business failure. Qualitative research on the failures of three businesses revealed that the lack of entrepreneurial ability was a major contributory factor (Dias & Martens, 2019). Business owners lacking entrepreneurial skills, misappropriated funds and made erroneous decisions, leading to poor business performance (Ayodele, 2018). The lack of entrepreneurial skills could have easily resulted in business failure when coupled with adverse environmental factors. Hence, owners should develop entrepreneurial skills that foster planning and decision-making, leading to sustainable business success.

Lack of Modern Technology. The majority of small business owners within Nigeria fail to use technology despite current related advances. Whereas a few enterprise owners used technology effectively to advance communication to grow their businesses, most did not want to share information and take advantage of emerging technology (Eze et al., 2019). Oyebiyi (2019) conducted a study focused on users and nonusers of information and communication technology (ICT) located in Ogun State, Nigeria; the findings showed that most small firms were at an early stage of use. Research on small business use of alternative payment platforms revealed that it was at an introductory stage (Akerejola et al., 2019). Business owners in the early stage of technology usage provided their firms with websites, social media platforms, and other simple technological tools (Gbadegeshin et al., 2019). Research findings showed that owners choose technology to implement based on personal values, attitudes, and experiences, not expert information (Eze et al., 2019). Owners of small firms in Nigeria seemed slow to adopt technology for managing and improving business processes.

Small enterprises not taking full advantage of available technology would likely fail in the current business environment. Researchers proffered several reasons for their hesitation to adopt modern technology. Agwu (2016) found that low awareness, lack of education, poverty, and nonrelevance of technology were causal factors in four small firms selected to participate in a qualitative study on ICT diffusion and adoption within Nigeria. Akerejola et al. (2019) found that limited knowledge of the potential benefits, perceived difficulty of use, and nonavailability of skilled personnel influenced the decision of small businesses not to adopt technology in Lagos State, Nigeria. Agboola et al. (2017) reported that owners often deliberately failed to embrace technology, even where its use could improve profitability. This lack of technology implementation might contribute to small business failure within Nigeria.

Success Strategies

Business Success Defined. The term *business success* depicts the ability of an enterprise to accomplish its stated goals and objectives. Several other definitions were advanced. Business success is firm growth based on increased financial outcomes, productivity, and employees (Razmus & Laguna, 2018). Business success has also been referred to as the firm's ability to achieve its goals of making profits and market share (Khairudin & Amin, 2020). Definitions have been inconsistent; therefore, researchers resorted to performance as the strongest measure of success. However, this research practice was criticized. For example, Radzi et al. (2017) argued that using firms' performances to measure success resulted in interpretational variance. Regardless, researchers continued to apply broad categories of financial, nonfinancial, and a combination of both measures to determine success.

Investigators supporting the use of financial indices for measuring firm performance argued that profitability was the determinant of business investment success because profit-making was the primary goal (Al Shahrani & Tu, 2016). The argument is that the ability to generate profits ensures continued business operations (Aguguom et al., 2019). Moreover, applying financial indices to determine business success, particularly profitability, offered an objective, quantifiable, and universally acceptable measure (Effiom & Edet, 2018). Researchers used various financial indices for measuring firm success. For instance, return on investment to determine the success of female owners of small businesses in Nigeria (Kabir et al., 2017) and correlated profit after tax for 5 years to assess the performance of female-owned firms in Western Nigeria (Omiunu, 2019).

Financial indicators, such as profits, sales turnover, and return on investments, were critical factors for measuring performance as well as overall business success.

Several researchers used nonfinancial measures to determine business success. For example, Tahir and Inuwa (2019) conducted a study on small firms in Borno State, Nigeria, using the nonfinancial performance measures of growth, expansion, survival, and competitiveness because the owners refused to disclose confidential financial information. Criticisms of nonfinancial indices for this purpose include their subjective nature, difficulty measuring, and the fact that such indices are better suited for performance measurements in nonprofit organizations (Essel et al., 2019). Researchers advanced that a nonfinancial index was more useful when firms were unwilling to divulge their financial information because such indices could assist in measuring success where data was unavailable (Baylie & Singh, 2019). Nonfinancial indices could be used in combination with other factors to measure success.

Nonfinancial and financial indices have been combined as complementary measures to capture total organizational performance. Researchers claim that this mixed method focusing on containing costs and other business objectives was appropriate (Gorondutse et al., 2018). Baylie and Singh (2019) researched the performance of small businesses using financial measures of profitability, market share, and sales growth with nonfinancial measures of customer loyalty, obtaining new customers, and firm reputation. Gumel (2019b) conducted a qualitative multiple case study on the challenges of small firms within Dutse, Jigawa State, Nigeria, and applied the measures of 5 or more years in operation as well as profits. Both financial and nonfinancial measures are useful for determining business success. The success measurement in this study was firm profitability and business continuity for 5 years or more.

Several factors could potentially contribute to small business success. Study findings revealed that the characteristics of owners and their firms were significant factors in determining business success (Sarawoko & Frisdiantara, 2016). However, Al-Tit et al. (2019) found that age and business skills affected entity success, but firm size, network, and business environment did not impact small enterprises. Similarly, Nunez-Pomar et al. (2016) affirmed that business size was not a factor for success in the sports service sector based on their research outcome. In contrast, Pett et al. (2019) argued that research findings with a study sample of hotels in the hospitality industry revealed that firm size based on the number of employees accurately measured enterprise success. Business environment and contextual factors seemed to contribute to the measure of success.

Research showed that the ability of owners of small firms to manage competitive environments and changing consumer profiles contributed to business success. The knowledge and resilience of entrepreneurs operating in uncertain or challenging environments are crucial for business success (Fatoki, 2018). Asenge and Agwa (2018) found that enterprise owners’ knowledge, skills, and ability to overcome challenges impacted firm success in their small business performance study conducted within Benue State, Nigeria. Similarly, Pulka et al. (2021) advanced that their research outcome revealed that the success factors of small enterprises in Northeastern Nigeria were grounded in the technical and managerial skills of the owners. Conversely, Mandhachitara and Allapach (2017) argued that their study's findings showed that the proactive management style of business owners combined with market intelligence contributed to their firms' success. Owners require the necessary skills and capabilities to manage the business environment.

Other contributors to small business success include managing customer demands and firm resources. Alfoqahaa (2018) found that the critical success factors of small firms' operations were excellent customer service and reliable delivery services rather than firm structure, production, or financing. Felix and dos Santos (2018) conducted a study that revealed that human resources, innovation, and capital funding were business success factors rather than the duration of operations. Adeola et al. (2021) applied the Lussier Model of Business Success or Failure with a small business study sample; the findings showed that adequate records, financial control, and professional advice were keys to firm success. Conversely, Radzi et al. (2017) researched the antecedents to success with small firms and found that technology use enhanced business performance more significantly than financial resources or knowledge sharing. Planning, innovation, and customer service could be crucial to meeting customer demand for firm success.

Business Strategy. Enterprises in all business environments should plan and implement entrepreneurial strategies to succeed. All business owners should develop strategies to guide their activities irrespective of their firm size (Adebisi & Bakare, 2019). Okoi et al. (2021) found in their study of small enterprises within Nigeria that entrepreneurial skills in planning and strategy formulation positively influenced business growth despite environmental complexity. Owners with entrepreneurial skills could incorporate business strategies to survive in complex environments (Alaka & Okogua, 2022), create a competitive advantage (Okoi et al., 2021), and achieve long-term success (Gidado & Babakura, 2019). Entrepreneurial strategies were considered necessary for growing and succeeding in all business environments.

Enterprise owners could formulate a business strategy to increase their customer base for improved firm performance, profits, and success. Ekon and Isayas (2020) reported that the findings of a study focused on small enterprises in Nigeria revealed that business strategy was a critical factor influencing firm performance and survival. Similarly, Agwu (2018a) found that small enterprise owners in Lagos, Nigeria, who implemented business strategies specific to their operations, achieved higher performance and increased market share. Research also revealed that small firm owners who applied unique business strategies achieved superior performance (Rahman & Anwar, 2019). Consequently, owners with implemented business strategies focused on increasing market share could achieve overall success.

Small firms could leverage effective business strategies to gain a competitive advantage. Owners could ground such strategies in innovation, low costs, quality, and adaptability to manage challenges emerging from the external environment. Small business performance was positively influenced by the entrepreneurial actions of planning, strategy formulation, and the effective management of scarce resources (Baylie & Singh, 2019). Business owners do not require the consistent application of unique techniques for growth; they could sustain success by combining various innovative strategies to redesign internal processes and use technology to leverage opportunities for profitability (Collins & Reutzel, 2016). Adebisi and Bakare (2019) conducted a study on small enterprises in Lagos State, Nigeria, which affirmed the findings that combining strategies improved business performance over the long term, irrespective of environmental turbulence. Formulating business strategies could aid firm owners in developing and communicating plans to innovate to create value for improved performance.

Innovation. Small firms could use innovation to drive growth and profitability competitiveness and continuously changing demands for improved products (Putnins & Sauka, 2020). Small enterprises should adopt innovative strategies for managing changing customer preferences and competitor behaviors for business survival (Prasanna et al., 2019). Owners could use their limited resources wisely to experiment with products, practices, and processes to deliver significant customer benefits for enterprise growth (Bukki et al., 2019; Ogunkoya & Hassan, 2019). Research findings revealed that innovativeness significantly contributed to sustained business success in small firms within Delta State, Nigeria (Ogunrode et al., 2020). Enterprises within emerging economies with institutional difficulties could innovate for firm growth and success over the long term. Owners who used innovation in an intensely competitive environment for resources and customers could experience sustainable firm success.

Small businesses should strategically innovate to create value to achieve superior performance. Previous research on small firms in Lagos State, Nigeria, revealed that owners who used innovation experience improved financial performance than noninnovative enterprises that recorded fiscal deficits (Kowo, 2019). Similarly, another study showed that innovative small firms performed better than their noninnovative counterparts (Makate et al., 2019). Firms could also create value by developing new practices. Research on small enterprises within the two Nigerian cities of Lagos and Ibadan revealed that new technological and market-driven practices were used to improve business performance (Olughor, 2015). Continuous innovation is essential for sustainable business success because creative methods typically lead to capital for further investments (Dogan, 2017). Business owners could implement *crowdfunding* as a financial innovation to raise funds from social networks (Eniola & Entebang, 2017). Innovation was central to improved performance and long-term business success, even in Nigeria.

Information and Communication Technology. With the accelerated development of ICT and severe competition eroding the value added to existing products and services, small enterprise owners should implement novel technology consistently to succeed. Some small businesses in Nigeria use information technology to create wealth, manage resources, and generate revenue (Yusuf, 2017). ICT is critical for effective management, communication, and improved decision-making to achieve business goals (Agwu, 2018b). ICT impacts how companies operate, interact, and communicate within the internal and external business environments (Obunike & Udu, 2018). Enterprise owners could use technology to improve customer service, decrease communication costs, improve efficiency, and increase competitive advantage. E-commerce and e-marketing tools are cost or product-differentiation strategies to enhance profitability, competitiveness, and productivity (Octavia et al., 2020). Small enterprises could use ICT to easily, cost-effectively, and rapidly reach markets previously beyond their affordable scope.

Small enterprise owners should understand how modern technology could support their business processes and improve performance to glean its benefits for sustaining success. Small firms require high technical competence to use state-of-the-art technologies to improve operations, reduce costs, increase sales, and enhance overall growth (Akpan et al., 2020). ICT could be a critical tool because of the opportunities available to small enterprises with limited resources in the e-environment. Okundaye et al. (2019) conducted qualitative research on five small business owners in Lagos, Nigeria, and found that using technology to improve process efficiency, innovativeness, and competitiveness could increase profitability. Despite these advantages, Okundaye et al. advanced that most firms were unlikely to acquire technology for various reasons. Researchers identified obstacles such as a lack of effective strategies and limited knowledge of novel technology (Chau et al., 2020). Small business owners operating in turbulent or uncertain environments could apply ICT to support flexible and adaptable processes for addressing emerging challenges from its adoption.

Small enterprise owners with limited resources could access ICT using basic web-based technology such as the Internet or shared resources from business collaboration or strategic alliances. Owners could use the internet for social networking, free information, or simple technology marketing tools with the resultant benefits of availability, low adoption costs, and world connectivity (Ndiaye et al., 2018). Business collaboration and networking could enable technology adoption at a reduced price (Prasanna et al., 2019).

Business collaboration or strategic alliances could provide invaluable access to specialized technology, knowledge, information, and skills (de Oliveira et al., 2016). Additionally, strategic alliances could provide resources, capabilities, and technology without the associated costs of in-house technology adoption. Consequently, through the Internet or shared resources, small enterprises could use novel technology at minimal cost to enhance performance toward sustaining success.

Small business owners could leverage technology to collect information on markets and customers. Enterprise owners could use the information on competitor behaviors, customer demands, and preferences to reposition offerings for greater success. Small firms using market information to create superior products could increase customer value (Bamfo & Kraa, 2019). The research outcome of a study of female-owned small firms within Western Nigeria revealed that performance improved when these enterprises used collected business information (Omiunu, 2019). Owners could gather online information for tailored products or services to increase customer loyalty and satisfaction. These owners could use technology to understand the business environment to develop effective strategies for competitive advantage and sustaining success.

Transition

The purpose of this qualitative multiple-case study was to explore strategies Nigerian small business owners implement toward sustaining success beyond 5 years. The professional and academic literature reviewed for the research encompassed the conceptual framework, historical perspective of small firms within Nigeria, and their challenges. Existing literature on business success was complex, with varied data and disparate findings, but all information was relevant to this study. Section 1 comprised the study's background and foundation for exploring the strategies required for small businesses to succeed.

Section 2 included the rationale for conducting a qualitative case study to explore strategies Nigerian small business owners could implement toward sustaining success beyond 5 years. This section also contained discussions on the role of the researcher, study population, sampling method, comparative analysis of data collection methods, data organization techniques, a summary of the data analysis, and research reliability and validity. Section 3 included an overview of the study, a restatement of the purpose, and discussions of findings. Application of the findings to professional practice, their implications for social change, and recommendations for further research concluded this study.

Section 2: The Project

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies Nigerian small business owners implement toward sustaining success beyond 5 years. The targeted population included three successful owners of small firms operating within Nigeria's professional services sector who had instituted strategies leading to sustained business success beyond 5 years. The implications for positive social change include the potential for owners to improve their implementation of strategies modeled for enterprise growth, sustainability, and profitability (Nwankwo & Kanyangale, 2020). The study could also provide useful information for consultants, policy makers, and government agencies for formulating policies to promote sustainable practices among small business owners toward entity growth, increased employment, and improved economic development.

Role of the Researcher

The researcher is the principal instrument for collecting and analyzing data in a qualitative study (Cypress, 2017). The researcher is responsible for selecting an appropriate method and study design to address the research question (Koskei & Simiyu, 2015). The qualitative method allowed the use of interviews as essential data sources (Yin, 2018). The role of the researcher included garnering answers, establishing trust, and being ethical (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). Before and during the interview process, my role as the researcher included carefully preparing interview questions to garner data to answer the research questions, recruiting participants, establishing a trusting relationship with interviewees, and demonstrating an ethical and nondirective stance toward ensuring the reliability and validity of the research findings.

The *Belmont Report* (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979) described ethical principles for research using human subjects. The *Belmont Report* differentiates between research and practice, promoting the following three basic ethical principles and their application: (a) respect for persons, (b) beneficence, and (c) justice (Friesen et al., 2017). As the researcher of this study, I adhered to these principles by respecting the rights of the participants to make informed decisions, protecting their privacy and confidentiality, ensuring no harm to the interviewees, and applying the principle of justice throughout the study process.

Further, qualitative research presents potential bias with the researcher as the data collector and analyst (Birt et al., 2016). Qualitative researchers bring their own biases to their research (Fusch et al., 2018). Bias encompasses any influence that distorts the results of a study (Galdas, 2017). Avoiding bias is a facet of ethics; consequently, the qualitative researcher should be explicit about limiting, if not eliminating, bias (Yin, 2018). Mitigating a researcher's personal bias ensures the correct interpretation of participant views (Fusch et al., 2018). Strategies to minimize bias include consciously reducing the researcher's influence on beliefs and values during data collection (Wadams & Park, 2018). The use of the following three core techniques supported this effort: (a) choosing informants with whom there existed no prior relationship, (b) adherence to an interview protocol (see Appendix) with open-ended questions in a consistent format, and (c) bracketing. My relationship with the topic of the study derived from working with small business owners. My job as a contract specialist included developing programs to support small business growth within the local community. My perspective was drawn from the interaction with business owners in my municipality who struggled to grow their enterprises and others who experienced business failure. Despite access to these owners, none participated in this study to address bias related to preexisting relationships.

An interview protocol was also used to mitigate bias. The interview protocol facilitates rich qualitative data collection to understand experiences related to a phenomenon to enhance the validity and reliability of the study (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). It is a research instrument for obtaining quality data from interviews systematically, consistently, and comprehensively (Yeong et al., 2018). The interview protocol is the procedural guide for ethical research, containing the interview questions, interview scripts, prompts for informed consent, and vital information reminders (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). The reminders include the performance of critical tasks, such as gaining access to participants, providing sufficient resources, scheduling data collection activities, and managing unanticipated events (Yin, 2018). Accordingly, the interview protocol of this study supported the collection of research data in a structured manner to avoid bias.

Bracketing is also a technique to suspend judgment to enable the separation of assumptions and bias from the research (Cypress, 2017). Investigators use bracketing to illuminate their implicit beliefs and render them explicit throughout the study (Wadams & Park, 2018). Bracketing personal bias involves (a) writing a journal of reflections throughout the process and (b) taking notes of assumptions during the data collection and analysis. A reflective journal was useful for effectively capturing researcher preconceptions and biases that could potentially influence decisions as well as actions throughout the research process (Johnson et al., 2020). Keeping a reflective journal ensured I acknowledged all potential personal biases related to the study by identifying and addressing them.

