

12-10-2025

Effective Corporate Social Responsibility Strategies That Small Business Leaders Use to Improve Brand Reputation

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Walden University

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Walden University

College of Management and Human Potential

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William Cativo

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Walden University
2025

Abstract

Effective Corporate Social Responsibility Strategies That Small Business Leaders Use to

Improve Brand Reputation

by

William Cativo

MBA, San Jose State University, 2019

BS, Menlo College, 2016

Research Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Business Administration

Walden University

October 2025

Abstract

Ineffective corporate social responsibility (CSR) practices in small businesses can damage brand reputation, reduce employee retention, and hinder sustainability. Small business leaders are concerned about these risks, as a large majority of consumers expect companies to act on environmental, social, and governance issues. Grounded in Carroll's CSR pyramid, the purpose of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry was to explore strategies small business leaders in the Western United States use to enhance brand reputation. The participants were six small business leaders with effective strategies to enhance brand reputation. Data were collected through semistructured interviews and a review of 10 CSR reports. Thematic analysis identified six themes: strengthen ethical practices, engage employees in values-driven CSR, communicate CSR strategies, adapt strategies to feedback and resources, address structural barriers, and formalize processes to overcome barriers. A key recommendation is for small business leaders to leverage community and industry networks to adopt scalable CSR practices. The implications for positive social change include the potential for small business leaders to strengthen trust, enhance well-being, and promote sustainability through ethical integrity, employee engagement, and community collaboration.

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Dedication

I dedicate this work to my parents, Juan Jose Cativo and Silvia Nelly Pinto-Cativo, whose sacrifices and perseverance created opportunities they never had for themselves. I also dedicate it to my brother, his wife, and their child, who I trust will continue our family's legacy of valuing education and achievement. Parental figures Dr. Amy Fujishige Boggs and John Boggs provided the additional guidance and care that sustained me, and Dr. Terri Givens offered encouragement that strengthened my resolve. I honor the memory of my grandmother, Thomas Hernandez, an educator who instilled in me the enduring importance of learning. Although she did not see this milestone, her spirit guided me. I further dedicate this to my close friends who supported me with humor and resilience, the teachers and mentors who fueled my dream, and my beloved companions: Chibi, Chiki, Peluda, and all companions. Finally, I dedicate this to first-generation students, underdogs, and anyone with doubt or lacking support. You matter, you make a difference, and I look forward to celebrating your success.

Acknowledgments

I am deeply grateful to those who made this doctoral journey possible. At Walden University, I thank my committee members, Dr. Gaytan and Dr. Kangas, for their mentorship and thoughtful feedback, and Amanda Wink, M.Ed., for her encouragement. I also appreciate the faculty and staff who contributed to my academic growth and provided resources that sustained me throughout this process. To my teachers and professors from earlier stages of education, I am thankful for igniting my passion for learning and modeling persistence. My close friends offered humor and encouragement through challenges, while colleagues and professional peers inspired my research and motivation. Lastly, I thank the small business leaders who participated in this project; their time, experiences, and perspectives shaped the findings and will contribute to advancing knowledge and practice.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Project

Background of the Problem

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) has evolved into a central element of contemporary business strategy, reflecting efforts to align financial objectives with ethical, social, and environmental responsibilities. While many studies have been conducted on CSR implementation in major organizations, a significant vacuum exists in understanding how small business leaders plan and implement effective CSR strategies (Çera et al., 2022). This gap in practice is important because small firms contribute significantly to employment, innovation, and community development, but face distinct challenges when implementing CSR initiatives. These businesses often operate with limited financial and human resources, making adopting and sustaining meaningful CSR practices difficult (Crossley et al., 2021).

Many small business leaders lack access to actionable CSR frameworks or sufficient knowledge to integrate CSR effectively into daily operations. Competing priorities, limited awareness, and the absence of clear best practices hinder broader CSR adoption. In addition, researchers have noted a lack of understanding of the specific challenges and opportunities related to CSR in small business settings (Mahmood et al., 2021). Researchers explore how CSR alignment with core business values can improve organizational resilience, particularly for resource-constrained firms (Oduro et al., 2021). Some small businesses are negatively affected by challenges in implementing CSR, which results in a lack of long-term profitability and ethical, social, and environmental concerns.

Business Problem Focus and Project Purpose

The specific business problem was that some small business leaders lack effective CSR strategies to improve brand reputation. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry project was to identify and explore effective CSR strategies that small business leaders in the Western United States use to improve brand reputation. The target population consisted of small business leaders in the Western United States who use effective CSR strategies to improve brand reputation.

I used purposive sampling to select six participants who met the established criteria for participation in the project. Researchers use the purposive sampling method to select specific participants meeting the established eligibility criteria to obtain relevant information to help researchers answer the overarching research question (K. R. Subedi, 2021). Researchers establish participants' eligibility criteria that align with the overarching research question of a study (W. M. Lim, 2024). I established eligibility criteria based on participants' expertise in applying effective CSR strategies to improve brand reputation.

Gaining access to participants requires that researchers maintain excellent communication with key organizational leaders, understand the target population, and use several methods for recruiting participants (Carter et al., 2021). I accessed eligible participants through targeted recruitment strategies, including advertising on LinkedIn in CSR-focused small business groups, outreach to local chambers of commerce, professional business associations, and CSR conference networks. I drew on personal and professional relationships to identify potential participants who meet eligibility criteria.

These recruitment methods are appropriate for accessing small business leaders actively engaged in CSR efforts. I collected data through semistructured interviews and a review of public documents, adhering to institutional review board (IRB) requirements.

The conceptual framework that grounded the project is Carroll's (1991) CSR pyramid model. Carroll used the CSR pyramid as a model to show the four key components of CSR: economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic responsibilities. Carroll emphasized the importance of balancing these responsibilities to achieve a holistic approach to CSR, incorporating the idea that organizations should have a positive role in the community by reflecting on their business practices' environmental and social impact. By implementing CSR practices, organizational leaders may achieve a balance between stakeholders' and shareholders' expectations and the economic, social, and environmental implications. Implementing CSR practices may allow organizations to meet legal and ethical expectations while enhancing their reputation and success. I selected Carroll's CSR pyramid model as the conceptual framework to support this project. The framework emphasizes the integration of economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic responsibilities as a foundation to identify and explore CSR strategies aligned with improving brand reputation.

Research Question

What effective CSR strategies do small business leaders use to improve brand reputation?

Assumptions and Limitations

Assumptions

Assumptions are facts accepted as accurate without direct verification (Adler, 2022). In this qualitative pragmatic inquiry project, I assumed that participants would respond truthfully and insightfully during semistructured interviews. I also assumed that I could recruit at least six small business leaders in the Western United States who have successfully used CSR strategies to improve brand reputation. Finally, I assumed that the findings of the project would be relevant and potentially applicable to other small firms.

Limitations

Limitations are constraints beyond the researcher's control that may affect the project's scope or findings (Enworo, 2023). One limitation of this project was the potential for participant and researcher bias during data collection and interpretation. Relying on professional networks and voluntary participation may have introduced self-selection bias, as participants with stronger CSR engagement could have been more willing to participate. Another limitation involved the reliance on self-reported data, which may have been influenced by the participants' perceptions or desire to present their organization positively. To address this bias, I applied recruitment and data collection strategies to mitigate bias. I employed consistent semistructured interviews and member checking and maintained a reflexive journal to reduce the risk of bias and enhance accuracy and validity. Additionally, IRB requirements for qualitative pragmatic inquiry limit data collection methods to semistructured interviews and publicly available documentation.

Transition

In Section 1, I established the foundation for this project by presenting the background of the problem, the specific business problem, the research question, and the project's purpose. The focus was on effective CSR strategies that small business leaders in the Western United States use to improve brand reputation. The conceptual framework guiding the project was Carroll's (1991) CSR pyramid, which outlined four dimensions of corporate responsibility: economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic. I also presented key assumptions and limitations.

Section 2 includes the professional and academic literature on CSR in small businesses. This includes the organization of the literature review and the application to the applied business problem. In Section 3, I detail ethical considerations, the nature of the project, population and sampling methods, data collection, the data collection instrument, data analysis, and trustworthiness. In Section 4, I present the findings, implications for business practice and positive social change, recommendations for further research, and the conclusion.

