

9-5-2024

Successful Economic Crisis Management Strategies Used by Small- and Medium-Size Enterprise Food Service Business Managers in the British West Indies

Lancelott Barnes
Walden University

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College of Management and Human Potential

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Lancelott Barnes

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Walden University
2024

Abstract

Successful Economic Crisis Management Strategies Used by Small- and Medium-Size

Enterprise Food Service Business Managers in the British West Indies

by

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MS, University College of the Cayman Islands, 2012

BS, International College of the Cayman Islands, 2009

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Business Administration

Walden University

August 2024

Abstract

Poor crisis management strategies caused small and medium-sized food service enterprise leaders to permanently close business operations during the COVID-19 pandemic. These closures resulted in significant economic losses and reduced employment opportunities in the industry. Grounded in the relational crisis management model, this qualitative pragmatic inquiry aimed to understand the economic crisis management strategies used by business managers in the food services industries to prevent business closures in the British West Indies. Data were collected from semistructured interviews with six business managers in the food services industry who successfully navigated their businesses through the COVID-19 pandemic. Four themes that emerged from the thematic analysis were (a) employee retention strategies, (b) customer-centric business strategies, (c) cost-cutting for financial stability, and (d) innovation and implementation. Recommendations for business managers include deploying comprehensive strategies using risk assessment planning, financial management, innovation and flexibility, employee support, technology leveraging, and strengthening relationships with stakeholders. The implications for positive social change include the potential for business managers to create environments in which economic and social systems are better equipped to cope with unexpected economic challenges, contributing to the stability and sustainability of communities and fostering a more robust and adaptable economy.

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Dedication

I dedicate this study to the memory of my late grandfather, Mr. Joseph Emmanuel Barnes. His unwavering commitment to hard work and dedication has left an indelible mark on my life, instilling in me the core values that have been instrumental throughout this journey. Joseph Barnes was not only a grandfather but also a guiding light whose wisdom and principles have shaped my character and work ethic. His legacy is a constant reminder of the profound benefits one can achieve through perseverance and diligence. In every challenge I faced during this study, I drew strength from his lessons about resilience in the face of adversity and the importance of maintaining a steadfast commitment to one's goals.

Acknowledgments

I am deeply grateful to God for granting me the strength and resilience to persevere throughout this study. His guidance and support have been a cornerstone of my journey, enabling me to overcome challenges and stay focused on my objectives. I am profoundly grateful to my beloved daughter, Lacey Barnes; my sister, Maria Barnes; and my brother, Kevin Barnes. Their unwavering support and encouragement have been a continuous source of inspiration. Their steadfast belief in my capabilities and the power of hard work and dedication has motivated me to strive for excellence. Their reminders that determination can overcome any obstacle have fortified my conviction that nothing in life is impossible with the right mindset and effort. I also acknowledge and express my heartfelt appreciation to my colleagues at the Ministry of Education. Their constant support, collaboration, and encouragement have significantly impacted my academic and professional development. Their belief in my work and their readiness to assist whenever needed have been invaluable, providing a robust foundation on which I could rely.

Table of Contents

Section 1: Foundation of the Study.....	1
Background of the Problem	1
Problem and Purpose	3
Population and Sampling	4
Nature of the Study	4
Research Question	6
Interview Questions	6
Conceptual Framework.....	7
Operational Definitions.....	8
Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations.....	9
Assumptions.....	9
Limitations	9
Delimitations.....	10
Significance of the Study	10
Contribution to Business Practice.....	10
Implications for Social Change.....	11
A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature.....	12
Conceptual Framework: Relational Model of Crisis Management	13
Crisis Preparedness	16
Crisis Prevention.....	20
Crisis Incident Management	23

Postcrisis Management	26
Supporting and Contrasting Theories	29
Understanding Crisis.....	35
Types of Crisis	37
Economic Crisis Impact on Food Services SMEs	44
Business Closure.....	47
Strategies to Prevent Business Closure.....	49
Leadership.....	49
Proactive Planning	51
Transition	53
Section 2: The Project.....	54
Purpose Statement.....	54
Role of the Researcher	55
Participants.....	57
Research Method and Design	58
Research Method	59
Research Design.....	60
Population and Sampling	62
Ethical Research.....	65
Data Collection Instruments	67
Data Collection Technique	72
Data Organization Technique	75

Data Analysis	76
Reliability and Validity.....	80
Reliability.....	80
Validity	81
Transition and Summary.....	84
Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change	86
Presentation of the Findings.....	87
Theme 1: Employee Retention Strategies.....	87
Theme 2: Customer-Centric Business Strategies.....	91
Theme 3: Cost Cutting for Financial Stability	94
Theme 4: Innovation and Implementation.....	96
Relevance to Conceptual Framework	100
Applications to Professional Practice	104
Implications for Social Change.....	105
Recommendations for Action	107
Recommendations for Further Research.....	110
Reflections	111
Conclusion	113
References.....	115
Appendix A: Invitation for Research Study Participation	169
Appendix B: Interview Protocol	170

Section 1: Foundation of the Study

During the 2020 pandemic, the food service industry experienced significant closures when business leaders of small and medium-size enterprises (SMEs) were unprepared for the crisis. Lushniak (2022) stated that the rapid and unexpected transmission of COVID-19 caught many countries by surprise, revealing significant deficiencies in their preparedness and response capabilities. The current study explored strategies of successful leaders who overcame the crisis and did not close their businesses. By examining leaders' approaches, I aimed to provide actionable recommendations for other business leaders to enhance their resilience and crisis management capabilities in the face of future challenges. The findings underscore the importance of adaptability, strategic planning, and innovative problem solving in maintaining business continuity during unprecedented global health emergencies.

Background of the Problem

Navigating the economic challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic has been a formidable task for leaders of SMEs. Particularly within the hospitality industry and its associated food services sector, SME leaders faced substantial setbacks during the global economic crisis triggered by the pandemic (Aigbedo, 2021). The impact of this crisis on businesses hinged on the ability of SME leaders to adapt and transform crisis-induced changes into opportunities rather than threats (Klyver & Nielsen, 2021). Prihatini et al. (2022) noted that the COVID-19 pandemic posed distinctive obstacles for leaders in different sectors, necessitating rapid adaptation and a willingness to accept change to traverse the intricacies of the crisis. Prihatini et al. highlighted the significance of swift

adjustment and proactive acceptance of change for leaders to traverse the intricacies of a crisis.

Notwithstanding formalized crisis plans, many SME leaders encountered challenges in executing these plans. This predicament arose due to resource constraints and a deficiency in preparedness (Alves et al., 2020). Limited financial resources and restricted access to credit markets further impeded leaders' capacity to secure essential funding, thereby hindering the sustainability of their businesses amid the COVID-19 crisis (Kalemli-Ozcan et al., 2020). The ability of business leaders to comprehend and navigate the threats posed by an economic crisis can be a daunting task for the survival of their organizations.

Defining their strategic position is paramount for any business leader aiming to steer their organization through a crisis. During crises, SME leaders must delineate their strategic stance within the business environment to confront global economic challenges, facilitating business stabilization and implementing survival strategies (Naradda Gamage et al., 2020). Ali et al. (2021) suggested that SME leaders must formulate strategies that reconfigure, realign, and reorganize business resources tailored to the disruptive context. Leaders who allocate resources toward developing and implementing comprehensive crisis management strategies may have an advantage when facing unforeseen circumstances.

Business leaders who embrace challenges can steer their organizations through difficult circumstances. The capacity of leaders in SMEs to navigate and capitalize on volatile and rapidly evolving business environments is contingent upon their adaptability

to unforeseen changes (Weaven et al., 2021). Riggio and Newstead (2023) explained that effective crisis management entails a mindset in which leaders anticipate unforeseen events. Leaders must maintain a perpetual vigilance and readiness to address unexpected circumstances (Ingram et al., 2021). Identifying and exploring the economic crisis management strategies SME business managers used in the food service industry to successfully prevent business closures may provide significant insights for other business managers in navigating potential economic crises.

Problem and Purpose

The COVID-19 pandemic presented substantial difficulties and uncertainty for SMEs, compelling their leaders to strengthen their capacity for resilience (Zutshi et al., 2021). SMEs represent over 90% of all firms worldwide, making them the backbone of the world's economy (Thorgren & Williams, 2020). The general business problem was that many SMEs in the food services industry regularly failed due to the effects of economic crises. The specific business problem was that some SME business managers in the food services industry lacked crisis management strategies to prevent business closures in the British West Indies. The purpose of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry was to explore and identify the economic crisis management strategies that some SME business managers in the food service industry used to prevent business closures in the British West Indies. The target population comprised six business managers in the British West Indies who had successfully managed their businesses through an economic crisis and avoided business closure.

Population and Sampling

The targeted population was business managers in the British West Indies food services industry who implemented strategies to prevent business closure during an economic crisis. I used purposive sampling to select participants with the knowledge, experience, and characteristics relevant to the study. Researchers use purposive sampling to select participants based on criteria that align with the research purpose (S. Campbell et al., 2020). Using purposive sampling, I targeted business managers in the food services industry with firsthand knowledge and experience related to the business problem. I selected business managers with the following characteristics: (a) owned and operated a business through the COVID-19 pandemic, (b) managed a business through the COVID-19 pandemic, and (c) were still in operation during the COVID-19 pandemic. Andrade (2021) explained that purposive sampling entails selecting participants with characteristics or experiences pertinent to the research question. Using this targeted approach, I ensured that the sample included individuals capable of providing valuable and insightful data. This process enriched the study's depth and facilitated a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

Nature of the Study

There are three methods a researcher can use to conduct their study: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods (Yin, 2018). For the current study, I chose the qualitative method. Researchers use qualitative methods to describe participants' feelings, views, and experiences and evaluate the significance of their actions (Rahman, 2020). A qualitative approach draws from the explanatory and humanistic paradigms to

understand people's lived experiences and build knowledge to understand perspectives (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). Limone et al. (2022) explained that quantitative research involves examining numerical data using diverse mathematical and statistical methodologies. The current study did not require analyzing numerical data. The quantitative method was deemed unsuitable for this study due to its inadequacy in answering the research question.

In alternative research paradigms, Timans et al. (2019) advocated using mixed-method research, which provides a structured framework for integrating multiple research methodologies. However, a mixed-methods approach was deemed unsuitable for the current study because the research question necessitated only one method to answer it. The qualitative designs considered for this study were (a) case study, (b) phenomenology, (c) ethnography, (d) pragmatic, and (e) narrative. I chose the qualitative pragmatic inquiry because it was ideal for generating comprehensive data that offered valuable insights into the lived experiences of SME business managers. Researchers employ qualitative pragmatic designs to underscore the tangible implications of beliefs, theories, and actions (Kelly & Cordeiro, 2020). The qualitative pragmatic design was well-suited for developing and presenting findings that aligned with the research question.

Researchers use the phenomenological design to examine human behavior. According to Boadu (2021), this approach is crucial for understanding lived experiences, emphasizing how individuals interpret and assign meaning to their experiences and conceptualize their environment. Consequently, the phenomenological design was deemed unsuitable for the current study. Researchers use the ethnographic design to gain insights into lived cultural

experiences (Simmons & Smith, 2019). This current study did not focus on exploring lived cultural experiences, making the ethnographic design unsuitable for this study.

Additionally, researchers use the narrative design to scrutinize human experiences through the lens of life stories (Ford, 2020). Considering that the primary focus of my research did not involve exploring human life stories, the narrative design was deemed unsuitable for this study. A qualitative pragmatic design was the most appropriate method to capture the interviewees' perceptions, strategies, and practical suggestions.

Research Question

What management strategies do successful SME business managers in the food service industry use to prevent business closures in the British West Indies during economic crises?

Interview Questions

1. What strategies have you found successful in preventing business closure during an economic crisis?
2. What strategies do you use to prevent business closure during an economic crisis?
3. How do you describe successful strategies?
4. What process do you use to determine if a strategy successfully prevents business closure?
5. What method will you use to retain a successful strategy?
6. What are the main barriers to implementing successful strategies to prevent business closure during an economic crisis?

7. How did you overcome critical barriers to implementing successful strategies to prevent business closure?
8. What modification, if any, did you apply to any strategies to prevent business closure?
9. What additional information would you like to contribute about successful strategies to prevent business closure during an economic crisis?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework governing this study was the relational model of crisis management developed by Jaques (2007). Jaques's model comprises four major crisis management elements: (a) crisis preparedness, (b) crisis prevention, (c) crisis incident management, and (d) postcrisis management procedures. Jaques structured each component to encompass a cluster of crisis prevention measures and procedures, considering the interdependent dynamics inherent in a crisis. Similarly, Dobrowolski (2020) advocated for managers to adopt a relational, nonlinear approach when confronted with a crisis, emphasizing the importance of acknowledging the interconnected facets of these situations. Amid the array of disaster management theories and models, Mike et al. (2021) posited that the relational model of crisis management is a well-suited framework for addressing the inherent interconnectedness within a crisis. This assertion stemmed from the observation that most existing models adopt a linear approach to managing crises.

The logical connections between the relational model of crisis management and the nature of the current study included applying the relational model of crisis

management to identify and explore the economic crisis management strategies that SME business managers used to prevent business closures. M. S. Johnson and Thompson (2021) employed qualitative methodology and the relational model of crisis management to explore the operational sustainability strategies leaders in historically Black colleges and universities adopted amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, Murad et al. (2021) used a quantitative approach to analyze crisis management strategies implemented by managers in five-star hotels in Jordan when faced with crises. M. S. Johnson and Thompson's work served as the foundation for the current study. Leveraging the lived experiences of SME business managers in the food services industry, this research aimed to augment the relational model of crisis management by identifying strategies to prevent business closures. This framework aligned with the research question and fulfilled the objectives of this study.

Operational Definitions

Crisis management: The process by which an organization manages a disruptive and unexpected event that threatens harm to the organization, its stakeholders, or the general public (Mikusova & Horvathova, 2019).

Crisis preparedness: Preventive measures and policies implemented before an occurrence to mitigate harm and disruption, emphasizing strategic planning and allocation of resources (Ghaderi et al., 2022).

Crisis prevention: A risk management strategy that helps provide predictable and comparable results and that aid in resolving issues and incidents by addressing their root causes (Luburic, 2021).

Postcrisis management: Analyzing the effects of an unexpected event and returning the organization to business as usual (Goh et al., 2016).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

Assumptions

Researchers use assumptions to define the direction and conclusion of their study. Assumptions are beliefs and viewpoints that influence a researcher's approach to their study, address the research problem, and determine the most effective data collection method (Almasri & McDonald, 2021). The first assumption in the current study was that participants would voluntarily participate in the study. The second assumption was that participants had the relevant knowledge to respond accurately to the interview questions. The third assumption was that I would have adequate information to answer the research question from the data I collected.

Limitations

There are limitations in all studies regardless of how well the researcher constructed and conducted the study. Ross and Bibler Zaidi (2019) defined limitations as indicators that may influence the results and interpretations of the research. The first limitation in the current study was time. Rahman (2020) indicated that qualitative methods can be time-consuming and resource intensive, requiring extensive data collection and analysis. Gathering, transcribing, and analyzing data required significant time and investments due to the need for careful coding and interpretation. The second limitation was the small sample size. A small sample size limits the generalizability of the findings to large populations (Alvarez et al., 2021). Due to the small sample size, I

risked missing essential details, and the conclusions might not have been applicable beyond the study's specific population.

Delimitations

Researchers use delimitations to limit the scope and boundary of the research. Coker (2022) stated that researchers use delimitations to specify what aspects of the research topic will be included and excluded from the study. Researchers can establish and address delimitations to ensure their studies are rigorous, well designed, and practical (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). The first delimitation in the current study was the geographical area, which was the British West Indies. I concentrated on a manageable area and developed a more comprehensive analysis by focusing on this geographical area. The second delimitation was the sample size. For this study, I interviewed six participants with knowledge relevant to the business problem. The third delimitation was that I interviewed participants who were in management roles.

Significance of the Study

Contribution to Business Practice

SME leaders in the food services industry face the global challenge of business failure due to economic crises. This issue underscores the need for robust management strategies and resilience in navigating economic turbulence. Managers of food-related businesses should implement innovative and creative methods to maintain operations during a global economic crisis (Nosachenko, 2021). Managers in the food services industry could use the findings from the current study to implement strategies in their businesses to prevent business closure during an economic crisis. Lussak et al. (2020)

explained that management's flexibility in providing services might positively impact operational progress during challenging economic times, leading to better operating performance of their businesses. Messabia et al. (2022) highlighted that business owners should exhibit a strong entrepreneurial mindset, frequently examining and discussing current situations with critical stakeholders to develop a crisis management strategy to remain in business. By implementing necessary changes, leaders can fortify their capacity to make informed decisions, bolstering their overall decision-making prowess during critical situations to prevent the closure of their businesses. Similarly, M. S. Johnson and Thompson (2021) proposed that business leaders must refine their crisis appraisal methods and adopt essential alterations to augment their decision-making acumen.

Implications for Social Change

The findings from the current study could benefit SME business managers who confront challenges in crisis management owing to unforeseen economic fluctuations. As pivotal entities in a community's economic landscape, SMEs foster sustained economic progress and mitigate unemployment rates (Sayyida & Alwiyah, 2020). Despite their societal significance, managers of SMEs contend with a myriad of intricate challenges. Thukral (2021) posited that managerial competence in navigating economic crises necessitates the cultivation of resilience among managers. Thukral further contended that possessing resilience empowers managers to gain deeper insights into their firms' responses when confronted with unforeseen and challenging circumstances in the economic landscape. Weaven et al. (2021) explained that SME leaders must understand customer preferences and meet the needs of stakeholders. Additionally, SME leaders

must leverage their competencies to adapt to dynamic and uncertain economic conditions, thereby maximizing potential prospects.

Sustaining the provision of goods and services to customers amid an economic crisis could result in positive social change. Sheth and Parvatiyar (2021) proposed that organizational leaders who take proactive steps to champion sustainability initiatives can distinguish themselves in the marketplace, stimulate innovation, fortify resilience against future adversities, and positively contribute to society and the environment. The findings of Sheth and Parvatiyar have the potential to make a substantial contribution to promoting positive social change, serving as a valuable resource for SME business managers in the food services industry. These findings may also offer a pathway toward augmenting their understanding and expertise in crisis management. Through this assistance, managers may fortify their capacity to navigate and respond to crises, potentially enhancing their businesses' resilience and sustainability and influencing positive societal changes in the business community.