Participants

The selection of participants is an integral facet of qualitative research. It is important to implement a procedure to ensure that the sample can provide the richest information to fully understand the phenomenon under study (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). Yin (2018) suggested that researchers define operational criteria to qualify participants. The requirements to participate in my study included (a) Nigerian small business owners operating within the professional services sector, (b) owners who have implemented strategies toward sustained success beyond 5 years, (c) owners of small businesses located in Lagos, Nigeria, and (d) owners able to articulate the strategies they have implemented.

The strategy for gaining access to participants involved various steps. After receiving approval for this research, the first step involved using contacts in my network of acquaintances to identify and gain access to persons who meet the criteria for participation (Vuban & Eta, 2019). Initial contact with participants was via telephone to elicit interest in the study. Then, potential interviewees were invited by email to participate through formal letters of introduction with attached consent forms containing detailed descriptions of the study and the research benefits. The letters of introduction contain information confirming participant privacy and confidentiality of data sharing (Monahan & Fisher, 2015). Following acceptance, interviewees chose interview times and dates to render access easy for the participants and retain scheduling control (Doody & Noonan, 2013). The final step was discussing the research before commencing the interview to confirm their understanding of their roles, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw from the study at any time with no adverse repercussions.

The strategy to establish a working relationship with participants was to build rapport and trust. Building rapport and creating productive interaction in qualitative interview situations is essential for data collection (Saunders et al., 2015). Developing empathetic ties and assurances of confidentiality will encourage participants to willingly provide a detailed account of their experiences central to the phenomenon ((Dikko, 2016; McGrath et al., 2018). Establishing a working relationship in this study was done in numerous ways. The first was establishing a good rapport by explaining the study and developing empathetic ties. The second was to provide reassurances of confidentiality, which increased participant confidence and desire to provide complete information.

Research Method and Design

This research study was a qualitative multiple case study to explore the phenomenon of interest. The study's research method and design were used from the onset through its conclusion (Yin, 2018). The research design should connect the data collection method to the research question and findings (Yin, 2018). The research method and design were selected from reviewing various approaches, as detailed in the following paragraphs.

Research Method

The three types of research methods are qualitative, quantitative, and mixed method. The primary consideration in research methodology selection is the type best suited to the data collection required to answer the research question (Taguchi, 2018). The qualitative method was useful for this study to answer questions requiring insight into participant perceptions of a phenomenon within a social context (Yin, 2018). The qualitative method is preferred where the research data are the participants' subjective experiences (Danford, 2023; Rahman, 2017) rather than generalization (Bengtsson, 2016). The qualitative method enables researchers to use open-ended questions to obtain detailed descriptions and interpretations of participant opinions as well as actions (Mohajan, 2018). This method is ideal for obtaining in-depth explanations and illustrative information related to the phenomenon under study (Alam, 2021). For these reasons, the qualitative method and data best addressed the research question.

A quantitative methodology involves the use of numerical measurements to examine relationships among variables. This method is used to collect quantifiable variables and analyze hypotheses (Taherdoost, 2022). The quantitative methodology is useful for quantifiable measurements to eliminate individual contextual factors (Mohajan, 2020). The method was inappropriate for this study, which required understanding contextual factors rather than hypothetical analysis or measurement of variables. Investigators apply a mixed method to research when collecting quantitative and qualitative data is required to answer the same research question (Schoonenboom, 2023).

The mixed method is suitable for numeric data and qualitative narratives to support observations or address confirmatory questions in a single study (Ivanokva & Wingo, 2018). The mixed method was inappropriate for this study because the research question did not require answers from quantitative and qualitative perspectives.

Researchers have applied qualitative methodology for similar studies. For instance, Akaeze and Akaeze (2016) used the qualitative method to explore the survival strategies small firms within Nigeria implemented to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years. Similarly, Gonzalez and Campbell (2018) found the qualitative method excellent for understanding the success strategies of five immigrant enterprise owners who sought business expansion beyond their ethnic enclave. Therefore, the qualitative method was useful for exploring the experiences and perspectives of Nigerian small business owners regarding the strategies they had implemented to achieve sustained success beyond 5 years.

Research Design

All empirical studies apply research designs, which are techniques for ensuring the validity and reliability of a study (Yin, 2018). The research design is the conceptual “blueprint” for conducting the study (Akhtar, 2016). Various research designs are used in qualitative studies, including ethnography, phenomenology, grounded theory, and case studies (Mohajan, 2018). The descriptive multiple case study was the design for this qualitative research.

Researchers have applied ethnography design to describe population complexities and interpret shared cultural nuances of a phenomenon under study (Grossoehme, 2014;

Jones & Smith, 2017; Korstjens & Moser, 2017; Rashid et al., 2019). Data were collected by observing and participating in participants' daily lives drawn from a social or cultural group (Morgan-Trimmer & Wood, 2016; Rashid et al., 2019). In contrast, phenomenology entails understanding participants' lived experiences related to the phenomenon under study (Rodriguez & Smith, 2018). A phenomenological design is useful for understanding the experience of an event rather than information drawn from the event (Guerrero-Castaneda et al., 2017). The ethnographic or phenomenological design was unsuitable for this study because it did not involve investigating a group culture or the lived experiences of research participants.

Grounded theory is useful for generating theory from systematic data collection and data analysis (Noble & Mitchell, 2016). The design involves constructing an explanatory theory to uncover processes inherent to the substantive area of inquiry (Johnson, 2015). Researchers use grounded theory to meticulously apply specific methods and techniques rather than explore a phenomenon over time (Tie et al., 2019). Grounded theory design was inappropriate for this study because the research did not require generating an explanatory theory.

Case study research is useful for obtaining in-depth knowledge of an event or phenomenon within its real-life context (Crowe et al., 2011). Researchers apply the case study design to answer research questions related to complex social phenomena manifesting during particular periods within specific locations (Dasgupta, 2015; Fabregues & Fetters, 2019). The aim is to obtain rich descriptions toward understanding a phenomenon, including improved business practices (Paek & Lee, 2017; Ponelis, 2015).

The case study design could be exploratory for defining research questions, explanatory for linking an event to its effect, or descriptive for illustrating a phenomenon within its real-life context (Yin, 2018). A case study could be single or multiple (Yin, 2018) or involve one location or entity or multiple locations and entities as a single, collective unit (Heale & Twycross, 2018). A case study allows for a comprehensive exploration of a phenomenon of interest.

A review of similar studies confirmed that the case study design was suitable for this qualitative study. Gumel (2017b) used the qualitative, descriptive multiple case study design to examine the sustained operation of small firms for a duration longer than 5 years and generated data confirming the effectiveness of their business strategies. Similarly, Ekanem and Abiade (2018) found that using a qualitative descriptive multiple case study research design to examine factors affecting small firm growth increased their understanding of how Nigeria’s economic conditions influenced their decisions. Larrinaga (2017) advanced that the case study design was appropriate for research on the success strategies of small business owners involving “how” and “why” questions. Although criticism of the case study design includes subjectivity and bias, using multiple sources of evidence ensured research validity and reliability (Alpi & Evans, 2019). Therefore, the descriptive multiple case study design was useful to fully describe the perspectives of Nigerian small business owners concerning the strategies they implemented for sustaining success beyond 5 years.

Data saturation is essential for a valid qualitative study. Failure to reach saturation could impact the quality of the research (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Saturation is the point at which the additional data collected contains no new information or new themes (Saunders et al., 2018). I asked open-ended and follow-up questions, which helped me gain perspectives to attain data saturation. Triangulation can be used to explore diverse levels and perspectives of the same phenomenon to achieve data saturation (Fusch & Ness, 2015). In this study, saturation was achieved by triangulating data collected via interviews and the archived records of participating business owners, and no new data appeared.

Population and Sampling

The research population for this study was composed of three successful small business owners within the professional services sector of Nigeria. The sample was appropriate for the scope of this research, which was to explore strategies implemented by small business owners in Nigeria to sustain success beyond 5 years. The three business owners selected for participation reflected similar characteristics, meeting the participant criteria for the study. The population provided insight into the phenomenon under study to address the SMEDAN (2015) report that indicated a high failure rate of small businesses in Nigeria.

The sampling technique employed in a study should support the research design. Research design should enable the recruitment of participants able to contribute rich data related to the phenomenon of interest (Farrugia, 2019; O'Reilly & Parker, 2012; Palinkas et al., 2015). Researchers should carefully select samples to evaluate thoroughly and deeply understand the phenomenon under study to achieve the research purpose (Naderifar et al., 2017). A purposeful sampling technique was implemented for this qualitative multiple case study. Purposeful sampling involves the deliberate selection of participants meeting specific criteria, resulting in proficient and knowledgeable participants (Benoot et al., 2016). The rationale for implementing this sampling strategy is to ensure a sample of individuals with experiences specific to the phenomenon under study (Etikan et al., 2016; Malterud et al., 2016; Robinson, 2014). Other researchers have used purposeful sampling to obtain in-depth knowledge of business strategies (Amin, 2018; Walker, 2012; Warren & Szostek, 2017). Therefore, purposeful sampling was used to select three Nigerian small business owners with the requisite knowledge and experience to explore strategies they had implemented to sustain success beyond 5 years.

The number of participants in a study is vital to establish research quality and credibility. Sample adequacy in qualitative research refers to the suitability of the sample composition and size (Vasileiou et al., 2018). An adequate number of participants is not dependent on quantity as much as sufficiency to result in data answering the research question (Bradshaw et al., 2017). Additionally, no set number of participants is required for a study; this is contingent upon the research type and requisite data sought (O'Reilly & Parker, 2012). A small number of participants could support an in-depth and comprehensive analysis of the research question in a case study (Vasileiou et al., 2018). A small number of participants who possessed rich information is adequate for studies with a narrow scope (Malterud et al., 2016), which fits the description of this research with a study sample of three participants. In previous studies focused on the knowledge, skills, and strategies employed for business success, the researchers recruited a sample of three owners of small coffee shops as participants (Turner & Endres, 2017) and obtained sufficient insight into the strategies they implemented (Akaeze & Akaeze, 2016). Three participants can produce sufficient valuable and reliable data for a multiple case study (Yin, 2018). I obtained data from three small business owners on the strategies they had implemented for sustained business success beyond 5 years.

A study sample should be of adequate size to enable a researcher to achieve data saturation. Data saturation is achieved when the researcher gleans no new information, new themes, or new codes from further questioning and can replicate the study (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Data saturation does not depend on the number of participants but on the rich and thick data quality (Burmeister & Aitken, 2012; Hennink et al., 2017). An appropriate sampling method could support data saturation (Palinkas et al., 2015). This study's three participating small business owners provided me with in-depth and extensive data to ensure data saturation. I would have continued conducting more interviews until reaching data saturation.

There were five strategies I employed to achieve data saturation in this study. A strategy is to use an appropriate study design and data collection methods (Fusch & Ness, 2015). I used the case study design and multiple data collection methods to collect relevant descriptive information. Another method was ensuring participant homogeneity by purposefully selecting three knowledgeable, experienced, and successful Nigerian small business owners (see Palinkas et al., 2015). I also ensured the three participants provided comprehensive and quality data. I collected data via semistructured interviews with consistent open-ended questions to draw rich and thick data that helped me gain perspective from the participants (see Guest et al., 2006). Then, I used thematic analysis to confirm the saturation of themes and codes after several follow-up meetings and methodological triangulation to determine data alignment (see Hennink et al., 2017). Finally, I produced a well-documented research account for future replicability (see Gumel, 2017b).

Researchers should select participants who would provide rich data for the study. It is vital to develop preset criteria for participant selection in a qualitative study (Yin, 2018). Such participant requirements could yield samples with valuable perspectives and the necessary experience to contribute data answering the research question (Sargeant, 2012). The criteria for participant selection in this study included Nigerian small business owners: (a) operating within the professional-service sector, (b) operating small businesses that met the SMEDAN (2017) classification, (c) operating for longer than 5 years, (d) who had implemented strategies for sustaining business success, (e) who earned an annual profit of between ₦500,000 and ₦1 million, (f) with operations located within Lagos, Nigeria, (h) who are willing and able to articulate the strategies they employed toward sustained business success, (i) who possessed the communication and language skills to provide rich descriptions, and (j) who are not younger than 18 years. I used these preset criteria to select eligible participants over 18 years old who provided rich data for this study.

Researchers should choose an interview setting that is comfortable for the participants. A suitable interview setting is essential for collecting rich data from participants. (Doody & Noonan, 2013). In this study, an appropriate setting equated to a quiet environment acceptable to the participant. The interviews in this study were held via Microsoft Teams to ease participants' fear of contracting COVID-19 and enhance engagement (see McGrath et al., 2018 and IRB approval). Conducting the interviews via video conferencing allowed for observing social and nonverbal cues such as intonations, body language, and gestures (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). Before conducting the interviews, I informed the participants of the duration of the interviews. The interview sessions were limited to 60 minutes to minimize fatigue and interruption (see Dikko, 2016). The setting selection in this research created a sense of ease and allowed for in-depth exploration of participants' perspectives of the phenomenon under study.

Ethical Research

The *Belmont Report* (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979) provided ethical principles for the protection of human subjects from exploitation during research. These principles include the creation of informed consent. Informed consent is the process by which individuals accept invitations to participate in research (Manti & Licari, 2018). In the informed consent process, the participants must understand all aspects of the research to make informed decisions and voluntarily confirm their willingness to participate in the study (Al Tajir, 2018). I commenced the interviews only after Walden University's IRB approved my application. The Walden IRB approval number for this study is 12-30-21-0418371. Upon initial contact, potential participants in this study received a detailed description of the research type, purpose, and societal benefits. They were all given sufficient time to decide whether to participate in the study (Smith & Fogarty, 2016). All participants indicated their interest and agreement to further discussions before their selection.

I complied with Walden University's IRB guidelines for conducting interviews by obtaining the participants' informed consent. The small business owners who agreed to participate in this study received copies of the consent form. The form contained detailed research descriptions, sample interview questions, discussed the voluntary nature and risk of participation, potential benefits, data privacy, and contacts for questions. The participants were apprised of the relevance of the consent form and the data collection procedures before they committed to participating in the study (see Yin, 2018). Before scheduling the interviews, the three participants confirmed their understanding of the interview process, the details of the consent form, and the voluntary nature of their consent (Al Tajir, 2018). The participants then indicated their consent by responding to my email with the phrase "I consent."

The consent form contains the procedure for withdrawing from the study based on the ethical principle of respect for the autonomy of all research participants (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). The participants have the right to withdraw at any time from the study (Dankar et al., 2019; Thorpe, 2014). Participants could effectuate withdrawal in person, by telephone, or by email without an obligation to provide a reason. Before commencing the interviews, I reminded the three business owners that they could withdraw from this study without an obligation to provide reasons, even after their consent. Any data provided before the withdrawal would be destroyed.

I did not offer any incentives to the three business owners for participating in the study to eliminate any sense of coercion or undue influence. Participants might provide unreliable data by fabricating information to receive rewards when researchers offer incentives (Robinson, 2014). To further reduce the risk of undue influence, none of the participants in this study were known individuals. There were no costs associated with transportation in this study, and no refunds were offered for travel as all interviews were held virtually via Microsoft Teams following IRB approval.

The consent form contained an assurance of ethical protection during the research process. I complied with Walden University’s IRB guidelines for conducting research by protecting participants from harm. My research documentation and study report did not include participants' personal information or details of identification to ensure confidentiality (see National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). The method for effectuating such protection was using labels within the research data, so participants were unidentifiable (see Ploug & Holm, 2017). Labels included letters and numbers to maintain participant confidentiality. With the understanding of the importance of protecting the participants’ identity, the three business owners were assigned unique codes consisting of the letter ‘P’ and numeric suffixes ranging from 1 to 3. In the audio-recorded interviews and the study findings, I identified the participants using the following codes: P1, P2, and P3. Additionally, I de-identified the three participants by deleting features from the transcripts that could be used to infer or reveal the business owners’ identities.

All confidential details provided by the participants were used solely for this study and not shared with any third party. The consent form served as an agreement on their ethical protection for this study between me and the participants. The participants had the right to direct any questions regarding their roles in the research to a university representative. I stored the study data in a password-protected external hard drive in a locked safe and shall destroy them 5 years following the completion of the research.

Data Collection Instruments

Data collection in the study was through interviews and the archival records of the participating small businesses. In a qualitative study, the investigator is the primary data collection instrument to explore, describe, and interpret the study data (Cypress, 2018). Researchers who undertake case studies use at least two of the following customary data sources: (a) documents, (b) archival records, (c) interviews, (d) direct observation, (e) participant observation, and (f) physical artifacts (Yin, 2018). One source would be the main data collection method, while the other would be secondary.

The semistructured interview was the data collection technique for this research. Interviews are the most direct approach to gathering detailed data on a phenomenon of interest (Barrett & Twycross, 2018). Snider and Davies (2018) used semistructured interviews to investigate strategies owners of small independent financial planning firms implemented to achieve profitability. Semistructured interviews allowed a deeper understanding of complex issues encountered by female enterprise owners operating online clothing stores (Amin, 2018). Researchers can use semistructured interviews to capture fundamental data from the participants' perspectives (Barrett & Twycross, 2018). Therefore, semistructured interviews were used in this study to explore the strategies implemented by small business owners within Nigeria to sustain success beyond 5 years.