Section 2: Literature Review

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

The purpose of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry project was to identify and explore effective CSR strategies that small business leaders in the Western United States use to improve brand reputation. This literature review was guided by Carroll's (1991) CSR pyramid model, which outlined economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic responsibilities as a foundation for effective CSR implementation. I accessed the Walden University Library, which offers extensive academic resources to identify relevant literature. The databases searched included ABI/INFORM Complete, Business Source Complete, Academic Search Complete, ProQuest Central, SAGE Journals, and Emerald Management. I also used open-access sources, including AOSIS OpenJournals and ScienceDirect, to locate peer-reviewed publications. In addition, I reviewed government websites to identify practical CSR frameworks adopted by small businesses to enhance reputation, trust, stakeholder relationships, and long-term sustainability. The focus of the project was to address this gap in the practice by exploring small business CSR implementation strategies.

I applied filters such as publication year, keyword relevance, and database specificity to refine the literature search. I prioritized articles published from 2021 onward and focused on materials available through the Walden University Library. The key terms used in the search included "small business CSR strategies," "CSR implementation in small businesses," "sustainability in small enterprises," "ethical management in small firms," "CSR strategies improve brand reputation," and "CSR

effect on reputation.” I verified the peer-reviewed status of sources using the Crossref Periodical Directory. The references in the project include a total of 213 sources, comprising 196 scholarly peer-reviewed journal articles (92%), 10 non-peer-reviewed articles (5%), and seven other scholarly and professional sources (3%), which include books, conference papers, and government publications. The total number of references published between 2021 and 2025 is 194, which is 91% of the total. The literature review contains 68 references, including 66 peer-reviewed journal articles (97%) and two conference proceedings (3%). Of the total literature review references, 63 (93%) were published between 2021 and 2025.

I organized the literature review into five major components: (a) the search strategy and literature scope; (b) the application of the literature to the applied business problem; (c) a critical analysis of the conceptual framework, Carroll’s (1991) CSR pyramid model; and (d) themes aligned with the research question, including the role of CSR in small business performance, CSR implementation in small businesses, and stakeholder involvement in CSR practices. These topics comprised subsections most closely related to the project’s goal. Throughout the literature review, I compared and contrasted various viewpoints and examined how prior research findings related to the project.

Application to the Applied Business Problem

The qualitative method was ideal for the project because it thoroughly explores leaders’ perspectives, experiences, and tactics. The qualitative pragmatic inquiry design is particularly relevant in focusing on practical answers to real-world situations (Bradway

& Årsand, 2021). The project's findings provide valuable insights into CSR implementation tactics, allowing for a better understanding of how small business leaders manage difficulties and use CSR to enhance brand reputation. Such findings might contribute to a broader discussion on how small businesses implement CSR from an assembly of leaders' viewpoints.

The project's findings will help small businesses identify and explore effective CSR strategies used by small business leaders in the Western United States to improve brand reputation. Despite limitations, effective CSR practices can strengthen brand reputation, foster stakeholder trust, and improve employee engagement (Le, 2022). Understanding the underlying meanings and reasons for CSR adoption can provide leaders with the required skills and insights to improve CSR activities in small businesses. Furthermore, the project's findings may improve business practices by providing practical techniques that lead to better productivity, improved organizational competitiveness, and long-term viability. Social transformation is possible in developing solutions that encourage ethical corporate practices, community participation, and environmental stewardship (Kiladze et al., 2023). These efforts might benefit society by promoting responsible corporate conduct, enhancing community bonds, decreasing environmental damage, and influencing other firms to pursue sustainable and socially responsible projects.

CSR Pyramid Model

Carroll's (1991) CSR pyramid is critical for understanding company commitments and community expectations, as it provides a solid framework for

evaluating CSR. López Santamaría et al. (2023) used Carroll's CSR pyramid to analyze CSR in Colombian credit unions and found it effective in resolving economic, legal, ethical, and charitable duties. According to the CSR pyramid, credit unions prioritize community development through economic and charitable efforts, including support for education and healthcare projects (López Santamaría et al., 2023). The findings are consistent with the CSR pyramid's principles, demonstrating the model's applicability across different business situations. Credit unions met social expectations by completing these tasks, which increased consumer trust (Glaveli, 2020) and stakeholder loyalty. Carroll's paradigm is a valuable tool for studying CSR dynamics across sectors.

The CSR pyramid is formed on the foundation of economic responsibility, which requires businesses to achieve their societal obligations successfully. The need to methodically understand the link between CSR and financial success is required to set feasible financial and sustainable goals (Schwartz & Kay, 2023). Profitability, along with reputation, is essential for promoting CSR investments because financially stable firms may better devote resources to social and environmental projects (Schwartz & Kay, 2023). This foundation helps businesses handle the highest levels of the CSR pyramid, such as legal, ethical, and charitable duties. Financial success is a motivation and a result of CSR activities, emphasizing its importance in sustainable company practices (Nguyen et al., 2021). Economic responsibility is critical in CSR strategy, influencing corporate image and customer citizenship behavior (C.-C. Chen et al., 2021).

Legal responsibility, the second step of the CSR pyramid, emphasizes conformity with laws and regulations. Legal duties are important in motivating company compliance

with environmental rules (Carroll, 2016) and satisfying minimum legal standards as law-abiding corporate citizens. Companies that follow legal frameworks avoid penalties and improve their reputation with stakeholders (Carroll, 2016), meeting their responsibility as social stakeholders. Legal compliance is a protective mechanism and a tool for building stakeholder confidence. Aside from regulatory conformity and moral duty, proactive compliance may boost an organization's market positioning by emphasizing its commitment to social and environmental governance (Saleem et al., 2021). Legal duties are critical for businesses establishing a solid ethical and charitable participation platform. For small business leaders, meeting legal obligations while maintaining ethical transparency with local stakeholders is especially critical to sustaining a trustworthy public image.

Ethical responsibility, the third tier of the CSR pyramid, goes beyond compliance to meet society's standards of justice and honesty. Ethical practices impact sustainable management within the company landscape (D'Avanzo et al., 2021). Companies prioritizing ethical obligations promote increased stakeholder trust and social goodwill, which is critical for long-term success (D'Avanzo et al., 2021). Ethical responsibility improves a company's reputation and promotes long-term competitiveness (D'Avanzo et al., 2021). Aligning with ethical values allows firms to achieve global standards for honesty and equity, enhancing their social license to operate (Jejenywa et al., 2024). As a result, ethical responsibility bridges the gap between legal compliance and charitable initiatives, making it an essential component of long-term CSR strategies to meet social and corporate ethical expectations.

Philanthropic responsibility is the pinnacle of Carroll's (1991) CSR pyramid, concentrating on voluntary contributions to society. Examining how philanthropic actions affect business operations, brand image, and awareness allows businesses to meet social demands for responsible enterprises (Štreimikienė & Ahmed, 2021). Organizations that engage in charitable initiatives receive benefits (Štreimikienė & Ahmed, 2021), such as greater employee satisfaction and retention. Philanthropy benefits communities while strengthening internal company culture (Štreimikienė & Ahmed, 2021). Philanthropic efforts can serve as a market differentiator (Cha et al., 2022), improving business reputation and reinforce public perception of the business as socially responsible. As a result, philanthropy benefits external stakeholders while creating internal cohesiveness, stimulating innovation, and strengthening organizational flexibility.

The CSR pyramid framework is a model used to illustrate and provide researchers with a framework to better understand a businesses' CSR responsibility on economic, legal, ethical, and charitable levels. Kusyik (2021) used Carroll's (1991) CSR pyramid to study the CSR orientations of small businesses. Kusyik stated that while small businesses frequently prioritize economic and legal duties, many also actively engage in ethical and charitable endeavors, albeit to a lower level. Kusyik also utilized the CSR pyramid to capture various degrees of CSR activity across corporate sizes and sectors. By addressing these factors, the CSR pyramid demonstrates ways small businesses may balance profit and greater societal contributions (Zhang, 2023). Carroll's methodology helps understand and promote CSR in various corporate scenarios.