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

The purpose of this pragmatic inquiry was to explore and identify the economic crisis management strategies that SME business managers in the food service industry used to prevent business closures in the British West Indies. The literature review included 352 scholarly articles from the Walden University Library databases, including ProQuest, Science Direct, Google Scholar, Directory of Open Access, SAGE, and JSTOR. During the initial searches for pertinent peer-reviewed literature, I narrowed the results to scholarly publications published within the past 5 years. Additionally, I

annotated articles to support the literature and cited previously discovered articles that provided additional resources to help the current study. I searched for literature using the following keywords: *crisis, leadership, business, organizations, economic crisis, crisis management, business failure, communication and innovation, crisis leadership, business failure, change leadership, financial crisis, and leadership strategies*. Approximately 85% of the sources were peer reviewed, as verified by Ulrich's Web Global Serial Directory through Walden University. The total number of sources reviewed included 258 peer-reviewed journal articles, 25 open journal articles, nine websites, two government websites, and 20 electronic books. Furthermore, most of the sources (86%) were published between 2019 and 2023.

The literature review consists of four main sections. The first section includes a detailed analysis of the relational model of crisis management, which I used to guide the study. The second section consists of an overview of different types of crises. I discuss their impact on businesses and strategies to address them. Furthermore, this section includes alternative theories. In the third section, I discuss the following themes and their relation to economic crisis: (a) understanding crisis, (b) types of crisis, (c) economic crisis impact on businesses, (d) economic crisis impact on food services SMEs, and (e) business closure. In the final section, I discuss strategies to prevent business closure.

Conceptual Framework: Relational Model of Crisis Management

The conceptual framework I used for this study was the Jaques (2007) relational model of crisis management. Jaques developed the relational model of crisis management, establishing a comprehensive schema delineating the crucial facets of

navigating a crisis. Jaques's model comprises four interlinked elements that effectively respond to a crisis scenario: (a) crisis preparedness, (b) crisis prevention, (c) crisis incident management, and (d) postcrisis management.

Jaques (2007) posited that each component of crisis management is linked, relying on the synergy of the others to formulate a comprehensive and efficient response to a crisis. Mike et al. (2021) underscored various theories and linear models in disaster management, emphasizing the unique nonlinear perspective of Jaques's model in comprehending and addressing the intricate challenges inherent in crises. Kartikawangi and Dahesihsari (2020) stressed the significance of proficient organizational communication during the COVID-19 pandemic. Kartikawangi and Dahesihsari advocated using the Jaques relational model to facilitate proactive crisis management by initiating early planning, assembling crisis management teams, and establishing robust communication frameworks in readiness for impending crises. Spais and Paul (2021) elaborated on the significance of the Jaques relational crisis management model as a prominent and influential framework in crisis management. Spais and Paul noted that the model is particularly significant for examining the mechanisms associated with unforeseen changes. Similarly, Dobrowolski (2020) recognized the significance of the Jaques model, highlighting that successful leadership during times of crisis requires establishing a proactive approach to crisis avoidance rather than prioritizing only crisis response.

Jaques (2010) emphasized the importance of crisis management in organizational operations, encompassing strategic responses to unforeseen events that can impact an

organization's operations, reputation, and stakeholder relationships. Crisis management involves implementing strategic measures by an organization's leadership to address a crisis effectively (John-Eke & Eke, 2020). The objective is to minimize the negative impact of the crisis on the organization's reputation, operational functions, and relationships with stakeholders. Brychko et al. (2023) advocated for leaders to continuously assess internal and external environments and address challenges by fostering heightened awareness. This process includes identifying opportunities and threats and developing strategic initiatives to leverage organizational strengths while simultaneously addressing and mitigating identified weaknesses. Rim and Ferguson (2020) emphasized that organizational leaders can fortify their capacity to safeguard their company's reputation in times of crisis by embracing proactive crisis management strategies. Leaders who fortify their strategy can protect their company by ensuring their organization is well prepared to navigate challenges and capitalize on opportunities.

The adept management of unforeseen events is pivotal for the success of a business. Proficiently managing unforeseen events requires leaders to collaborate, coordinate actions among diverse stakeholders, and adopt interdisciplinary approaches to prepare and respond to crises (Bataille & Cordova, 2023). Kaul et al. (2020) underscored the importance of leaders cultivating cooperation among diverse stakeholders during a crisis. Kaul et al. emphasized the necessity of transparent and timely communication to build trust and facilitate coordinated responses. Jaques's relational crisis management model underscores leadership's pivotal role in effectively managing crises, emphasizing its significance in providing guidance, making critical decisions, and maintaining

organizational stability during turbulent periods. Jaques's relational model of crisis management encompasses a comprehensive framework that spans the entire crisis management lifecycle, including precrisis readiness, postcrisis recovery, and learning. Using the Jaques model as the conceptual framework for this study, I provided effective crisis management strategies that SME business managers may implement to prevent business failure.

Crisis Preparedness

Organizational leaders bear the responsibility of preparing for a crisis. Crisis preparedness involves preemptive measures and strategic planning, including developing protocols, contingency plans, and resource allocation strategies to mitigate the potential impact of an unforeseen crisis (Akhshik & Beglou, 2023). Every organizational leader will encounter a crisis during business operations (John-Eke & Eke, 2020). In times of crisis, leaders must broaden their circle of influence and adopt a collaborative leadership approach while outlining their strategy for facing present and future challenges (Dirani et al., 2020). Crisis preparedness is necessary for businesses, serving as a cornerstone for their survival and resilience amid unforeseen events or emergencies.

Crisis preparedness entails the development of strategies and executing proactive steps to identify and mitigate the detrimental consequences of potential risk (Ghaderi et al., 2022; Timmis & Brussow, 2020). Leffler et al. (2021) explained that crisis preparedness is essential for efficiently handling emergencies, guaranteeing sufficient resources, and encouraging efficient communication and teamwork. According to Leffler et al., a robust crisis preparedness framework is the linchpin for managing emergencies.

A crisis preparedness framework fosters seamless communication and collaboration, enhancing the organization's capacity to navigate adversities (Gogalniceanu et al., 2022). Organizational leaders must prioritize the development of a crisis preparedness framework to effectively respond to unexpected events that may threaten the stability and operations of their organizations.

Business leaders should engage in continued crisis preparedness to ensure the resilience and sustainability of their organizations. Mpekiaris et al. (2020) specified that business leaders must engage in comprehensive preparedness initiatives to mitigate the potentially devastating impact of disasters and safeguard their continued existence in the market. In explaining the need to be fully prepared for disruptions and potential risks, Reeves et al. (2020) underscored the necessity for unwavering support and dedication from every echelon within an organization. Reeves et al.'s assertion is consistent with the fundamental principle that effective management of strategic risks is paramount. Hatton and Brown (2021) emphasized that risk management transcends operational functions, representing a strategic imperative with substantial influence on leaders' decision making, notably during crises.

Reeves et al.'s (2020) research and the insights articulated by Hatton and Brown (2021) underscored the critical role of organizational leaders in cultivating a comprehensive and unified approach to enhancing resilience amid uncertainties. In such contexts, leaders must apply proficient crisis management techniques to sustain business operations. The unprecedented challenges faced by SME leaders during the COVID-19 crisis demanded the implementation of crisis management measures to navigate the

turbulent times successfully (Klyver & Nielsen, 2021). During the COVID-19 pandemic, SME leaders implemented cost cutting strategies and diversified into new markets to ensure their businesses continued operations (Rahman et al., 2022). Rahman et al.'s (2022) assertion underscored the vital importance of strategic risk management and crisis preparedness, particularly in the face of multifaceted challenges that can threaten the stability and sustainability of organizations.

Specific crises, notably economic crises, can erode confidence in institutional frameworks. Cais et al. (2021) explained that economic uncertainty and volatility could decrease trust and confidence in government institutions, financial systems, and other societal structures. The decrease of trust in an organization can lead to a wide range of negative consequences that can impact its performance, reputation, and overall success. Spalluto et al. (2020) stated that during the COVID-19 pandemic, organizational leaders built trust by being transparent in their decision-making process. Additionally, Thorgren and Williams (2020) explained that SME managers navigated the impact of the COVID-19 crisis by implementing proactive crisis management as a crucial factor in mitigating the effects of the crisis. Navigating the impact of a crisis and building trust requires proactive preparedness, effective communication, decisive action, and ongoing efforts to rebuild trust in the aftermath of the crisis.

The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on businesses across various industries. SME leaders reported increased perceived business risk across financial, operational, and market domains (Cepel et al., 2020; Shahi & Devkota, 2022). SME leaders who strategically allocate resources toward risk assessment, early warning

systems, and disaster preparedness can better withstand and navigate the repercussions of potential risks (Skouloudis et al., (2020). Effective risk management involves implementing strategies that comprehensively grasp the interconnected nature of challenges while integrating suitable risk management approaches (Adhikari & Khanal, 2021). Naradda Gamage et al. (2020) highlighted that leaders of SMEs encounter diverse global economic challenges. However, leaders can forge alliances with policymakers and engage multiple stakeholders to cultivate an environment conducive to their sustainability and expansion.

Effective leadership is pivotal in proactively preparing for a crisis or unforeseen events. Riggio and Newstead (2023) explained that crisis leadership is critical to organizational management, particularly during uncertainty, disruption, or emergency. Alariki and Al-Abed (2021) emphasized that organizational leaders who demonstrate resilience, adaptability, and decisiveness are better equipped to handle crises effectively. These qualities may assist leaders in responding adeptly to changing conditions, making well-informed decisions, and confidently guiding their organizations forward.

Through the meticulous undertaking of risk assessments and comprehensive scenario planning, a leader may possess the capability to discern vulnerabilities and formulate strategic approaches aimed at mitigating potential impacts. Ghaderi et al. (2022) emphasized the need for leaders to recognize the importance of crisis preparedness, engage in continuous training initiatives, and employ proficient communication strategies to address this imperative effectively. These efforts bolster a leader's overall preparedness, ensuring their organizations possess the necessary tools to

navigate and adeptly manage crises (Kane et al., 2021). An imperative initial step in crisis management is conducting a thorough assessment of the present circumstances. This process is critical for understanding the situation's scope, severity, and implications (Boin & Rhinard, 2023). As emphasized by Boin and Rhinard (2023), it is the responsibility of leaders to identify the central issues arising from the crisis to bolster their response strategies. Leaders must prioritize these concerns based on their severity and anticipated impact. Additionally, leaders must cultivate a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted factors contributing to the onset of the crisis.

Crisis Prevention

Crisis prevention is a proactive strategy aimed at averting the onset or minimizing the probability of a crisis. Jaques (2007) stated that this proactive stance involves measures such as early warning systems, continuous environmental monitoring, effective risk management, and prompt emergency action. Jaques (2010) highlighted the fundamental significance of crisis prevention. This approach encompasses a variety of strategies aimed at mitigating potential adversities. Furthermore, Jaques (2007) underscored the importance of a proactive approach to crisis prevention, advocating for regular risk assessments, a robust crisis management framework, efficient communication strategies, comprehensive training, simulations, and a continuous improvement mindset.

Organizational leaders can diminish potential damage, safeguard their reputations, and ensure uninterrupted business operations by proactively identifying and mitigating potential risks before they evolve into full-fledged crises. According to Zimmerman et al.

(2021) and Murad et al. (2021), leaders must adopt a proactive stance in readiness for unforeseen events. Adopting a proactive stance involves recognizing potential risks, devising strategic contingency plans, and implementing measures to mitigate their adverse impacts. Luburic (2021) stressed the pivotal role of proactive measures in averting crises. Rather than relying on reactive responses after a crisis, leaders should allocate resources toward preparedness initiatives and set up early warning systems (Luburic, 2021). A proactive approach demands comprehensive protocols, simulated training sessions, and regular drills to handle unforeseen occurrences adeptly (Abbas Zaher et al., 2021; Bajwa & Mehdiratta, 2020; Leta & Chan, 2021). Through proactive measures, leaders can anticipate potential challenges more effectively, devise strategies to tackle them, and reduce the detrimental consequences on their organizations, stakeholders, and communities (Dittfeld et al., 2021).

A comprehensive understanding of the origins of a crisis is essential for organizational leaders. Leaders equipped with a nuanced understanding of a crisis's origin are better poised to manage and alleviate its extensive repercussions (Brinks & Ibert, 2020). According to Frangieh and Rusu (2021), crises emerge from the precrisis phase, necessitating leaders to implement comprehensive strategies and proactive measures. In our interconnected current landscape, Wysokinska-Senkus and Gorna (2021) highlighted that organizational leaders confront various risks capable of profoundly affecting their operations, reputation, and sustainability. To navigate this landscape, Schoemaker and Day (2021) advocated for leaders to engage in scenario planning, adopt real options thinking, and cultivate dynamic capabilities as strategies to

prepare for unpredictability and volatility. According to Schoemaker and Day's assertion, leaders must discern the likelihood of potential risks and proficiently execute strategies to mitigate or navigate them effectively. By adopting these proactive measures, leaders may safeguard their organizations from detrimental outcomes, fostering an environment conducive to sustainable growth and enduring success.

Chatzipanagiotou and Katsarou (2023) suggest that effective strategic planning and crisis management require robust leadership, transparent communication, stakeholder collaboration, and continuous strategy assessment and improvement. Organizational leaders with decisive attributes and clear vision can empower managers to guide, motivate teams, and facilitate informed decision-making to prevent business failures. A study by Ching-Fu et al. (2020) on the Taiwanese government's response to the COVID-19 crisis identified three fundamental pillars defining the government's strategy: swift detection and response mechanisms, effective communication strategies, and proactive governance measures. These pillars were pivotal in the government's containment of the virus and mitigation of its public health and economic impacts.

Leaders can effectively mitigate the impact of unexpected occurrences by cultivating a comprehensive grasp of potential risks. Giorgetto (2021) asserted that this process involves skillfully crafting tailored response strategies to address these events' distinctive challenges. Eriksson and Hallberg (2022) stated that leaders can cultivate resilience and bolster their ability to manage forthcoming challenges adeptly if they understand the risks associated with a crisis. Leaders could also gain crucial insights for navigating complex situations by cultivating a heightened awareness of potential risks.

This approach may enable informed decision-making that safeguards the organization's stability and resilience in facing adversities.

Crisis Incident Management

Crisis incident management, a crucial component, entails the real-time response and strategies implemented during a crisis. This phase necessitates swift and adept decision-making, effective communication channels, and adept resource allocation to contain and mitigate the crisis's immediate impact (Alariki & Al-Abed, 2021). According to the perspectives offered by Jaques, managing crisis incidents involves a crucial shift from the initial emergency phase to a stage characterized by undertaking an objective assessment and early recognition of the situation. Leong et al. (2015) advocated that researchers prioritize increased focus on the crisis response phase to alleviate and fortify against the immediate ramifications of calamities. This progression necessitates activating preestablished processes and carefully selecting and implementing appropriate strategies to mitigate reputational damage and rebuild trust (Tao & Song, 2020). Hayes et al. (2021) emphasized that emergency incidents are intricate and ever-changing situations necessitating swift decision-making, proficient communication, collaborative teamwork, and adept leadership. In times of crisis, leaders who take proactive measures to engage with stakeholders can effectively address these issues, rebuild trust, and address public concerns promptly (Wei & Kim, 2021). Furthermore, Thielsch et al. (2021) explained that managing a crisis is a complex and challenging task that requires robust infrastructure and coordinated efforts from multiple stakeholders. By understanding the

key challenges, crisis management teams and organizational leaders may better prepare themselves to respond to crises and minimize their impact.

Crisis communication is also an essential aspect of managing a crisis effectively. Kim and Lim (2020) highlighted the importance of crisis communication strategies for fostering positive employee reactions, stressing the need for leadership to demonstrate clarity, consistency, and transparency. A crisis communication strategy should be comprehensive, timely, transparent, and accurate, utilize multiple dissemination channels, engage stakeholders, and convey empathy and concern (Ozanne et al., 2020). Haupt (2021) emphasized that crisis communication strategies should consider the emotional needs of individuals affected by the crisis. Haupt stated that emotions run high during emergencies, and people may experience fear, anxiety, or grief. Effective crisis communication acknowledges these emotions and provides support and reassurance to those affected (De Waele et al., 2020). Through effective communication strategies, leaders may adeptly offer support, alleviate anxiety, foster resilience, and promote cohesion among individuals within an organizational context.

System activation response is also a crucial component of crisis management. During moments of crisis, system activation involves the intricate process of harmonizing and mobilizing personnel, resources, and existing systems (Quarantelli (1988). The primary objective of system activation is to reinstate a state of normalcy swiftly, minimize the extent of damage incurred, and guarantee an efficient and effective response mechanism. Hugelius et al. (2020) accentuated the importance of adeptly

coordinating communication strategies, resource allocation methods, and ethical considerations within the management framework of disaster situations.

The effective amalgamation of these elements is imperative, as it ensures timely and suitable assistance to individuals adversely affected by the disaster. In examining nursing competencies in crisis response during the COVID-19 pandemic, Pascua (2021) emphasized the crucial significance of nurses possessing a wide range of abilities. This process involves evaluating circumstances, identifying potential hazards and threats, and formulating effective measures to mitigate their impact. Additionally, Pascua highlighted the significance of establishing clear communication channels, swiftly mobilizing resources, and ensuring the safety of both patients and health care personnel. Similarly, Shinnars and Africa (2021) underscored the essential role of ongoing professional development for nurses. Shinnars and Africa emphasized the importance of continuously honing skills and expanding knowledge to adeptly respond to dynamic and evolving situations during times of crisis. Shinnars and Africa stated that by prioritizing continuous development, individual nurses and organizational leaders may enhance their capabilities, enabling them to navigate crises more effectively and contribute to positive outcomes.

Datta and Nwankpa (2021) underscored the necessity of a robust crisis response strategy to ensure uninterrupted business continuity within the intricately connected and dynamic modern business milieu. In this context, adept organizational leaders can swiftly anticipate potential crises, efficiently mobilize resources, and employ adaptable strategies to surmount challenges (Schakel & Wolbers, 2021). Turan (2022) highlighted the

significant impact of diverse crisis management strategies on shaping consumer perceptions and influencing brand equity, underscoring the necessity for organizational leaders to respond adeptly to crises.

It is incumbent upon organizational leaders to proactively institute effective response strategies to safeguard brand equity and mitigate the adverse repercussions of crises (Farhang et al., 2023). Implementing proactive crisis response strategies may allow organization leaders to detect potential crises early on and take preventive measures to mitigate their impact. By identifying potential risks and vulnerabilities, organization leaders can develop plans and protocols to address these issues before they escalate into full-blown crises.

Postcrisis Management

Postcrisis management encapsulates the aftermath of a crisis scenario. Through postcrisis analysis, business leaders may identify strengths and weaknesses in their strategies, operations, and risk management approaches (Cucculelli & Peruzzi, 2020). Within the domain of organizational management, it is critical that leaders actively participate in postcrisis reflection and analysis. Leta and Chan (2021) underscored the importance of leveraging past experiences to augment future preparedness, tackling significant challenges, capitalizing on opportunities, and integrating best practices. Pearson and Clair (1998) posited that postcrisis analysis may prove instrumental for organizational leaders to identify inadequacies within their crisis preparedness strategies and provide opportunities to build resilience. By embracing lessons learned, leaders could proactively devise strategies to prevent similar crises from occurring again.