The additional data collection method used in this study was company archival records. Archival records are useful sources of organizational background information in qualitative research (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Warren and Szostek (2017) reviewed company financial documents and semistructured interviews to explore strategies implemented by small business owners to sustain long-term success. Similarly, Turner and Endres (2017) used archival records and semistructured interviews to investigate the skills, knowledge, and successful strategies of owners of small coffee shops. Company archival records are valuable data sources to corroborate and augment evidence drawn from interviews (Yin, 2018). The archival records of the participating Nigerian small businesses were the secondary data source used to explore the strategies implemented by their owners toward sustaining success beyond 5 years.

As a data collection method, semistructured interviews are the systematic gathering of evidence using a predetermined protocol (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The protocol is a planned structure to guide the semistructured interview process and assure data collection within an ethical framework (Deller, 2019). The interview questions were grounded in a primary theme derived from the research phenomenon, which all participants answered in the same sequence. Company archival records consist of data internal to the small businesses owned by the interviewees and accumulated by their organization (Cotteleer & Wan, 2016). Data collection also included obtaining archival records such as business plans, presentations, reports, newspaper articles, and other documentation relevant to the participating small businesses.

A technique for enhancing the reliability and validity of the data collection, known as member checking, is sharing synthesized interview data with the participants for their feedback (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Member checking enables the study sample to confirm the accuracy of the transcribed or notated data (Candela, 2019) to ensure research validity (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). To provide added reliability and validity to the data collected as well as the study findings, I conducted member checking by asking the participants to verify my interpretation of their answers to the interview questions.

Data Collection Technique

The data collection technique is the method used to collect different forms of data. Data collection techniques facilitate answering the research question and support the selected research designs (Renz et al., 2018). For a qualitative case study, this technique allows the collection of detailed descriptions surrounding participant experiences (Gaya & Smith, 2016). The technique could impact the quality of the research (Yin, 2018). In this study, I used semistructured interviews and a review of company archival records as data collection techniques to answer the research question to ensure a quality study.

The process of data collection commenced with the purposeful selection of participants. In recruiting the participants, I contacted the National Institute of Marketing of Nigeria, which recommended two small business owners. Although the two business owners contacted indicated interest, only one responded to my invitation and participated. The two participants recommended by the Advertising Practitioners Council of Nigeria responded and participated in this study. To gain access to the potential participants, I obtained their telephone numbers from their associations. I contacted the potential participants via their telephone numbers and obtained their verbal consent before emailing the invitational letters and informed consent forms. All participants received the research details to adhere to ethical principles and confirmed their commitment to the study was not influenced (O'Keeffe et al., 2016). I did not commence data collection until I received an email confirmation of informed consent from each participant.

After providing consent, participants provided schedules and agreed to virtual semistructured interviews. I conducted and recorded the participants' interviews in Microsoft Teams video conferencing between February and March 2022 at the participants' convenience in line with COVID-19 guidelines. I used the interview protocol (see Appendix) to guide the context and content of the semistructured interview process (Ponelis, 2015). The interview protocol for the research contained the planned structure of the interviews, the questions, concluding remarks, and the member checking structure to support a consistent and systematic process, enhancing the sessions' quality (Yeong et al., 2018). I offered no incentives other than a promise to send the participants a summary of the findings after the study's completion.

The semistructured interviews followed the same process for all participants. I used the six interview questions derived from the central research question to execute the semistructured interview via Microsoft Teams. The interviewees answered the same six open-ended questions in the same sequence. I asked probing follow-up questions and obtained in-depth and comprehensive descriptions of the phenomenon under study. I noted nonverbal cues and other observations in a journal and audio-recorded the interviews following the consent of the participants. It was vital to use an audio recorder for secure data storage and retrieval (Deller, 2019). The interview sessions were transcribed, responses synthesized, and follow-up member checking interviews were scheduled to confirm the interpretations to complete the data collection process.

There are several advantages and disadvantages of semistructured interviews. The benefits are (a) rapid yield of data in quantity, (b) immediate follow-up and clarification, (c) clearer understanding of participant activities, (d) visual aids for challenged participants, and (e) personable procedures (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). There is a higher possibility of collecting quality data with semistructured interviews (Adhabi & Anozie, 2017). The disadvantages of semistructured interviews include (a) the necessity to build trust within a limited period, (b) the possibility of an unwillingness of participants to share all information, (c) potential unfamiliarity with the local language, (d) dishonest participants, and (e) the potential to unintentionally influence participant responses (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The recording of the interviews via Microsoft Teams did not lead to participants' nervousness or uneasiness because the participating business owners had prepared the information to divulge during the interview based on the sample interview questions and the requirement to audio record the interviews. During the recording of the interviews, despite assurances of confidentiality, I observed that participants were reluctant to divulge strategic information because of previous experiences with unauthorized use. Despite these disadvantages, in contrast to the other interview methods, semistructured interviews offered the flexibility to use standardized questions for comparison and further inquiry to enhance data research quality (O'Keeffe et al., 2016). The technique also allowed for an in-depth analysis of a complex subject from a relatively small number of participants (Young et al., 2018). The semistructured interviews supported the collecting, analyzing, and interpreting quality data in this case study.

The technique for collecting organizational documents and company archival data included requesting records after establishing a working relationship with the participants. For this study, I reviewed the company archival records obtained from the three business owners, including business plans, strategic reports, profile presentations, customer advertorials, policy documents, and firm brochures. I also reviewed marketing advertisements, news articles, and publicly available management statements on their official websites and social media. The documents corroborated and increased contextual understanding of participants' interview revelations, contributing to theme development and findings derivation. Archival records review has the following advantages: (a) a good source of preliminary information, (b) useful for corroborating information, (c) suitable for verifying interview data, and (d) providing organizational background or contextual information (Yin, 2018). However, archival records might be inaccurate, biased, or outdated (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Analyzing such records in conjunction with interview data could provide richer information, increase authenticity, and enable data triangulation (FitzPatrick, 2019). Conducting the semistructured interviews and reviewing the company documentation and archival records aided in the methodological triangulation and enabled me to compare data collected from multiple sources to determine if data alignment occurred.

Member checking commenced after the interview transcripts were interpreted and the data were synthesized. Member checking enables participants to confirm that the data interpretation reflects their intended meanings and viewpoints (Birt et al., 2016; Thomas, 2017). I used the member checking interview to obtain participants' review of responses to the questions and their interpretations. Two participants were able to verify that the synthesis represented their responses. One participant made a minor clarification and provided relevant additional information. Synthesis updates continued until no new data, themes, or codes emerged. In a previous study focused on cognitively demanding task implementation, the researcher used member checking to verify the data interpreted (Candela, 2019). Member checking allows participants to corroborate analyzed data to enhance research (Wolf, 2017). Member checking of data interpretation enhanced the quality of this study to explore strategies implemented by Nigerian small business owners toward sustaining success beyond 5 years.

Data Organization Technique

Data organization is useful for secure data storage and retrieval. In qualitative research, data organization involves maintaining a collection log and using software to analyze raw information (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Another tool is a journal for reflection and notes on researchers' reasoning and emotional reactions during the research process (Berger, 2015). I maintained a research log in a computer spreadsheet, cataloging and labeling data with identifiers to protect participant privacy for the study. I used unique codes for each participant, including de-identifiers, to maintain the confidentiality of the participating business owners. The three business owners were assigned participants' codes consisting of the letter 'P' and the numeric suffix ranging from 1 to 3. Thus, the codes for the three participants were P1, P2, and P3. I removed all features such as names, places, and events mentioned during the interviews from the transcripts that could be used to identify the participants to prevent inferential identification of the business owners.

The NVivo software was the main tool for importing, filing, and organizing the audio recordings of the interviews, interview transcripts data, organizational documents, notes, and archival records for analysis (see Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). Storing all data in the NVivo application enabled me to retrieve and analyze data effectively. As the researcher, I was responsible for storing the collected data safely (Alase, 2017). I stored all data securely to prevent unauthorized access. Electronic data were stored in a password-protected external hard drive, while hard copies of all data collected were kept in a locked safe. After completing the study, I will store all data securely for 5 years, after which the data shall be destroyed in compliance with Walden University guidelines.

Data Analysis

Data analysis consists of searching, interpreting, and determining the meanings of patterns (Azungah, 2018). It involves examining the patterns to effect order and structure (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Analytical software tools are useful aids for simplifying the data analysis process in qualitative research for an efficient organization, analysis, and interpretation of data (O’Kane et al., 2021). The data visualization features can be useful for model creation to compare themes and make connections more apparent (Colorafi & Evans, 2016). These features and other capabilities within NVivo software enable users to search complex data sets toward rapidly completing the analysis process (Sutton &

Austin, 2015). I used NVivo for this study to assist in my facilitation of data analysis. NVivo enhanced my sorting of data from the interview transcripts as well as company archival records into themes and subthemes. Although the software assisted in managing data, I analyzed and interpreted all the data as the researcher. The data analysis process of this study involved data review, comparing the results from each collection method, and integrating the outcomes to arrive at the research conclusions.

A researcher is responsible for processing the data collected meaningfully and usefully (Karagiozis, 2018). The data analysis for this study followed a logical and sequential process. Thematic coding and content analysis were used to identify, categorize codes, and label the data. The data analysis process consisted of the following five steps: (a) compiling, (b) disassembling, (c) reassembling, (d) interpreting, and (e) concluding (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). In the compiling stage, I created a database using NVivo to compile the verbatim interview transcripts, organize the company archival data, bracket them into units of meaning called codes, review patterns of codes, and identify the links between codes (Maher et al., 2018). The disassembling step was the coding process, which involved using a short phrase or word to identify the category of the data (Linnerberg & Korsgaard, 2019) for sorting descriptive labels or themes within the compiled data (Roberts et al., 2019). I consolidated related data units into categories to construct meanings out of the data. I then combined the categories into themes and sub-themes, which is the reassembly phase using NVivo to catalog the labels into sequences and groups to determine or correlate central themes with recent studies as well as the conceptual framework (Cypress, 2018; Johnson et al., 2017). I derived the reported findings by correlating the themes with the studies and conceptual framework to understand the research phenomenon.

The interpretation process includes using thematic analysis to create accurate, credible descriptions from the sequences and groups to determine the findings (Yin, 2018). Thematic analysis of data aids in themes and pattern identification to answer the overarching research question (Williams & Moser, 2019). Theming enables the collation of codes from the transcripts to present the findings in a coherent manner (Sutton & Austin, 2015). Documents obtained from the participating small business owners were another source of data for this study, which enabled triangulation (see Yin, 2018). I collected firm brochures, profile presentations, advertorials, business plans, strategic reports, policy documents, firm brochures, news articles, and publicly available management statements on their official websites and social media platforms.

I undertook content analysis to determine that the organizational documents contained information directly related to this study. In content analysis, the researcher analyzes data by sorting related codes into clusters, combining clusters with similar meanings into themes (Lemon & Hayes, 2020). The content analysis revealed that the documents contained information that corroborated and increased contextual understanding of participants' interview revelations and contributed to theme development. I kept a reflective journal to capture preconceptions and biases that could influence decisions and actions. Maintaining a reflective journal aided me in recording contextual data in its natural setting to stimulate ideas visualizing, consolidating, and interpreting the data for theme development.

Data analysis processes differ and may not be appropriate for every study. For instance, there are four types of triangulation: (a) investigator, (b) theory, (c) data, and (d) methodological (Morse, 2015). The study did not involve multiple investigators, theory, or data method; consequently, the investigator, theory, and data triangulation approaches did not apply. Methodological triangulation occurs when a researcher uses multiple data collection methods to analyze a comprehensive view of a phenomenon (Cope, 2014; FitzPatrick, 2019). Methodological triangulation was applied to this study because the data collection strategy involved using semistructured interviews of Nigerian small business owners to collect data on success strategies and reviewing company archival records to augment or corroborate the interview evidence. Researchers use methodological triangulation to explore different perspectives on the same phenomenon to increase the validity of the findings (Johnson et al., 2017). This process enhances research quality, although various data sources could yield equivalent results with a slight divergence due to different dimensions of the phenomenon (Joslin & Muller, 2016). I conducted methodological triangulation by comparing the semistructured interview data, organizational documents, and artifacts to determine if data alignment occurred.

Using NVivo to classify major themes into categories increased the validity of the study findings. The key themes and sub-themes in the conceptual framework were supported with selected literature. The theoretical propositions of the conceptual framework guide the literature review, determine the selected methodology, and provide the benchmark correlating the study findings (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). In this study, I correlated the emergent themes from the data collected with the conceptual framework and the literature. The conclusion and recommendations were derived from integrating the study findings with the conceptual framework to answer the research question.

Reliability and Validity

Reliability

Reliability is vital to the quality of research findings. Reliability refers to dependability, which is a quality indicator (Mandal, 2018a). Dependability demonstrates that the results are consistent and replicable (Forero et al., 2018). Reliability assesses the dependability of the findings of a study where a researcher applies the same procedure within a context (Hayashi et al., 2019). It refers to consistency in analytical techniques through transparent data interpretation (Noble & Smith, 2015). Member checking was used to establish reliability in this study by sharing the data interpretations with participants for any correction, reaction, or additional insight (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Member checking aids data validation, enhancing research reliability (Smith & McGannon, 2018). To ensure the reliability of the study findings, I adhered to the interview protocol and asked the same questions to the participants in the same sequence. I asked clarifying questions to eliminate ambiguities and made no suggestive comments about the study to the participants at any time to influence participants' perspectives. Additionally, member checking was an integral facet of this research process to verify the accuracy of data interpretation, strengthening the study findings' reliability.

Validity

Validity is another element that impacts the quality of research findings. This variable refers to the integrity in the process of applying the research method to accurately represent the data (Noble & Smith, 2015). The validity of qualitative research involves examining the appropriate nature of the processes or data collected (Leung, 2015). Researchers use the criteria of credibility, transferability, and confirmability to establish validity in qualitative research (Nowell et al., 2017). I used the same criteria to demonstrate validity in this study.

Credibility

Credibility is an important criterion for the enhancement of research quality. It is the process of enhancing confidence in the research findings as reflective of credible data and representative of the actual perspectives of participants (Forero et al., 2018). Ensuring credibility involves maintaining an audit trail of the research methods, processes, and data to link the chain of evidence to the findings (Yin, 2018). Strategies to achieve credibility in qualitative studies include member checking and triangulation (Mandal, 2018a; Moon, 2019). In this study, I established credibility by (a) maintaining an audit trail of data and additional information in an appropriately organized database using a computer spreadsheet, (b) using member checking, which involved sending all participants my interpretations of their responses to the interview questions for confirmation of correctness to ensure that data interpretation was representative of participants perspectives, and (c) undertaking methodological triangulation of the verified interview data corroborated or augmented by company archival records and artifacts to determine data alignment.

Transferability

Transferability refers to the meaningfulness of a study to readers and its usefulness to future research in other contexts or settings (Newman & Clare, 2016). It is important to provide thick descriptions of the particular context so readers can assess the transferability of the findings to their peculiar situations (Maher et al., 2018). Confirming transferability involves establishing transparency in data collection and analysis (Amin et al., 2020). The resultant in-depth descriptions allow readers to determine whether the findings were transferable to their sites. The techniques for enhancing the transferability of this study's findings included using the interview protocol to guide the interviews, strict adherence to the research design, achieving saturation during data collection by methodological triangulating, and using member checking to ensure data interpretation matched the participants' perceptions. Details of these processes and techniques are contained in this study documentation to enable researchers and other readers to affirm the transferability of the findings.

Confirmability

Confirmability is the extent to which others support the research findings. The term describes how others could confirm that research findings are from the analysis of the data collected (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). The goal of confirmability is to ensure neutral and objective data interpretation (Johnson et al., 2020). Researchers can enhance confirmability by triangulation and member checking to gather additional information or correct errors (Amin et al., 2020). Bracketing can also be applied to eliminate opinion and ensure the participant's views are reflected (Deggs & Hernandez, 2018; Wolf, 2017). In this study, to enhance confirmability, I asked probing questions during the interviews to collect rich descriptive data, bracketed using notes from my reflective journal to minimize bias, conducted member checking to reflect participants' views accurately, and gathered new information and verified data interpretation while providing context. Additionally, I used methodological triangulation to attain different perspectives and derived study findings from the data correlated with literature on the phenomenon.

The generally accepted principle is that saturation is achieved when data collection contributes no new information, codes, or themes (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Gentles et al., 2015; Hagaman & Wutich, 2017). These researchers advanced that data saturation in a research study depends not on the number of interviews but on the quantity of data collected. Data saturation is critical for categorizing, abstracting, and replication to ensure comprehensive research results (Elo et al., 2014). The themes of the conceptual framework become well developed at the point of data saturation as grouping data and creating concepts become difficult when not achieved (Hayashi et al., 2019). The strategies for achieving data saturation in this study included creating effective interview questions, probing responses to obtain clarifications, member checking to ensure the correctness of data interpretations, and the continuous collection and synthesizing of additional data until no new codes or themes emerged.

Transition and Summary

Section 2 contained the following areas: study purpose, my role as a researcher, the importance of ethical research, population, and sampling approach. This section also articulated the rationale for the selected qualitative methodology, multiple case study design, and strategies for organizing, collecting, and analyzing data to achieve research reliability and validity. Section 3 contained data analysis results and a presentation of the study findings. Section 3 also included the application of the findings to professional practice, implications for social change, and recommendations for further research.

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

Introduction

In this qualitative multiple case study, I explored strategies Nigerian small business owners implement toward sustaining success beyond 5 years. Owners of small firms in Nigeria should understand the business environment as well as competitive strategies to implement for enterprise growth and success. Owners' understanding of techniques to implement toward enterprise growth is necessary for sustained business success (Adewole & Umoru, 2021). Successful small businesses could create employment opportunities, poverty alleviation, and economic development.