The CSR pyramid model has also been used to study employee views of CSR efforts in the hotel industry. CSR activities improved employee trust and organizational commitment in hotel environments (Choi & Choi, 2021). Prioritizing economic and legal obligations and ethical and charitable actions improved workers' perceptions of organizational care and resilience during crises (Choi & Choi, 2021). Understanding the need for a balanced approach across all CSR aspects develops employee trust and morale, especially during difficult times. Emphasizing the importance of ethical and charitable initiatives can improve employee engagement and loyalty (Nyuur et al., 2021). The CSR pyramid model provides a solid framework for analyzing the diverse effects of CSR activities in tumultuous situations, connecting theoretical principles to actual outcomes.

Carroll's (1991) CSR pyramid paradigm systematically assesses how CSR affects customer behavior. The pyramid framework can assess various global sectors, focusing on organizations' economic, legal, ethical, and charitable obligations (Yasir & Anna Amjad, 2021). As the pyramid's foundation, economic responsibility substantially influences customer purchasing decisions, while ethical and philanthropic initiatives create brand loyalty and trust (Yasir & Anna Amjad, 2021). Integrating CSR into corporate initiatives improves customer image and long-term sustainability (Salam & Jahed, 2023). Understanding the multidimensional impact of CSR helps firms strategically use CSR programs to generate long-term success and strengthen stakeholder relationships.

Other Supporting and Contrasting Theories

The project is enhanced by including supporting, contrasting, or opposing theories from the current literature on CSR in small business company success. The stakeholder theory addresses diverse stakeholder needs, the resource-based view theory considers CSR a strategic resource, the agency theory criticizes CSR through a profit-maximization lens, and the institutional theory focuses on external pressures influencing CSR adoption. Researchers use these theories to obtain a comprehensive framework for critically examining CSR's motives, obstacles, and complex effects on small businesses' commercial success.

The second theme, CSR implementation in small businesses, revolves around CSR development in small businesses. With an emphasis on the many definitions, causes, and effects of CSR in small businesses, this section examines common concerns about the concept. Small businesses' unique difficulties in implementing CSR activities, such as resource limitations, scalability concerns, and creative solutions to overcome these obstacles, are highlighted. The third theme, stakeholder involvement and CSR in small businesses, focuses on how important stakeholders influence and propel CSR initiatives. To understand the dynamics of stakeholder expectations, engagement techniques, and their impact on the overall performance of CSR projects, this subject first contextualizes the main topic of CSR inside small businesses.

Stakeholder theory offers a supplementary theoretical framework with some overlap with CSR activities for meeting the expectations of diverse stakeholders. According to stakeholder theory, small businesses may enhance organizational trust by

aligning CSR programs with stakeholder interests, ensuring long-term sustainability and growth while dealing with societal challenges (Dmytriyev et al., 2021). In stakeholder theory, businesses may generate shared value by addressing the interests of all stakeholders rather than focusing just on profit maximization. Small businesses can use stakeholder theory to reframe and steer CSR performance outcomes to avoid misleading CSR implementation and support innovation (Wang et al., 2022). CSR activities based on stakeholder theory can assist small businesses in recruiting and retaining employees who value ethical and socially responsible workplaces.

The shared value theory supports the claim that CSR adoption helps small businesses and society. Shared value theory used in CSR programs should improve social and economic outcomes, resulting in a synergy between profitability and social impact while addressing consumer needs (Hsiao et al., 2021). Small businesses integrating their CSR activities with shared value theory get many dimensions and perspectives on performance to confirm scenarios (Hsiao et al., 2021). According to shared value theory, CSR programs should connect company strategy with social impact, providing economic and social benefits while minimizing legal and ethical compliance difficulties (Buddu & Scheepers, 2022). Shared value creation allows small businesses to innovate by creating products and services corresponding to ethical and sustainable business strategies.

In contrast, agency theory contends that CSR initiatives might be regarded as a waste of resources, particularly in small enterprises with little financial capability. A critic could argue that corporate owners may emphasize personal interests over broader stakeholder concerns, possibly reducing the effectiveness of CSR initiatives (Dong et al.,

2021). According to agency theory, the separation of ownership and management can result in conflicts of interest, with divergent aims leading to agency issues and inconsistent conduct (Dong et al., 2021). Small organizations may need to set precise accountability procedures to ensure that CSR programs fit with financial performance goals. Well-integrated CSR programs can help to reduce agency disputes by providing long-term economic advantages (Chang et al., 2022). This opposing theory offers an understanding of potential agency-based CSR's strategic implications and barriers.

Institutional theory scholars emphasize another important viewpoint, stressing how external factors drive CSR adoption in small businesses. Regulatory restrictions, industrial norms, and societal expectations influence CSR, social efforts, and stakeholder perception (Handoyo & Anas, 2024). According to institutional theory, CSR behaviors are not always voluntary but are frequently in reaction to external forces that promote optimal business performance (Handoyo & Anas, 2024). Carroll's (1991) CSR pyramid highlights economic duties as the cornerstone of CSR, in contrast to institutional theory, which focuses on external forces. According to institutional theory, CSR is driven by compliance and industry standards instead of the CSR pyramid's financial success-based business strategy (Ng et al., 2022). This difference emphasizes small enterprises' importance in managing external influences while implementing CSR.

CSR Implementation in Small Businesses

Small businesses may effectively undertake CSR programs by matching efforts with their organization's strengths and community needs, enhancing their reputation. CSR strategies are most effective in small firms, particularly family-owned, when they

prioritize sustainability and build strong linkages to local communities (Fonseca & Carnicelli, 2021). Integrating CSR into core corporate operations, such as environmentally responsible practices and community participation, may improve business performance and stakeholder relationships (Fonseca & Carnicelli, 2021). Small firms should prevent overextension by starting small and concentrating on significant, demonstrable outcomes that reflect their values (Peake & Potter, 2022). CSR misalignment disturbs the amplification of small businesses' positive influence on reputation and employee engagement, as well as a targeted, localized strategy that guarantees CSR activities are meaningful and sustainable over time.

Small businesses can successfully execute CSR efforts by connecting their implementation efforts with community-based objectives and operational skills. Small businesses in the service and tourist industries benefit from CSR practices that focus on social and environmental benefits, especially those that include local stakeholders and meet critical societal needs (Metzker et al., 2021). Small businesses prioritizing the implementation of CSR in their operational framework frequently enjoy improved reputation and increased customer loyalty (Metzker et al., 2021). Small businesses should prioritize authenticity and measurable outcomes to improve performance and align efforts with sustainable and achievable goals (Omowole et al., 2024). Starting small and focusing on areas of direct community impact can help small enterprises generate real change while strengthening their market presence.

Small businesses may use CSR initiatives to improve community participation and business sustainability. Small businesses in the global economy have had great

success with CSR programs by focusing on alignment with their shared core values and localized strategic needs (Gavurova et al., 2022). Authenticity and employee involvement are critical components of effective CSR practices. This increases stakeholder trust in small businesses to implement CSR leads, establishing small businesses as potential change agents and supporting employee change desires (Gavurova et al., 2022). Focusing on measurable outcomes and beginning with small, controllable efforts can assist small businesses in avoiding restraints while increasing impact (Nesterova, 2021). Small firms may guarantee that their CSR initiatives are relevant and long-term by adopting a planned and localized strategy.

Small businesses can implement CSR effectively by prioritizing sustainable strategies relevant to their operational circumstances, tailoring CSR to operational strengths, and supporting customer and employee trust. Small firms must accurately identify and successfully incorporate sustainability into their CSR strategies to optimize resources, concentrate on localized impact, harness employee participation, and align activities with their company culture and goals (Gomes, 2024). Businesses that include stakeholders in CSR planning will likely build internal and external trust and long-term community partnerships (Gomes, 2024). These findings are consistent with more prominent viewpoints that emphasize the necessity of developing a unique and responsible brand image, particularly in a competitive market (Jusuf, 2023). Small firms may build significant and sustainable CSR practices by adopting a unique strategy based on their strengths and local community needs.