Moreover, postcrisis communication plays a crucial role in managing the aftermath of a crisis. Ulmer et al. (2007) highlighted the necessity for organizational leaders to engage in purposeful communication with stakeholders, addressing concerns and providing viable solutions and remedies after a crisis occurs. Kiambi and Shafer (2016) emphasized the importance of proficient corporate crisis communication in safeguarding a company's reputation amid challenging times.

An organization's reputation significantly relies on leaders' adeptness in crisis management. Leaders must proactively devise and implement crisis response strategies to mitigate the detrimental effects (Schermer, 2021). Leaders must identify areas for improvement and implement necessary adjustments through a thorough analysis of their crisis communication approaches. This continuous learning process fosters resilience and preparedness for future crises.

In the aftermath of a crisis, there is often an inclination to return to normal business operations swiftly. Jaques (2007) highlighted the significant risks associated with an organization's postcrisis strategy, noting that ineffective management in this phase can have severe and longlasting implications for the organization. Poblete et al. (2022) articulated the substantial challenge of re-establishing relationships with diverse stakeholders following a crisis. Poblete et al. suggested that leaders must assess the repercussions of the disruption on these relationships, identify areas necessitating improvement, and devise cooperative strategies to address any arising challenges. Xu (2019) proposed that leaders should allocate resources to support affected stakeholders, engage in proactive reputation management, and establish enduring relationships to

cultivate trust, emphasizing that such commitment is imperative for effective postcrisis recovery and longterm stability.

A notable risk associated with the aftermath of a crisis involves supply chain disruption. In response to the global supply chain disruption triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, Saleheen and Habib (2022) indicated that business leaders adopted a comprehensive risk assessment approach and integrated sustainability considerations to mitigate their disruptions. Ritter and Pedersen (2020) expounded on how business leaders strategically positioned themselves for success in the post-pandemic era. According to Ritter and Pedersen, their approach involved embracing digital transformation, reevaluating supply chain strategies, understanding evolving customer behavior, and fostering innovation within their organizations. Crises often disrupt routine operations, compelling business leaders to innovate in their approaches. Implementing sustainability strategies postcrisis becomes paramount for business leaders aiming to achieve recovery and long-term success. This strategic shift is critical in navigating the challenges posed by a crisis and ensuring sustainable business practices for future resilience.

Jaques (2007) emphasized the importance of promptly debriefing the crisis team and assessing the crisis plan immediately after a crisis. Arriaga et al. (2020) explained that debriefing constitutes a structured process enabling individuals or teams to reflect on their performance and discern areas that necessitate improvement. This process holds substantial value for organizational leaders because they may glean insights from past experiences and errors. Leaders could leverage insights gleaned from debriefing sessions to solidify successful operational strategies and discern areas for enhancement through

the assimilation of prior experiences (Paquay et al., 2022). Business managers in the food services industry could potentially benefit from debriefing. Debriefing sessions may also serve as an opportunity for a comprehensive evaluation of their crisis management approach while acknowledging areas of strength, identifying flaws, and adjusting strategies as deemed necessary. Postcrisis evaluation may also foster a culture of continuous improvement, refining crisis response protocols and fortifying the organization's resilience in confronting future challenges.

Supporting and Contrasting Theories

I explored several alternative theoretical frameworks pertinent to this study. Among these theories were Weick's (1993) sensemaking approach to crisis management, Fink's (1986) model of crisis management, Mitroff's (1994) five-stage crisis management model, and Coombs's (2007) situational crisis communication theory. Although there were many different approaches to managing a crisis, Abdalla et al. (2021) indicated that crisis management is a multifaceted discipline involving various methodologies and strategies to address crises efficiently. Jaques contested the linearity of other crisis management models, arguing that crisis activities often overlap or coincide rather than follow a single direction. Jaques suggested that organizational leaders may gain the knowledge and insight to make informed decisions to minimize crisis related issues by understanding the relationship between crisis activities.

Weick Sensemaking Approach to Crisis Management

Various alternative conceptual frameworks have emerged within crisis management, offering unique approaches and perspectives. One such framework is

Weick's (1993) Sensemaking approach to crisis management, which underscored the pivotal role of sensemaking in comprehending and managing crises. Weick highlighted the significance of constructing narratives to make sense of ambiguous information during crises. According to Weick, individuals and organizational leaders engage in sensemaking by collectively interpreting the crisis, identifying key concerns, and devising appropriate responses. Boin and Hart (2012) posited that incorporating sensemaking strategies can augment leaders' understanding of the complexities inherent in crises, empowering them to render informed judgments. Weick, Boin, and Hart emphasized the criticality of sensemaking as a vital process within crisis management. Weick, Boin, and Hart highlighted the cooperative essence of this process, which entails a collective understanding of the crisis and formulating response strategies. Christianson and Barton (2021) provided insightful perspectives on how leaders and organizational executives tackled the challenges stemming from the disruptions induced by COVID-19. Christianson and Barton emphasized the significance of adaptive sensemaking as a crucial tool for maneuvering through volatile and uncertain environments.

Maitlis and Sonenshein (2010) posited an argument against Weick's sensemaking approach, suggesting that its emphasis on individual cognitive processes might oversimplify the intricate process of sensemaking during crises. Maitlis and Sonenshein highlighted a potential oversight of the social and emotional facets within Weick's framework, indicating a limitation in its application for comprehending and handling complex crises where social and emotional factors hold substantial significance. Seeger et al. (2003) contended that although Weick's approach recognizes the importance of

communication in establishing shared understanding amid crises, it lacks a comprehensive framework for thoroughly analyzing and overseeing the processes involved in crisis communication.

Fink Model of Crisis Management

Like Jaques's relational crisis management model, Fink (1986) presented a structured analogy of a crisis's evolution, likening it to a lifecycle marked by a sequence of distinct stages. Fink offered a holistic framework for comprehending and effectively addressing organizational crises. Fink's model comprised four key stages: (a) prodromal, (b) acute, (c) chronic, and (d) resolution. The prodromal stage represents the initial phase, characterized by the crisis's emergence and early warning signals. As the situation transitions to the acute stage, the crisis reaches a critical point, necessitating immediate and decisive action. Subsequently, in the chronic stage, efforts focus on stabilizing the crisis, though its effects persist, demanding long-term solutions. In the resolution stage, organization leaders effectively resolve the crisis by implementing strategies to prevent similar occurrences in the future. Frandsen and Johansen (2020) emphasized Fink's substantial impact, recognizing his research as one of the foremost pioneering works in crisis management. Frandsen and Johansen underscored Fink's significant contributions to comprehending organizational crises, crisis management practices, and crisis communication strategies.

Upon examining Penn State University's crisis management strategies in the aftermath of the scandal involving former assistant football coach Jerry Sandusky, Ketchen (2014) highlighted Fink's expertise in crisis management, emphasizing his

insights into the factors contributing to the inadequacy of Penn State's crisis management efforts. Through a thorough analysis of Penn State's response using crisis management principles, Ketchen suggested that Fink's approach to crisis management played a pivotal role in shaping subsequent approaches to crisis communication and reputation management in comparable high-profile cases. Kamei (2019) highlighted Fink's model as an effective strategy encompassing various activities such as preparedness, response, recovery, and mitigation, all aimed at minimizing the impact of crises and facilitating a return to normalcy. Fink's crisis management model presents a comprehensive linear structure encompassing different crisis management phases. In contrast, Jaque's relational crisis management prioritizes relationship maintenance amid a crisis and provides a non-linear approach to crisis management.

Mitroff's Five Stages Crisis Management Model

Mitroff (1994) acknowledged the existence of a lifecycle progression in crises. Mitroff proposed a systematic framework to comprehend, effectively manage, and extract valuable lessons from crises within organizational contexts (Coombs & Holladay, 2010). Iftikhar et al. (2023) described Mitroff's model as a process in which leaders must detect early warning signals to mitigate potential harm, limit the crisis's impact, and subsequently identify lessons learned. Although Mitroff's model has been widely used and praised for its comprehensive approach to crisis management, it has also faced criticism for certain limitations and potential drawbacks. Researchers argued that Mitroff neglects the importance of proactive learning. This narrow focus may cause organizational leaders to miss valuable opportunities to prevent or mitigate future crises

(Boin & Hart, 2003). Some researchers criticized Mitroff's Five Stage Crisis Management Model for its limited consideration of stakeholder perspectives. Coombs and Holladay (2006) argued that leaders should focus on organizational responses to crisis management and consider the needs and expectations of various stakeholders, such as employees, customers, and the community.

Maintaining stakeholder trust and mitigating negative repercussions on an organization's reputation depends on implementing effective communication, transparency, empathy, and responsiveness (Men et al., 2022). Critiques argued that there is a lack of empirical evidence supporting the effectiveness of Mitroff's model in real crisis scenarios. Critics contend that the practicality and utility of the model remain unverified, emphasizing the need for further validation through empirical research (Boin & Hart, 2003). Though influential, Mitroff's Five Stages Crisis Management Model has been criticized for its lack of nuance and context-specific approach, highlighting the need for a more comprehensive crisis management approach.

Coombs Situational Crisis Communication Theory

Within the Situational Crisis Communication Theory, there is recognition that effective communication is vital in managing a crisis. The Coombs Situational Crisis Theory is a theoretical framework that elucidates the strategies leaders employ in crises to protect their reputations and uphold the trust of their stakeholders (Coombs, 2022). Macnamara (2021) asserted that the Situational Crisis Communication Theory is the predominant crisis communication theory researchers recognize. Guerber et al. (2020) highlighted that the Coombs Situational Crisis Theory provides a systematic framework

for understanding how organizational leaders communicate with stakeholders during a crisis. By considering the cognitive processes that underlie stakeholders' views, organizational leaders may customize their communication strategies to respond to crises and safeguard their reputations. Othman and Yusoff (2020) asserted that organizational leaders must thoughtfully assess the interplay between crisis history, crisis responsibility, and crisis severity while formulating their crisis response strategies. Coombs and Holladay (2010) presented various implications for crisis communication practitioners. Initially, they recommended that organizational leaders concentrate on framing crises as technical errors, as this approach tends to generate more favorable perceptions of the mistake itself and the organization involved. Additionally, Coombs and Holladay underscored the significance of adjusting communication strategies to accommodate the changing nature of the crisis, highlighting its considerable influence on perceptions surrounding the error.

Although the Coombs Situational Crisis Theory has garnered extensive recognition and has played a significant role in guiding research and practice in career development, it has also encountered various criticisms. In assessing the relevance of the Coombs Situational Crisis Theory within the Japanese culture to understand cultural nuances and communication practices, Barkley (2020) highlighted potential limitations arising from cultural disparities. Barkley indicated that Japanese culture emphasizes collectivism, harmony, and conflict avoidance. Consequently, leaders within Japanese organizations may prioritize preserving public harmony over transparency and full disclosure during crises. Barkley's research posited the necessity of adapting situational

factors and communication strategies in Coombs's Situational Crisis Theory to better align with the nuances of the Japanese cultural context. Furthermore, the Coombs Situational Crisis Theory's focus on strategic communication may result in overlooking the emotional and psychological elements inherent in crisis communication, which are crucial for understanding stakeholders' reactions and requirements (Claeys & Cauberghe, 2014). Organizational leaders should consider these constraints and incorporate additional components into their crisis management strategies to ensure effective communication and preserve reputation during critical moments.

Understanding Crisis

Scholars have extensively argued that a crisis can potentially imperil an organization's existence. A crisis is a pivotal and unforeseeable event or circumstance that poses significant threats to an individual, community, organization, or society (Boin & Hart, 2003). Coombs (2021) further delineated a crisis as an occurrence that presents a substantial threat while offering a significant opportunity for an organization. Coombs emphasized the erratic nature of crises and highlighted that a crisis may pose sudden and severe challenges to an organization, demanding a prompt and adept response. Expanding on this concept, Seeger et al. (2003) offered a broader definition, characterizing a crisis as the perception of an unpredictable event that jeopardizes stakeholders' fundamental expectations that may significantly impact an organization's performance, resulting in adverse outcomes. This definition underscores the crucial role of stakeholders' perceptions in shaping the narrative of a crisis and highlights the potential consequences for an organization's reputation and overall performance. Such insights underscore the

multifaceted nature of crises, highlighting their potential impact on stakeholders and underscoring the critical necessity for crisis response personnel to manage these unpredictable and high-risk situations proactively.

A crisis has the potential to introduce uncertainty into the operational efficiency of an organization. Pearson and Clair (1998) described a crisis as a specific, unexpected, and non-routine event or series of events that create high levels of uncertainty. A crisis may arise from various internal and external factors, including financial challenges, governance issues, demographic changes, and evolving societal expectations (Goedegebuure & Meek, 2021). Bergman-Rosamond et al. (2022) stated that crises encompass various events, such as natural disasters, economic recessions, and public health emergencies. Bergman-Rosamond et al. articulated that these events invariably yield profound consequences, necessitating concerted efforts to mitigate their impact and effectively facilitate recovery.

During a crisis, leaders often face time-sensitive situations requiring immediate action. Grissom and Condon (2021) highlighted the need for leaders to rely on their expertise, experience, and available data to make informed decisions. During a crisis, leaders must demonstrate task-oriented behaviors, which involve offering explicit guidance and making effective decisions (Boin et al., 2013). In times of crisis, effective leadership is crucial for navigating uncertainty, managing change, and ensuring the well-being of individuals and the stability of organizations (Brion, 2021). Leadership is critical in guiding individuals and organizations through uncertainty and adversity in times of

crisis. Leaders must navigate difficult choices, offer guidance, instill assurance, and efficiently mobilize resources to address the challenges.

Organizational leaders must traverse periods of instability and avoid potential detriment by instituting effective crisis management strategies. Alkhawani et al. (2019) specified that crisis management is pivotal in safeguarding organizations' continuity and triumph, particularly when confronted with arduous circumstances. Alkhawani et al. posited that during times of crisis, it becomes imperative for organizational leaders to embrace a transformational leadership paradigm. Boin and McConnell (2007) articulated the importance of organizational leaders understanding the potential ramifications of a crisis on their operations, financial standing, and reputation. Boin and McConnell noted that such comprehension is essential for formulating and implementing efficacious risk management and preparedness strategies.

Types of Crisis

Reputational Crisis

A reputational crisis can significantly harm a business's operations across multiple facets. Schermer (2021) described a reputational crisis as a circumstance wherein an organization's actions, conduct, or occurrences substantially jeopardize its reputation, thereby inducing adverse perceptions among stakeholders. Schermer highlighted the intricate and diverse nature of crises, which may stem from internal deficiencies, external incidents, or a combination of both factors. Reputational crises can potentially yield far-reaching adverse ramifications, undermining trust and shaping stakeholder perspectives (Kuipers & Schonheit, 2022). These challenges can have far-

reaching consequences, impacting an organization's brand image, customer trust, investor confidence, and overall business performance. Fragouli (2020) explained that corporate reputation is essential in shaping stakeholder perceptions, impacting consumer behavior, and attracting talent and investment. Fragouli's assertion underscores the multidimensional significance of corporate reputation beyond mere brand perception. Fragouli suggested that a strong reputation can positively impact various aspects of an organization's relationships with stakeholders, ultimately contributing to its overall success and sustainability in the marketplace.

Organizational leaders are vital in upholding stakeholder trust and confidence by addressing reputational challenges within a company. Dwiedienawati et al. (2021) highlighted the importance of organizational leaders formulating strategies to protect the reputation of their organizations. Dwiedienawati et al. recommended timely and transparent communication as a pivotal strategy to mitigate and effectively manage potential reputational harm. Le Roux and Van Niekerk (2020) emphasized the importance of fostering effective communication and collaboration among diverse stakeholders to reduce the impact of potential disasters on their organization. Le Roux and Van Niekerk suggested that it becomes crucial for organizational leaders to understand the factors contributing to reputational crises. By understanding these factors, organizational leaders can gain a deeper awareness of the vulnerabilities within their organization, whether stemming from internal processes, external influences, or a combination of both (Salunkhe et al., 2023). Knowing potential risks, leaders can use this information to make informed decisions.

With this knowledge, leaders can swiftly detect early warning signs and take preemptive actions to strengthen their organization's resilience against potential threats to its reputation, thus averting or mitigating the impact of potential crises (Pedersen et al., 2020; Schermer, 2021). By taking proactive steps tailored to address particular risks (Gray et al., 2020), leaders may shield their organization from potential harm and position themselves to capitalize on opportunities for growth and advancement, even amid challenging circumstances. Englert et al. (2020) stated that an economic crisis can undermine an organization's reputation. Consequently, it becomes imperative for managers within these institutions to embrace and implement crisis management strategies. Knowing potential risks could foster a culture of resilience within an organization; leaders may build a workforce that is adaptable, prepared for change, and capable of responding to unexpected situations.

Leadership Crisis

A leadership crisis can exert profound and extensive impacts on business operations. Dalcher (2020) elucidated that, during periods of crisis, leaders face unprecedented challenges that require a departure from conventional strategies. In times of crisis, leadership necessitates navigating challenging decisions, establishing communication channels, and providing clear direction (James & Bennett, 2023). Klebe et al. (2021) suggested that leaders adopt a proactive stance in navigating crises. Klebe et al. suggested that leaders must take proactive measures to effectively address and manage challenging situations. Incorrectly addressing crises may also result in harmful and disruptive outcomes. Leaders who display destructive behaviors during a crisis, such as

narcissism, authoritarianism, and unethical conduct, can erode trust, impede effective communication, and disrupt organizational decision-making processes (Fors Brandebo, 2020). When exploring the challenges faced by healthcare workers during the pandemic, Beilstein et al. (2021) highlighted the importance of proactive planning, transparent communication, and compassionate leadership. Beilstein et al. noted that such an approach fosters unity and purpose among team members, especially during a crisis.

Strategic leadership is also significant, particularly in times of crisis. Amid the dynamic and unpredictable nature of the pandemic, strategic leadership and foresight proved pivotal in guiding various sectors through the challenges of the COVID-19 crisis (Farhan, 2021; Mutch, 2020). Farhan and Mutch articulated that leaders exhibited proactivity in decision-making, transparency in communication, and agility in adapting to rapidly evolving situations. Farhan's insights highlighted the vital impact of strategic leadership in adeptly navigating the complexities of the pandemic. Farhan and Mutch emphasized that leaders, through their foresight, played a critical role in shaping their nation's response to unprecedented challenges. In examining crisis management practices among SMEs, Brunelli et al. (2023) and Kottika et al. (2020) emphasized a significant deficiency in the resources and capabilities of SME leaders to manage crises effectively. Brunelli et al. noted that poor leadership, ineffective communication, and an absence of clearly defined objectives frequently obstruct the efficacy of crisis management strategies in SMEs. Brunelli et al. and Kottika et al.'s insights shed light on the complexities encountered by SME leaders as they endeavor to manage and mitigate crises, particularly under the conditions imposed by restricted resources. Kottika et al. underscored the

pivotal role of leadership, communication, and a strong sense of purpose in enhancing the effectiveness of crisis management.