For this research, I interviewed three owners of capacity building and business consulting (P1), marketing communication (P2), and experiential marketing (P3) firms located in Lagos, Nigeria, in the professional services sector. These owners have successfully implemented strategies for at least 5 years and gained profits. I used semistructured interviews via video conferencing to collect data from the participants and reviewed organizational archival records such as company profiles, marketing brochures, and other publicly available data. I used NVivo to organize data, assign codes, develop themes, correlate central themes with recent studies, and conceptual framework to support deriving the study findings. Four themes emerged from data analysis: setting strategic business direction to guide activities, implementing entrepreneurial strategies for competitive advantage and growth, using key resources to build capabilities for improved productivity, and managing challenges in the business environment to ensure survival. The first major theme comprised three subthemes, the second major theme contained five subthemes, the third major theme consisted of four, and the fourth major theme included three subthemes.

Presentation of the Findings

This qualitative multiple case study was conducted to answer the overarching research question: What strategies do Nigerian small business owners implement toward sustaining success beyond 5 years? I conducted semistructured interviews with three successful small business owners via video conferencing, reviewed organizational documents and artifacts, and recorded my reflections on the data in my reflective journal to develop themes to answer the overarching research question. The following four themes emerged after coding, triangulating, integrating, and constructing meaning from the data: setting strategic business direction to guide activities, implementing entrepreneurial strategies for competitive advantage and growth, using key resources to build capabilities for improved productivity, and managing challenges in the business environment to ensure survival.

Theme 1: Setting Strategic Business Direction to Guide Activities

As a result of data analysis, the first theme that emerged was that setting a strategic business direction to guide activities was critical for sustaining business success. Based on data analysis, I observed that the three business owners, from the onset, determined the firms’ strategic directions to guide the activities of their organizations. The owners interviewed (P1, P2, and P3) stated that setting clear business strategic direction through the company’s vision and mission, business strategies, and strategic plans to achieve the firm’s objectives was critical for sustaining success. The findings in

Theme 1 aligned with previous research indicating that strategic direction, which involves developing and aligning a firm’s vision, mission, and strategic objectives toward organizational goals, contributed to improved business performance (Munyao et al., 2020). Strategic business direction includes developing mission and vision statements (Alshameri & Green, 2020), formulating a business strategy (Amertha et al., 2021), and undertaking strategic planning (Brito & Zapata, 2020) for improved performance for long-term success (Desta, 2019). Setting a strategic business direction would provide clarity of corporate goals, improve resource allocation, and enhance a firm’s chance of sustaining success.

Vision and Mission

P1, P2, and P3 divulged that they formulated vision and mission statements from the firms’ inception to guide the activities of their enterprises. Companies use vision and mission statements to articulate their strategic intent to exist, survive, and grow (Maina et al., 2020). Vision and mission statements are critical to a firm’s success as the company’s long-term goals could influence the decisions of potential customers and increase market share (Alshameri & Green, 2020). Vision and mission statements are useful for building a shared sense of purpose, impacting performance, and creating competitive advantage (Maina et al., 2020). P1 revealed that the company’s vision and mission statements encapsulated the firm’s business philosophy and were a sustaining factor. P1 further explained that their vision and mission statements conveyed the company’s main objective: teaching, guiding, and motivating business executives:

The strategy I implemented was to have a clear vision. The vision statement

> included shepherding as the underlining theme, considering that shepherding is to nurture, grow, and empathize. The vision statement formed the crux and the pillars that would help to drive the entire business. The vision, mission, and philosophy have not changed in the 12 years we have been in business.

P2 affirmed that clear vision and mission statements were critical to sustaining business success. P2 disclosed that the firm's vision and mission statements enabled the company to define their brand, set standards, and formulate guiding principles. According to P2, a clear vision aided the firm in surviving the most compelling challenge, allowing the enterprise to focus on their mission:

> You should have a very clear vision of what needs to be done or what you want to do, … a clear definition of the essence of the brand, and the personality of the brand as well. Those things are really critical in building a business. As I said earlier, we have been in this business for 30 years; if we were not very clear or focused on what we wanted to do from the onset, we would not have taken the business to four or five years; how much more than 30 years? We clearly defined ourselves … . We understood our role clearly to be the bridge between brands and arts.

P3 advanced that the company's vision and mission statements were important features that assisted the organization in clearly defining its objectives, operations, and clientele for long-term success. P3 explained that the clearly stated vision and mission statements allowed the enterprise to concentrate on their core objectives. Focusing on their vision enabled the firm to build resilience for business survival and long-term growth. P3 shared that:

> Basically, in coming up with our strategy, in the beginning, we had a clear vision because most of us lived with the fear that our company may not last for 5 years, not to mention 10 years. So, from the beginning, I was determined that this company, if possible, would outlive me. One must have a clear vision of what one wants an organization to do and a mission of how to operate.

The organizational documents I reviewed clarified the perspectives of P1, P2, and P3 obtained from the interview data. P1 included information on its vision and mission statements in its advertorials posted online as well as in the business directory. P1 also included their vision and mission statements on their social media platforms. The company's website disseminated the firm's vision of "discovering and building the next generation of leaders through focused capacity-centric programs." Additional information on the firm's website indicated its mission was to provide "bespoke programs to help businesses, individuals, and organizations harness their potentials, develop their skills, and support them to drive high performance."

After reviewing P2 organizational artifacts and documents, it became clear that the firm considered their vision and mission statements critical. The vision and mission statements for P2 referred to as their "ambition every day," can be found on their website as part of the company's information, alongside their history and team members. P2 also included the vision and mission statements in their profile presentation in the company portfolios sent to prospective clients. P2's profile presentation revealed their vision statement was "to be the most valued by those who most value brands." Their mission statement was the firm would be “most local of international agencies; most international of locals.” The document clarified that P2’s mission was to challenge the status quo using global expertise and Nigerian insights to develop solutions.

The information on P3’s website confirmed that their vision and mission statements were considered critical. P3 also included their statements in profile presentations sent to clients as part of their pitch. P3’s vision was to provide clients with “knowledge and resources necessary to achieve their goals and objectives on time and within budget.” Their documents also contained the firm’s mission: to “generate the deepest, lengthiest engagement possible for our clients with their audiences.”

Business Strategy

P1, P2, and P3 shared information on their firm’s business strategy and its importance in determining how to achieve organizational goals. A business strategy is a firm’s long-term plan to reach their envisioned future state, including company goals, services, customers, and markets to develop to ensure profits (Abdulwase et al., 2020). Business strategy is a coherent, integrated set of choices or outlines of how a firm intends to achieve their goals and value proposition in relation to the environment for competitive advantage (Gorynia et al., 2019). Business strategy is also fundamental for firms to overcome market challenges, determine positioning to competition or adverse situations, and future direction on change management to achieve expected performance (Barbosa et al., 2018). Firms use business strategies to determine the company’s overall direction and set boundaries for activities to be included or excluded.

P1 disclosed that the firm’s business strategy was important as a framework for managing and achieving enterprise goals for sustaining success. P1 explained that their business strategy was also the basis for business expansion and growth. P1 advanced that their business strategy aided the firm in increasing their customer base and profitability:

> We needed to create structures around the vision, which served as guiding principles for managing business operations. We defined the scope of interest, clearly stating it was about media, training, and consulting. You may call it operating by objectives, selling by objectives, or managing by objectives. The whole strategic framework looked at a big ship with a small lifeboat. If you ask me, what will endear the business beyond 5 years? I saw the radio property as the big ship; it provides a vehicle for me to drive millions of followers across the board. Many of them I do not see, and I do not know. Still, from the tracking of the media audit, we probably are touching over 1.5 to 2 million people. I also acquired the mentoring posture as a strategy. At some point, I had close to 70 or 80 people I was mentoring.

P2 shared that the firm formulated key developmental plans and business strategies from the visions and mission statements. P2 advanced that the organization's clarity on their business model, clientele, and the importance of value addition contributed to the firm's success. Additionally, their business strategy, which they constantly challenged, ensured customers had life-long relationships and created a competitive advantage. P1 stated that:

> We defined our brand personality as being bold and warm at the same time. We were also clear that we wanted to work with clients who value brands because we

> understood that we were into brand building. It was important to us to work with clients who valued brands and were not more inclined toward sales. We defined and determined what we would be doing in three ways. The first is to clearly understand our clients, their market, and our target. We were always pitching ourselves against global standards or global agencies … to add value to clients' expectations. We also approached every brief as if they were new briefs. We would look at each brief uniquely to proffer a solution critical for that particular brief. We had a clear definition of long-term and short-term goals. We say to ourselves: these are the things we want to do or maybe the newest technology we want to acquire or staff we want to recruit or new business to consider.

P3 affirmed that the firm's business strategy was to develop fresh concepts with firm resources for sale to interested companies seeking brand enhancement and consumer attraction. P3 explained that their business strategy enabled the organization to create a competitive advantage for sustaining business success. P3 clarified that their business strategy emanated from their mission, which from the onset, "was not to wait for briefs or until we win clients but to be totally different." According to P3,

> We were the ones developing proposals. We looked at various companies, multinationals, and brands. We were developing proposals that we believed could enhance or add value to brands. Part of what we told ourselves was that we must think outside the box and not go the way everyone would. We (wanted) our business to be different in terms of fresh ideas, innovation, and execution. We pride ourselves on the fact that if you give jobs to our company, we will deliver.

The reviewed organizational documents and archival records elucidated the views of P1, P2, and P3 obtained from the interview data. On P1's website, there was information on the broadcast schedules of the radio shows and details on the coaching and mentorship programs, providing context to the narrative on the radio program being the framework for their business strategy. After reviewing archival records of the radio shows on social media platforms, I gained a detailed understanding of P1's explanations of using the programs as a platform for sharing experiences. For example, the program's contributions to building community leaders and the foundational structure for their business strategy became clearer. P1's website included information on preferred clientele: partnerships, individuals, or organizations seeking development as business leaders. P1's perspective was affirmed by details of their advertorial for the mentorship program, which was tagged as "an exclusive session for junior or mid-level executive and career-minded executives passionate about their development and advancement." The attendees of P1's mentorship programs were selected from interested participants of their radio shows, affirming P1's statement that the radio program was the framework of their business strategy.

The information on the firm's website enriched the context of P2's narrative, revealing the bold and warm personality the firm sought to portray through the creative use of colors and designs in their advertorials. P2's company documents and artifacts provided details of their customers and comprehensive services, affirming the firm's clarity on preferred clientele and business scope. The illustrated ideation process on their marketing brochure aligned with P2's statement on the firm's business concept. This process confirmed that the organization sought detailed insights from clients to ensure that strategies and materials derived from briefs meet the customers' expectations. Details on P2's website, marketing brochures, and advertorials showcasing international clients clarified the context of the firm's practice of measuring their services against international brands and adhering to global standards.

In support of P3's responses, the content of the firm's website, marketing brochure, and advertorials made references to the firm considering every brand, moment, and people to be engaged for every brief as unique, confirming the use of novel ideas as their business strategy. In their profile presentation document, P3 included overviews of campaigns, details of clients' briefs, and new strategies executed for each event, affirming that every service was implemented using unique concepts. I also gained a better understanding of P3's perspective of being different from the local awards to the firm in 2021 for "best use of digital in an activation" and "best use of props in an activation," as these awards substantiated the statements that the firm created novel experiences for their clients.

Strategic Planning

According to P1, the firm reviewed several options to achieve organizational goals. P1 determined that it was necessary to collaborate with training partners to offer marketing and sales courses, and to engage seasoned professionals to be teachers. P1 explained further that although the radio program was the flagship of their operations, the firm reduced the number of airings and used colleagues' stations for free or at discounted rates to reduce production costs because of limited financial resources. P2 testified that their firm used trend analysis, income, and budget forecasts for new business assessments as global changes impacted types of clients, costs, and service expectations. P2 clarified that the resultant business analysis report was the basis of the firm's investment in resources and people to support strategic plans. P3 noted that their firm held planning sessions to consider goals, resources, weaknesses, strengths, and means of channeling opportunities in the business environment to ensure that the organization achieved their corporate objectives and attracted the preferred clientele. These planning sessions, P3 contended, supported the development of strategic plans for improved performance for sustained firm success.

P1, P2, and P3 perspectives aligned with research findings that strategic planning enabled firms to define their direction and decide on resource allocation to pursue their business strategy for improved company performance (Desta, 2019). Strategic planning is a deliberate and disciplined process to produce fundamental decisions to guide organizations (Kools & George, 2020), set priorities, and provide resources necessary for overall business effectiveness (Umar et al., 2020). During strategic planning, firms investigate business options, forecast potential obstacles, and proffer solutions to sustain the company's mission (Williams et al., 2018). Firms could use strategic planning to regularly review business direction and resources to respond to unpredictable competitive environments.

P1, P2, and P3 engaged in strategy-making processes by defining their firms' vision and mission statements, formulating business strategies, and making strategic plans to manage the external environment. The organizational and archival documents retrieved from P1, P2, and P3 corroborated and gave a clearer understanding of their perspective on how fundamental strategic planning was to firm success. The three participants revealed that they organized strategic planning meetings at the beginning of each year, with reviews scheduled at mid-year to determine available options and resources necessary to achieve organizational goals to sustain business success, especially with the current challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Correlation to the Literature

Theme 1 findings supported previous research that small firm owners who applied business strategy and planning achieved superior performance (Adebisi & Bakare, 2019; Rahman & Anwar, 2019). Organizations can adopt strategic direction practices by focusing on the vision and mission statements that inform the basis of performance critical for sustainable firm success (Kungu et al., 2020). Firms' vision, mission, and objectives allow organizations to pursue ambitious goals to acquire resources to ensure a competitive advantage (Makori & Waithaka, 2019). A good business strategy should be consistent with a firm's vision, mission, and objectives to enable organizations to achieve their overall goals.

A business strategy should not be considered the results but should be adapted as a guide in strategic planning (Tarifi, 2021). A business strategy is also useful for developing alternative tactics for competitive advantage and long-term success (De Andreis, 2019). Firm owners would require knowledge and skills to formulate business strategies to experience benefits. An organization's business strategy could enable the owners to manage challenges and create competitive advantages (Abdulwase et al., 2020). Similarly, research outcomes revealed that business strategy is crucial to a firm's ability to survive environmental uncertainty and risks in the long term (Alfaro et al., 2020; Visedun & Terdpaopong, 2021). Theme 1 findings correlated with current literature (Adebisi & Bakare, 2019; Rahman & Anwar, 2019) in that the participating small business owners confirmed that they improved organizational performance by formulating appropriate business strategies to aid planning and seizing opportunities in the market to reduce costs and increase customer base.

Correlation to the Conceptual Framework

The findings derived from Theme 1 are related to Lumpkin and Dess's (1996) EO theory in that setting a firm's strategic direction using the vision and mission statements, business strategy, and strategic planning is related to strategic decision-making. An organization's strategy-making process, which involves firm strategy, practices, and policies, provides the basis for business decisions and firms' behavior. Owners could strategically act to gain a competitive advantage by implementing any of the theory's dimensions. Firms use their strategic direction to define business goals and build a common purpose for employees toward achieving company objectives.

Business owners are expected to formulate vision and mission statements through which firms articulate their intent to exist, survive, and grow. The mission statement informs the business strategy firms use to create and reinforce their competitive position in the market. A firm's mission statement and business strategy should guide practical day-to-day operations for improved firm performance. Enterprise owners should purposefully act to determine how any of the theory's five dimensions could predict the nature and success of any undertaking contingent upon the internal factors in the organization and the business environment (Lumpkin & Dess, 1996). Thus, owners should analyze and properly plan before undertaking a corporate venture.

A firm's strategy-making process involves planning and strategic decision-making to provide a common goal for the organization. Understanding a firm's goal is critical to motivating employees to achieve or exceed expectations (Makori & Waithaka, 2019). Owners communicating their firm's strategy to employees would enable them to apply selected approaches toward achieving the desired goals. The employees could also use their knowledge to modify the strategy to create a competitive advantage and positively impact firm performance. Planning, strategy making, and communicating the approach to employees are crucial factors in sustaining business strategic direction.

The findings from Theme 1 revealed that setting a strategic direction is essential for large and small businesses. Setting a strategy direction enabled owners to consider the overall purpose of setting up a business and their goals. Owners should articulate their visions and missions for setting strategic directions for the firm. The strategic direction is the foundational action that allows enterprise owners to determine company objectives for creating short, medium, and long term goals (Umar et al., 2020). Enterprise owners require goals to formulate strategies and undertake resource planning to align with the firm's vision. Setting a strategic direction could allow for consistency and stability of strategies, which employees could adopt to achieve organizational goals. Having clear goals could ensure that employees understand their deliverables toward achieving organizational objectives. Firms could also periodically review, measure, and track the progress of tasks to ensure alignment with goals for improved performance. Thus, setting strategic direction could aid small businesses in increasing efficiency, improving profitability, and sustaining long-term success, as confirmed by the participating owners.

Theme 2: Implementing Entrepreneurial Strategies for Competitive Advantage and Growth

The second theme that emerged from analyzing data collected from the three participants was that it was essential for firms to implement entrepreneurial strategies to gain a competitive advantage for growth in the current business environment. Firms that implement entrepreneurial strategies manage prevailing uncertainties in the business environment, and perform better at sustaining competitive advantage and wealth creation (Wilson et al., 2019). Similarly, Small businesses with limited resources can depend on their entrepreneurial strategies to grow and overcome the liability of their size to compete against established firms (Alam et al., 2022). The three participants avowed that their entrepreneurial strategies contributed to sustaining their company's success. P1, P2, and P3 shared that they developed strategies to compete in the same market with larger and more professional organizations. Entrepreneurial strategies include innovativeness, proactiveness, risk-taking, competitive aggressiveness, and autonomy. The participants acknowledged that they provided innovative services, proactively sought customers, took risks, competed aggressively, and acted autonomously. Theme 2 aligned with research outcomes that small firms could use entrepreneurial strategies to adapt to changing business environments for improved performance (Betakova et al., 2021).