Small businesses may enhance their public reputation and strengthen stakeholder relationships by implementing practical CSR activities. When the corporate landscape changes, such as after COVID–19, CSR activities should focus on resilience and adaptation, notably by combining employee involvement and flexibility to meet shifting expectations (Freze et al., 2023). Firms that use such methods improve brand loyalty and recognition while increasing operational efficiency and flexibility through cost-effective sustainability initiatives (Freze et al., 2023). This is consistent with a greater emphasis on authentic, localized CSR activities that promote value-driven motivators while allowing for nuanced stakeholder and strategy-driven methods that directly influence surrounding and customer audiences (Shen et al., 2023). By focusing on these principles, small businesses may successfully traverse the hurdles of implementing CSR while reaping its enormous rewards.

Small businesses can help achieve sustainable development goals by executing focused CSR efforts. CSR efforts have successfully contributed to sustainable development by connecting company practices with local needs, encouraging environmental protection, and boosting access to education (Sudirman et al., 2021). These activities improve the company’s reputation and establish long-term stakeholder connections for shared investment (Sudirman et al., 2021). Small enterprises that adopt strategic CSR see growth in CSR-oriented markets and consumer trust due to the perceived genuineness of their activities (Safeer & Liu, 2022). Small firms may boost their market presence by concentrating on projects that benefit consumers and communities while attaining sustainable development goals.

Small businesses may increase brand loyalty by conducting targeted CSR efforts that appeal to their target demographic. CSR initiatives emphasizing and fulfilling specific marketplace demands and expectations boost customer trust and satisfaction, necessitating regular effect assessment (Motadi, 2024). Ethical practices, such as community participation and environmental stewardship, strengthen consumer connections and long-term loyalty while improving CSR initiatives and stakeholder engagement in company and government settings (Motadi, 2024). Small businesses in the United States prioritizing authenticity and transparency in their CSR activities impact CSR perceptions and consumer attitudes toward social responsibility (Hassan et al., 2022). Small businesses may gain a competitive edge by enhancing reputation and stakeholder perceptions through aligning CSR programs with consumer expectations while being recognized for their contributions to societal well-being.

Small businesses can adopt CSR effectively by following global reporting standards, encouraging openness, and accountability. Adherence to Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) standards allows firms to integrate CSR programs with measurable outcomes, increasing credibility and stakeholder involvement (Halkos & Nomikos, 2021). Reporting on environmental and social indicators enables firms to address community issues and foster trust and strategic partnerships (Halkos & Nomikos, 2021). Small businesses that implement CSR practices address consumers increasingly concerned about social and environmental issues and demand that companies take relevant preventative action while accounting for the needs of complex governments, nonprofit organizations, and businesses (Pérez et al., 2021). Small businesses that

embrace standardized reporting frameworks may efficiently handle CSR adoption while contributing to long-term development.

Stakeholder Involvement and CSR in Small Businesses

Effective CSR implementation in small businesses necessitates a commitment to openness and measurable results, which improve transparency and organizational reputation, rather than symbolic efforts. While major corporations frequently stress CSR in public disclosures, its execution varies greatly, indicating that enterprises must go beyond rhetoric to have actual social and environmental effects (Ting, 2021). Small businesses implementing proven CSR programs have increased stakeholder confidence, long-term sustainability, credibility, and organizational support (Ting, 2021). The importance of authenticity in CSR initiatives is shown by the fact that organizations that authentically integrate CSR into their operations experience greater sincerity, identity reflection, and consistency (J. S. Lim & Jiang, 2021). Small businesses may make substantial long-term contributions by aligning their CSR initiatives with fundamental corporate principles and needs.

Effective CSR implementation improves small business success by building strategic tools and societal impact. CSR programs favorably impact customer perceptions, enhancing brand trust and loyalty (Tiep Le et al., 2021). Small businesses that engage in CSR activities see higher financial performance and customer retention, demonstrating the importance of ethical and socially responsible business strategies (Tiep Le et al., 2021). CSR is more than a charitable initiative; it is a strategic instrument that improves long-term company sustainability and reputation while benefiting society and

the firm (Saiia & Schwartz, 2022). Integrating CSR into core operations enables small businesses to strengthen stakeholder relationships while increasing reputation and social impact.

CSR adoption may boost technical innovation and enhance environmental performance in small businesses. CSR activities, particularly those funded by green funding, enable technical improvements that improve sustainability efforts (Awawdeh et al., 2021). Small businesses that integrate CSR into innovation initiatives enhance their environmental performance and acquire long-term sustainability in the market (Awawdeh et al., 2021). Adopting CSR may increase operational efficiency, minimize waste, and improve regulatory compliance, leading to cost savings and long-term stability while fostering creativity and resilience and promoting long-term corporate success (Awad & Martín-Rojas, 2023). CSR is a strategic tool that helps small businesses produce long-term value while reaffirming their commitment to social and environmental responsibility.

Small businesses may improve CSR implementation by connecting projects to their fundamental principles and using strong stakeholder connections. CSR is especially beneficial to family-owned small enterprises because of their long-term vision and strong community links (Combs et al., 2022). Small businesses are likely to participate in genuine CSR activities that improve their reputation, promote staff retention, and foster consumer loyalty, resulting in a good reputation (Combs et al., 2022). CSR promotes resilience by encouraging innovation and building stakeholder trust, making it an essential component of long-term corporate strategy (G. Chen et al., 2023). Small firms

that include CSR in their core operations may provide long-term economic, social, and environmental value, putting them in a position for sustainable success.

Stakeholder participation is critical in small businesses implementing and leveraging CSR activities to establish sustainable business practices. Engaging stakeholders, such as workers, customers, and local communities, enables firms to connect their CSR efforts with societal expectations, resulting in better relationships and long-term advantages (Ansu-Mensah et al., 2021). Businesses that actively include stakeholders in CSR decision-making have a greater reputation and trust, resulting in trust (Ansu-Mensah et al., 2021). Effective stakeholder involvement ensures that CSR programs are relevant and beneficial, reducing resource waste and encouraging authenticity in CSR efforts. Stakeholder cooperation improves CSR effectiveness by stimulating innovation and generating shared value (Ayorinde et al., 2024). Small businesses incorporate stakeholder viewpoints into their CSR plans, making it a viable and strategic instrument for long-term business success.

Stakeholder participation impacts how small businesses execute and use CSR activities to improve social and economic results. Proactive stakeholder engagement may promote CSR development by matching corporate practices with stakeholder expectations, boosting transparency and trust (López-Concepción et al., 2021). Integrating stakeholder feedback into CSR programs improves compliance with sustainable development goals, resulting in long-term social and environmental benefits (López-Concepción et al., 2021). Effective stakeholder engagement improves CSR implementation by encouraging innovation, strengthening consumer loyalty, and

enhancing brand reputation. Stakeholder-driven CSR efforts can boost employee engagement and corporate sustainability (Bapat & Upadhyay, 2021). Small businesses may have a significant social effect by incorporating stakeholder viewpoints into CSR activities while remaining financially viable, establishing CSR as a strategic approach to success.

Stakeholder participation shapes CSR implementation in small businesses by influencing openness, accountability, and strategic alignment. Businesses with excellent stakeholder involvement have better CSR performance, as evidenced by the amount and quality of CSR disclosures (Koh et al., 2022). Businesses that actively communicate their CSR initiatives to stakeholders acquire confidence and credibility, which may improve their reputation and long-term sustainability (Koh et al., 2022). Stakeholder engagement ensures that CSR programs are aligned with social and company interests, which promotes long-term sustainability. Stakeholder involvement is required for successful CSR implementation, and effective stakeholder engagement includes incorporating stakeholders' perspectives into management decision-making (Mukhtar & Bahormoz, 2021). By incorporating stakeholder viewpoints, small businesses may create CSR projects with a significant social effect while increasing financial resilience.

Stakeholder participation is critical for small businesses to successfully execute CSR programs that correspond with corporate aims and community expectations. During the COVID-19 pandemic, organizations that focused on the quality of their relationship with stakeholders through CSR decision-making displayed greater adaptation and resilience, maintaining trust and sustainable business operations (Abdillah et al., 2022).