The global hospitality industry was significantly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. SME leaders in this sector fortified their crisis preparedness and resilience by implementing tailored crisis management strategies (Burhan et al., 2021; Kaushal & Srivastava, 2021). Burhan et al. and Kaushal and Srivastava suggested that tailoring crisis management approaches to the challenges SME leaders face in the hospitality sector yields more effective outcomes. This approach underscores the importance of implementing industry-specific strategies to enhance the ability of SME leaders to navigate and respond effectively to unforeseen crises.

Economic Crisis

An economic crisis can exert a profound impact on businesses across various dimensions. Hadziahmetovic et al. (2018) defined an economic crisis as an intricate interplay of interconnected elements encompassing financial instability, market disruptions, and macroeconomic imbalances. Moreover, Borio (2020) expounded that economic crises introduce uncertainty and significantly influence the financial health of firms. Understanding the origins and implications of economic crises is crucial for policymakers and business leaders to navigate these formidable challenges and fortify their resilience effectively. Aktar et al. (2021) undertook a comprehensive study examining the predicted ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic on energy consumption, CO₂ emissions, and the policies implemented by leaders to mitigate these effects. The study, occurring during the pandemic (before vaccine discovery), used a

conceptual method to predict crises during and after the pandemic. Akhtar et al. noted that policymakers could leverage government initiatives to enhance prosperity and resilience, advocating for a shift towards developing enforceable strategies for decisive action during the pandemic. Akhtar et al. emphasized the importance of proactive policy measures to mitigate the environmental repercussions of the pandemic-induced economic crisis. Akhtar et al. advocated for these measures to guide the global economy toward a more sustainable trajectory, particularly during uncertain times.

Examining the measures implemented by the Nigerian government to mitigate the pandemic's consequences, Ozili (2021) revealed that the pandemic led to diminished economic activities, resulting in job losses and reduced earnings for individuals employed in affected sectors. Economic downturns can manifest various impacts on business finances. Hertati et al. (2020) indicated that an economic crisis can profoundly affect a business's financial standing, especially concerning its operational aspects. Hertati et al. highlighted repercussions such as decreased revenues, heightened operational costs, and stricter financing conditions stemming from these crises.

The pandemic exposed vulnerabilities within global supply chains. Shahed et al. (2021) highlighted that the COVID-19 crisis significantly affected business leaders and their ability to manufacture goods due to disruptions in the global supply chain. J. Chen et al. (2021) observed that the pandemic precipitated raw material scarcity, leading to supply network disruptions. According to J. Chen et al., this situation affected the production of goods, leading to delays and increased costs. Amid an economic downturn, accelerating digital transformation initiatives becomes imperative for business leaders.

Datta and Nwankpa (2021) indicated that during the COVID-19 pandemic, organizational leaders promoted remote work, amplified online sales, and enhanced their companies' digital marketing strategies by adopting digital technologies. Valdez-Juarez et al. (2022) further elucidated that business leaders adjusted their operations and enhanced their competitiveness, thus alleviating the adverse effects of the economic decline through investment in innovation and technology. Economic crises may also reshape consumer behavior, affecting businesses' revenue streams and marketing strategies. In times of economic decline, Goswami and Chouhan (2021) proposed an adaptive approach for retailers to navigate shifting market demands by reallocating resources, investing in digital infrastructure, and embracing innovative methods to engage and retain customers.

Understanding consumer preferences amid economic instability may guide producers and marketers in adjusting strategies offering affordable alternatives to meet evolving demands (Rabadan et al., 2020). During recent economic crises, governments globally implemented diverse fiscal stimulus measures to bolster struggling businesses. Nicola et al. (2020) highlighted that governments globally implemented stimulus packages and financial aid programs, temporarily alleviating businesses and stabilizing economies. Governments are crucial in promoting stability and implementing financial assistance and relief measures to business owners during crises (Abd Aziz et al., 2022). By supporting business owners, governments could mitigate the adverse effects of economic downturns, including unemployment, diminished productivity, and reduced consumer spending.

Economic Crisis Impact on Food Services SMEs

SMEs in the food service sector play a crucial role in global economies. During economic crises, SMEs often encounter significant challenges that impact their sustainability and growth. The food industry holds a pivotal position within society, making substantial contributions to economic growth, employment generation, and the holistic welfare of communities (Abbate et al., 2023). Economic upheavals, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, have disrupted the food industry's economic landscape, causing supply chain disruptions and shifting consumer behavior towards online grocery shopping and home cooking (Artem & Alexey, 2020). Ausat and Suherlan (2021) stated that many SME business leaders in Indonesia experienced significant disruptions in their supply chains, resulting in considerable difficulties in sourcing raw materials and components. Ausat and Suherlan stated that these challenges were primarily attributed to the widespread impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which affected global trade and logistics networks, further complicating the procurement processes for these businesses.

Lee and Ham (2021) asserted that the COVID-19 pandemic instigated a substantial alteration in consumer behavior, prompting a notable inclination toward safer and more convenient food choices. Lee and Ham highlighted that this shift increased demand for delivery and takeout services and a growing interest in meal kit subscriptions. Bivona and Cruz (2021) asserted that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on SMEs within the food and beverage industry required their leaders to adapt to new measures rapidly. In response to this crisis, numerous business leaders initiated innovative changes to their business models. Bivona and Cruz noted that affected leaders strategically

employed business model innovations, adjusting their frameworks to align with shifting market dynamics, evolving customer needs, and technological progress.

The lockdown measures imposed to curb the spread of COVID-19 also significantly impacted the operations of SMEs. Lu et al. (2021) highlighted that the repercussions of the COVID-19 crisis in Sichuan, China, primarily stemmed from the enforcement of lockdowns and social distancing protocols. Lu et al. stated that these measures significantly reduced the demand for goods and services, causing disruptions across regional supply chains. Ali et al. (2021) highlighted SME managers' intricate challenges in the food services industry. Ali et al. underscored the multifaceted hurdles of maintaining seamless supply chains and ensuring uninterrupted business continuity during the COVID-19 pandemic. Ali et al. further noted that SME managers faced many challenges during the pandemic. Chief among these was the disruption of transportation, which significantly hindered the efficient movement of goods and materials vital to their operations. Lockdowns, restricted movements, and fluctuating regulations profoundly impacted logistics networks, resulting in delays and interruptions in the timely delivery of supplies.

Moreover, Ali et al. highlighted the acute impact of labor shortages. As the pandemic unfolded, numerous challenges arose in securing an adequate workforce. Factors such as employees falling ill, concerns about workplace safety, and government-imposed restrictions on labor mobility all contributed to a scarcity of available workforce (Haug et al., 2020; Le et al., 2020). This scarcity, in turn, strained the ability of SME managers' ability to maintain their usual operational capacities in the food services sector.

Etemad (2020) asserted that leaders of SMEs face numerous challenges amidst global crises, including reduced demand for their products, financial constraints, and changes in regulatory environments. Etemad emphasized the inherent vulnerability of SME leaders, highlighting their comparatively lower financial resilience and adaptability to withstand prolonged periods of crisis compared to more giant corporations. Lim et al. (2020) observed that economic crises frequently result in diminished access to financing for SMEs due to heightened risk aversion among banks, leading to a decreased willingness to extend loans. As banks prioritize minimizing their exposure to potential losses, SME leaders face hurdles in obtaining the necessary capital to sustain or expand their operations during challenging economic phases.

Consequently, limited access to financing exacerbates the financial strain on SMEs, hindering their growth prospects and their leader's ability to navigate through economic downturns successfully. Najib et al. (2021) emphasized the critical importance of government assistance and innovation in securing the survival of SME restaurants amid economic crises. Najib et al. stated that governmental intervention, comprising financial aid, tax relief, and rent subsidies, is crucial in supporting businesses experiencing difficulties. Furthermore, Najib et al. stated that these initiatives may aid enterprise managers in maintaining their workforce and continuing operations in the face of challenging circumstances. In Germany, the COVID-19 crisis wielded a substantial impact, notably on businesses operating within the restaurant and bar industry (Neise et al., 2021). Neise et al. highlighted that these enterprises promptly adjusted to new regulations and evolving consumer behavior patterns prompted by the pandemic.

Pedersen et al. (2020) indicated that proficiently navigating a crisis demands implementing a distinct strategy compared to standard company operations. According to Pedersen et al., this approach involves tackling unpredictability, disruptions, and heightened stakeholder demands in challenging circumstances.

SME managers are particularly vulnerable during economic crises due to limited resources, reduced financial reserves, and dependence on immediate revenue streams. However, proactive measures can substantially mitigate the adverse impacts of such crises (Boman & Schneider, 2021; Oladele et al., 2020). By implementing a combination of proactive measures, SME managers in the food services industry could strengthen their resilience and increase the likelihood of navigating through economic crises with more stability and agility.

Business Closure

Business closure can significantly impact an organization's reputation, fostering negative perceptions among stakeholders. Kibler et al. (2021) articulated that business leaders encounter difficulties in upholding their reputation and credibility following the closure of a business, given the societal stigma commonly associated with failure. Business closures, often a consequence of economic downturns or unforeseen events like the COVID-19 pandemic, are a common occurrence in the dynamic business landscape (Bendavid et al., 2021). Business closures are an intrinsic aspect of the economic landscape; however, their ramifications are far-reaching. Business closures profoundly affect unemployment rates, leading to job losses and amplifying financial strain on families and individuals (A. Huang & Makridis et al., 2020). Furthermore, business

closures disrupt supply chains, impacting other businesses within the interconnected ecosystem (Walmsley et al., 2021). This ripple effect has the potential to initiate a cascading sequence, ultimately resulting in a more widespread economic downturn.

The closure of businesses carries profound social implications extending beyond economic challenges. Individuals may grapple with psychological stress, social unease, and financial hardships (Stephens et al., 2021). Closure may also result in unemployment, weaken the social framework, erode community cohesion, influence local infrastructure and services, and trigger repercussions across various industries (Siyongwana & Shabalala, 2019). Mental health ramifications are significant, encompassing job loss, stress, anxiety, and depression stemming from financial insecurity and uncertainties about what lies ahead (Park & Kim, 2021). Furthermore, business owners and entrepreneurs deeply invested in their enterprises may undergo distress and setbacks, enduring lasting psychological strain affecting individuals, families, and the community. The immediate and severe consequences of business closures are notably manifested through job losses, significantly elevating unemployment rates. The COVID-19 pandemic prompted many business owners, as the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics (2021) reported, to temporarily or permanently shut down their operations. This precipitated widespread joblessness and financial insecurity among individuals.

Furthermore, business closures reverberate through supply chains and may influence suppliers and interconnected industries. This interdependency could amplify economic shockwaves and trigger a cascading effect on associated sectors. Insights from the International Monetary Fund (2020) indicated that closures in pivotal sectors, notably

manufacturing and retail industries, unleashed a ripple effect on suppliers, precipitating a contraction in economic activity and impeding recovery endeavors. Additionally, businesses contribute to local economic development through investments and job creation. When a business closes, these contributions diminish, potentially causing long-term effects on a region's economic growth and stability.

The closure of businesses holds the potential to influence consumer confidence and alter spending behaviors, consequently leading to a decline in overall demand. Reducing consumer spending, a pivotal engine of economic expansion, could exacerbate the prevailing economic downturn. According to Song et al. (2021), 93% of the world's workers resided in countries affected by business closures, leading to many jobs transitioning to remote work arrangements. Safeguarding a company's survival and continuity demands astute planning and strategic actions, especially in an economic crisis. Business leaders are responsible for steering their organizations through turbulent times by formulating comprehensive strategies that mitigate closure risks and bolster resilience.

Strategies to Prevent Business Closure

Leadership

Leadership stands as an indispensable element in effective organizational management. Eichenauer et al. (2022) elucidated the pivotal role of leadership during an economic crisis, emphasizing its significance in providing essential direction, inspiring and motivating teams, and ensuring stability. During an economic crisis, leaders must plan strategically to navigate the challenges and uncertainties. Schaedler et al. (2022)

highlighted that successful strategic leadership in tumultuous times necessitates a blend of foresight, adaptability, risk management, innovation, and proficient communication. By embodying these attributes and skillfully steering the organization through turbulent periods, strategic leaders can effectively position their entities for sustained success, resiliently overcoming the hurdles presented by economic crises. A good communication strategy is vital, particularly during economic turmoil. Josef and Helena (2022) highlighted the significance of exploring the correlation between communication and organizational effectiveness during an economic crisis. Josef and Helena emphasized the pivotal role of effective leadership communication in managing stakeholder expectations, addressing concerns, and maintaining organizational stability.

In times of uncertainty and upheaval, individuals, organizational leaders, and societies rely on trust to foster cooperation, make informed decisions, and maintain stability. Everett et al. (2021) elucidated the significance of trust in leadership during a global health crisis, emphasizing its crucial role for policymakers and leaders at all levels. Goldstein and Wiedemann (2020) emphasized the crucial role of trust in shaping public reactions during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Goldstein and Wiedemann, trust played a crucial role in guiding individuals and communities as they dealt with the difficulties brought forth by the pandemic. Goldstein and Wiedemann further stated that trust was critical to promoting a sense of cohesion, togetherness, and collective action. SME business managers in the food services industry could use this approach to adeptly navigate future crises while actively engaging with their employees and communities and promoting resilience.

One significant aspect of leadership during an economic crisis is providing a clear vision and direction. Fathih et al. (2021) stated that visionary leaders articulate a compelling vision that motivates and aligns individuals within the organization toward a common goal. According to Fathih et al., a leader with vision serves as a beacon of hope and direction, guiding actions and decisions during uncertain times. Furthermore, leadership involves making tough decisions in allocating resources and managing uncertainties. According to Northouse (2021), leaders must exhibit adaptability and flexibility, adjusting strategies to address immediate challenges while focusing on long-term goals. Northouse's (2021) perspective underscores the necessity for leaders to possess a multifaceted skill set that encompasses adaptability and flexibility. These qualities could enable business managers in the SME food services industry to navigate uncertainty, seize opportunities, and guide their teams toward sustained success amid a rapidly changing landscape.

Proactive Planning

In today's competitive business landscape, organizational leaders must proactively forecast future events, prepare for potential hurdles, and mitigate risks amidst global economic fluctuations to steer their enterprises effectively. Within this framework, proactive planning emerges as a pivotal strategy, enabling business managers to maneuver uncertainties and capitalize on emerging opportunities effectively (Dittfeld et al., 2021). According to Dittfeld et al., leaders who embrace proactive planning can foresee potential disruptions in their supply chains and devise effective strategies to mitigate associated risks. Additionally, Meng (2020) highlighted that leaders integrating

proactive measures into their supply chain management practices possess the capacity to substantially fortify resilience and agility when navigating through dynamic business environments.

Anticipating future events and proactively taking necessary actions are crucial for business leaders to bolster their resilience, agility, and long-term sustainability. Kaplan et al. (2020) emphasized that organization leaders can adapt to evolving market dynamics and position themselves for sustained success by contemplating potential future scenarios and aligning strategies accordingly. AlRawi et al. (2019) advocated a fundamental strategy for organizational leaders, emphasizing the regular conduct of risk assessments. AlRawi et al. proposed that this approach may help leaders proactively understand and mitigate potential threats to organizational objectives in a rapidly evolving business landscape. Constantly monitoring the external environment could empower SME business managers in the food services industry to make informed decisions, swiftly adapt to changes, identify growth opportunities, and maintain a competitive edge.

SME business managers within the food services industry should integrate the envisioning of multiple scenarios into their strategic planning processes. Seeve and Vilkkumaa (2022) suggested that organizational leaders incorporate a wide range of potential future scenarios into their strategic planning to facilitate more informed decision-making and better prepare for various eventualities. SME business managers in the food services industry can develop flexible strategies using information from proactive planning activities. This approach may enable them to capitalize on emerging risks and opportunities while mitigating their impact. Engaging in proactive planning can

aid these managers in crafting adaptive strategies to navigate and respond effectively to potential threats. According to Zafari et al. (2020), managers must adopt proactive planning to make decisions and adjust their business strategies to address uncertainties. Managers could also use this approach to enhance preparedness for potential disruptions, market shifts, or unforeseen events, boosting their resilience and adaptability. By proactively anticipating and addressing future challenges and opportunities, organizational leaders could effectively manage risks, drive innovation, and maintain a competitive advantage in dynamic markets.

Transition

In Section 1, I provided the purpose of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry: to identify and explore the economic crisis management strategies that some SME business managers in the food service industry use to prevent business closures successfully in the British West Indies. I discussed the background of the problem and presented strategies business managers may use to manage an economic crisis. Additionally, I discussed the conceptual framework and conducted a comprehensive review of professional academic and professional literature. In Section 2, I restate the purpose statement and discuss the role of the researcher, the research method, research design, participant selection, population and sampling, ethical consideration, the data collection instruments and techniques, and the data analysis process. I conclude Section 2 by describing the importance of reliability and validity in research. In Section 3, I will discuss the study's findings, their applicability to professional practice impacts, and their implications for social change.

Section 2: The Project

The purpose of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry was to explore and identify the economic crisis management strategies that some SME business managers in the food service industry used to prevent business closures successfully in the British West Indies. In this section, I outlined my responsibilities as the qualitative researcher of this study and described the primary instrument for collecting data. Additionally, I explained the criteria used to determine who was eligible to be included in the sample. I also defined the process for obtaining informed consent from participants to collect data. I concluded Section 2 by explaining the methods used to ensure reliability and validity.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry was to explore and identify the economic crisis management strategies that some SME business managers in the food service industry used to prevent business closures successfully in the British West Indies. The key areas of exploration included the lack of strategies for managing economic crises to prevent business closure. Studies have shown that a lack of strategies to manage crises during an economic crisis leads to business closure (Kang et al., 2021). I conducted the current study to identify the strategies employed by SME leaders in managing an economic crisis. Additionally, I discerned optimal strategies tailored for leaders of SMEs in the food services industry. The primary objective was to offer recommendations on integrating these strategies into leaders' respective businesses.

Role of the Researcher

The role of a qualitative researcher is to conduct in-depth investigations and gather detailed data about human behavior, experiences, and perceptions to convey an understanding of the research to the reader. As the qualitative researcher of this study, I explored and identified the economic crisis management strategies SME business managers used to prevent business closures in the food service industry. A qualitative researcher serves as the instrument responsible for conducting systematic investigations by gathering and analyzing data to generate new knowledge (Collins & Stockton, 2022). As the primary research instrument of this study, I collected data from business managers in the food services industry using open-ended questions and semistructured interviews. Crick (2021) explained that qualitative researchers use a philosophy suited to answering the research question. It is critical for qualitative researchers to be flexible and adjust their approaches and questions in light of new information or unexpected results.