Innovativeness

P1, P2, and P3 attested that they were innovative by using the differentiation strategy to create unique, new, and improved services for a competitive advantage. The three participants commented that service innovations aided client retention and referrals to other customers for business growth. Firms should be innovative by generating new ideas and showing creativity for a competitive advantage to improve business performance (Bhandari & Amponstira, 2021). Previous research revealed that firms involved in innovative practices, including generating novel ideas distinct in originality, experimenting, and providing creative processes or services, experienced growth, increased market share, and improved performance (Ibrahim & Abu, 2020). Business owners could maintain the capacity for innovativeness by tracking changes in consumer patterns and technological possibilities to sustain organizational growth (Achtengen, 2020). Enterprise owners could introduce new processes, products, or ideas to attack new customers and improve performance.

P1 explained that their firm offered unique and original executive development programs designed from experience to meet the client's specific needs. P1 revealed that their organization trained executives on improving their company's productivity and performance based on each client's peculiarity. According to P1, the unique training program's positive impact increased customer satisfaction ratings and client referrals. P1 noted that referrals also increased for speaking engagements, which improved business performance for sustainable firm success:

The training, capacity building, and executive coaching programs are bespoke

> solutions for our clients. When we develop a proposal, it is bespoke, tailor-made, and not off-the-shelf. We get referrals from clients. We also get referrals from customers who have heard about us and are satisfied with our services.

P2 shared that their firm created a unique service through value addition. Adding value and exceeding clients' expectations, according to P2, was very important for improved customer satisfaction and business performance. P2 emphasized that the organization considered every client's brief as new and endeavored to provide novel solutions irrespective of the length of the relationship:

> We approach every brief like a new brief … even though we have worked with a particular brand for one year, two years, or five years. We would look at it uniquely to enable us to proffer the solution that is critical or important for that particular brief. We never take anything for granted.

P3 mentioned that their business strategy was to produce disparate novel concepts. P3 advanced that their strategy involved creating new concepts, suggesting novel ideas, and testing customer appeal in the market. This business strategy is applied to all customers irrespective of the relationship length. According to P3, the organization produced fresh concepts "even when working with regular clients, and we did not relent in trying to come up with fresh ideas." P3 affirmed that being innovative by creating novel ideas or concepts contributed to improved firm performance, stating, "That is part of the strategies we have used to gain inroads, remain relevant, and sustain the company so far."

My understanding of how P1, P2, and P3 employed innovativeness became clearer after reviewing their organizational documents and artifacts. In P1's documents, there was clear evidence that the business owner's experience was the foundation for the training and coaching programs. These programs were uniquely created based on the specific requirements of the trainees, supporting P1's perspective. After reviewing P2's archival documents, I understood that their organizational innovation culture evolved from their foundation. As reported in the document, P2 developed a creative advertisement in their second year to run as a six-month campaign on CNN. The CNN executives were impressed with the advertisement's novelty and offered free spots for two months. P2 was the first agency to place an advertisement on an international network. This information in the company's archival documents corroborated P2's statements on the firm's innovative tendencies. P3's revelation was corroborated by the case study article on its award of the "Grand Prize for Strategic Interpretation of Clients' Brief." According to the judges, the award was based on the firm's "innovative experiential idea and seamless execution of the first-of-its-kind noiseless party." P3, in an interview in 2022, stated that the project earned the client an international award and recognition for them. The judges' description corroborated P3's perspective of the firm's continued quest for innovative ideas.

Proactiveness

The three participants advanced that they proactively pursued opportunities to develop novel services from information gleaned from market trends to attract new customers. Proactive firms could discover latent customer needs and new opportunities ahead of rivals for improved business performance (Abdalla & Mohamed, 2020).

Additionally, firms can create a competitive advantage for organizational growth by proactively scanning the environment to identify new trends, keeping up to date with the competition, and closely interacting with customers (NuelOkoli et al., 2021). P1 explained that their firm identified the need for company executives to acquire performance management skills for increased productivity. According to P1, their organization relied on such information to design programs for young executives in Nigeria to enable them to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of their workforce for improved productivity. From P1's perspective, proactiveness entailed leveraging existing relations to promote their training services:

> I contacted corporate organizations to pitch the opportunity to train (through) persons invited to attend free seminars. To attract corporate clients, the strategy adopted was putting up the names of people who attended the seminars for free through our website. We … pull data and go through a solicitation process that says, "Please contact your HR department and tell them about us and that we can do this or that." We had satisfied people selling the idea in their organizations and asking their HR departments to engage our firm regarding training opportunities.

P2 stated that their firm reviewed global, regional, and local trends to determine the impact on their business. The forecasts enabled the organization to determine business strategies to gain competitive advantages. P2 explained that besides scanning the environment, the company relied on relationships with friends in the industry and previous clients to obtain referrals to new customers:

> We nose around and find out about new businesses that are springing up. We also

> look at trends. We look at what is new or what is trending in the world. Often, we try getting to know some of the key decision-makers in those organizations, and then we do our profile presentations to them. That way, we can clearly inform them about concepts we can profile or provide for them. We speak with our friends in the industry. We speak with past clients and sometimes get new businesses from networking and introductions.

P3 shared that the firm's initial strategy was to seek opportunities to sell their ideas by predicting changes in demand and customers' needs to produce concepts. The organization ensured that their concepts appealed to clients' expectations of novelty or clarity of their requirements. P3 further explained the company's proactiveness in the following words:

> We wanted to develop ideas and sell them to the client, not necessarily awaiting briefs. We decided that we must not see ourselves as an organization that will wait for briefs. We decided to develop concepts that we could execute and look for people to buy. We look at … our strengths … and how to channel our opportunities.

The organizational documents and artifacts retrieved from P1, P2, and P3 corroborated all the participants' perspectives on their firms' efforts to be proactive. The advertorials posted on P1's website and social media platforms disseminated information on (a) the names of persons who had attended seminars, (b) that the seminars are free, (c) young executives selected as regular participants of the radio programs, and (d) a month support access to an executive coach. The information increased my contextual understanding of P1’s perspective of how their media services were useful in discovering customers’ needs and business opportunities.

A case study article on the firm’s anniversary in 2018 enriched P2’s narrative on the company’s proactive stance. The information revealed that the firm decided not to rely on only formal briefs. The organization made “cold calls and even offered free creatives so potential clients would see what we could do.” This strategy enabled P2 to gain clients, corroborating and providing a contextual understanding of P2’s perspectives.

After reviewing the organizational archival documents collected from P3, it became clear that the firm would continue its current proactive direction. In an interview in 2022 contained in the case study article, P3 confirmed that their organization would maintain the strategy of developing ideas for interested clients. P3, in the interview article, stated that “there are some concepts we are selling to some of our clients right now and other prospective clients… that (may) materialize, be it this year or next year.” The statement aligned with the firm’s stance on proactiveness from P3’s perspective.

Risk-Taking

P1, P2, and P3 took substantial business, financial, or personal risks in managing their operations. P1 had set up a limited liability company, operating the firm on the side while in employment. P1 took a personal risk by leaving a secure job to fulfill the firm’s vision statement and expand the business. According to P1, “I was in paid employment and was running the business until 2016, when I decided to bid goodbye to paid employment.” Additionally, P1 took the financial risk of obtaining a bank loan and investing personal resources in the company:

> I held training sessions, which required resources. These were personal resources I put into it. I started a (radio) station, … I funded the production and airtime. The question you are going to ask me is, who sponsored it? It was me, myself, and I. At some point, I approached my bank to get an overdraft. I can tell you largely that it was funded by myself all through.

P2 pointed out that their firm had taken financial risks by investing in technical equipment upgrades for growth. The company required updated technology to enhance business competitiveness and improve customer satisfaction. P2 explained that the organization took the financial risk because “we needed finances for upgrades.” P2 shared that their firm took a business risk that resulted in potential revenue loss by excluding certain clients for ethical reasons:

> We have had to make very hard business decisions. We did not do a business worth over 500m Naira in the early 2000s because of such (ethical) issues. At that time … and today, it was a lot of money. We did not perform the service because the client insisted on this below-the-line activity.

P3 explained that the organization also took financial risks to create a competitive advantage and gain clients. P3 purchased technological tools that required financial investments without the certainty of profits. This investment aided P3 in testing new ideas with marketing companies at their firm’s expense. Risk-taking, according to P3, was essential for business growth:

> In business, you have to take risks but not blindly, as no venture no gain. There have been cases in the past where clients call, just looking for ideas. They request

> a proposal. After they receive the proposal, you will not hear from them again. But that will not deter us. No! Because it is all about risk. Venturing out to start the business itself is also a risk in the end.

Risk-taking relates to firms venturing into the unknown without certainty or probability of success, allocating resources for growth, or an executive assuming a stance favoring a strategic course (Dess & Lumpkin (2005). Risk-taking, which encompasses business, financial, and personal risks, includes seizing opportunities or acting boldly without knowing the activities' consequences (Achtenhagen, 2020). Firms can create a competitive advantage for improved performance by taking the risk of deviating from their usual practices and undertaking initiatives with uncertain outcomes (Betakova et al., 2021). Business owners could take controlled risks to support other strategies to create competitive advantages for superior performance.

Organizational documents from all three participating business owners either corroborated or increased the contextual understanding of their perspectives of their firms' efforts on risk-taking. An example is a confirmation on the firm's website of P1 resigning from a multinational to focus on training young executives. P2, in the 2018 article, confirmed that the company's stance against unethical practices still existed and had caused the organization to suffer monetary loss. Finally, P3 revealed in a 2022 archival document that investing in technology had become necessary for creating a competitive advantage, as more brands were established online and using digital platforms to reach audiences because of challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Competitive Aggressiveness

The three participants employed competitively aggressive tactics such as investing in advertisements, service promotions, and ensuring client satisfaction in their defined customer segment. Firms could be competitively aggressive by responding to market trends and customer demands to achieve a competitive advantage (Lumpkin & Dess, 1996). Owners could be competitively aggressive by using existing customer relations and knowledge of current market dynamics trends, taste changes, and demands on existing products to create value (Aroyeun et al., 2019). Business owners could also use price control mechanisms, invest heavily in marketing and advertisements, and maintain good customer relationships with clients to enhance their competitive advantage (Aroyeun, 2018). Enterprise owners who are members of professional associations that restrict competitive aggressiveness could implement alternative strategies. An alternative strategy is to use the firm's strength in providing high-quality products relative to competitors to outperform rivals in a specific market (Nwankwo et al., 2022). Clients' satisfaction could be a critical tool for competitive aggressiveness as it could reflect the economic value of the service and increase knowledge of customers' needs for comparative advantage.

P1 was competitively aggressive in responding to market demand by offering high-quality content to a clearly defined customer segment. P1 disclosed that they offered high-quality, "tailor-made programs for executives, not off-the-shelf." The firm also invested in email marketing to create and promote their novel services to meet clients' demands for a competitive advantage. Email marketing enabled the organization to receive clients' feedback and improve performance for increased customer satisfaction::

> My experience with the strategy for long-term success is that you must have feedback. Feedback is strong; it drives customer satisfaction, aids service improvement, and promotes customer retention. Part of the retention strategy is that a satisfied customer will refer you and still remain a client.

P2 disclosed that the company could not engage in direct competitive aggressiveness because of restrictions in their industry's professional association code of ethics. As their competitors were members of the same association, they had to operate within the confines of the association's rules. However, P2 noted that the firm knew the importance of being "ahead of their competitors at all times." Therefore, to ensure competitive aggressiveness, P2 placed advertisements, used market knowledge, provided excellent quality services, and sought feedback for increased customer satisfaction. P2 explained how customer satisfaction contributed to firm performance:

> I think paying attention to feedback is the heart of great customer service. One of the tools that we have used to elicit feedback from our clients is our assessment forms. We act based on those areas we need to improve or new business areas. Feedback helps us serve our clients better. The availability of data everywhere now really does help us. When you provide value to your clients, your clients will eat out of your hands, and you will be able to dictate your prices.

P3 was competitively aggressive by investing heavily in a marketing division that managed the testing of novel ideas to determine public impact. The firm used the test results from the marketing division to refine their ideas and to create new concepts for a competitive advantage. P3 further advanced that their organization competed aggressively by delivering results and resolving challenges to ensure client satisfaction for improved firm performance. P3 stated concerning client satisfaction:

> We are upfront with our clients. We inform our clients of challenges and how we intend to solve them. We proffer solutions to the issues to ensure we achieve (our target); even if we cannot achieve it 100%, we implement a similar concept without shortchanging the brands. We are upfront. We have always delivered the goods.

Reviewing their respective organizational documents and artifacts gave me a more detailed understanding of how P1, P2, and P3 competed aggressively.

P1's advertorial on social media platforms indicated that they had a customer segment and described their programs as intended for "career-minded junior to mid-level executives looking to change jobs or advance their careers." Additionally, P1 on their website encouraged participants to submit post-event evaluations using the relevant links on their social media platforms. In this regard, I gained a contextual understanding of P1's perspective on using online platforms to engage clients for customer retention, which aligned with P1's statement.

My understanding of how P2 indirectly competed aggressively against their rivals was clearer after reviewing their organizational documents and artifacts. In the case study article, P2 stated that the firm "created a rude awakening" by developing a company advertisement that they placed as a center spread in two Sunday newspapers with the highest readership. The advertisement featured a display of underwear with the headline

"We will take your briefs to town," punning on the word 'brief.' The article revealed that P2 won their famous account because of the advertisement, contributing to their business success. The article's content corroborated P2's perspective of the firm's aggressive competitive stance.

The information I reviewed in the organizational and archival documents increased my contextual understanding of P3's perspective of competitive aggressiveness. P3 stated in the archived 2022 article that they constantly engaged clients to ensure that "the ingenious parameters and execution (of their concepts) brings about returns on investment and an impact measurement of more than six months, which is why clients will attest that we affected the brand years after." P3 explained that the intention was to craft ideas that would create lasting memories to ensure customer retention. The article's contents aligned with P3's statements that the firm ensured competitive aggressiveness.

Autonomy

From P1's point of view, the business owner was responsible for communicating the firm's vision and making decisions. However, employees were expected to contribute ideas. P1 explained that the firm required junior personnel to facilitate idea generation and development discussions. According to P1, employees were encouraged to participate in concept creation and challenge sessions to drive decision-making in the company. Allowing personnel autonomy created collective ownership, which P1 believed made "people more responsible." P1 emphasized that "allowing people to be expressive and be able to do what they wanted" was a model to be retained.

P2 stated that employees were given some autonomy to initiate ideas and make job decisions. However, not all employees were allowed to make commitments on behalf of the firm in all circumstances. P2 explained that there were various management and decision-making levels. In some instances, only senior management was authorized to make decisions:

> You can grant a certain measure of autonomy to a person to make decisions. Still, if decisions need to be taken at senior levels, a junior level personnel knows when to call for help and say to the client, "I need to get back internally to discuss. I will revert to you after that." There is some form of autonomy. Yes!

P3 revealed that employees were encouraged to act autonomously as freedom of expression was a part of the firm's culture. P3 shared that the firm usually held strategy sessions that staff members attended for idea generation. At the strategy sessions, all staff were urged to speak openly, suggest ideas, and make critical reviews for creating unique services for a competitive advantage. P3 explained that idea generation was an integral part of the firm's work culture:

> Everyone must develop ideas after sharing information (on a proposal). We must go to the client with at least three ideas (for options). Everyone must chip in because that is the basis on which most people are recruited. Everybody must bring in one idea or the other to contribute.

Firms could promote autonomy to contribute positively to organizational goals through employee participation in decision-making, ease of communication, and dissemination of key information (Verbano et al., 2019). In a previous study, business owners in Nigeria displayed autonomy as they strongly desired independence in idea development and operations, which could lead to sustainable business success (Li, Anaba et al., 2021). Allowing an employee to take autonomous actions, such as contributing to identifying and selecting the firm's entrepreneurial pursuit, could create a competitive advantage to improve firm performance. However, some researchers have challenged the potential benefits of allowing workers autonomy, stating that research revealed that, in some cases, autonomy might result in the loss of resources due to employee negligence or recklessness (Arisi-Nwugballa et al., 2016). P1, P2, and P3's organizational documents corroborated their statements. The information collected clarified the participants' perspectives on autonomy. The documents revealed that the owners made decisions independently and encouraged employee autonomy. The firms also ensured that personnel could communicate easily, initiate new ideas, and design unique customer concepts to achieve their organizational goals for sustaining business success.

Correlation to the Literature

Theme 2 findings correlated with previous research that firms can implement entrepreneurial strategies to ensure growth in highly competitive and uncertain business environments (Gupta, 2018; Omotosho & Anyigba, 2019). With increasing competition, disruptions, and emerging institutional contexts, enterprises could deploy appropriate entrepreneurial strategies, which do not need to be mutually exclusive, to take advantage of the opportunities in their operating environment (Omotosho & Anyigba, 2019). Owners operating in uncertain business environments should possess the ability to recognize and respond to market development. Owners should undertake market research and analysis to determine opportunities or threats. Based on the market signals, owners could adapt their strategies to leverage their strengths or defend against threats. Thus, owners could change their products, services, or processes in response to the uncertainty in the business environment to create value.

Additionally, small businesses could use innovativeness, proactiveness, risk-taking, competitive aggressiveness, and autonomy as entrepreneurial strategies, with each dimension applied at a level beneficial for creating competitive advantage (Gupta, 2019). Research has shown that each dimension's benefits differ in an uncertain business environment. In a study conducted in Lagos State, Nigeria, that innovativeness was the most significant contributor to small firms' success (Ogunrode et al., (2020). In contrast, research in the Eastern part of Nigeria revealed that competitive aggressiveness was more important for sustainable growth (Okoli et al., 2019). Owners should conduct market research and track trends to determine the entrepreneurial strategies best suited to the business environment. The enterprise owners could use the information to determine the best strategic approach to using EO dimensions to create value.