Stakeholder interaction affected prioritizing CSR initiatives, ensuring that organizations addressed essential societal and economic problems while preserving operational stability (Hasan et al., 2023). Small businesses may improve their CSR reputation and maximize resource allocation by incorporating stakeholders. Owner-managers are critical in designing CSR initiatives by incorporating stakeholder feedback and improving brand reputation and consumer loyalty (Saveanu et al., 2021). Effective stakeholder involvement helps small firms develop CSR projects that have a significant impact, promoting company sustainability.

Stakeholder participation is critical for small businesses to undertake CSR programs that match employee values and increase company credibility. When workers believe CSR intentions are genuine, they exhibit more forceful pro-environmental behavior and organizational commitment, strengthening CSR programs' success (Wut & Ng, 2022). CSR authenticity builds trust, resulting in increased internal stakeholder participation and the long-term viability of CSR operations (Wut & Ng, 2022). Small businesses involving stakeholders in CSR decision-making can develop activities that appeal to internal and external audiences. Businesses implementing stakeholder-driven CSR initiatives see increased reputation, innovation, and long-term sustainability (Shah & Guild, 2022). Prioritizing stakeholder involvement may assist small organizations in developing CSR projects that improve company performance while encouraging significant impact and organizational sustainability.

Stakeholder involvement is critical for the success of CSR programs in small firms because it fosters trust and long-term commitment. Businesses that use strong

stakeholder engagement methods, such as alliances with external groups, do better financially and socially (Suriyapongprapai et al., 2021). Businesses that connect their CSR activities with stakeholder expectations can improve their reputations and implement programs that deliver economic and social advantages (Suriyapongprapai et al., 2021). CSR implementation in resource-dependent sectors demonstrates how enterprises prioritizing stakeholder input may build sustainable and socially responsible operations (Isacowitz et al., 2022). Small businesses can use similar strategies, such as incorporating stakeholder feedback into CSR decision-making, ensuring that initiatives align with community and business goals, increasing credibility, and strengthening long-term relationships that contribute to organizational resilience and growth.

Stakeholder participation is crucial for successfully implementing CSR in small businesses, impacting strategic decision-making and impact. Businesses that actively include stakeholders have more substantial CSR commitment and performance (Agarwala et al., 2023). CSR engagement is favorably connected to small enterprises, and older company age positively correlates with CSR participation (Agarwala et al., 2023). Transparency in CSR activities promotes accountability and alignment with stakeholder expectations, which is critical for small businesses seeking to build community partnerships. Small businesses that maintain transparent reporting methods increase stakeholder confidence, resulting in more substantial support for CSR programs (Reid et al., 2023). Small businesses may adopt a proactive approach to stakeholder involvement, increasing CSR effectiveness.

Transition

Section 2 included the literature review, which comprised several subsections, starting with an introduction that describes the literature search, and the percentage of articles identified as peer-reviewed and their publication dates. Several subsections focused on the applicability of the literature to the research question and the project's purpose. In Section 3, I discuss the following subsections: project ethics; nature of the project; population, sampling, and participants; data collection activities; interview questions; data organization and analysis techniques; reliability and validity; and the transition and summary. In Section 4, I present the findings, provide the business contributions and recommendations for professional practice, provide an overview of the implications for positive social change, and provide recommendations for further research and the conclusion.

Section 3: Research Project Methodology

Project Ethics

The researcher's role in qualitative studies is critical for data collection, organization, and analysis, enabling a thorough evaluation of the research issue. Researchers are the primary research instrument responsible for acquiring access to participants, promoting communication, arranging the study process, conducting interviews, transcribing interviews, conducting member checking, gathering and analyzing data, and presenting the results (Ohme et al., 2023). As the principal research instrument, I oversaw all research project phases, including idea definition, data collection from numerous sources, interview transcription, data organization and analysis, and theme development, as Lavrysh (2024) recommended. Researchers advocate employing a variety of data sources, such as semistructured interviews and organizational records (DiStefano & Yang, 2023). I conducted semistructured interviews and evaluated public documentation to gather data from various sources for the planned project. I partnered with industry leaders to obtain a list of potential participants they recommend for the project.

My previous experience includes growing my family's small business, starting my own, and aiding existing small businesses and subject matter authors. Over 15 years, I gained a realistic view of a wide range of CSR and implementation issues in small businesses. Working with industry professionals from various backgrounds and sectors extended my perspective to cover a variety of circumstances and variables. My experience assisted me in developing interview questions capable of eliciting phenomena

that could explain the participants' diverse experiences. Familiarity with members of various associations, such as Rotary clubs, business colleges, and community business-promotion associations, helped me gather a competent, qualified, and purposeful sample population of participants willing to share their experiences and confidential information.

Established norms, regulations, and professional guidelines control ethical issues in social research, and IRBs and academic groups enforce them (Macnamara, 2024). Researchers, including myself, have a moral and professional commitment to maintain ethical integrity throughout the study process (Schmid et al., 2024). Adherence to the criteria described in *The Belmont Report* (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979) is critical for assuring the safety of human participants. The report outlines three core ethical principles: *respect for persons*, which emphasizes autonomy and informed consent; *beneficence*, which maximizes benefits while minimizing harm; and *justice*, which ensures an equitable distribution of research burdens and benefits (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). Regarding the respect for persons principle, researchers must uphold participant autonomy by ensuring voluntary and informed consent while acknowledging that those with reduced sovereignty require additional safeguards (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). The beneficence principle requires researchers to limit possible damage while maximizing society and individual gains, demanding in-depth risk-benefit analyses (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). The justice

principle requires equitable participant selection and treatment, ensuring that the research incumbrances and compensations are fairly dispersed and do not disproportionately affect vulnerable populations (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). These are fundamental to competent and ethical research techniques.

The Belmont Report describes the practical ethical principles applied in human subjects research, centering on informed consent, risk-benefit evaluation, and participant selection. The informed consent process is based on three key components: disclosure, which ensures that participants receive comprehensive and accurate information about the project; comprehension, which ensures that participants understand the nature, risks, and benefits of their participation; and voluntariness, which confirms that participation is free of coercion or undue influence (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). I followed (a) *The Belmont Report's* ethical principles, (b) IRB protocols, and (c) any extra ethical standards established by collaborating organizations. My research activities did not begin until I received proper IRB approval and clearance. To ensure ethical compliance in research, I educated participants about the *informed consent* principles and the project's goal, methods, risks, and rewards before they signed their consent form. I treated participants fairly, informed them that their participation was entirely voluntary, allowed them to withdraw from the project at any point during the research process without negative consequences, and maintained their confidentiality. The confidentiality of all collected data was carefully preserved. Consent, including electronic consent gathering, improves

accessibility and complies with ethical research requirements (De Sutter et al., 2024).

Before participating, each participant read and signed the informed consent form, which describes the project's scope, participant expectations, potential risks and benefits, and my contact information in case participants had any questions (Godskesen et al., 2023).

As researchers suggested, participants were fully informed of their entitlement to volunteer for the project's involvement (Carolan, 2024). Consistent with ethical research norms, I advised participants that they could withdraw from the project without providing a reason or facing negative repercussions. This right was explicitly stated in the informed consent form, which states that withdrawal can occur orally or in writing without penalties, boosting eagerness to engage (Miteu, 2024). Ensuring participant privacy and confidentiality is critical for all research to maintain ethical integrity (Lahman et al., 2022), prevent illegal access or disclosure, preserve anonymity, and protect personal data. To eliminate bias and ensure the project's impartiality, participants did not receive physical or intangible incentives before, during, or after the project, as recommended by several researchers (Mowbray et al., 2024).

All people and linked organizations were given pseudonyms to guarantee strong ethical protection for participation. The project did not include any identifying characteristics that might lead to the indirect identification of individuals or organizations. Ethical research produces reliable and relevant results while reducing possible participant dangers (Camilleri & Filieri, 2023). Research-related digital material was safely maintained on a password-protected hard drive, while physical papers were preserved in a locked drawer at my home. Per Walden University IRB criteria, all

research-related data will be kept for 5 years before being irreversibly deleted (Office of Research and Doctoral Services, 2025). These safeguards are consistent with best practices in ethical research, including data security, participant confidentiality, and adherence to institutional and regulatory compliance norms. The IRB approval number for the project at Walden University is 06-23-25-1198035.