As the researcher of this study, I adhered to the moral principles and guidelines established in the *Belmont Report* to ensure ethical research. The United States Department of Health and Human Services, Office for Human Research Protections (1979) introduced the *Belmont Report* to protect human subjects of research. The three general principles of the *Belmont Report* are respect for persons, beneficence, and justice. As the researcher, I adhered to ethical conduct and demonstrated utmost respect for all participants. This commitment was grounded in the principles and guidelines outlined in the *Belmont Report*, guiding my actions to ensure the welfare and rights of those involved in the study. Based on the principles outlined in the *Belmont Report*, I was committed to

upholding the highest standards of ethical conduct in my research endeavors. I respected the autonomy of individuals by safeguarding their privacy through the removal or encryption of any identifying information, thereby ensuring participants' confidentiality.

Furthermore, I adhered to the principles of beneficence by prioritizing the well-being of participants and obtaining their informed consent before their involvement in the study. Additionally, I promoted justice by treating all participants fairly and equitably, avoiding exploitation, and adhering to the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines. Through these ethical practices and principles, I conducted my research in not only a scientifically rigorous but also a morally and socially responsible manner.

As the researcher, I was unfamiliar with the participants and initiated contact with them after receiving IRB approval. Despite possessing some knowledge and experience in crisis management, I committed to not leveraging this expertise to forge relationships with participants. Also, I did not permit my experience to influence the participants in any manner.

To mitigate bias and prevent the interpretation of data from being influenced by personal perspectives, I thoroughly reflected on how my own experiences, beliefs, and values might have impacted the analysis of the data collected. Kahalon et al. (2022) noted that bias can influence readers' and reviewers' perceptions and evaluations of research. By diligently identifying and addressing personal biases, I enhanced the credibility and trustworthiness of the research findings.

Participants

I used purposive sampling to select participants aligned with this study's purpose. Researchers use purposive sampling to choose participants based on criteria relevant to the research question (S. Campbell et al., 2020; Sibona et al., 2020). Researchers should select participants who meet the requirements for inclusion in the study, ensuring they represent the targeted population (Capili, 2021). To be included in the current study, participants had to have experience managing a SME in the food services industry during the last 4 years and had to have successfully implemented strategies to prevent business closure.

As the researcher, I established a strong rapport with participants and fostered an environment encouraging them to share their experiences openly. Semistructured interviews are a successful approach to exploring participants' experiences (Henriksen et al., 2022). Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik (2021) advocated for the implementation of semistructured interviews and purposive sampling by qualitative researchers. This approach enables the careful selection of participants with relevant experience related to the research topic. For the current study, I chose a sample comprising six eligible business managers in the food services industry to explore and identify the economic crisis management strategies they used to prevent business closure. Before commencing the data collection process, I applied for and received the Walden University IRB approval, and then I formally solicited written consent from the participants.

Building trust with participants is critical for the successful collection of data. Ahmed et al. (2022) advocated for researchers to dedicate time and effort toward

establishing relationships with participants grounded in respect, honesty, and transparency. Building relationships can lead to more meaningful and in-depth data collection and a more accurate representation of the participants' experiences and perspectives. After obtaining the names and contact information of the participants, I sent an invitation email accompanied by the informed consent form. In this communication, I explained the purpose of the study and asked participants to confirm their participation by email, expressing their consent by stating "I consent."

Before the interview, one of my goals was to establish and reaffirm the participants' trust by providing details about the study's purpose, objectives, and significance. I conveyed this through various means such as email, telephone conversations, and the distribution of the informed consent form. Building trust and collaborative relationships with study participants is crucial to enhance the quality and validity of the data collected (Fernandez et al., 2022). Ahmed et al. (2022) suggested that building trust can also improve the validity of the research findings. I encouraged participants to ask questions, seek clarification, and express concerns throughout the relationship-building process. Furthermore, I ensured accessibility by providing additional contact information to facilitate ongoing communication to answer participants' inquiries.

Research Method and Design

In this study, I explored and identified the economic crisis management strategies that some SME business managers in the food service industry used to prevent business closures successfully in the British West Indies. In this section, I discuss the qualitative

research methodology and its applicability to this study. This section also includes a comparative analysis of three primary research methodologies: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods. This section culminates with a comprehensive overview of the research methodology and design used in the study.

Research Method

There are three methods a researcher can use to conduct a study: qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods (Yin, 2018). Researchers use the qualitative approach to describe participants' feelings, views, and experiences and evaluate the significance of their actions (Rahman, 2020). M. Saunders et al. (2016) explained that researchers use the qualitative approach to interpret a phenomenon's subjective and constructed meanings by collecting nonnumerical data. Researchers use the qualitative approach to draw from the explanatory and humanistic paradigms to understand people's lived experiences and build knowledge to understand perspectives (M. S. Johnson & Thompson, 2021; Tomaszewski et al., 2020). After researching and analyzing other research methods, I chose the qualitative method for the current study. The qualitative method was more appropriate for answering the research question, which required exploring and identifying the economic crisis management strategies some SME business managers in the food service industry used to prevent business closure.

Quantitative methodology is appropriate when the researcher intends to examine numerical data through mathematical and statistical analysis techniques (Limone et al., 2022). Borgstede and Scholz (2021) explained that researchers use the quantitative method to establish valid mathematical representations for empirical phenomena and to

gather and analyze data while testing hypotheses. Researchers also use the quantitative approach to examine associations, patterns, and trends within data about a population using survey instruments (Bougie & Sekaran, 2019).

The purpose of the current study did not involve the examination of associations, hypothesis testing, or the triangulation of data for result validation. Timans et al. (2019) explained that researchers use the mixed-methods approach to offer a framework for combining more than one research methodology. Researchers also use the mixed-methods approach to triangulate their findings and validate their results from multiple perspectives (Tashakkori et al., 2020). Garcia-Gonzalez and Ramirez-Montoya (2023) articulated that researchers use the mixed-methods approach to ensure coherence and complementarity between the two methodologies. Neither quantitative nor mixed-method approaches were appropriate for the current study. The qualitative approach was suitable for answering the research question. Using the qualitative approach, I explored and identified rich and detailed insights into the experiences and perspectives of SME business managers in the food services industry.

Research Design

I selected a qualitative pragmatic inquiry design for this study. Researchers use the qualitative pragmatic inquiry design to address the complex and dynamic context in which an organization operates, and use pragmatic inquiry to emphasize the principle of actionable knowledge (Kelly & Cordeiro, 2020). Additionally, researchers may consider a pragmatic inquiry design to formulate strategic analytical decisions, including establishing a suitable balance between various viewpoints and perspectives within their

given context (Ramanadhan et al., 2021). A researcher uses the qualitative inquiry design to ensure the validity and reliability of the data to determine the research outcome (Morse, 2020). The current study explored and identified the economic crisis management strategies that some SME business managers in the food service industry used to prevent business closures. The qualitative pragmatic inquiry design was appropriate for answering the research question in this study.

I considered alternative qualitative designs for this study, such as case study, phenomenology, ethnography, and narrative. Researchers use the case study design to conduct an in-depth examination, systematically research various groups, and investigate in-depth data (Rashid et al., 2019). Researchers use the case study design to collect and analyze qualitative data, understand the research problem, and answer the research question (Rashid et al., 2019). Yin (2018) identified two distinct categories of case studies: the single case study and the multiple case study. A single case study is comparable to a single experiment, whereas a multiple case study facilitates the exploration of similarities and differences among a diverse set of scenarios (Yin, 2018). The single case study was unsuitable for the current study because I was not exploring a single case. The multiple case study was unsuitable for this study because I was not exploring similarities and differences among cases. Researchers use the phenomenological design to examine human experience and behavior (Serresse et al., 2022). The current study did not intend to examine human behavior. I sought to explore and identify the economic crisis management strategies that some SME business managers in the food service industry used to prevent business closures. The

phenomenological design was unsuitable for this study. Researchers use the ethnographic design to understand cultural groups (Simmons & Smith, 2019). The current study did not aim to explore cultural groups, rendering the ethnographic design unsuitable.

Researchers use a narrative design to examine human experiences through life stories (Ford, 2020). The narrative design was unsuitable for the current study because I did not intend to investigate human life stories.

When conducting qualitative research, researchers must address the concept of data saturation. The researcher achieves data saturation when the collected and examined data no longer yield new information or themes (Mwita, 2022). Braun and Clarke (2021) identified focus groups, interviews, and checklists as viable methodologies researchers might use to attain data saturation. For the current study, I asked participants the same interview questions and used a checklist to record repetitive information. Repetitive information is an indication of data saturation. I reached data saturation when the data ceased to provide new insights or information pertinent to the research question and objectives.

Population and Sampling

The selected population for my study consisted of SME business managers in the food services industry in the British West Indies. The sample was selected through purposive sampling based on participants' knowledge, experience, and characteristics relevant to the study. Researchers use purposive sampling to align the sample with the study's purpose and objectives, thereby enhancing the credibility of the data (S. Campbell et al., 2020). Qualitative researchers use purposive sampling to select participants with

diverse and specific characteristics or qualities relevant to the research objective (Guha et al., 2021). Apostolopoulos and Liargovas (2016) explained that it is imperative for qualitative researchers to choose participants who have a certain level of familiarity and expertise in the subject matter under study. I selected SME business managers with the knowledge and practical understanding of implementing crisis management strategies in an economic crisis. This approach ensured that participants' insights and perspectives were valuable and could contribute to answering the research question.

I chose six participants who met the following criteria: (a) managed a food services business throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, (b) effectively executed strategies to avert business closure during the COVID-19 pandemic, and (c) possess over five years of experience in managing a business within the food services industry. In a qualitative study, the researcher must determine the appropriate sample size (Mocanasu, 2020). Mthuli et al. (2022) suggested that the sample size is suitable when the data collected is comprehensive enough to understand the phenomenon under examination. For data collection, I conducted in-person interviews using a voice recording device and ensured participants were comfortable. Siedlecki (2022) elucidated that it is imperative to establish a comfortable and secure environment for participants during interviews. After the interview, I transcribed the data onto a computer utilizing Microsoft Word software. Transcribing recorded audio into written form is essential to analyze a particular phenomenon or event (McMullin, 2023). D. R. Johnson and Scheitle et al. (2021) asserted that researchers traditionally consider in-person interviews the gold standard in qualitative research due to the depth of data that direct interactions can provide. Utilizing

in-person interviews, I captured rich, nuanced data through direct observation and engagement, facilitating a deeper level of communication. Additionally, I established a personal and trusting relationship with the interviewee, which led to more open and candid responses. Conversely, Robinson et al. (2021) elucidated that virtual interviews confer advantages, including diminished travel expenses, enhanced convenience, and greater scheduling flexibility. Robinson et al. also highlighted that virtual interviews are susceptible to challenges, including technological disruptions, communication obstacles, and impediments to establishing rapport in a virtual environment.

Edwards and Holland (2020) stated that interviews have emerged as the prevailing and unquestioned approach in qualitative research because interviews provide insight into the genuine internal aspects of an individual's experiences. I utilized interviews to extract nuanced insights to better understand participants' experiences. Furthermore, I utilized the interview recordings as a substantial and thorough data repository for subsequent analysis.

I ensured that the data I collected reached data saturation, a point at which researchers have gathered sufficient information to draw necessary conclusions, with additional data collection unlikely to yield further valuable insights (Aguboshim, 2021; Mwita, 2022). This state of data saturation is further characterized by the absence of new information and data duplication, rendering continued data collection redundant (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). Reaching data saturation represented a significant milestone, indicating that I have collected sufficient data to answer the research question.

Ethical Research

As the researcher of this study, I used the *Belmont Report* as an ethical framework to safeguard the rights and well-being of the participants. The development of the *Belmont Report* stemmed from recognizing unethical research practices within the scientific community. The United States Department of Health and Human Services, Office for Human Research Protections (1979) introduced the *Belmont Report* to protect human subjects of research. The three principles of the *Belmont Report*, respect for persons, beneficence, and justice, serve as a framework for ethical decision-making in research involving human subjects (Nagai et al., 2022). Islam and Samsudin (2020) described the ethical conduct of research as a crucial element for safeguarding the rights of participants, upholding integrity, and preserving public confidence in the scientific community.

According to Millum and Bromwich (2021), researchers must obtain informed consent from participants to provide them with the essential knowledge to make autonomous decisions to safeguard their rights and well-being. To ensure respect for participants, I provided them with a thorough overview of the purpose of the research and informed them of their rights as research subjects. Similarly, I informed them that they could refuse participation or withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

Another ethical consideration pertains to safeguarding participants' confidentiality and data. Researchers must meticulously consider strategies for safeguarding participant information throughout the research process (Vlahou et al., 2021). To maintain participant confidentiality, I upheld their autonomy and obtained their

informed consent. Jacquier et al. (2021) specified that researchers provide clear, understandable information to individuals about the purpose, risks, benefits, and alternatives of participating in a study. I provided participants with all pertinent information regarding the study, including its purpose, prospective risks and benefits, and measures taken to safeguard participant's confidentiality.

Preserving data over a prolonged duration could facilitate the replication of studies related to my research topic. Mayo et al. (2023) specified that to protect sensitive data, researchers must adhere to stringent privacy and security standards, such as robust encryption protocols, access controls, and auditing mechanisms. I securely saved the data on my laptop, encrypted external devices, and a secure cloud-based storage platform with restricted access controls intended to last five years. I stored the written notes in locked cabinets to prevent unauthorized access to guarantee security and confidentiality. After five years, I will permanently delete all electronically stored data and shred any physical data. I will securely delete the encryption keys to render all encrypted data unreadable and inaccessible. Additionally, I will maintain a comprehensive record of this process to support future audits or inquiries.

Protecting research participants is of paramount importance to safeguard their identities. McKibbin et al. (2021) emphasized that researchers remove or modify identifying information from datasets before sharing or making them publicly accessible to reduce the risk of identification. Using McKibbin et al.'s approach, I protected the participants by anonymizing personal information using pseudonyms and unique identifiers to maintain privacy (for example, P1 for the first and P2 for the second

interviews). To further mitigate risks, I monitored and evaluated participant data without exploiting or using them primarily to advance my research objectives.

All Walden University affiliated studies require the IRB's ethics review and approval before participant recruitment, data collection, or dataset access. Before contacting participants to receive their consent, I ensured I had obtained IRB's approval requirement. Adherence to regulations about human subjects in research, including obtaining informed consent from participants, is crucial in safeguarding the confidentiality of participants, fostering public confidence, and upholding ethical principles (Wolf et al., 2020). Kahrass et al. (2021) and Bazzano et al. (2021) underscored the critical importance of informed consent in research, as it ensured that participants were fully aware of the potential risks and benefits of the study. I presented the participants with an informed consent document, which they had to read and acknowledge. The informed consent document detailed an agreement that imposed no obligations on the participants. This agreement ensured that participants were fully aware of their voluntary involvement in the study and retained the right to withdraw at any time without any repercussions. Additionally, the document included instructions on withdrawing from the study if they chose to do so. The Walden University's IRB approval number for this study was 04-03-24-0505395, which expires on April 2, 2025.

Data Collection Instruments

As the researcher conducting this qualitative pragmatic study, I was the primary instrument for data collection. Gani et al. (2020) explained that the researcher is the primary instrument for collecting data in qualitative research. The researcher's

responsibilities encompass data collection, reflection and analysis, and generating knowledge and understanding (Pezalla et al., 2012). As the primary instrument for collecting data, I collected data from participants using semistructured interviews. Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik (2021) suggested that qualitative researchers use semistructured interviews to explore complex topics, understand participants' perspectives, and gain a deeper understanding of their experiences. Using semistructured interviews, I asked eight open-ended questions to guide the conversation, aimed at permitting participants to share their unique experiences. Ruslin et al. (2022) suggested that researchers utilize semistructured interviews to explore complex topics and gather detailed participant insights. I asked follow-up questions to clarify any vague or ambiguous responses. Isaksen et al. (2022) explained that researchers obtain accurate and reliable information and acquire a deeper understanding of the interviewee's perspective by asking follow-up questions. I ensured that the data accurately reflected the participants' experiences and perspectives by asking follow-up questions.

I used the interview protocol (Appendix B) to ensure consistency and reliability in the interview process. Young et al. (2018) suggested that acquiring high-quality interview data hinges upon utilizing a reliable interview protocol. I followed the interview protocol by posing the same questions to each participant to ensure consistency while continuously monitoring for data saturation. Aguboshim (2021) explained that researchers achieve data saturation when they observe a recurrence of prevailing themes in the data, devoid of any discoveries. The researcher achieves data saturation when they have collected and analyzed enough data to reach a point of redundancy, where further

data collection and analysis are unlikely to yield new insights or themes (Braun & Clarke, 2021). I achieved data saturation upon collecting sufficient data to understand and explain the phenomenon I explored.

I conducted member checking to verify the findings with participants to ensure the accuracy and credibility of the data collected. Researchers use member checking to ensure the accuracy of collected data by allowing participants to verify the authenticity of their responses (Erdmann & Potthoff, 2023; Motulsky, 2021). Similarly, researchers use member checking to ensure that their interpretations align with the participants' experiences and understandings, thereby increasing the study's validity (Schwartz-Shea, 2020). Utilizing member checking, I engaged with participants to solicit additional insights or clarify misunderstandings. This process led to more nuanced and refined data and interpretations. Erdmann and Potthoff proposed a set of decision criteria to guide researchers in ethically choosing a member check method. These criteria enhance the research process's transparency, rigor, and ethical considerations.

Erdmann and Potthoff proposed five criteria that offer a systematic approach for researchers to evaluate different member check methods based on their appropriateness for a study context and the ethical implications involved. Erdmann and Potthoff stated that researchers could (a) return interview transcripts to participants, (b) member check interviews, (c) member check focus groups, (d) synthesize member checking, and (e) provide the research report or a draft of the publication to participants. I returned the interview transcript to the participants for this study and used member check interviews. Returning transcripts to participants allowed them to verify the accuracy of the data to

facilitate the process of data accuracy verification. Erdmann and Potthoff raised ethical concerns about returning written speech transcripts. Erdmann and Potthoff argued that such practices could evoke discomfort, prompt apologies, or discourage participants from the study. In the context of health sciences, Erdmann and Potthoff stated that receiving interview transcripts might distress participants or evoke memories of past difficulties, particularly given the varying stages of their conditions.

Moreover, Erdmann and Potthoff observed that soliciting feedback on transcripts may overwhelm participants by bringing a sensitive topic back into focus. To address these ethical concerns, I supported participants by safeguarding their rights and well-being and implemented strict confidentiality measures. Upholding ethical standards, I prioritized confidentiality and cultivated an environment of respect and safety for all participants.