Entrepreneurial strategies, which are EO dimensions, are critical for new value creation for a competitive advantage and firm growth (Wales et al., 2020). However, owners should possess entrepreneurial skills to implement these strategies (Dapo, 2020). Although some research has revealed poor entrepreneurial skills as one of the reasons for business failure in Nigeria (Ikupolati et al., 2017), in a dynamic business environment, owners are compelled to acquire new skills for entity survival (Adeyemi & Olabosinde, 2022). With digital transformation, owners should possess entrepreneurial skills, which include creativity, innovativeness, effective communication, teamwork, and networking to make things happen (Jandim, 2021). In the current business environment, owners with the right entrepreneurial skills could use the EO dimensions to create a competitive advantage for sustaining business success.

The EO dimensions contribute individually to business performance because of the diverse relationship of each capability with the environment (Ruba et al., 2021). This view aligns with the multidimensional approach propounded by Lumpkin and Dess (1996). Some researchers have adopted the view that EO dimensions are capabilities or resources critical for firm survival following the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. These researchers have used these entrepreneurial strategies in their study on business performance with the RBV framework. In a previous study on small businesses, EO dimensions were regarded as internal capabilities to create values to manage the effect of globalization and products' shorter life cycles in the current dynamic and competitive business environment (Cuevas-Vargas et al., 2019). In another research, EO dimensions were considered intangible resources that small firms could use to create a competitive advantage (Kiyabo & Isaga, 2020). Wales et al. (2021) explained that this phenomenon of using RBV as a conceptual framework for research on the impact of EO dimensions is because the theory captures the organization of resources as a means to gain a competitive advantage over rivals. The finding that owners should implement entrepreneurial strategies for competitive advantage and growth supported research outcomes (Gupta, 2018; Omotosho & Anyigba, 2019). Owners could experience long-term growth by creating competitive advantages using the EO constructs as entrepreneurial strategies.

Correlation to the Conceptual Framework

The findings derived from Theme 2 applied to Lumpkin and Dess's (1996) EO theory, as the five entrepreneurial strategies are the dimensions that characterize the theory. EO dimensions include a willingness to innovate, take risks, be proactive relative to market opportunities, be competitively aggressive, and act autonomously (Lumpkin & Dess, 1996). These dimensions have been referred to as processes, practices, or strategies that would help business owners exploit external opportunities (Anwar et al., 2022). Small business owners in Nigeria face numerous challenges which could impede long term growth. In an unfavorable business environment like Nigeria, owners should recognize and exploit opportunities for survival and long term success. Enterprise owners could deploy strategies from the EO dimensions to seek and transform potential opportunities into competitive advantages.

Potential opportunities could result from innovative activities, new markets, or novel technologies from the external business environment. Owners should be aware of changes in the market, customer demands, or trends to identify potential opportunities. The participating owners confirmed that market analysis to identify opportunities was critical to improved performance to sustain business success. Business owners should accept risks and deploy EO strategies to exploit perceived opportunities for growth (Zakariah et al., 2022). Small business owners in Nigeria have also used EO strategies to exploit opportunities in the external environment for firms' survival and competitiveness (Dele-Ijagbulu et al., 2020). Uncertain business environments fraught with challenges still offer opportunities for growth and expansion. Therefore, owners should continuously identify market expansion areas and analyze their competitors' strategies to exploit opportunities to create value.

In the current business environment with constant changes and highly competitive markets, firm owners could use the EO dimensions as strategies to survive and grow. Owners could create a competitive advantage from strategies using the EO constructs to achieve superiority and lead over rivals (El-Masry et al., 2021). Enterprise owners could also use EO to rapidly evolve business processes to sustain success over competitors (Wales et al., 2020) and adjust to changing environments by developing technological skills for firm sustainability and growth (Abdalla & Mohammed, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic, which caused mobility restrictions and the rapid development of digital technology, may have presented opportunities for value creation and survival. The easy access to knowledge could have supported exploiting opportunities using EO dimensions for competitive advantages. The changes in the current business environment could have impacted small firms differently depending on location and have enhanced contextual relevance in EO research.

Recent studies on the EO and performance nexus revealed that the dimensions vary independently given the context. Contextual factors could arise from territorial differences, environmental dynamism, or organizational composition. Previous research on the relationship between EO and performance in China, Spain, and Mexico revealed substantial differences in the importance of the dimensions from each country (Basco et al., 2020). Another study showed that high and low environmental dynamism affected research outcomes on the impact of EO on firm performance (Yin et al., 2021). The variability also applied to firms' operational capacity as EO configuration impacted performance differently in high and low-technology firms (Huang et al., 2023). These studies' outcomes reveal the influence of contextual factors supporting the multidimensional approach to research using the EO theory.

The findings of Theme 2 supported the proposition that enterprise owners in emerging economies like Nigeria could apply the EO dimensions in their business environment regardless of adverse circumstances or institutional context. A study showed that owners of small businesses in Nigeria who adopted techniques from EO dimensions achieved high returns on investment, increased market shares, and improved business efficiency for sustained firm success (Ulo & Sunday-Nwosu, 2022). All the EO elements could be relevant for value creation for increased customer satisfaction and improved market share. However, owners should configure the dimensions of the EO to determine the most effective strategies for growth in their business environment. Theme 2 findings fundamentally aligned with Lumpkin and Dess's (1996) EO theory, characterized as an organization's orientation toward value creation, capturing entrepreneurial decisions, methods, and actions using the five dimensions to create competitive advantage. Theme 2 justified applying EO theory to small businesses.

Theme 3: Using Key Internal Resources to Build Capabilities for Improved Productivity

The third theme derived from data collected from the three participants was that firms' internal resources were crucial for building capabilities to improve productivity for sustaining business success. Companies require internal resources to build capabilities for creating products and services to achieve organizational goals (Bayon & Aguilera, 2021). The key internal resources of an organization include human, technological, financial, and knowledge (Li et al., 2020). Each enterprise could create their resource base configuration to achieve their desired market position even though not all contributed equal value to the organization (Bayon & Aguilera, 2021). Research revealed that small businesses could manage their internal resources to build capabilities, boost operational activities to enhance efficiency, and increase profitability (Li, Anaba et al., 2021). P1, P2, and P3 revealed that effective management of firms' internal resources contributed to their ability to create a competitive advantage for sustained business success.

Human Resources

P1, P2, and P3 confirmed that the right group of employees and other human resources were crucial to sustaining business success. P1 shared that human resources played pivotal roles in their organization as employees, training facilitators, and mentors contributed to business performance. P1 revealed that the company sought knowledgeable and experienced trainers to facilitate their development programs for executives in various industries. These facilitators and other personnel contributed to the firm's unique program designs and development, creating a competitive advantage. P1 explained that the firm had long-term personnel who played pivotal roles in ensuring clients' satisfaction and improving business performance:

> I think the first thing is people. The second thing is people. The third thing is people. I will give you an example. My business manager has been with me for

> nine years. From the client's standpoint, many students and mentees are not where they were three years ago. Many have grown and are excited that our firm was part of their journey.

P2 advanced that human resources are crucial in the creative service sector. A service company should have the right people to manage unusual situations and challenges for future growth. P2 divulged that their firm required digitally competent people to achieve organizational goals and create a competitive advantage to sustain business success. P2 explained that the firm ensured the recruitment and retention of skilled personnel:

> I would say that people are the heart of the organization. We have also been very intentional about our workforce, from recruitment to orientation. I will tell you that we have what we call an "A-Team." A unique team based on careful selection. We have a good welfare package to ensure we do not have a high staff turnover. We train members of staff.

P3 also advocated that human resources are critical for organizational success in the creative service industry. The company required highly creative people to generate novel ideas and concepts for a competitive advantage. P3 disclosed that due to the significance of human resources, they employed competent and experienced people. Their firm chose people with unique skills to provide value-adding services to the company irrespective of family status or gender for organizational growth:

> Number one of the key resources is human resources. We must find a square person for a square hole and employ them. In our business, you need people who

> can think, creative people who are not normal, who can tell you that I will land the sun here and the entire world will still be cool. Human resources are key for our creative department because we work with ideas, the only thing we sell. We need people who think of how to interpret creative ideas. Basically, human resources are key to us.

Human resources comprise the contribution of talents, personal characteristics, experiences, training, and tacit knowledge to employees' skills and organizational competencies. Human resources are critical in business management, as profitability and sustained success depend on employee behavior, decisions, and performance (Hee & Jing, 2018). Human resource investment has a high potential for improved productivity, efficiency, and organizational performance (Blaga, 2020). Human resources could speedily react to facilitate productivity and innovation in an environment characterized by rapid change (Alzhrani. 2020). Although it is well established that human resources are critical to firms' success, the owners should ensure that the quality of personnel is consistent with the corporate mission and strategies. The organizational documents from P1, P2, and P3, which comprised their policies and guidelines on personnel recruitment, employment processes, qualification and experience preferences, and remuneration schemes to attract the right employees, corroborated and provided a clearer understanding of the participants' perspectives.

Technological Resources

All participants shared information on the importance of technological resources and their benefits to firms. From P1's point of view, the company benefited from leveraging technology as broadcasting production became easier, cheaper, and more efficient with a larger audience reach. P1 divulged that social media platforms and communication tools significantly improved productivity. For example, the "Lunch and Learn" program was featured on Instagram, meetings were held via Zoom, the firm's website was useful for publications and information, podcasts were streamed live on Google Play, and radio programs were recorded via telephones. P1 elucidated that technology was invaluable:

> When I started this radio station, I had to book studios, but I do not have to go to the studios these days. I sit in my bedroom and use my iPhone 12. With my producer on the other side, I record early and push it through to the radio stations. I have not seen the four walls of my radio station in, say, 9 to 10 months. I have not been there. Technology has done that. Technology enabled a congregation of sorts and content development.

From P2's perspective, technological resources were crucial to the growth of their business. The firm used technology for conceptualizing, presenting, and communicating ideas to clients as well as the public for sustainable business success. P2 disclosed that with changes in the environment and government regulations on mobility restrictions following the COVID-19 pandemic, leveraging technology became vital for firm survival. These occurrences necessitated the update and upgrade of the firm's information technology infrastructure and equipment to enable employees to work predominantly remotely:

> With drastic equipment and machine technology changes, you must keep updating

> and be as dynamic as possible. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the fact that we had upgraded our IT helped. It was easy to continue operations as the staff had laptops, and a central server enabled us to work from around the globe. Even today, we operate a hybrid method.

P3 shared that technology was a key resource and a central tool for creating unique concepts and presenting ideas to the firm's clientele. The use of technology today to create a competitive advantage, according to P3, has become more critical for sustaining business success because of customers' demands. These technological resources were particularly crucial as advertisements are more digitally rendered these days than inserted in newspaper publications. With digital advancement, clients expect presentations composed of virtual creative concepts with minimal verbal interpretations:

> Technology is key because we must bring most of our creative ideas to life. When we make presentations, PowerPoint is no longer used. We now present a digital concept to the client. The rendition is digitally simulated from the beginning to the end. We produce 3D animation and video recordings of the whole idea to enable the client to visualize the concept; you are no longer expected to describe it. In this digital era, technology also plays a critical role because it allows us to extend beyond the particular venue and help amplify some of those systems or activations we created digitally. New technology allows you to show new ideas developing daily, ensuring you compete favorably in the market.

Technological resources include equipment, processes, and infrastructure businesses require to create marketable products and services. Technological progress has contributed to the growth of high-quality products at affordable prices. Business owners would need to implement automation, connectivity, data, and security-based solutions to benefit from technological advances. Firms aiming for increased online information traffic can use digitalization and automation to attract customers. The evolution of the Internet allows owners to use their websites as essential marketing tools (Omotosho, 2020). With the increasing importance of customization, firms can use relevant technology to create unique products for clients to win market share and competitive advantage (Sima et al., 2020). The Internet of Things, big data analysis, and relational fusion technologies could aid information dissemination, track consumer profiles, and support customer networks for entity growth (Sima et al., 2020). Thus, technology has become essential in value creation and performance enhancement for sustained firm success. The three participants provided lists of technology they deployed on their websites and organizational documents, which I reviewed, corroborating their statements and clarifying their perspectives.

Financial Resources

P1, P2, and P3 confirmed that financial resources were another key requirement for business growth. P1 disclosed that most entrepreneurs considered funding the most important internal resource to aid firm survival. Funding is essential for continual business operations and acquiring production resources for profitability and growth. P1 shared that financial resources were critical for business operations to ensure continuous radio programs airing and to pay “producers, rent studios, and personnel remunerations.” P1 observed that small businesses experience difficulty obtaining funding as banks were unwilling to grant them loans due to their inability to provide the requisite collateral.

From P2's perspective, financial resources enabled the company to perform business operations to achieve its organizational goals. For example, financial resources aided the firm in recruiting staff, purchasing equipment, and acquiring market knowledge to create a competitive advantage. P2 disclosed that the firm could not have recruited some of the industry's best or purchased the equipment upgrades without the needed financial resources. P2 confirmed the importance of finances, stating "an organization without finances cannot continue business operations" or conduct "toe-in-water checks to confirm or disproof market information for improved business performance."

P3 revealed that financial resources were crucial for any firm to sustain operations in the business environment because of customers' payment practices in the country. According to P3, clients did not usually abide by the contractual payment clauses or agree to prepay for services. Therefore, the firm retained sufficient funds to execute the work for clients before receiving payment for services rendered, usually after 30 days following the presentation of invoices. P3 explained that finance was a "major factor that can drain your resources and even destroy a company if not well managed."

Financial resources consist of all liquid assets used to transact business operations. Finance is a principal factor in acquiring other resources for the sustainability of small businesses (Akabom et al., 2018). Firms require funds for human capital and other tangible or intangible knowledge-creating resources when developing processes or products, such as capital equipment, software, and licensed technology for innovations (Perez-Alaniz et al., 2022). Financial resources could contribute to superior performance because of the unique role of funds in constituting other resources effectively. The statements of accounts of P1, P2, and P3 clearly showed their investments in technology, equipment, and payments for other services to ensure the continued operations of their firms, corroborating the statements of the participants. After reviewing the organizational documents of the three participants, I clearly understood the contextual perspectives of P1, P2, and P3.

Knowledge Resources

The three participants discussed the importance of their brands and reputation in the industry in their firm's ability to configure resources to create a competitive advantage. Trademarks, names, images, designs, and artistic works are knowledge resources or intellectual property rights for commercial applications that confer brand equity, which companies leverage to create a competitive advantage (Bican et al., 2017). Knowledge resources could enable firms to sustain business success through innovativeness, creativity, and value creation for competitive advantage and increased profitability (Ge & Xu, 2020; Liu, 2020). Well-managed knowledge resources could help firms gain competitive advantages in markets that rivals could not achieve (Li, Wang et al., 2021). Knowledge resources were predominantly available in firms with advanced technology and highly analytical and intellectual abilities (Li et al., 2020). P1, P2, and P3 trademarks in colors, images, and words captured their unique brands. In the organizational documents of the participants, their vision and mission statements, strategic objectives, and trademarks depicted their respective brands. P2 confirmed that the goodwill from the firm's strong brand heritage was an advantage. The participants used their knowledge resources and created their brands, concepts, and unique services.

Correlation to the Literature

Theme 3, that using key internal resources aided the building of capabilities for improved productivity, aligned with the research conclusion that an organization could use their internal capability to manage changes and threats in a dynamic business environment for sustained success (see Anugwu et al., 2021). Human resources were critical for creating a competitive advantage for growth. Research revealed that although business success was dependent on available finances, access to capital, albeit important, was not the most critical factor for firm growth (Ameh et al., 2020). Similarly, other researchers (Kulkov et al., 2020; Perez-Alanis et al., 2023) found that although financial resources were required at the initial stages of business operations, knowledge resources for innovation better supported the creation of competitive advantages for sustained firm success. Financial resources were not the most important internal resource for organizations in the creative sector. Human and technological resources seem to be the major contributors to business performance in that industry.

Although research findings revealed that technological resource usage was low for small businesses in Nigeria (Okunday et al., 2019), the impact of COVID-19 brought to the fore its importance in creating a competitive advantage. A study showed that the inclination of businesses in Nigeria to adopt information technology increased because of the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly as most firms were obliged to observe the mobility restriction policy (Itanyi & Obuka, 2022). Another research also revealed that the enforced remote working policies during the COVID-19 pandemic compelled enterprise owners to invest in digital transformation using modern technology (Penco et al., 2022). Rapid trends, technological advancement, and a knowledge-based economy have also influenced organizations' use of technology for value creation.

Consequently, these compelling factors caused organizations to increase the mandatory use of technology, leading to enhanced communication and improved efficiency. Improvements in organization processes or services have increased customer satisfaction for sustained firm success despite challenges in the external environment (Maryam & Park, 2022). These changes have also impacted the demand for knowledge resources; there is an increased request for persons with digital skills and competencies. However, business owners should determine the technology best suited to their organization and the cost implications because of their limited resources.

Theme 3, using key internal resources to build capabilities for improved productivity, aligned with Barney's (1991) RBV theory. RBV's framework of competitive advantage involves the presence of valuable, rare, inimitable resources and a firm's organization to capture value. Firms could create competitive advantage and superior performance from their resources, including assets, capabilities, firm processes, attributes, information, and knowledge (Barney, 1991). Under the RBV theory, competitive advantage derives from firm-specific resources and capabilities that are costly for copying by rivals. Some researchers suggested that as EO refers to processes that lead to new entry, it should be regarded as an intangible resource that creates a competitive advantage (Kiyabo & Isaga, 2020). Although some researchers have suggested that the RBV theory could be used for exploring the EO-performance relationship in developing countries (Onwe et al., 2020), others have criticized its applicability to small businesses, claiming that it was best suited to larger firms (Tehseen et al., 2019). A criticism of the application of RBV theory to small business studies is that such enterprises own common resources, which are not unique, that they could integrate internally to create competitive advantages (Tehseen et al., 2019). Theme 3 findings aligned with Barney’s RBV theory, suggesting that firms could use their internal resources to create a competitive advantage for sustaining business success.