Nature of the Project

Researchers consider the nature of their study when choosing the most appropriate method. Researchers use one of the three available research methodologies: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed (Mulisa, 2021). The qualitative method enables the subjective study of phenomena, allowing for an in-depth comprehension of non-numerical data (Renjith et al., 2021). The qualitative method stresses the interpretation of lived and observed phenomena within a specific environment and among purposely selected participants (Megheirkouni & Moir, 2023). Researchers use the qualitative method to identify and explore participants' perceptions, experiences, views, and attitudes (Bazen et al., 2021). I chose the qualitative method for the project to identify and explore a phenomenon. The phenomenon was effective CSR strategies that small business leaders use to improve brand reputation.

Researchers use the pragmatic inquiry design to conduct an inductive study combining established qualitative methods strategically to meet a study's purpose using a conceptual framework as a guide and participants acting within a real-world problem (Ramanadhan et al., 2021). Based on Dewey's (1938) inquiry model, pragmatic inquiry design facilitates the development of new knowledge through experiential learning,

researcher involvement with changing contexts, and iterative refining of tools, knowledge, and objectives (Stompff et al., 2022). I chose the pragmatic inquiry design to steer this inductive investigation, which included and integrated traditional qualitative data gathering and analysis from a real-world problem.

Population, Sampling, and Participants

Before beginning data collection, researchers must identify appropriate participants (Althubaiti, 2022). Establishing participant eligibility criteria ensures alignment with the central research question (Dahal et al., 2024) and helps identify individuals who meet the requirements of the study. Common challenges include locating and accessing a suitable organization (McBeath & Hopkins, 2024). Another challenge is obtaining participants' agreement to participate in the research study (Lander et al., 2023). Participants are eligible if they have relevant experience and knowledge related to the phenomenon under study (Jaffe & Richardson, 2023).

I established eligibility criteria for individuals to qualify for participation in the project based on participants' expertise and knowledge, using effective CSR strategies to improve brand reputation. I used purposeful sampling to select participants for the project due to their expertise and knowledge working with employees in small business environments and using effective CSR strategies to improve brand reputation.

Accessing research participants and organizations often presents a significant challenge (Villanueva et al., 2024). Researchers are encouraged to collaborate with influential organizational personnel, utilize diverse recruitment strategies, and develop a clear understanding of the target population (Negrin et al., 2022) to address this issue.

Olmos-Vega et al. (2022) noted that accessing participants can reveal a researcher's underlying assumptions and the contextual framework in which the study is situated. I engaged with key organizational leaders in this project using a practical approach. I accessed eligible participants through targeted recruitment strategies, including advertising in CSR-focused small business groups on LinkedIn and outreach to local chambers of commerce, professional business associations, and CSR conference networks. I also drew on personal and professional relationships to identify small business leaders who met the eligibility criteria. These strategies were appropriate for engaging participants whose experience aligned with the project's purpose of exploring effective CSR strategies to improve brand reputation.

Gaining the trust and acceptance of participants is essential for qualitative research (Foláyan & Haire, 2023). Researchers establish rapport to facilitate the collection of rich and meaningful data (Horsfall et al., 2021). One practical approach to building trust and rapport is consistent participant interaction throughout the study (George et al., 2023). I engaged with participants regularly to develop mutual trust and acceptance, while collecting in-depth and insightful data.

Researchers ensure alignment between the central research question and study participants by choosing the most suitable research design (McInerney et al., 2024). Defining clear participant eligibility criteria supports individuals with relevant knowledge and experience with the phenomenon under investigation, thereby enhancing the study's ability to address the central research question (Pyo et al., 2023). Selecting participants with demonstrated experience and insight into the phenomenon ensured alignment

between participants and the overarching research question (Pfeifer & Dolan, 2023). I ensured that the eligibility criteria I established for this project were designed to identify small business leaders with firsthand knowledge of CSR strategies that influence brand reputation.

Selecting the appropriate sampling method is vital to establishing the trustworthiness of qualitative research (M. Subedi, 2023). Purposive sampling is a practical approach that narrows the participant pool by ensuring that all individuals meet consistent eligibility criteria, enabling a deeper understanding of the studied phenomenon (Zickar & Keith, 2023). This technique involves purposefully selecting participants based on characteristics relevant to the phenomenon under study (Nyimbili & Nyimbili, 2024). I used purposive sampling to identify participants who met the eligibility criteria to obtain meaningful data.

I gathered data from six small business leaders in the Western United States with effective CSR strategies to remain competitive and increase profit. As Althubaiti (2022) explained, the broader applicability of research findings enhances their relevance when they can be generalized to similar populations. A sample of six participants proved sufficient for qualitative research grounded in pragmatic inquiry, with the participants possessing meaningful insight into the research topic. Previous qualitative studies employing small, focused samples have yielded rich, context-specific data (Green & Binfet, 2021). If new data or themes emerged after six interviews, I was prepared to proceed with additional interviews and review of documents until data saturation was achieved, thereby ensuring methodological triangulation.

Researchers reach data saturation when no new ideas or themes emerge from participant replies (Rahimi & Khatooni, 2024). Six semistructured interviews can provide enough depth and breadth of knowledge to support saturation with the research topic (Bekele & Ago, 2022). I conducted semistructured interviews with open-ended questions to extract rich data from participants, increasing the likelihood of data saturation. I contacted suitable individuals via email or phone to recruit participants and gain their informed consent to participate in the project.

Data Collection Activities

Lincoln and Guba (1985) introduced the idea of a researcher as the principal research tool. In qualitative research, researchers acknowledge that the researcher is the research instrument rather than a detached spectator (Yoon & Uliassi, 2022). Researchers undertaking a pragmatic inquiry research study acquire data through interviews, observations, and document analysis (Ramanadhan et al., 2021), allowing them to make educated conclusions from a holistic viewpoint. I served as the principal data collection instrument in the planned project. I conducted semistructured interviews with open-ended questions and analyzed public organizational documentation. An interview protocol includes interview steps, a script for the introduction and conclusion, prompts for obtaining participant consent, and interview questions and prompts (Jiménez & Orozco, 2021), balancing structure and flexibility to ensure researchers collect relevant data while allowing participants to express their perspectives freely. I utilized an interview protocol (see Appendix) to support and guide me through the interview process, ensuring that all

participants were interviewed consistently in the same way to mitigate bias. The Appendix contains the interview questions I used in my research project.

Semistructured interviews with open-ended questions are commonly used in qualitative research (Busetto et al., 2020). Interviews with participants provide insight into their opinions on the phenomenon under inquiry (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021), allowing researchers to explore important phenomena. Semistructured interviews enable researchers to ask follow-up questions, providing an interpretative context (Henriksen et al., 2021). Qualitative researchers use semistructured interviews with participants to get information from experts on the investigated phenomena (Buys et al., 2022). Researchers make it easier to acquire rich data (Oranga & Matere, 2023) by asking participants for comprehensive details about the topic under inquiry. Semistructured interviews may facilitate the emergence of previously unexplored themes (Javaid & Mahmood, 2023). Semistructured interviews involve using predetermined questions while allowing researchers to pose clarifying follow-up questions as needed (Oerther, 2021). Researchers also analyze organizational documents and artifacts related to the phenomenon under investigation to enhance their qualitative findings' depth, trustworthiness, and confirmability (Dyar, 2021). Employing multiple data collection methods enables researchers to deepen their understanding of the phenomenon and strengthen the rigor of their study through methodological triangulation (Donkoh & Mensah, 2023). In this project, I reviewed publicly available organizational documentation relevant to how business leaders implement successful CSR strategies to enhance brand reputation, including industry documents such as CSR and sustainability reports. I applied

methodological triangulation by comparing member-checked data from semistructured interviews with data from the publicly available document reviews and found that the data were closely aligned, which enhanced the credibility and confirmability of the findings.