In the manuscript draft phase, I also incorporated member check interview. According to Erdmann and Potthoff, it is crucial for researchers to provide participants with meaningful sections of the research report during member checking, inviting them to offer oral comments. Furthermore, to ensure the accuracy of their information, I encouraged participants to review the sections and assess them carefully. Additionally, Erdmann and Potthoff stated that researchers empower participants by inviting them to amend their data during the member check interview. Erdmann and Potthoff also underscored the importance of considering ethical issues during member check interviews. Erdmann and Potthoff cautioned that interviews could evoke either distress or a therapeutic response among participants. Erdmann and Potthoff noted that in some

instances, participants may encounter traumatic experiences during their interaction with the researcher, perceiving the researcher as a critic, judge, or therapist based on their interpretations.

Erdmann and Potthoff specified that researchers adhere to social justice, equity, and empowerment principles throughout this process, facilitating collaborative inquiry grounded in mutual respect and trust. Ahmed et al. (2022) posited that building trust is crucial in enhancing the relevance and impact of research based on positive expectations of respect, transparency, and confidentiality. In addressing this ethical concern, I upheld the principles of respect and dignity for all participants. I ensured transparency throughout the process, ensuring clarity and trustworthiness in all engagements. This process also entailed respecting their privacy, accommodating changes in their participation decisions, promptly providing essential information, and vigilantly monitoring their well-being.

Kapiszewski and Karcher (2021) highlighted the importance of maintaining transparency throughout qualitative research's data analysis and interpretation phases. Kapiszewski and Karcher argued that maintaining transparency throughout the research enhances the study's credibility and validity, aligned with a broader commitment to openness and accountability. By ensuring transparency and confidentiality, I aimed to respect participants' rights and build a trusting relationship. Upon sending the transcripts, I expressed my gratitude to the participants, invited them to review the transcripts for any necessary clarifications, and requested that they identify any errors within two weeks. I reiterated my appreciation for their participation.

Data Collection Technique

The data collection technique I used in this study was face-to-face semi-structured interviews. Davies et al. (2020) specified that face-to-face interviews facilitate the inclusion of non-verbal cues, thus enhancing communication and promoting a greater understanding of participants' perspectives. Researchers use semistructured interviews to gather in-depth qualitative data when studying complex phenomena or exploring participants' perspectives and experiences (Ruslin et al., 2022). I used semistructured interviews to elicit the experiences, perspectives, and emotions of participants within the organization.

In addition to semistructured interviews, a researcher may use an audio recording device and a journal to capture the interviewee's exact words. Rutakumwa et al. (2020) highlighted that the researcher uses an audio recording device to capture and analyze the nuances of language, tone, and emotions. I captured every word by recording the interview and ensured I did not miss or misinterpret any information. Audio recordings provide a reliable source of information that the researcher can revisit and analyze multiple times, facilitating a thorough understanding of the interview content and enabling practical analysis while promoting transparency and accountability (McMullin, 2023; Rutakumwa et al., 2020; Tessier, 2012). I asked each participant the same questions and encouraged detailed responses. As the conversation progressed, I asked probing questions to delve deeper into specific areas of interest and to clarify any ambiguous points. Toward the end of the interview, I summarized the key points discussed and asked the participants if they wished to add any final thoughts or insights.

Upon completing the interview, I expressed my gratitude to each participant for their involvement and informed them that I may contact them for further clarification if necessary. I used the following abridged interview process:

Identify Potential Participants Through Purposeful Sampling

After receiving IRB and ethics approval, I selected a sample of six participants from the food services industry to seek their consent to participate.

Sending the Informed Consent Form

Once participants agreed to participate, I sent the informed consent form so they could decide whether to participate in the study.

Receiving Consent and Commencing the Interview

After obtaining consent, I arranged in-person interviews with each participant to explain the purpose of the interview, addressed any questions on the consent form, and discussed their rights to withdraw from the study.

Verify Interview Time

I verified the participant's preferred interview time.

Interview Protocol

I used the interview protocol (see Appendix B) as the framework for conducting the interviews.

Conduct Interviews with Participants

Before starting the interview, I introduced myself and thanked the participants for agreeing. I then discussed the following:

- informed consent and any questions about it

- recording of the interview
- transcription process
- interpretation of the data

After the interview, I explained the member-checking process and informed the participants that I would provide a transcribed version for their review and feedback.

Member Checking

I sent the participants a transcribed interview for them to review and offer any necessary clarifications.

Data Storage and Analysis

Upon completing the interview and transcribing the data, I uploaded the data into NVivo for storage, preservation, and organization.

Although semistructured interviews offer numerous advantages, they also present several disadvantages. Husband (2020) acknowledged a significant benefit associated with using semistructured interviews. The researcher stated that using semistructured interviews enables researchers to delve deeply into areas of interest while maintaining some structure. Researchers may also use semistructured interviews to encourage participant engagement. Due to its conversational style, participants may feel motivated to provide comprehensive and detailed responses when actively involved in the interview process (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). I conducted all interactions with participants respectfully, fairly, and professionally, creating a comfortable and supportive environment that encouraged open and honest communication.

One of the disadvantages associated with semistructured interviews is the inherent possibility of bias. The flexibility of open-ended interviews allows interviewers to guide the discourse and potentially add their own biases during data collection (Babbie, 2016). An open-ended nature might undermine the findings' reliability and objectivity, posing significant implications for the validity and trustworthiness of the research outcomes.

Data Organization Technique

The organization and storage of multiple data sources are crucial components of qualitative research. I maintained a data log to track interview dates and related documentation to ensure transparency and accountability. Lester et al. (2020) highlighted that one of the first steps in qualitative analysis is to prepare and organize the data for thematic analysis. Saldana (2013) explained that developing a coding framework with specific codes is essential to capture themes that may emerge from qualitative data. For this qualitative pragmatic inquiry, I used NVivo to develop a coding system to track and record emerging themes from the data. The researcher may use NVivo to organize, analyze, and code data (Dhakal, 2022). I assigned the following codes to represent the six participants: P1, P2, P3, P4, P5 and P6. I also assigned codes to describe any public documents I reviewed, D1, D2, D3, D4, D5, D6, etc. Once I identified similar themes, I highlighted them with the same color.

Upon completing the data organization and analysis process, I used a secure cloud storage solution with encryption to store each participant's data. Altuwaijri and Ghouzali (2020) suggested that securely keeping data may prevent unauthorized access by malicious apps or attackers. I protected each participant's data from unauthorized access

to ensure their data remained confidential and protected from potential threats. I also retained a duplicate copy of the data using multifactor passwords on an external storage drive. Siegel et al. (2021) defined data retention as the capability of memory devices to retain stored information over time. I used this strategy to protect participants' privacy and maintain the integrity of their data for five years. After five years, I will destroy all electronic and physical data per the participants' consent agreement and the university's guidelines.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is an essential component of the research study to facilitate understanding. Mezmir (2020) stated that qualitative data analysis is a systematic process of organizing, categorizing, and analyzing data to uncover patterns, themes, and insights. Researchers may identify patterns, themes, and meanings by analyzing data to understand individual experiences, perceptions, and behaviors (Dierckx de Casterle et al., 2021). Lochmiller (2021) suggested that qualitative researchers often use thematic analysis to identify the data's patterns, themes, and meanings to understand the studied phenomenon better. Braun and Clarke (2006) encouraged researchers to use thematic analysis to analyze qualitative data. According to Braun and Clarke, researchers can explore complex phenomena and obtain insights into the experiences and perspectives of individuals. Through the thematic analysis process, I recorded emerging themes, analyzed their relationships, and interpreted their meanings to understand the data better.

I used Braun and Clarke's six-step analytical process to identify, analyze, and interpret patterns and themes. Using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis, I analyzed the data as follows.

1. In the first phase, I familiarized myself with the data by thoroughly reviewing transcripts and interviews to identify emerging patterns, themes, and relationships. Belotto (2018) suggested that researchers familiarize themselves with the data to generate codes, search for themes, and define and name themes for the final report. Becoming familiar with the data, I increased the reliability and validity of the findings.
2. In the second phase, I generated initial codes. Braun and Clarke indicated that the researcher generates initial codes by identifying meaningful segments in the data to capture key concepts and patterns. Researchers assign codes to data segments to represent essential concepts or ideas (Jnanathapaswi, 2021). Peel (2020) emphasized that researchers generate initial codes by systematically labeling or tagging data segments relevant to the research question. Researchers may also utilize computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software to organize and systematize data collection and analysis (Freitas et al., 2019). I used the NVivo software to generate and label codes for this qualitative pragmatic inquiry. NVivo is a qualitative data analysis software that supports coding, categorizing, and annotating data to identify key concepts or themes (Dhakal, 2022). I generated codes from the data using NVivo and affixed labels to specific sections. Using this process, I identified

patterns, themes, and relationships to understand the data's underlying patterns and themes.

3. In the third stage, I searched for categories by grouping related codes. Themes are patterns or concepts that arise from the data and serve as an overarching framework for researchers to organize and interpret the coded data (Jowsey et al., 2021). By grouping similar codes under a single category, I gained a deeper understanding of the underlying concepts and relationships within the data.
4. In the fourth stage, I reviewed categories and refined them into themes. Researchers review and refine themes of the entire dataset, ensuring they accurately represent the breadth and depth of participants' experiences (K. A. Campbell et al., 2021). I considered how each theme related to others and examined whether any new themes emerged. I also compared codes and categories within and across themes, ensuring consistency and coherence in the interpretation of the data.
5. In the fifth stage, I defined and named the themes. Researchers should use clear and concise language when defining each theme to enhance the clarity and impact of the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Kiger & Varpio, 2020). I developed clear definitions and descriptions for each theme and assigned appropriate, concise labels to ensure they accurately reflected the content.
6. I wrote a comprehensive report that presented the findings in the final stage. Byrne (2022) stated that the report should provide a detailed account of the

themes identified, supported by relevant quotes or excerpts from the data.

Dawadi (2021) explained that researchers write up their findings at the final stage, providing a detailed account of the themes identified, supported by relevant quotes or examples from the data. In the report, I discussed the implications of the findings and their contribution to the field of study. I reflected on my role as the researcher in shaping the analysis and any potential biases or limitations observed.

The relational model of crisis management was the conceptual framework through which I answered the research question. I aimed to establish connections between the codes and themes identified in my research and the underlying conceptual framework. Additionally, I conducted a comprehensive assessment of recently published academic literature to support and contextualize my findings. Novitzky et al. (2020) argued that researchers should make their data and methodologies accessible to others to enhance trust in research findings and facilitate knowledge sharing among researchers. Researchers may help bridge the gap between theory and practice through collaboration, leading to more effective educational interventions (Anwer & Reiss, 2023). I correlated my research study with other recently published research to enhance the validity and reliability of the findings.

Additionally, by reviewing recently published literature, I established a stronger foundation for my study, provided additional evidence, and gained a more comprehensive understanding of the topic. Furthermore, linking my study to recently published literature

demonstrated that I had considered my field of study's most current methodologies, frameworks, and theories.

Reliability and Validity

In qualitative research, ensuring the reliability and validity of the findings is crucial to maintaining the study's credibility and trustworthiness. According to Vu (2021), qualitative researchers adopt distinct approaches in evaluating validity and reliability, primarily due to the unique characteristics of qualitative data. In this context, quality assessment revolves around crucial dimensions such as credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Quintao et al. (2020) indicated that researchers may improve the validity and reliability of their research by using strategies such as triangulation, member checking, reflexivity, and peer review to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of their findings. By considering both reliability and validity in research design, I improved the credibility and impact of my research.

Reliability

Reliability is a critical consideration for researchers in their studies. Watts and Finkenstaedt-Quinn (2021) explained that reliability is the degree of consistency and dependability of research findings. Cheung and Tai (2023) indicated that reliability is an essential aspect of qualitative research to ensure the research findings' rigor and credibility. Rose and Johnson (2020) explained that researchers adopt strategies to enhance reliability in qualitative research, such as member checking and triangulation. For this qualitative pragmatic inquiry, I used member checking to ensure that my interpretations aligned with participants' perspectives, enhancing my findings' reliability.

Zairul (2021) indicated that member checking involves seeking feedback from participants to validate and verify the accuracy of the findings. Upon completing the data analysis, I shared the transcribed version with the participants for their review and feedback to enhance the data's reliability.

Validity

Validity is essential in research to ensure the findings are accurate and reliable. Sabnis and Wolgemuth (2023) indicated that ensuring the validity of qualitative research findings is crucial to maintaining credibility and trustworthiness. The researcher uses validity to ensure that the data collected is relevant, meaningful, and representative of the phenomenon under investigation (Rezapour Nasrabad, 2020). Using various data collection techniques, researchers can triangulate their findings and enhance the credibility and validity of their study (Nassaji, 2020). I ensured validity by drawing accurate conclusions and providing reliable and accurate knowledge in the field of study.

Credibility

Credibility is an essential component of qualitative research. To establish credibility, researchers may ensure that their data collection methods are appropriate and rigorous (Anderson, 2017). According to Fleming et al. (2021), researchers have the potential to bolster credibility by fostering open accessibility of their research, to enable thorough examination and validation. This approach aids in cultivating trust within the research community while prioritizing the utilization of robust methodologies and evidence. I used member checking for this qualitative pragmatic inquiry to enhance my study's credibility. Schwartz-Shea (2020) explained that qualitative researchers use

member checking to improve the validity and reliability of data by allowing participants to review and respond to the interpretation of the data. I ensured that the interpretations and conclusions drawn from the data aligned with the participants' perspectives by actively involving them in the analysis process. This involvement allowed for accurate verification and validation of their interpretation. Further, I reviewed publicly accessible documentation for ideas that helped to triangulate the findings and evidence collected from the interviews.

Transferability

Transferability is an essential component of qualitative research. Fleming et al. (2021) described transferability as the degree to which a researcher may transfer or apply the findings of a study to different contexts or situations. Korstjens and Moser (2018) highlighted the importance of transferability in research, suggesting that researchers provide detailed descriptions of their research to enable readers to assess the transferability of their findings to their situation. Furthermore, Yin (2018) indicated that qualitative researchers provide extensive details that allow readers to evaluate the relevance of their findings in a new but comparable context to improve the transferability of their research. To ensure the transferability of my study, I provided a detailed, clear, and concise description of my research, enabling readers to understand the methodology and the derivation of the results.

Confirmability

Confirmability is a crucial aspect of qualitative research that researchers use to ensure validity. Establishing confirmability is essential to ensure the rigor and credibility

of qualitative research (Connelly, 2016). To achieve confirmability, researchers may use rigorous procedures derived from the data rather than being driven by personal beliefs or assumptions (Kalu & Bwalya, 2017). Member checking is an approach that researchers may use to establish confirmability. Member checking involves sharing the research findings with participants to verify their accuracy and interpretation (McKim, 2023). By involving participants in the analysis process, I ensured I accurately represented their perspectives and addressed potential biases or misinterpretations.

In addition to member checking, researchers can also enhance confirmability through detailed research process documentation. This process includes providing a clear and systematic account of the methods used to collect and analyze data and document any decisions or changes made during the research process (Nassaji, 2020; Tamarinde et al., 2019). By maintaining a transparent record of these processes, I demonstrated the reliability and confirmability of the findings.

Data Saturation

Data saturation is a fundamental element that contributes to the overall validity of qualitative research. Data saturation is the point at which no new information or themes emerge from the data, indicating that the researcher has gathered enough data to address the research question adequately (Mwita, 2022). Data saturation bolsters the credibility and trustworthiness of the research findings and enhances the validity and reliability of the study (B. Saunders et al., 2018). By achieving data saturation, I was confident I had gathered sufficient data to address the research question. I achieved data saturation when I had gathered enough evidence to the point where no new information or themes

emerged. Hennink and Kaiser (2022) posited that researchers must choose a suitable sample size to achieve data saturation. Sarfo et al. (2021) suggested that 10 to 20 knowledgeable participants are sufficient for a qualitative sample size. The sample included six business managers who successfully navigated their businesses through the COVID-19 pandemic, possessing valuable crisis management strategies to aid others in similar situations. I achieved data saturation when no new themes emerged from the interviews. In a qualitative study, researchers achieve data saturation when new data no longer provide additional insights or alter the emerging themes (Alam, 2021). Face-to-face and in-person interviews are the traditional forms of generating data in qualitative studies (Gray et al., 2020). I conducted face-to-face interviews to gather nuanced, firsthand accounts from participants, allowing for a more comprehensive exploration of their experiences and strategies. This approach facilitated a more dynamic and interactive data collection process, enabling me to capture subtle non-verbal cues and build rapport with interviewees. The data source for the qualitative pragmatic inquiry consisted of business managers from the target population and publicly available documentation, which aided in triangulating the interview data.

Transition and Summary

In Section 2, I restated the purpose statement and explained the role of the researcher. I discussed the participant selection process, the research method and design, population and sampling, ethical considerations, the data collection instruments, data collection, and organization techniques. I concluded Section 2 by describing reliability and validity in qualitative research. In Section 3, I discussed the study's purpose,

presentation of findings, application to professional practice, and the potential for impacting social change. Drawing from these findings, I offered recommendations tailored for SME business managers in the food services industry to navigate economic crises adeptly. Furthermore, I highlighted areas requiring further research based on the identified limitations. To conclude Section 3, I provided a comprehensive reflection on the invaluable insights gained during the study, culminating with a clear and concise conclusion.

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

The purpose of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry was to explore and identify the economic crisis management strategies that some SME business managers in the food service industry used to successfully prevent business closures in the British West Indies. I collected data from six business managers who provided detailed insights into the overarching benefits of their approaches. To maintain confidentiality, I assigned alphanumeric codes to each participant: P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, and P6. I attained data saturation after conducting the sixth interview. Consequently, I deemed further interviews unnecessary.

After completing the interviews, I transcribed the audio recordings and analyzed the transcribed data. To ensure the accuracy of interpretations, I conducted a transcript review by sending the transcriptions to each participant for validation. All participants concurred with the transcripts of their respective interviews. The findings indicated that business managers effectively prevented business closures by implementing strategies focused on (a) employee retention strategies, (b) customer-centric business strategies, (c) cost cutting for financial stability, and (d) innovation and implementation. In Section 3, I present the findings with a detailed discussion of how food service business managers can implement crisis management strategies during economic crises to effect positive social change within their communities. Additionally, I presented recommendations for action and further research. I also provided my reflection and concluded the study.

Presentation of the Findings

The research question was the following: What management strategies do successful SME business managers in the food service industry use to prevent business closures in the British West Indies during economic crises? To answer the research question, I conducted semistructured face-to-face interviews with six business managers from the food service industry who successfully implemented economic crisis management strategies to prevent business closure. The managers discussed their lived experiences and strategies they used to prevent business closure. I categorized the codes and themes derived from the transcribed data using NVivo 14 software and applied Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step technique for thematic analysis. The themes that emerged from the data were (a) employee retention strategies, (b) customer-centric business strategies, (c) cost cutting for financial stability, and (d) innovation and implementation.