Correlation to the Conceptual Framework

The findings derived from Theme 3 that using the key internal resources to build capacities could improve productivity applied to Lumpkin and Dess’s (1996) EO theory. EO portrays how firms display, configure, and use their resources to work in new combinations (Wales et al., 2021). Firms could combine EO with their internal resources to promote organizational growth and competitiveness (Ruba et al., 2021). Resources are usually consumed while exploring opportunities and creating new value. With increased market interaction and information transfer, owners could learn to refine and develop new resources with greater potential to achieve a competitive advantage.

Nigerian small business owners could use EO to manage challenges in their business environment. Previous research revealed that small firms in Nigeria used EO to overcome obstacles by experimenting with new ideas and creative concepts, developing technological processes, seeking possibilities, anticipating needs, and taking reasonable risks (Ighomereho et al., 2022). Another study also showed that firms could use EO strategies to collect novel information on credit conditions, make accurate predictions, and seize opportunities for easy access to finances and loans from banks (Civelek, 2021). Moreover, EO could enable business owners to adjust to the changing environment by developing key internal resources for sustainability and growth (Akpan et al., 2020; Ardelean, 2021). Enterprise owners could manage the dynamic external business environment by using their internal resources to exploit opportunities.

Small firm owners could apply digital and technological tools to enhance organizational resources in combination with EO tendencies to leverage new market opportunities, translate innovation into enhanced business knowledge, rapidly transform practices to boost performance, and create competitive advantages for long-term success. It is critical that owners skillfully combine EO dimensions with their internal resources to improve productivity. Theme 3 findings related to Lumpkin and Dess' (1996) EO theory in that organizational capabilities could enhance the pursuit of new knowledge for improved productivity.

Theme 4: Management of Challenges in the Business Environment for Firm Survival

The fourth theme from analyzed data collected from the three participants was that enterprise owners should manage challenges in the business environment for firm survival. This theme supports research outcomes that enterprise owners could adopt new strategies to address emerging global and local challenges to remain competitive in their industries (Matriano, 2022; Saad et al., 2021). An example of a global challenge is the recent COVID-19 pandemic that caused a surge in competition between businesses and industries in Nigeria (Aroyeun et al., 2018). These emergent operational and financial issues, increased competition, and changing business trends impacted business operations and profitability (Matriano, 2022). Therefore, owners should implement strategies such as building resilience capabilities, developing an effective organizational culture, and managing operations to react to changes for improved performance. The three participants discussed the importance of managing business challenges for sustaining business success.

Building Resilience Capabilities

P1, P2, and P3 revealed that building resilience capabilities was crucial for managing challenges and turbulence in the business environment for firm survival. Resilience is the capability of businesses to holistically use their ability to adjust under difficult conditions and emerge more resourceful (Ulo & Sunday-Nwosu, 2022). Without resilience to manage changes in the business environment, firms would lag behind their competitors, struggle to survive, and eventually close down (Pedauga et al., 2022). Resilience capability is necessary to ensure a firm returns to a stable state after interferences and turbulence in the business environment (Saad et al., 2021). The world is undergoing increasingly rapid, unprecedented, and unpredictable change, so firms should institute strategies to withstand threats and emerge stronger. Organizations would require resilient systems designed to manage global threats because of universal interconnectedness. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has caused organizations to build resilience capabilities to manage global catastrophic events more evident.

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted large as well as small organizations. Building resilience became more relevant for small firms because of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on businesses (Zighan et al., 2021). Firms that build resilience capabilities to respond to disruptions or economic crisis could exploit opportunities to create value. Enterprises could build resilience capability by (a) being agile and flexible for internal restructuring to optimize resources, (b) scanning and reassessing the business environment for prioritizing critical aspects of operations, (c) redefining broad and achievable short-term goals, (d) adopting diversification strategies for responsiveness to changes in customer preferences, and (e) using knowledge and experience of market dynamics for proffering innovative solutions and new communication channels with customers (Zighan et al., 2021). Owners may be unable to anticipate or prepare for all disruptions; however, building capabilities could make the firms agile and resilient. The capability to respond rapidly and effectively to crises could sustain organizational success. Enterprise owners could obtain a competitive advantage from their resilience capabilities to quickly adapt to threats for superior performance.

P1 revealed that their firm built resilience capabilities by being agile and open-minded, reassessing the business environment, and adopting diversification strategies. According to P1, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic reinforced the necessity to manage challenges in the business environment by “being agile and open to innovation, new territories, as well as novel partnerships.” The firm also reassessed the business environment and expanded their service to include formal booking for speaking engagements hitherto free of charge. P1 disclosed that the firm decided to diversify their offering by starting an online business school:

Since COVID-19 has impacted our usual business practices, I am changing gears.

> I am moving into opening a business school for participants in the radio program. The attendees will receive certificates from the online business school. There will be a curriculum signed on a monthly or quarterly basis.

P2 shared that building resilience was necessary for business continuity, which was why the firm was “dynamic and constantly updating.” The firm also scanned and reassessed the business environment to prioritize their goals and review their strategies. P2 elucidated that the extent of the business environment assessed included Nigeria, West Africa, and the world because changes in other countries impacted their firm’s survival, as exemplified by the Russian and Ukraine war. For this reason, the firm used business forecast reports showing trends worldwide for strategy formulation:

> We look at what is going on in the world to forecast incomes. We also apply the red and blue oceans strategies as necessary because sometimes, one cannot say that we only work with certain clients. We look at what is new to help us determine businesses to support and those we will no longer pursue.

P3 affirmed that building resilience, which he described as “being dogged, having a fighting spirit and never giving up” is crucial for firm survival. The firm’s tactics for building resilience included flexibility, adopting strategies responsive to consumer preferences, proffering innovative solutions, and using new communication channels. P3 explained that the firm had to “reinvent itself” because the COVID-19 pandemic and the consequent ban on public gatherings by the government reinforced the necessity to build resilience. The firm held online meetings to discuss solutions to the COVID-19 pandemic challenges, such as the inability to provide physical concepts to their customers, amongst others:

> We were meeting online and strategizing. Saying this will work, that will work, and suggesting periodic interventions because it became the survival of the fittest. We asked people to develop new ideas and reinvent old concepts that we assumed would be difficult to implement. We had to develop hybrid events to sustain ourselves. That is what I mean by being resilient.

My understanding of how P1, P2, and P3 built resilience to manage challenges in the business environment became clearer after reviewing their organizational documents and artifacts. The documents and artifacts contained information on changes in communication channels, trend analysis, business forecasts, and correspondences on virtual speaking engagements. These documents corroborated and provided clarity on the participants’ perspectives.

Developing an Effective Organizational Culture

The participants discussed their organizational culture as an integral part of how companies operate and manage challenges in the business environment. Organizational culture is a set of norms, beliefs, expectations, and assumptions that individuals share within an organization that determines how they should behave to achieve business goals (Diana et al., 2021). Organizational culture could be identified from a firm’s implicit values or standards, formal declarations in vision, mission, policy statements, and organizational procedures (Khan et al., 2020). A firm should communicate and use their shared values in decision-making, organizational practices, and policies as well as affirm them in observable behaviors (Martinez et al., 2021). When business owners align the vision, mission, and values with the organizational culture, the employees could likely develop the required mindset to achieve the company's objectives.

Organizational culture is a critical factor in firm performance because of its impact on employees' attitudes and behaviors (Khan et al., 2020; Khedhaouria et al., 2020). Employees aligned with a result-oriented organizational culture could use problem-solving abilities to proffer ideas for increased productivity. Research revealed that owners can create a flexible, adaptable, dynamic, and creative organizational culture where innovativeness and risk-taking are regular practices to manage changes in the external environment (Azeem et al., 2021). Another study showed that an effective organizational culture could influence employees to take action to enable firms to overcome challenges and achieve long-term success (Mohsen et al., 2020). However, for an organizational culture to engender employee commitment and impact performance, owners should ensure that personnel consider the firm ethical, trustworthy, and fair. Additionally, owners should ensure that their recruitment process supports hiring persons with mindsets affiliated with their corporate culture for increased commitment to using maximum efforts for increased productivity.

Pi, P2, and P3 revealed they created organizational cultures of mutual trust, harmony, and ethical standards. Their organizational cultures enable them to build flexibility, creativity, and stability within their firms. The three participants affirmed that they promoted a cultural environment of fairness and equality regardless of employee levels. The owners advanced that they desired organizational cultures that allowed innovativeness and creativeness to build competitive advantages and manage challenges.

P1, P2, and P3 advanced that they created rules guiding ethical behaviors in business transactions, which were affirmed in observable behaviors. The participants confirmed losing business deals because they refused to engage in unethical practices. P2 disclosed that new employees attended an orientation program for easy assimilation, understanding, and imbibing of their organizational culture. The company documents corroborated the participants’ statements. All the participants formulated policies and rules on ethical behaviors, which were communicated to employees. P2 was also a member of the Convention for Business Integrity. After reviewing the organizational documents and artifacts, I understood the participants’ perspectives.

Managing Operations

The participants shared the importance of developing effective business processes and managing operations. P1 revealed that the firm “is disciplined in how we operate” and developed processes to ensure proper operations management. The firm’s administrative department scheduled training programs and speaking engagements to ensure effective management. The company also appointed accountants and auditors for proper financial management, which P1 acknowledged was crucial for enterprise survival. P1 explained that having effective and efficient business processes contributed to the firm’s ability to manage challenges for long-term success.

According to P2, business processes were critical for value creation and client retention. P2 advanced that proper operations and business process management ensured consistent quality client services. P2 explained that “business processes are critical as any organization without efficient processes will die in a few years.” The company’s supervisors were expected to ensure that employees adhered to business process guidelines and organized re-orientation programs where necessary. P2 elucidated that operations management included quality control for “mitigating human challenges in picture productions,” which was critical for firm performance in the creativity industry.

P3 disclosed that the firm was determined to manage its operations efficiently from commencement. The company structured its client’s services to include operations, finance, and technical units. The operations unit instituted processes to manage additional requirements for creative personnel and requisite resources. P3 advanced that managing financial operations was critical to ensure that the organization suffered no monetary loss and that all applicable taxes were paid. According to P3, it was important to “put structures in place to manage operations from the beginning to sustain business success.”

Operations management involves the efficiency and effectiveness of a company’s processes in addressing productivity and quality issues (Kamoni & Kiarie, 2018). Efficient business processes enhance firms’ performance to sustain a competitive advantage. An organization with poor operational systems and procedures cannot exploit their knowledge resources’ maximum potential capabilities, as effective business processes are necessary to achieve organizational goals (Li, Wang et al., 2021). Firms manage operations by developing highly responsive and easily adaptable processes to meet business requirements for value creation (Majukwa & Haddud, 2016). With globalization, the rapid development of information technology, and changing customer preferences, organizations will require improved operations to ensure coordinated support systems for sustained performance (Kamoni & Kiarie, 2018). To survive in changing environments, owners should ensure that their operations are guided by processes and practices with the potential for flexibility in response to constraints as well as opportunities.(Li, Wang et al., 2021). The three participants possessed organizational charts depicting the creation of various departments, evidencing that their firms were properly structured. The three business owners also documented relevant procedures and processes that guided operations management. The organizational documents I reviewed corroborated their statements and gave me a clearer understanding of their perspectives.

Correlation to the Literature

Theme 4, managing challenges in the business environment for firm survival, correlated with several research outcomes that enterprise owners who operate in a constantly changing business environment with volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous challenges must adapt to thrive (Aidianto et al., 2021; Ligouri & Pittz, 2020; Pacheco et al., 2023; Rimita et al., 2020; Santos et al., 2023). The Nigerian business environment is fraught with complex and ambiguous challenges, which small firms must overcome (Alonge et al., 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic, however, posed a greater threat to small enterprises. Small firms experienced reduced productivity, opportunities, and profits (Akingbade, 2021). These firms would require agility, resilience, and other strategies to manage pandemic-related challenges.

Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic brought to the fore the necessity for small business owners to build resilience capabilities. Previously, researchers discussed resilience as part of business continuity and crisis management, emphasizing resources (Niemimaa et al., 2019). However, recently, researchers have suggested that organizations evaluate the resilience of their business models rather than the continuity of resources. For instance, a previous study showed that only firms that successfully adapted their business models and organizational behaviors survived the COVID-19 pandemic (Aidianto et al., 2021). Similarly, another research revealed that linear and predictable business models were outdated, as firms required flexible, agile, and resilient business models to manage challenges in the business environment (Santos et al., 2023). Firms could use digital technologies to speedily adapt and redesign resilience as a strategic and operational aspect of the business for firm survival.

Organizational culture plays a pivotal role in building resilience capabilities. A firm's resilience capabilities development depends on an organizational culture that enables employees to respond at the right time and in a competitive manner to changes in the business environment (Joseph & Kibera, 2019). Business resilience and the speed to adapt to environmental changes depend on the organizational culture, behaviors, and the external environment (Santos et al., 2023). A study revealed that the resilience response type that firms adopted for survival, continuity, or growth was a function of their human capital, organizational culture, or market conditions (Santos et al., 2023). Organizational culture seems pivotal in the building of firms' resilience capabilities. Owners would require an effective organizational culture to build resilience. Such resilience capabilities could support firms to manage changes in the external environment for sustained business growth.

Managing business operations could aid resilience capability development. Efficient processes could support resilience development by mitigating the effect of crises on a company’s operations. Resilience development depends on the organization’s maturity level and well-established processes (Sincore et al., 2023). Firms should analyze their internal processes and response effectiveness to environmental changes or disruptions to identify bottlenecks or gaps to resolve issues before developing resilience capabilities (Pacheco et al., 2023). Well-managed processes could aid resilience for operational flexibility, adaptability, maintenance, and recovery for firm survival. In a dynamic business environment fraught with complex challenges and constant changes, owners would require effective operations management to sustain entity success. Theme 4 aligned with previous research (Aidianto et al., 2021; Santos et al., 2023) and confirmed that firms could manage challenges in the business environment by building resilience, creating a supportive organizational culture as well as ensuring efficient business operations for survival.

Correlation to the Conceptual Framework

The findings from Theme 4 that managing challenges in the business environment could lead to firm survival applied to Lumpkin and Dess’s (1996) EO theory in that firms could use EO strategies to build resilience and manage challenges. In the multidimensional concept of EO, owners engaged in strategic decision-making practices and styles to proactively explore and exploit challenges as opportunities for growth (Lumpkin & Dess, 1996). EO dimensions support owners’ short-term operational actions of exploiting opportunities to build resilience for long-term goals, survival, and competitiveness (Zighan et al., 2021). Additionally, EO enabled strategic flexibility to detect and exploit uncertainties or changes in the business environment as new opportunities for competitive advantages (Ahworegba et al., (2020). Firms would require agile and adaptable systems to build resilience capability to manage changes and challenges in the business environment. Rapid unprecedented changes would require owners to use diverse strategies, operations, and resources uniquely to create value. The participating owners confirmed that openness to new skills, knowledge, or relationships was necessary to enhance resilience capabilities. Enterprise owners could use EO dimensions to facilitate the building of new capabilities and strengthen their resilience against threats in the business environment.

Some researchers have connected the EO element of innovation to the resilience discussions. This connection would stem from the rationale that firms would create new practices, adapt novel solutions, and exploit emergent opportunities to build resilience to manage crises in the business environment. Previous research revealed that innovativeness enabled owners to readjust their approach to managing uncertainties to suit environmental changes for resilience (Akingbade, 2021). Similarly, another study showed that with innovation, owners could rapidly evolve and advance new business processes to build resilience capability (Camison-Haba et al., 2019). However, Pacheco et al. (2023) argued that although innovation was a tool to strengthen an organization's resilience, not all disruptions associated with innovativeness for resilience generated the expected results. Moreover, both concepts could be contradictory, and the innovation may lead to chaos and a negative crisis effect. Owners should ensure that the strategies for building resilience support the expected outcomes in the context of their business environment.

The earlier studies on the EO and performance relationship were linear without considering the business environments. However, recent researchers have recognized the moderating influences of contextual factors. For example, a study examined the EO and performance relationship with social and business environments as the moderating factors (Dossou et al., (2023). Moreover, previous research revealed that organizational culture, internal resources, and management support moderated the relationship between EO and performance, as these factors improved performance (Nwankwo et al., 2022). Organizational culture could enable employees to use EO dimensions to create value (Khedhaouria et al., 2020). However, owners should institute a culture that promotes creativity initiation, autonomy, risk-taking, and flexibility to respond to demands critical to improved business performance (Aboramadan et al., 2020). An effective organizational culture could allow employees to adapt and restructure processes in response to external forces for firm survival.

There seems to be an increased interest in studying EO using the multidimensional conceptualization as environmental factors could impact firm performance. Owners should consider contextual factors when managing challenges in the business environment. Small enterprise owners should consider factors in the external environment that could impact firm performance when building resilience capabilities, developing organizational culture, and managing operation processes for firm survival. Theme 4 supported studies on the impact of the external business environment on small businesses using the EO theory, confirming that challenges could affect firm survival.

Applications to Professional Practice

This study's findings fulfill the purpose of exploring strategies Nigerian small business owners implement toward sustaining success beyond 5 years. The four themes fundamental to the study findings align with the conceptual framework, answer the research question, and correlate with the literature on the phenomenon confirming the study's contribution to understanding strategies toward sustained long-term success for small businesses in Nigeria. The emergent themes are (a) setting strategic business direction to guide firm activities was critical to achieving the firm's objectives, (b) implementing entrepreneurial strategies was essential to create competitive advantage, (c) using key internal resources was necessary for building capabilities for improved productivity, and (d) managing challenges in the business environment was crucial for firm survival. Small enterprise owners in Nigeria or countries with similar business environments could increase financial performance or create a competitive advantage for sustaining success by applying the research outcomes, as exemplified by the participating owners.