Triangulation expands a research study's breadth, depth, and richness by employing multiple approaches to gather and validate data. Methodological triangulation involves drawing upon various sources of evidence to increase the validity and trustworthiness of findings (Vivek et al., 2023). This approach enables researchers to explore a phenomenon from multiple perspectives (Arias Valencia, 2022). For instance, triangulating data from semistructured interviews with data from organizational document analysis supports the development of convergent evidence, enhancing construct validity in qualitative studies (Schlunegger et al., 2024). In this project, I conducted methodological triangulation by comparing member-checked data from semistructured interviews with information obtained from publicly available organizational documents and determined that data alignment had occurred. I incorporated member checking by presenting participants with my interpretations of their responses and requesting confirmation to ensure the accuracy of my interpretations.

As the primary research instrument, I collected data by conducting, recording, and transcribing semistructured interviews guided by an interview protocol (see Appendix). Participants responded to all predetermined interview questions outlined in the interview protocol. Asking for parting thoughts allows participants to share insights or experiences related to the phenomenon that may not have emerged earlier in the interview (Brailas,

2025). A research study inevitably reflects some degree of researcher bias (Florczak, 2021). Researchers address their biases by practicing reflexivity, which mitigates bias and enhances research integrity (Jamieson et al., 2023). Reflexivity involves the process by which researchers critically consider and document their thoughts and decisions throughout the data collection process (Jamie & Rathbone, 2022). Reflexivity is essential for promoting transparency and minimizing bias within the research process (Olmos-Vega et al., 2022). To address potential bias, I practiced reflexivity by reflecting on my thoughts and decisions using a reflexive journal to maintain a record of these reflections during the data collection process.

Another widely used data collection method in qualitative research is the analysis of organizational documents (Wallwey & Kajfez, 2023). When combined with interviews, reviewing these materials enables researchers to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Sibbald et al., 2021), enhancing the study's rigor by facilitating methodological triangulation (Edwards & I'Anson, 2020). Researchers may analyze annual reports, financial statements, and budget summaries (Kamal, 2024). Additionally, these documents can offer specific contextual details, including accurate name spellings or key event information (Morgan, 2022). I reviewed publicly available customer reviews, customer feedback, employee documents, internal communication materials, policy documents, advertisements, and CSR and sustainability marketing materials relevant to effective CSR strategies that small business leaders use to improve brand reputation.

Researchers employ member checking to allow participants to correct, confirm, update, or explain specific aspects of the collected data, enhancing the study's trustworthiness (Lloyd et al., 2024). During member checking, researchers invite participants to examine the researchers' interpretations of participants' responses to interview questions to ensure the accuracy of those interpretations (López-Zerón et al., 2021). I conducted member checking to strengthen the validity and reliability, which includes the trustworthiness of the data, collected during interviews by asking participants to verify the accuracy of my interpretations of their interview responses.

Interview Questions

1. What effective CSR strategies did you use to improve brand reputation?
2. How did your employees respond to those CSR strategies?
3. How were CSR strategies used to improve reputation communicated throughout the organizational ranks and among stakeholders?
4. What modifications did you apply to any CSR strategy to improve its effectiveness in improving brand reputation?
5. What were the key barriers to implementing successful CST strategies to improve brand reputation?
6. How did you overcome the key barriers to implementing successful CSR strategies to improve brand reputation?

7. Would you like to share any additional information about your successful CSR strategies used to improve brand reputation that we have not already discussed?

Data Organization and Analysis Techniques

Before data analysis, researchers may benefit from establishing a systematic approach to organizing data. Qualitative researchers are encouraged to incorporate appropriate data management and organization mechanisms into their methodological planning prior to analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2024). A robust data management strategy enhances project rigor by promoting transparency and reproducibility (Cunha-Oliveira et al., 2024). Organizing data in a structured manner can improve the efficiency of the qualitative analysis (AlMaian & Bu-Qammaz, 2024). I created a comprehensive data organization system for the project to enhance its rigor.

I conducted semistructured, face-to-face interviews with selected participants using open-ended questions (see Appendix). Assigning unique codes to participants during data collection is a frequently used approach that helps to maintain participant confidentiality and privacy (Nii Laryeafio & Ogbewe, 2023). I calculated that data saturation could be reached with six participants. I assigned the following codes to participants: the letter “P,” for the participant code, followed by a number between 1 and 6, resulting in codes CSRP1, CSRP2, CSRP3, CSRP4, CSRP5, and CSRP6, representing the six participants. I conducted interviews for the project. I erased identifying data from the transcripts to ensure participant confidentiality in the project. Replacing participants’ actual names and the names of persons and locations reported during data collection with

pseudonyms is a successful method for maintaining participant confidentiality (Itzik & Walsh, 2023). To further ensure participant confidentiality, I transcribed each interview, deleted any identifying information, and marked all transcripts and supporting materials with the assigned participant code.

Throughout the project, I used a digital reflexive journal to document personal reflections, cognitive processes, and observations from semistructured interviews, including coding and emerging themes, promoting transparency. Reflexive journaling is an effective strategy that promotes transparency in the research process by helping researchers examine their positioning and potential biases (Karcher et al., 2024), and it supports the bracketing process by encouraging critical self-awareness (S. P. Thomas & Sohn, 2023). A reflexive journal also enables researchers to record detailed aspects of the project, such as personal responses to interviews and descriptions of the interview setting (Shannon, 2023).

Researchers retain collected data for the duration required to support the project's ethical integrity, methodological soundness, and analytical goals. Maintaining participant data securely and avoiding unnecessary data retention are essential practices in ethical research and data governance (Adarmouch et al., 2020). Data protection regulations established the following best practices researchers can follow to ensure proper data handling during and after a study: (a) defining the purpose of data collection, (b) obtaining informed consent, (c) collecting only necessary information, (d) using the data solely for the purposes specified, (e) retaining information only as long as necessary, and (f) securing the data appropriately (Joyce & Javidroozi, 2024).

Researchers must address the ethical responsibilities of managing data collected during a project. Best practices include storing physical documents securely in a locked cabinet and securing electronic data on password-protected devices (Mukantwari et al., 2025). Upon completing the project and aligning with Walden University's requirements, I will retain raw data on a password-protected flash drive for 5 years. After this retention period, I will delete all digital files, physically destroy the flash drive, and shred printed materials obtained during the interview.

Qualitative data analysis is a dynamic, iterative process that typically occurs alongside data collection, enabling continuous refinement of emerging insights (Locke et al., 2020). Researchers draw from various analytical approaches, such as thematic, content, and discourse analysis, to explore data from multiple perspectives (Alejandro & Zhao, 2023). Thematic analysis, in particular, involves repeatedly reading interview transcripts to develop a deep understanding and interpretation of the content (Christou, 2022). To enhance efficiency, researchers frequently utilize computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS), such as Dedoose and NVivo, to code, organize, and analyze data systematically (Cousins et al., 2024). These tools also support identifying themes and examining their relationships, strengthening qualitative studies' analytical rigor and depth (Olapane, 2021); therefore, I used thematic analysis and software tools to analyze data in the project.

Data analysis in qualitative research follows a structured sequence of steps. Braun and Clarke (2022) introduced a 6-phase approach to thematic analysis: (1) become familiar with the data, (2) generate initial codes, (3) search for themes, (4) review themes,

(5) define and name themes, and (6) produce the final report. Steps 1 and 2 involve immersing oneself in the data to produce preliminary codes (Yusuf & Abas, 2024). In this project, I began by reading and rereading the transcribed interview data and reviewing the organizational documents to familiarize myself with the content and context. I recorded initial notes and reflections in my reflexive journal to capture preliminary insights. I then generated initial codes in NVivo by labeling recurring words, phrases, and ideas across the transcripts and document data. In Step 3, researchers organize data to uncover recurring themes and patterns across the interview transcripts. I organized the coded data within NVivo to identify relationships and patterns between participants' responses and document findings, grouping similar codes into broader categories that reflected emerging CSR-related concepts. Limna (2023) recommended using qualitative data analysis software such as NVivo to enhance efficiency in coding and interpreting study findings. NVivo supports rapid organization, classification, and categorization of qualitative data (Rylee & Cavanagh, 2022). In this project, I used NVivo to code, organize, and analyze raw data from interviews and document reviews by mapping codes, clustering themes, and identifying relational patterns. In Step 4, I reviewed the emerging themes to determine data patterns and themes to answer the central research question for the project. Step 5 involves defining and naming the finalized themes by conducting thematic analysis, ensuring that member-checked data reflects participants' intended meanings, and cross-referencing themes with the member-checked data. Member checking allows researchers to validate their interpretations of participants' answers to interview questions with the participants by giving the researcher's interpretation of

participants' responses and asking them to verify the accuracy of such interpretations (Vella, 2024). I shared my interpretations of participants' responses to interview questions with each participant and asked them to confirm or correct my interpretations. Lastly, in Step 6, I compiled and presented the final project findings in a comprehensive report.