Theme 1: Employee Retention Strategies

Employee retention strategies emerged as a predominant theme from the analysis, with all six business managers highlighting it as a critical strategy to prevent business closures. P2 and P5 underscored the importance of deploying effective employee retention practices tailored to retaining their staff despite the unique demands presented by the economic crisis. Their views align with Nadel et al. (2022), who highlighted the critical role of adequate nurse staffing in maintaining a safe healthcare environment during the COVID-19 pandemic. Andel et al. noted that staffing shortages led to longer wait times, increased patient risk, and reduced care quality. P1 and P2 indicated that they implemented employee retention strategies to ensure business sustainability despite

numerous challenges, noting that this approach contributed to maintaining stability. P2 and P5 emphasized fostering collaboration and effective communication to understand staff sentiments and contributions. This process, they argued, created mutual understanding and cohesion within the team. P2 explained that they adopted this strategic approach to enhance staff satisfaction and improve organizational agility and responsiveness. P2 emphasized the necessity of retaining staff to uphold the organization's reputation as a caring environment. Shafiq et al. (2022) noted that employees with strong organizational commitment show higher dedication due to emotional connections to their work. Organizational loyalty and job satisfaction are critical factors influencing employee retention, performance, and overall organizational success (Vuong et al., 2021). P1 highlighted that loyal and committed staff members often exhibit exceptional performance and adaptability, willingly transitioning into new roles as needed without complaint. According to P1, P2, and P6, the flexibility and dedication displayed by their staff significantly contributed to the organization's resilience and success.

In a region reliant on expatriate labor in the food services industry, P1 and P6 elaborated on the difficulties they and numerous staff members faced in maintaining livelihoods due to the limited availability of employment and business prospects. Despite these challenges, P1, P2, and P5 noted that many staff members continued their employment by shifting to roles as drivers and delivery personnel, showcasing commendable adaptability. Tan et al. (2021) demonstrated that adaptability emerged as a vital skill for effectively navigating the uncertainties and evolving challenges precipitated

by the COVID-19 crisis. This adaptability allowed individuals and organizational leaders to respond dynamically to rapidly changing conditions and unforeseen disruptions. P1 noted that most of their staff quickly transitioned into positions offering financial gain, driven by the fear of losing a sustainable income. This observation is consistent with the findings of Tan et al., who also identified economic insecurity as a primary motivator for such transitions. P1 emphasized the importance of incentivizing and supporting staff in adapting to evolving circumstances, highlighting that fostering a resilient workforce was crucial for their success.

P1 and P2 explained that their team's empowerment and sense of security contributed to their business's success, attributing this to the caring nature of their managers. Empowering employees can enhance decision-making processes, expedite problem solving, and contribute to business growth and sustainability (Utomo et al., 2021). P1 and P2 further stated that their strategic approach to empowering staff reduced fear and ensured motivation and resilience in the face of unexpected changes.

P2 emphasized the significance of cultivating a supportive and positive environment where employees felt appreciated and satisfied, recognizing that staff morale impacts productivity and performance. With this perspective, P2 prioritized actions aimed at improving staff well-being. These initiatives included implementing flexible work hours and establishing open communication channels to understand their staff's experiences and the factors that affected them the most. Wong et al. (2021) underscored the critical role of managers in safeguarding employee well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic. Wong et al. suggested that managers must cultivate a supportive

work environment that considers each employee's unique needs. P1 echoed this sentiment by stating that they prioritized their employees' holistic needs by implementing a structure that allowed staff to take wage cuts to retain their jobs while providing opportunities to take on additional roles to compensate for salary losses in their primary positions. P1 emphasized the importance of offering such opportunities because essential staff members were crucial to business operations, and they did not want to lose them.

P2 reported a 95% decline in sales and customer numbers in the deli section, necessitating a staff reduction. Despite this, P2 stated they were committed to retaining employees by redeploying them to tasks such as gathering shopping carts, operating staff transportation buses, and handling ad hoc duties. P2 also noted an unexpected outcome of the COVID-19 pandemic: increased food sales due to lockdown measures, which led to a surge in overall sales.

Conversely, P5 described the necessity of substantial staff layoffs to reduce costs. Dawson et al. (2023) highlighted the extreme difficulty of obtaining profits during the COVID-19 crisis, leading to widespread struggles, firm collapses, and layoffs. P5 emphasized the imperative nature of their actions due to heightened financial pressures. P5 acknowledged the profound impact of staff layoffs, recognizing their financial necessity and the emotional difficulty for managers in conveying this news. P5 stressed the importance of maintaining open and empathetic communication with staff during the challenging period. P5 provided regular updates to ensure transparency about the company's status and government regulations. By focusing on transparent

communication and strategic planning, P5 aimed to mitigate the crisis's adverse effects on staff and guide the business with resilience and foresight through the difficult period.

Theme 2: Customer-Centric Business Strategies

An organization's viability depends on its customer base. Ding and Li (2021) proposed a people-centric approach during crises, prioritizing equitable treatment of employees, partners, and customers. Similarly, Gupta and Ramachandran (2021) defined a customer-centric approach as placing the customer at the core of all business decisions, a principle endorsed by P1 and P6. Their strategies align with Gupta and Ramachandran's assertion, focusing on understanding customer needs, preferences, and behaviors. P1 and P6 endeavored to meet their customers' preferences by developing personalized menus catering to customers' requirements. According to P1 and P6, the customers are the heart of their businesses. Leavy (2022) emphasized that placing the customer at the core of the business drives loyalty, increases revenue, and provides a competitive edge. By prioritizing customer needs and preferences, P1 and P6 created personalized menus that enhanced customer satisfaction, encouraged repeat patronage, and improved retention. P6 detailed an evolutionary shift in their operational strategy, moving from strict adherence to a predetermined menu to prioritizing immediate customer needs through a more flexible, customer-oriented approach. According to P6, this shift enabled more effective responsiveness to customer preferences, enhancing satisfaction, accommodating unique demands, and encouraging repeat orders. Similarly, P1 implemented a comparable strategy, emphasizing flexibility and underscoring the importance of customer-centricity in driving business success.

Highlighting the critical role of customer satisfaction, P2 explained that during the COVID-19 pandemic, their managers expected all employees to prioritize customer needs despite the potential health risks. P2 acknowledged that their managers had established this expectation without fully considering the risks associated with virus exposure. According to P2, this strategy emphasized maintaining high service standards and ensuring customer satisfaction under challenging and uncertain conditions, reflecting a dedication to sustaining business operations amid significant public health concerns. Supporting this perspective, Jeong et al. (2022) asserted that restaurants could enhance customer satisfaction and loyalty by prioritizing service offerings, implementing competitive pricing, and catering to diverse preferences, even amid significant challenges such as those posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. P1 and P6 corroborated this perspective by implementing strategic changes to meet customer needs.

P3 noted that the decline in customer numbers necessitated a 50% reduction in staff, resulting in a substantial decrease in revenue. P3 described the decision to lay off staff as difficult but necessary to align operational costs with the diminished demand due to the economic repercussions of the crisis. Echoing P3's observations, P5 and P6 acknowledged that workforce reductions affected many employees' livelihoods and significantly impacted the business's financial stability. C. C. Chen and Chen (2021) highlighted the profound impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the well-being and career change intentions of unemployed and furloughed hospitality workers. C. C. Chen and Chen recommended that managers address these issues within their organizations to

promote employee satisfaction, retention, and overall organizational resilience during a crisis.

Further elaborating on this point, P3 observed the profound economic ramifications of staff reductions, highlighting the harsh realities that business managers must confront when customer numbers dwindle during challenging periods such as a pandemic. Mujtaba (2022) emphasized that the unpredictability of the job market during the pandemic complicated managerial efforts to forecast future staffing requirements. Mujtaba further explained that this uncertainty hindered the development of long-term recruitment strategies, posing challenges to maintaining organizational stability and planning for future growth. Although organizational managers may view downsizing as necessary to reduce expenses during economic hardships, this strategy may offer immediate relief. This strategy may also have enduring consequences for affected employees and broader economic stability.

All participants except P2 concurred that their financial circumstances necessitated downsizing. Nonetheless, they expressed profound compassion toward their staff, acknowledging that many employees had families in other countries they could neither visit nor support financially due to global lockdown measures. Barbato and Thomas (2020) highlighted the significant psychological distress experienced by Italian foreign workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Barbato and Thomas explained that these workers faced challenges such as isolation, uncertainty about job security, and limited social support networks, which contributed to their heightened psychological distress. P5 emphasized that this situation imposed an additional emotional burden on

them, mainly when they had to inform staff that they could no longer afford to keep them on the payroll.

Theme 3: Cost Cutting for Financial Stability

Cost cutting for financial stability is essential for business leaders to manage unforeseen impacts. During a crisis, enterprise leaders can implement these measures to mitigate financial strain by reducing nonessential production and operational expenses (Ding & Li, 2021). P1 aligned with Ding and Li's (2021) assertion by evaluating their business activities, identifying areas to reduce costs, and ensuring the maintenance of their core business functions. Examining strategies implemented by Vietnamese business leaders during the COVID-19 crisis, Nguyen et al. (2021) observed a strong focus on cost reduction strategies to sustain operations throughout the pandemic. According to Nguyen et al., this strategic approach enabled business managers to navigate the economic challenges posed by the crisis, ensuring operational continuity and financial stability by imposing cost cutting measures. According to P1, the urgent need to adapt to the rapidly changing economic landscape and safeguard their business's long-term viability drove them to reduce operational costs to sustain their businesses. As a first step, P1 initiated a comprehensive audit of all operational expenses to identify potential cost reductions without compromising service quality. P1 stated that they focused on critical areas such as renegotiating contracts with suppliers and landlords to secure more favorable terms and purchasing discounts.

Digitalization and technology can reduce operating costs in today's rapidly evolving business environment. By leveraging digital technologies, business leaders can

streamline processes, improve efficiency, and drive cost savings across various functions (Broccardo et al., 2023). Digital transformation extends beyond adopting new technologies; it represents a fundamental shift in how businesses operate and deliver customer value. Implementing e-business information systems holds substantial promise for businesses by offering increased efficiency, wider market reach, cost savings, enhanced customer experience, and data-driven decision-making capabilities (Setyowati et al., 2021). SME business managers should recognize the transformative potential of digital technologies in enhancing operational efficiency, improving customer experiences, and gaining a competitive edge in the market. By digitizing sales, marketing, inventory management, and customer service processes, P3 streamlined operations, reduced costs, and adapted more swiftly to market fluctuations. According to P3, this strategic shift enabled managers to manage costs effectively while enhancing responsiveness and securing a competitive edge.

In response to lockdown measures, P2 and P3 implemented online systems to meet customer needs, enabling customers to order meals online. According to P3, this swift adaptation was crucial for maintaining business operations and ensuring customer satisfaction without in-person dining. The first step involved selecting and deploying a robust, secure, user-friendly online ordering platform. P3 explained that the new platform integrated seamlessly with their existing business model, consistently prioritizing the customer. P3 explained that they offered real-time updates on menu availability, order status, and delivery tracking. According to P3, this technology minimized disruption, allowed for immediate resumption of customer service, and is still in place today.

Reflecting on their crisis response, P4 indicated that earlier insights would have enabled a more proactive reduction of workforce and operational costs through the extensive use of online capabilities. This reflection underscores the importance of adaptability in business strategy and the value of preemptive action in cost management. Implementing cost-reduction strategies can significantly mitigate financial strain and increase operational efficiency (Belanche et al., 2021). P4 emphasized that organizational leaders may enhance financial stability during economic crises by optimizing operations and creating a more adaptable and efficient organizational structure. P4's hindsight highlighted the necessity for continuous evaluation of operational strategies and the readiness to make decisive adjustments in response to evolving circumstances.

Theme 4: Innovation and Implementation

During periods of crisis, such as economic downturns, business leaders may face unprecedented challenges threatening their enterprises' survival. It becomes imperative for leaders to adopt innovative strategies to navigate these turbulent times effectively (Sharma et al., 2022). Guderian et al. (2021) proposed that organizational leaders may successfully manage challenges and drive sustainable growth amid uncertainty by embracing data-driven approaches and fostering a culture of innovation. The study's participants highlighted the vital role of innovation in preventing business closures during the COVID-19 pandemic. This collective sentiment underscores business leaders' need to adapt rapidly and creatively to unforeseen challenges.

P1 and P6 exemplified innovative strategies by introducing and implementing a boxed family feast meal plan. P3 elucidated that they introduced an online system,

designating it with a memorable and easily recognizable phrase. According to Gavilan et al. (2021), online food delivery services that adapted to changes during the COVID-19 pandemic by prioritizing customer safety and investing in technological advancements were better positioned to thrive amidst uncertainty. According to P1, this initiative aimed to cater to entire families by offering a comprehensive meal package at a discounted rate. P1 and P6 explained that this approach made meals more affordable for customers during economically challenging times and ensured families could enjoy a convenient dining experience at home.

Additionally, P1 and P6 implemented a swift and efficient delivery service, enhancing customer experience with prompt and reliable meal delivery. P1 noted that this innovative approach did more than sustain business operations; it brought joy and excitement to families. P1 and P6 stated that the meal plans provided comfort and a sense of normalcy during the disruption by delivering high-quality, ready-to-eat meals. Online food delivery may enhance customer loyalty and engagement. De Souza et al. (2022) conducted an in-depth investigation into the food service industry amid the COVID-19 pandemic. De Souza et al. specified that industry leaders undertook significant remodeling of their operations, adopted various technological innovations, and emphasized implementing sustainability practices. De Souza et al. indicated that these strategic adaptations positioned the leaders more favorably for success in the postpandemic landscape. By offering convenient ordering options and personalized experiences, restaurant owners can cultivate stronger customer relationships and encourage repeat business (S. L. Huang & Siao, 2023). This initiative underscores how

thoughtful, innovative ideas may address immediate business challenges and positively impact customers' lives, supported by P1's approach.

P2 and P5 introduced a work shift rotation schedule to ensure adequate staffing levels to enhance operational resilience. In their investigation of the association between occupational stress, work shift patterns, and health outcomes among hospital workers, Coelho et al. (2023) asserted that understanding the impact of various shift schedules on the health and performance of workers was crucial for designing effective interventions to mitigate these risks. P2 explained that their innovative work shift strategy allowed them to maintain flexibility and effectively adapt to changing circumstances, such as sudden increases in demand or unexpected absences. They began by conducting a thorough analysis of workforce requirements and the operational needs of each department. Jimenez-Gomez et al. (2021) posited that organizational leaders may implement targeted support measures, thereby mitigating stress levels and enhancing overall job satisfaction among employees by thoroughly understanding their workforce. By understanding peak hours, critical tasks, and staff availability, P2 and P5 designed shift patterns that optimized employee presence and productivity. P2 emphasized that this approach ensured sufficient personnel were always on duty to handle the workload efficiently, thereby minimizing disruptions and maintaining service quality.

Furthermore, P3 developed a robust and efficient online ordering system and a frozen boxed lunch option for families. P3 explained that customers had the option to preorder their meals through this system, after which each meal was individually prepared, wrapped, and labeled according to the customer's details. According to P3,

implementing this innovation offered families convenient and reliable meal options that could sustain them for several days. Operating within the food service industry as part of a major hotel chain, P4 explained that they experienced significantly reduced overseas tourist visitors. Marques Santos et al. (2020) elucidated the behavioral changes in tourism induced by the COVID-19 pandemic. Marques Santos et al asserted that understanding these shifts in tourist behavior was essential for stakeholders in the tourism industry to navigate these challenging times successfully. In response, P4 stated that they redirected their focus to the local economy by introducing affordable staycation packages tailored to the local market. The COVID-19 pandemic catalyzed a paradigm shift across industries worldwide, compelling organizational leaders to reassess their strategies, operations, and structures to adapt to the new strategy (Howe et al., 2021). P4 indicated that this approach represented a substantial shift from its traditional pricing structure aimed at international guests but was necessary to remain in business. P6 implemented an innovative strategy targeting various ethnic groups by offering meals tailored to their cultural preferences on designated days of the week. According to P6, this approach aimed to appeal to a broader customer base with distinct culinary tastes and attract a more diverse clientele.

P6 explained that this initiative significantly boosted the company's revenue during the pandemic and that customers' positive responses led to integrating this plan into their current menu offerings. P6 stated that this strategic initiative provided immediate financial benefits and strengthened the company's market position by demonstrating adaptability and cultural awareness. This example underscores the critical role of cultural sensitivity and market diversification in fostering business resilience

during challenging times. Latvala et al. (2021) asserted that socio-cultural benefits, such as community cohesion and cultural heritage preservation, represent important non-market values. Latvala et al., suggested that incorporating these non-economic factors into decision-making may enhance socio-cultural well-being. By understanding and responding to the unique preferences of various customer segments, P6 effectively expanded its market reach and reinforced its commitment to inclusivity. Afoukane et al. (2021) asserted that it is critical for managers to conduct regular assessments of their business strategy to gauge socioeconomic conditions tailored to specific needs. This approach highlights the potential for businesses to thrive by embracing diversity and innovation, even in the face of economic uncertainty.

Relevance to Conceptual Framework

This study is grounded in the relational model of crisis management, which serves as its conceptual framework. I used the relational model of crisis management to identify and explore the management strategies successful SME business managers in the food services industry use to prevent business closure during economic crises. Dias et al. (2021) posited that economic crises affect SMEs' operations, financial stability, and overall performance, leading to diminished consumer spending, disruptions in supply chains, heightened competition, and restricted access to capital. Consequently, SMEs encounter numerous challenges that jeopardize their sustainability. Notteboom et al. (2021) argued that by analyzing the impact of an economic crisis, managers may better prepare stakeholders for future disruptions by implementing proactive measures. Effective crisis management necessitates the continuous monitoring of both internal and

external environments. Managers may adopt this strategy to acquire the requisite knowledge to formulate strategic plans aligned with the organization's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats.

The study's participants consistently emphasized the significance of innovation and collaborative teamwork as essential factors in preventing the closure of their businesses. For instance, P1 and P2 underscored developing new ideas to maintain operations through innovative strategies. P2 highlighted that while managers primarily oversaw crisis management, they also relied on input from front-line staff to mitigate the pandemic's effects. The inclusion of front-line staff, according to P2, reflected effective team effort. P2 further noted that by incorporating the perspectives and expertise of both managerial and front-line staff, they adopted a more robust and adaptive strategy to navigate the situation. Jaques posited that organizational leaders must establish specialized crisis management teams to address the multifaceted impacts of crises. Crisis management teams should include individuals with diverse expertise and roles within the organization to ensure a comprehensive approach to crisis management (Lukic et al., 2020), a perspective shared by P2. Thielsch et al. (2021) argued that crisis management teams should possess clear communication channels, collaborative capabilities, and the ability to adapt to changing circumstances while making evidence-based decisions. These elements are essential for ensuring seamless information flow within the team and across the organization, thereby facilitating timely and informed decision-making during crises.