The first strategy embedded in the study's findings was setting a strategic business direction to guide activities by developing mission and vision statements, formulating business strategies, and undertaking strategic planning to achieve firm objectives (see Posch & Garaus, 2020; Sara et al., 2021). Establishing and maintaining a consistent strategic business direction for a firm commences with setting a clear vision as a framework for formulating the organization's goals. The vision should enable employees to identify, interpret, communicate, and commit to the company's objectives.

The mission statement should consist of clear goals achievable through the formulation of business strategies and planning. Business strategies are critical for determining firm capabilities and internal resources, whereas strategic planning guides achieving optimal performance. Organizations could use strategic planning to exploit opportunities for increased productivity, sustained competitive advantage, and improved firm performance. The participating small business owners set strategic directions by developing and communicating their vision and mission statements. Setting strategic directions enabled the owners to involve personnel in business planning and strategy development to obtain employee commitment to achieving organizational goals. Enterprise owners in Nigeria or similar environments could also leverage strategic business direction to explore and exploit identified opportunities in an evolving environment.

The second strategy involved implementing entrepreneurial strategies for competitive advantage and growth. This strategy entailed using innovativeness, proactiveness, risk-taking, competitive aggressiveness, and autonomy to build capabilities to gain an advantage over rivals (Betakova et al., 2021). Innovativeness encompasses creating new ideas or involvement in novel practices to adapt to changing business environments for improved performance. Proactiveness enhances innovative activities and involves identifying new trends to gain an advantage over competitors. Risk-taking concerns venturing into the unknown without certainty of success and might involve business, financial, or personal risks. Undertaking innovative activities might be risky as their outcome is unknown; however, proactive involvement in innovative activities could help owners mitigate the uncertainty in the business environment and create a competitive advantage. Competitive aggressiveness is the tendency to gain market entry or strengthen market position. Firms display competitive aggressiveness by undertaking massive advertisements and customer satisfaction drives. Autonomy motivates owners and employees to take self-directed actions to exploit market opportunities. Autonomy allows employees to exploit business networks to create a competitive advantage for sustained performance despite prevailing business uncertainties. Enterprise owners in Nigeria or small firms in similar environments could apply this finding to create a competitive advantage for sustaining business success.

The third strategy entailed using key internal resources to build capabilities for increased productivity, excellence, financial performance, and competitive advantage for long-term success (see Ameh et al., 2020). The key resources consisted of human, technological, financial, and knowledge, which the participating owners used to build capabilities for creating unique products to gain an advantage over competitors. The owners considered human resources, encompassing talents, skills, characteristics, and competencies useful for creating unique products difficult to imitate by rivals, as critical resources in the creative services industries. The firms acquired human resources by recruiting people with the right skills, knowledge, ability, and capability to provide the level of creativity required. Technological resources include processes, equipment, and infrastructure to create products and services to meet client expectations. With the rapid changes in customers’ expectations and demands, firms should possess current technology and equipment to produce quality services for improved financial performance (Camison-Haba et al., 2019). The owners considered equipment upgrades and IT infrastructure vital investments to meet customers' expectations in the current business environment. Financial resources were crucial to the sustainability of small firms' success (Akabom et al., 2018). The owners confirmed that financial resources, including all liquid assets, were essential for continued business operations and payment of wages. The companies leveraged their knowledge resources, including trademarks, names, images, designs, artistic works, or intellectual property rights for commercial application, which conferred brand equity to create unique products or services for a competitive advantage. Nigerian small business owners in Nigeria in the professional services sector or similar organizations in uncertain environments could configure their internal resources to build capabilities to sustain business performance and long-term success.

The fourth strategy involved managing challenges in the business environment for survival. The strategy encompassed building resilience capabilities, developing an effective organizational culture, and managing operations to ensure firm survival in a changing business environment (see Rimita et al., 2020). Resilience is a firm's capacity to holistically use their ability to adjust and emerge more resourceful after uncertainties. After the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, it became imperative that owners manage their business operations with agility and resilience for sustainable success. The participating owners integrated values into their organizational culture, enabling employees to communicate, participate, and commit toward a common goal. Organizational culture is a set of norms, beliefs, expectations, and assumptions that individuals share within a firm (Aboramadan et al., 2020). The owners actively encouraged innovative cultures through employee autonomy to enhance teamwork and creativity for improved performance. Managing business operations was critical to sustaining business success, as efficient and effective processes improved productivity. Business processes that promote quality and enhance performance could sustain a competitive advantage. Having structures and systems to manage company operations was crucial to productivity for business sustainability. All the participating owners emphasized the necessity for processes managed by competent persons to ensure effective and efficient operations for sustainable success. Nigerian small business owners or firms operating in similar environments could learn from this finding that skilled personnel properly managing business operations could contribute to firm survival.

With the constant changes and disruptions in the business environment, particularly with the recent COVID-19 pandemic, business owners should implement strategies to sustain success beyond 5 years. Setting strategic direction with a clear vision and planning could support achieving company objectives (Sara et al., 2021). Owners could implement EO strategies to exploit new market opportunities and manage the dynamic business environment to acquire a competitive advantage (Dele-Ijagbulu et al., 2020). A strong culture aligned with the company’s structure could enhance the implementation of entrepreneurial strategies and become a dominant source of competitive advantage (Joseph & Kibera, 2019). Shaping the firm culture to encourage creativity and responsiveness could help employees deal with uncertainty as well as ensure productivity. Aligning firm dynamics with formulated policies, internal resources, and an effective culture could enable owners to acquire skills to manage market turbulence as well as competitors for improved performance.

Business performance is usually measured by the ability to achieve corporate objectives and profit from resources. A firm's performance is imperative in sustaining business success (Faloye & Owoeye, 2021; Penco et al., 2022). From the study's findings, owners could use all five dimensions of an EO to implement business strategies for improving performance. Small businesses could use these strategies to adapt, restructure, and reinstitute internal processes and behaviors to respond to external forces. Additionally, these strategies could support enterprise owners in managing the challenges of limited access to finance, unfavorable external environments, poor entrepreneurial skills, and lack of modern technology contributing to business failure in Nigeria. Organizations that can manage these challenges and the hostile external business environment are more likely to achieve firm objectives for sustained growth. Nigerian small business owners could use the EO dimensions to support structure, resources, and processes for implementing strategies toward sustaining success beyond 5 years.

Implications for Social Change

In this study, four strategies emerged that small business owners in the professional service sector in Nigeria adopted to sustain success beyond 5 years. These strategies could increase firms' competitive advantage, market share, and profitability. Owners who use these strategies could sustain business operations, improve productivity, increase taxable income, and contribute to Nigeria's GDP (Gumel, 2018; Ngutsav & Ijirshar, 2020; Olaore et al., 2021). Improved business performance could create employment opportunities, improve people's social well-being, enhance the quality of life (Adeola et al., 2021; Olademeji & Aladejebi, 2020), and ultimately reduce poverty. Enterprise owners could enhance business sustainability by improving their entrepreneurial skills and managerial practices. With improved skills, owners could form partnerships and collaborate for firm expansion (Akingbade, 2021). Collaboration or partnerships could yield increased innovative activities to create competitive advantages for market share. With long term success, business owners could increase participation in development projects to improve the living standard of community members.

Disseminating the research findings to small enterprise owners and business research institutes in Nigeria could encourage the adoption of these strategies as intrinsic to firms' survival. Therefore, I will share a summary of the study's findings with the participants, relevant private as well as public institutes, and professional associations through webinars, online or in-person conferences, or seminars. Encouraging owners in the country to adopt the strategies in the study's findings could translate sustained entity success into economic growth, increased employment, improved fiscal revenue, and an expanded tax base. An increase in successful small firms could result in an improved business environment through infrastructure development, human capital increase, investments in research institutes, and the quality of overall business networks. The improved business environment could attract foreign investments, accelerate GDP growth, and increase regional development.

Recommendations for Action

Four themes emerged in this study. The first theme, setting strategic business direction to guide firm activities, is critical to achieving corporate objectives. The second theme was that implementing entrepreneurial strategies supports the creation of competitive advantage. The third theme entailed using key internal resources for building capabilities for improved productivity. The fourth theme, managing challenges in the business environment, is crucial for sustaining market share and long-term success beyond 5 years. The recommendations for small businesses and government institutions' actions for improvements stem from the validity and reliability of the research findings, as well as the necessity to maximize the impact of social change on communities in the country. Enterprise owners in Nigeria could use the inherent strategies in their business practices with support from government programs to experience improved performance and sustained success.

I recommend that small firm owners in the professional services sector adopt the study's findings to promote sustainable business practices for competitive advantage. Enterprises could sustain long-term success by setting strategic directions, implementing entrepreneurial strategies, using key internal resources, and managing challenges in the business environment (Na Allah & Ahmed, 2022; Ologbenla, 2022), as the participating owners exemplified. Owners could review policies and strategic plans to ensure investment returns for improved performance (Gumel, 2018). Exploiting opportunities and implementing entrepreneurial strategies could support the creation of a competitive advantage for improved performance (Herath, 2023). Additionally, owners should manage government regulations and develop resilience capabilities for sustainable firm performance (Raoof et al., 2021). To ensure survival, small firm owners should leverage digital technology to acquire knowledge of the business environment to influence strategy construction and reconfiguration of resources for long-term success.

In the long term, the Nigerian Government should facilitate the success of small businesses in line with the United Nations' (2019) sustainability development goal to build resilient infrastructure, promote and sustain industrialization to end poverty, reduce inequality as well as spur economic growth. To effectively support Nigerian small enterprise owners, the government, with the support of SMEDAN, Central Bank of Nigeria, and Commercial Banks with SME Programs, should train businesses in the services sector using the strategies implemented by the participating owners. Firms could also use industry associations and stakeholder network partners to obtain government policy support on regulatory bottleneck reduction, tax incentives, increased funding, and ease of doing business to enhance firm survival (Adeosun & Shittu, 2021). Private as well as public institutions should provide affordable training to enterprise owners on managing business systems, processes, and structures to enhance the success rate of small firms (Baah-Mintah et al., 2018). Finally, I will share a summary of the findings and recommendations to the participants, associations in the professional services sector, relevant government agencies as well as public and private institutions to support further research on business practices. The results will be disseminated via conferences, training, seminars, and publications in research domains.

Recommendations for Further Research

The validity and reliability of this multiple case study’s findings establish the extent of its transferability to research in a similar context. A criterion for determining the credibility of a research process is the transferability of the research findings (McGinley et al., 2020). The transferability of the study's findings could be affected by the potential impact of the research limitations (Akpoviroro & Akanmu, 2021; Onwe et al., 2020). The limitations of this study's findings' transferability include (a) limiting the data collection method to semistructured interviews, (b) using organization archival documents and artifacts as the only method of triangulating the data collected from interviews, and (c) participant's reluctance to disclose sensitive information. With the interviews as the data collection method, the findings were based on the participants' interpretations of the issues. The participants' reluctance to disclose sensitive information made data collection from external sources time-consuming. Excluding owners of small enterprises not in the professional services sectors and not located in Lagos, Nigeria, from participating in this study also limited the generalizability of the findings to other business segments with different requirements. Finally, a limited understanding of relationships between variables embedded in themes underlying the study's findings may limit generalization to statistical analysis.

I recommend further research to overcome limitations, increase validity and reliability as well as improve the transferability of the study's funding. Researchers should use the same research design to obtain qualitative data through semistructured interviews with enterprise owners in other service sectors. Other researchers should also triangulate data from semistructured interviews with participants' observations (see Yin, 2018). Researchers could also obtain information anonymously to determine statistical relationships among variables and test the hypothesis in the study's findings using mixed methods or quantitative methodologies. Another recommendation is to invite small enterprise owners in other business sectors in different states in Nigeria to participate in a study to advance their growth because of their significant roles in developing the country's economy. Further research to extend knowledge on this research findings will deepen understanding of strategies that owners of small businesses could implement toward sustaining success beyond 5 years.

Reflections

While reflecting on my journey through the DBA program at Walden University, I realized that I had acquired considerable knowledge through the coursework and the doctoral study processes. Such knowledge prepared me to gain access, interview participants, collect and analyze data, and distill findings from emergent themes. I have now established that the components of the DBA Program were crucial to acquiring skills to undertake this doctoral study and disseminating knowledge to other persons. At the commencement of the research, I preconceived that it may be difficult to find small business owners who meet my study criteria as participants. Contrary to expectations, the small business owners I contacted possessed the requisite experiences and qualifications. The owners willingly participated, although scheduling convenient times for interviews was challenging. The challenge of scheduling was mitigated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which eliminated the need for physical meetings and made harmonizing dates easier as all interviews were virtual.

Based on other researchers' perspectives, I expected participants to hesitate to release confidential documents before the interview's commencement. As envisaged, all the participants were reluctant to provide detailed information after the interview, despite follow-up questions and reiterating my obligation of data confidentiality. The participants explained that their unwillingness stemmed from previous experiences with researchers who used confidential information without permission. The interview conversations with the participants and the thematic analysis of the data improved my understanding of challenges in the Nigerian business environment and strategies that small business owners adopted toward sustaining entity success beyond 5 years. I learned from the study that setting a strategic business direction was critical for achieving company goals for sustaining success, implementing entrepreneurial strategies was essential for mitigating uncertainties and creating competitive advantage in the market, using the firm's internal resources could help build capabilities for improved productivity, and managing challenges in the business environment was necessary for firm survival. Additionally, I noted that small enterprises could implement entrepreneurial strategies to mitigate the adverse effects of the hostile business environment.

Following thoughtful reflections, I observed that the study's findings derived from the participants' disclosures aligned with the conceptual framework, answered the research questions, and supported established literature. I learned that using educational, institutional, and specific government-programmed facilitations to share these strategies could support the development of small businesses. With the knowledge gained, enterprise owners may acquire skills to identify market opportunities for improved business performance in Nigeria, leading to increased profitability and poverty reduction. To support small enterprises, I envisage that the specific government program should encompass infrastructure development, creating an enabling business environment, human capital development, research, and articulating consistent policies.

Reflecting on the knowledge I have acquired culminating in this study's conclusions, I realized that my unstructured and uniformed ideas of sustaining small business success had been transformed by Walden University's academic mentoring and support into a more advanced and evidence-based concept, which could be a useful tool for developing a country's economy. I also understand that contrary to my pre-conceived impressions, applying this study's findings could support the growth of Nigerian small enterprises and poverty reduction. Further reflection revealed that the knowledge I gained from the DBA coursework and the thorough doctoral study process aided my research skills development and refined my thoughts.

My doctoral study journey was more challenging than I had anticipated but rewarding. The specialization courses helped me fulfill my dream of acquiring knowledge on business strategy that firms could apply to their business practices for long-term success. In this study, I explored strategies small business owners in Nigeria implemented toward sustaining entity success beyond 5 years. My experiences during the data collection process increased my understanding that maintaining cordial relationships with the participants, using open-ended questions, and clarifying perspectives could elicit more information, generate novel knowledge, and prevent participant biases. I believe the DBA program increased my respect for research and its contribution to developing new knowledge as well as amplified my understanding of the importance and impact of social change. I am certain that the knowledge I have acquired from the DBA program has prepared me to contribute more meaningfully to social change in my community and my country.

Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies that small business owners implement toward sustaining success beyond 5 years. The conceptual framework of this study was the EO theory. The theory's five dimensions, which could support sustainable business success, are innovation, risk-taking, proactiveness, competitive aggressiveness, and autonomy. Researchers applying the EO theory to small firms conceptualized the constructs as the strategy-making process or orientation that owners could use to improve firm performance to sustain business success.

I used semistructured interviews with open-ended questions to collect data from three small business owners in the professional services sector in Nigeria who have successfully implemented strategies for sustainable success. After analyzing the data, the four themes that emerged as underlying strategies towards long-term entity success resonating among the participants were (a) setting strategic business direction to guide firm activities was critical to achieving the firm's objectives, (b) implementing entrepreneurial strategies was essential to create competitive advantage, (c) using key internal resources was necessary for building capabilities for improved productivity, and (d) managing challenges in the business environment was crucial for firm survival. Although environmental hostility could impact strategic direction, firm resources, business processes, or activities, owners could take calculated risks and implement entrepreneurial strategies to create a competitive advantage for improved performance.

Owners of small firms could use the EO dimensions to support strategies for sustainable business growth and success beyond 5 years.

Government policies and strategic programs could influence the external business environment and impact business growth. Through its policies and programs, the government could create an enabling business environment to reduce hostility sufficiently. The Nigerian government could also strengthen support for small enterprise growth by improving infrastructure, human capital development, and research. The study’s findings support the theoretical application of EO to sustainable organizational success, align with the study’s conceptual framework, answer the research question, and fulfill the research purpose. Small business owners in Nigeria applying these findings in theirs or a similar environment could improve performance and sustain firm success.

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Appendix: Interview Protocol

1. Introduce myself and provide a brief overview of the study.
2. Remind all participants that though they have provided consent, they can withdraw from the study anytime.
3. Ask for any other concerns and address them.
4. Turn on the audio-recording device.
5. Introduce the participants for the recorded interview using coded identification and noting the date and time.
6. Commence the session by asking the interview questions in sequential order
7. Ask follow-up or probing questions as needed.
8. Stop recording.
9. Discuss potential dates with the participants for follow-up interviews and member checking.
10. Thank all participants for their contribution to the study.
11. Reiterate the contact numbers for future questions or concerns.
12. End the interview process.