All participants emphasized the crucial role of their staff in swiftly adapting to sudden changes and collaborating as a cohesive team. During the COVID-19 pandemic,

employees have had to adjust to altered job responsibilities, often undertaking tasks outside their traditional roles to meet evolving organizational needs (Al-Jubari et al., 2022). Adapting and quickly changing directions may prevent cracking under pressure when facing unexpected challenges. Embracing change and adjusting strategies in response to crises may also build resilience for future challenges. He et al. (2023) posited that organizational resilience is essential for business leaders to endure unexpected events such as natural disasters, economic downturns, or pandemics. Resilient managers within the food service industry could adopt He et al.'s strategy to withstand disruptions and emerge more robust and competitive over the long term. P5 explained the necessity of leading by example, highlighting his decision to resume his role as the lead chef despite it not being his primary responsibility. Bajaba et al. (2021) asserted that adaptive managers were essential during the COVID-19 crisis, demonstrating flexibility, resilience, empathy, innovativeness, and strong communication skills. Makian and Nematpour (2021) indicated that it is crucial for managers to transcend immediate challenges and consider the long-term implications of their current decisions. Using this approach, managers can steer organizations toward long-term success and resilience in today's dynamic business environment.

It is also crucial for managers to incorporate scenario planning into their crisis management strategies to proactively identify potential crises, assess their impacts, and develop response plans to mitigate associated risks. Jaques, outlining the various stages of the relational model of crisis management, advocated that at the precrisis stage, organizational leaders should anticipate potential risks and vulnerabilities and develop

strategies to address them. Additionally, P1 and P6 emphasized the importance of consistently setting aside emergency funds, which proved invaluable in alleviating some of the financial burdens they experienced. P1 explained that they used their reserve funds to cover rent, purchase supplies, and pay utility bills for a short period, which proved beneficial for the overall success of their business.

Transparency and effective communication may prove to be crucial for managing crises. Varma (2021) highlighted that it is important for organizational leaders to demonstrate transparency and communicate effectively with stakeholders. This approach could maintain trust and mitigate customer uncertainty during crises. P1 highlighted that constant communication with all stakeholders was also essential for maintaining business operations, noting that they regularly communicated with suppliers and landlords to renegotiate costs and reduce overall expenses as the crisis progressed. P5 stated that regular communication with staff was vital for supporting their emotional and psychological well-being. This finding aligns with Kim's (2021) assertion that strong internal communication and solid organization-employee relationships are essential for organizational resilience. Kim emphasized that by prioritizing transparent communication and positive employee relations, leaders may foster a robust foundation for adaptation, overcoming challenges, and thriving in a dynamic environment.

I identified four primary themes: employee retention strategies, customer-centric business strategies, cost cutting for financial stability, and innovation and implementation. The themes represent management strategies to successfully prevent business closure during an economic crisis and align with the relational model of crisis

management. Participants P1, P2, P3, P5, and P6 explained that their staff's willingness to adapt and mobilize quickly to other areas enhanced their businesses' survival. Spais and Paul (2021) suggested that clear communication and the ability to adapt to changing circumstances swiftly are crucial for effectively addressing the challenges posed by unexpected events. Spais and Paul emphasized that organizational leaders prioritizing these elements are better equipped to navigate crises and maintain operational stability. Managers may formalize a comprehensive crisis management strategy to prepare for and manage unforeseen events that jeopardize an organization's survival, particularly during economic crises. Jaques' framework underscores the necessity for organizational leaders to understand their employees' capacities thoroughly and implement crisis management practices to create resilient organizations capable of navigating challenges. Managers may enhance their preparedness and response to unforeseen events by integrating crisis management strategies into the organizational hierarchy. This integration ensures a structured and coordinated approach during crises, fostering a culture of resilience and adaptability.

Applications to Professional Practice

The findings of this study hold considerable significance for professional practice within the food services industry, especially about ensuring business continuity. The findings align with existing literature, confirming the efficacy of strategies used by SME food service business managers in preventing business closures. During the COVID-19 pandemic, SME managers encountered substantial challenges, resulting in numerous business failures (Amankwah-Amoah et al., 2021). Amankwah-Amoah et al. highlighted

that the absence of effective closure-prevention strategies led to multiple failures among SMEs, as business leaders struggled to adapt to the rapidly changing landscape, culminating in widespread closures. Incorporating the strategies presented in this study into their operational plans could enable SME business managers in the food services industry to proactively mitigate risks and increase the likelihood of preventing business closures.

It is imperative for managers to understand the multifaceted nature of business closure risks and implement comprehensive strategies aimed at prevention. This approach requires a comprehensive understanding of the various factors contributing to business failures and the ability to develop and implement effective mitigation strategies. Policymakers and entrepreneurs could leverage their knowledge to implement measures that mitigate risks and enhance prospects for long-term business viability (Mayr et al., 2021). Business managers could apply this study's findings to recognize their pivotal role in developing and implementing effective closure-prevention strategies. By embracing the recommended approaches, managers could proactively address potential challenges and safeguard their enterprises against economic downturns. Moreover, they could enhance their ability to anticipate risks and implement timely interventions to protect their organizations from potential closures.

Implications for Social Change

The resilience of SME food service managers during economic crises is a multifaceted challenge influenced by interconnected factors. McCann et al. (2023) explained that the global COVID-19 pandemic significantly affected SMEs by instigating

widespread lockdowns, imposing operational restrictions, disrupting supply chains, and diminishing consumer demand, precipitating an economic crisis. In addressing these challenges, Bivona and Cruz (2021) argued that innovation played a pivotal role in enhancing the resilience, adaptability, sustainability, and efficiency of SME managers within the food and beverage industry. Ngoc Su et al. (2021) proposed that effective organizational crisis management necessitates cultivating a culture of innovation and adaptability. Ngoc Su et al. argued that such cultures enable leaders to successfully navigate tumultuous periods by fostering continuous improvement and rapid adaptation to changing circumstances. This approach supports organizational resilience and positions organizational leaders to capitalize on emergent opportunities during and after crises.

In addition to describing strategies to manage the effects of an economic crisis, the findings of this study have broader implications for social change. Business managers could use the findings to provide a framework for enhancing their organization's resilience and economic stability. By enhancing their organization's resilience, business managers could create positive shifts within the societal structure by fostering economic stability, enhancing community resilience, and promoting sustainable development practices. By implementing the recommended strategies, business managers could enhance the robustness and adaptability of the community, thereby fostering an environment in which economic and social systems are better equipped to handle future challenges.

Recommendations for Action

These findings may prove valuable for business leaders lacking crisis management strategies to prevent business closure during an economic crisis. The experiences of other business managers may prove helpful for SME food service business managers by providing practical strategies, innovative approaches, and tested methodologies that can be adapted to enhance operational resilience and prevent business closures during challenging economic conditions. Buhagiar and Anand (2023) argue that knowledge management is crucial during crises, as it ensures the efficient capture, sharing, and utilization of relevant information. Organizational leaders may use this process to make informed decisions, adapt to rapidly changing circumstances, and maintain operations continuity, enhancing their resilience and ability to navigate crises. To prevent business closure during an economic crisis, I recommend that business managers develop strategies that include (a) risk assessment planning, (b) financial management, (c) innovation and flexibility, (d) employee support, (e) leveraging technology, and (f) strengthening relationships with stakeholders. By adopting these strategies, managers may safeguard their businesses against sudden economic shocks, enhancing their resilience and ensuring long-term sustainability. This proactive mindset is crucial for their businesses' survival and success in the face of economic difficulties.

Another essential recommendation for SME business managers is the implementation of strategic planning. Strategic planning includes establishing distinct goals and objectives, evaluating current capabilities, and determining actions to achieve long-term success (Swaidi & Jumaan, 2022). Many SMEs failed during the COVID-19

pandemic due to insufficient strategic planning by managers. Klimas et al. (2021) indicated that numerous entrepreneurs fail due to financial constraints and a lack of innovation. Klimas et al. asserted that understanding these effects is crucial for managers navigating entrepreneurship's inherent challenges and uncertainties. Mekdessi et al. (2021) emphasized the importance of understanding the impact of crises on SMEs for policymakers, business owners, and other stakeholders. Mekdessi et al. posited that leaders may formulate targeted policies and interventions by identifying critical issues and potential solutions. If managers adopt Mekdessi et al.'s approach, they may be able to maintain stable employment during economic turbulence through active participation in strategic planning. This approach requires proactively identifying obstacles, capitalizing on favorable circumstances, and efficiently allocating resources to safeguard and sustain operations. Through a proactive stance, SME business managers may better withstand unexpected economic events, ensuring the sustainability of their businesses.

Another key recommendation for SME business managers is establishing a culture that fosters innovation. Creating an environment that nurtures creativity and encourages innovative thinking could facilitate continuous improvement and flexibility. This approach may also promote a culture where employees are motivated to propose new ideas but, most importantly, stay current with industry trends and technological advancements. Several participants highlighted the benefits of encouraging innovation within their organizations. By promoting a culture of innovation, SME managers may better adapt to market changes, meet evolving customer needs, and maintain a competitive edge. All participants agreed that innovation played a crucial role in their

sustainability. By adopting a proactive approach, organizational leaders could enhance their capacity to withstand economic shocks and strategically position their organizations for long-term growth. This proactive stance may also facilitate anticipating challenges, swiftly adapting to unexpected changes, effectively utilizing resources, and ensuring immediate resilience.

Another crucial recommendation for SME managers involves ensuring financial stability and establishing partnerships with supportive organizations. Financial stability encompasses maintaining sufficient cash reserves, diversifying revenue sources, and employing prudent financial management strategies. Additionally, by forming strategic alliances and collaborations with supportive entities, such as financial institutions and government agencies, SME managers could access essential resources and assistance during periods of economic downturn. This approach may also strengthen their business's financial structure and establish a support network. This approach may also enhance their organization's capacity to withstand and endure economic crises. I will submit the study for publication through journal platforms such as ProQuest, Elsevier, and various economic and financial journals. Additionally, I will disseminate the findings to organizational leaders to ensure the practical application of the research insights. By targeting these reputable outlets, I aim to reach a broad audience of academics and practitioners, contributing to existing knowledge and providing valuable strategies for successfully managing an economic crisis.

Recommendations for Further Research

This qualitative pragmatic inquiry identified and explored the economic crisis management strategies used by SME business managers in the food service industry in the British West Indies to successfully prevent business closures. The research findings delineated four main themes: (a) employee retention strategies, (b) customer-centric business strategies, (c) cost cutting for financial stability, and (d) innovation and implementation. Based on these findings, I recommend that future research explore economic crisis management strategies SME business managers use in the food services industry. The current study identified four main themes from a relatively small sample size, which may have overlooked critical details. The limitation of a small sample size restricts the depth and breadth of the insights obtained and may prevent accurate estimates of population parameters. K. Chen and Guo et al. (2021) suggested that discerning a significant difference between groups may require a larger sample size. A small sample size may also limit the generalizability of findings to a broader population.

Consequently, conducting future research with more extensive and diverse samples is crucial to enhance the applicability and validity of the results. Further research could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the economic crisis management strategies SME business managers use in the food services industry. Additionally, this approach could lay a solid foundation for theoretical analysis and practical implementations, ultimately leading to more robust findings and impactful outcomes.

I recommend that future research adopt a methodology distinct from pragmatic inquiry. Exploring alternative methodological approaches may also yield a broader range

of insights and a deeper understanding of SME business managers' economic crisis management strategies. This shift could potentially address the current study's limitations, enhancing the robustness and applicability of future findings. Pragmatic inquiry frequently relies on individual perspectives and experiences, which may introduce biases and diminish the objectivity of the findings. Moreover, the inherently contextual nature of pragmatic inquiry could constrain the transferability of results to other settings or sectors, potentially restricting the applicability of research conclusions across diverse geographic or economic contexts. In this regard, a mixed-methods approach would be highly effective. By combining qualitative methods with quantitative data, this approach may enhance the depth and breadth of the research. This approach would further guarantee that the strategies identified are robust, comprehensive, and adaptable to various contexts and challenges, enhancing their applicability and effectiveness in diverse situations.

Reflections

Embarking on my doctoral journey has been one of the most challenging and rewarding experiences of my academic life. At the outset, I felt excitement and trepidation, unaware of the demands ahead. After completing my master's degree over 12 years ago, I encountered a steep learning curve during the initial phase of my doctoral journey. Narrowing my research interests into a meaningful topic during the prospectus phase proved challenging. Having exclusively worked in the public sector, identifying a business problem unrelated to the public sector was difficult. Nevertheless, my passion for politics and current affairs guided me to this topic. The pressure to contribute

knowledge to my field often felt overwhelming, leading to moments of self-doubt and questioning my decision to pursue this path.

A significant difficulty I encountered was managing the extensive literature review. I often felt inadequate, questioning whether my writing was too extensive or insufficient. The sheer volume of existing research was daunting and synthesizing the information into a coherent framework seemed nearly impossible. Additionally, I faced numerous challenges with my research methodology, struggling to determine the most appropriate approach.

The introduction of Dr. Dooley and the support from Team Dooley were invaluable to my progress. At this stage, I realized the task was not impossible, as I had a supportive chair and reliable colleagues. Their guidance provided me with a renewed purpose, as they offered constant support and clear direction. The support of my colleagues and Dr. Dooley enabled me to navigate challenges, set new goals, and maintain focus on my objectives. Team Dooley's constant and constructive feedback helped refine my research questions and develop a solid methodology. Reflecting on this journey, I realize that while the challenges were significant, they were surmountable with solid support. My doctoral journey has been a profound learning experience marked by personal, professional, and academic growth. Despite the numerous difficulties, the invaluable assistance from Team Dooley and the supportive network of my classmates mitigated these challenges. This journey has imparted valuable lessons in resilience, the importance of collaboration, and the significance of a supportive community. These

experiences have contributed to my personal, professional, and academic growth and equipped me with skills and insights to carry forward into my future endeavors.

Conclusion

SMEs play a pivotal role in the food services industry, significantly contributing to a nation's economy by providing employment, fostering innovation, and catering to diverse consumer needs. These enterprises introduce unique products and services, thereby enhancing market variety and competition, ultimately benefiting both consumers and larger businesses. The COVID-19 pandemic has severely impacted SMEs in the food services sector. Government-imposed restrictions, including lockdowns, social distancing measures, and reduced capacity regulations, have led to substantial financial strain, resulting in many permanent closures. The decreased revenue and increased operational costs have exacerbated these businesses' financial difficulties.

The importance of crisis management strategies cannot be overstated, especially for SME managers during an economic crisis. The absence of robust plans may lead to significant challenges and potential business failure. The research has shown that managers within the food services industry have faced considerable difficulties in crisis mitigation due to a lack of knowledge and strategies for managing economic crises, which has hindered their ability to navigate and recover from such disruptions. For their businesses to withstand unexpected challenges, it is critical for SME managers to implement proactive measures that enhance resilience and improve survival prospects, especially during turbulent times. During crises, SME managers should adopt effectual behavior, involving strategically utilizing existing resources, forming partnerships, and

being receptive to new opportunities and innovation (Haneberg, 2021). Managers may also use this approach to navigate uncertainties and capitalize on available assets, fostering adaptability and resilience in challenging times.

The study findings indicated that SME managers in the food services industry should concentrate on four critical areas to prevent business closures in the British West Indies: (a) employee retention strategies, (b) customer-centric business strategies, (c) cost cutting for financial stability, and (d) innovation and implementation. Focusing on these critical areas may enhance organizational resilience, improve operational efficiency, and increase the likelihood of sustaining business operations during challenging times.

Managers must be thoroughly prepared to manage crises, as these can emerge unexpectedly and pose significant threats to an organization's reputation, operations, and survival. Effective crisis management requires foresight, strategic planning, and the ability to respond swiftly and decisively to mitigate potential damages. By ensuring that managers are equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge, they may be better prepared to navigate through unforeseen challenges and maintain stability in turbulent times.

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Appendix A: Invitation for Research Study Participation

Subject: Doctoral Study - Requesting Your Participation

Dear [Name],

There is a new study about successful economic crisis management strategies used by small- and medium-sized enterprise food service business managers in the British West Indies that could help business leaders better understand how to manage an economic crisis successfully. For this study, you are invited to describe your experiences managing your business during the COVID-19 economic crisis.

About the study:

- One 30-60-minute face-to-face interview that will be audio-recorded
- To protect your privacy, the published study will not share any names or details that identify you

Volunteers must meet these requirements:

- Business manager
- Managed a food service business throughout the COVID-19 pandemic
- Effectively executed strategies to avert business closure during the COVID-19 pandemic
- Possess over five years of experience in managing a business within the food services industry

This interview is part of the doctoral study for Lancelott Barnes, a DBA student at Walden University. Interviews will take place during April 2024.

Please reach out to lancelott.barnes@waldenu.edu to let the researcher know of your interest. You are welcome to forward it to others who might be interested.

Sincerely,

Lancelott Barnes

Walden University Doctoral (DBA) Candidate

Lancelott.barnes@wandenu.edu

(345)925-6468

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Research Question:

What economic crisis management strategies do some SME business managers in the food service industry utilize to prevent business closures in the British West Indies?

Before the Interview

1. I will Identify potential participants through purposeful sampling.
2. I will attach the informed consent form and the interview questions with the invitation to participate email.
3. Request confirmation of participants through the informed consent form.
4. I will verify the participant's preferred interview time.

At the Start of the Interview

1. I will start the interview with a welcome and introduction and reiterate the purpose of the study.
2. I will thank each participant for agreeing to participate.
3. I will explain to the participant that I will record the interview and explain why.
4. I will discuss the transcription of the data and the member-checking process.
5. I will explain to the participants that I will assign codes to ensure confidentiality and privacy instead of using their names.
6. I will reiterate the following:
 - a. The interview is voluntary
 - b. They can withdraw consent at any time
 - c. The interview will be no longer than 60 minutes
 - d. Breaks are allowed
 - e. They may ask questions
 - f. I will email a transcript of the interview for their verification

During the Interview

1. I will begin recording.
2. I will record notes in my journal.

3. I will ask the interview questions in Appendix B.

After the Interview

1. I will save the recording on my laptop using an appropriate naming convention.
2. I will schedule member-checking sessions with participants.
3. I will save a copy of the recording to an encrypted external device and a secure, secure, cloud-based storage platform with restricted access controls.
4. I will transcribe the data from digital recording.
5. I will interpret the participant's responses, incorporate pertinent journal notes, and formulate my interpretation.
6. I will email each participant, requesting confirmation of the accuracy of my interpretation.
7. I will amend my interpretation and make changes if needed.
8. I will upload the data to the NVivo software to develop a coding system to track and record emerging themes.
9. I will begin preparing the final analysis.