Researchers use the pragmatic inquiry research design to employ multiple data sources to comprehensively address research problems (Allemang et al., 2021). Incorporating triangulated data enhances the depth and richness of findings (Ilma WS et al., 2024). Researchers use methodological triangulation to validate and cross-check various data sources, such as semistructured interviews and document reviews (Xiangjun & Lei, 2024). In the project, publicly available organizational documents were a secondary data source for triangulation. Multiple methods can be used to analyze data from document reviews, including thematic and content analysis (Humble & Mozelius, 2022). I applied content analysis to categorize and interpret these publicly available materials. This method enables systematic classification of data, coding, and identifying emerging patterns, thereby contributing to an organized approach to qualitative interpretation (Ahmad et al., 2025). Content analysis consists of three phases: preparation, organization, and reporting (Pollock et al., 2022). I employed methodological triangulation by comparing themes generated from the thematic analysis of interview transcripts with codes and categories derived from the content analysis of publicly available documents; triangulation served to corroborate and test the credibility and confirmability of the identified themes. According to Braun and Clarke's (2022) 6-

step process, Step 6 involves drawing conclusions and offering recommendations based on the findings to address the overarching research question (Ahmed et al., 2025). I concluded the project by synthesizing findings and proposing recommendations aligned with the research purpose and question.

Mapping across diverse data sets enables researchers to concentrate on critical themes that address the overarching research question and align these themes with existing literature and conceptual frameworks, enhancing the coherence and depth of qualitative research findings (Marvi et al., 2024). Assigning labels to qualitative data segments allows for systematic classification and grouping of key themes into broader categories, facilitating organized analysis and interpretation (Vears & Gillam, 2022). In thematic analysis, assessing the frequency of thematic codes within each data category can help identify prevalent themes, enriching the depth and clarity of qualitative data interpretation (Beck et al., 2025). I employed NVivo's data-coding feature to organize key themes into categories, enhancing the project's credibility. Researchers employ conceptual frameworks and literature to identify significant themes and concepts that inform their inquiry (Luft et al., 2022). Researchers connect the conceptual framework to existing literature, methodology, and research findings. I correlated the critical themes with the project's conceptual framework and existing literature.

Reliability and Validity

Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four criteria, dependability, credibility, transferability, and confirmability, are recognized as foundational to ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research. These criteria collectively serve as the qualitative equivalent of

reliability and validity in quantitative methodologies (Mirhosseini & Pearson, 2024).

Adherence to these criteria in the project demonstrated methodological rigor, ensuring that findings are credible, transferable to similar contexts, and confirmable through systematic documentation.

Reliability

Reliability remains a central concern in qualitative research, requiring sound and reliable instruments to generate dependable findings (Kusmaryono et al., 2022).

Dependability in qualitative research refers to the consistency and stability of findings across time, researchers, and contexts (Kakar et al., 2023). To support dependability, qualitative researchers emphasize using well-crafted interview questions that minimize bias and influence participants' responses (Cairns-Lee et al., 2021). In this project, I used the same well-crafted, open-ended interview questions for all participants to enhance consistency across data collection. As recommended by qualitative research experts (Schafer & Phillippi, 2025), I implemented member checking of data interpretation to confirm the dependability of the data collected. The member checking process involves researchers sharing their interpretations of participants' interview responses with participants and requesting their verification of the accuracy of such interpretations (Kullman & Chudyk, 2025). Member checking can strengthen the credibility of qualitative findings by allowing participants to confirm interpretations and help mitigate potential researcher bias (Motulsky, 2021). To enhance the project's credibility and avoid potential bias, I conducted member checking by providing participants with my

interpretations of their responses to interview questions and asking them to verify the accuracy of my interpretations.

Recording interview sessions enables researchers to produce accurate transcripts, supporting dependable data collection and identifying thematic patterns (Rowlands, 2021). In the project, I asked participants to elaborate on their responses to reduce potential bias. If responses were vague or lacked relevance, I encouraged further explanation. To minimize the influence of researcher bias and preserve the integrity of participant perspectives, I refrained from disclosing specific details about the project before conducting the interviews, as suggested by several researchers (French et al., 2021). To ensure consistency and increase the reliability of the project, I adhered strictly to the interview protocol. According to Visiers-Jiménez et al. (2021), several researchers stated that new questions should not be asked during the interviews; therefore, I did not introduce new questions during the interview process.

Validity

In alignment with the principles of qualitative pragmatic inquiry design, I used multiple data sources, semistructured interviews and publicly available corporate documents, to conduct methodological triangulation. As several researchers suggested, methodological triangulation includes multiple data methods (Hansen et al., 2023). No single type of evidence offers a comprehensive advantage over others; instead, sources are most effective when used in a complementary manner to reinforce credibility (Kington et al., 2021). A rigorously designed qualitative pragmatic inquiry project should incorporate as many sources of evidence as possible to enhance validity.

Methodological triangulation enhances the validity of a case project, as confirmed by recent scholars (Hong et al., 2024). Methodological triangulation refers to comparing multiple data sources to determine whether alignment exists among the collected information (Gbedemah, 2023). I used semistructured interviews and publicly available organizational documents to apply methodological triangulation in the project. In qualitative pragmatic inquiry, triangulating data sources represents a primary strategy for supporting research validity by reinforcing consistency and credibility in the findings (Hanson-DeFusco, 2023).

Credibility, transferability, and confirmability are critical components of the validation framework for establishing rigor and trustworthiness in qualitative inquiry (Singh et al., 2021). Researchers confirm credibility when conducting qualitative pragmatic inquiry studies by applying multiple data collection methods to compare and assess alignment among data sources (Foster, 2023). When a single researcher analyzes the data, credibility depends on the inclusiveness and representativeness of the collected dataset (Morgan, 2024). Reviewing interview transcripts contributes to credibility by promoting an accurate and comprehensive representation of participants' views (Sakaguchi et al., 2025). I conducted a detailed review of interview transcripts to ensure I captured the full range of participants' perspectives. I also identified and examined patterns of similarity and difference across project participants. I used member checking, conducted after transcription and before analysis, to support the accuracy of the interpreted data, as experts recommended (Soysal & Türkmen, 2024). I implemented

member checking by providing participants with my interpretations of their responses to interview questions and asking them to verify the accuracy of those interpretations.

Transferability refers to the extent to which the findings of one study are applicable in other contexts (Drisko, 2024). Researchers conducting qualitative pragmatic inquiry studies aim to produce high-quality findings by purposefully selecting relevant participants, reporting detailed demographic information, performing thorough data analysis, and presenting the results in a clear and accessible manner to enhance the transferability of the study's outcomes (S. L. Thomas et al., 2024). To enhance the transferability of the project, I selected suitable participants, reported detailed demographic information, conducted thorough data analysis, and presented findings in a well-organized and easily interpretable format.

Confirmability is addressed after establishing dependability, credibility, and transferability (Wilson et al., 2023) and refers to the extent to which the data reflect participants' perspectives without researcher bias (Ahmed, 2024). I actively listened during each interview and documented my reflections, insights, and potential biases to enhance confirmability in the project. I ensured accurate transcription of interview responses, established a transparent connection between collected data and resulting interpretations, and incorporated relevant findings from the existing literature to strengthen the confirmability of the project's results.

I continued to collect and review data until data saturation was reached. Data saturation occurs when additional data collection no longer provides new or meaningful insights (Aguboshim, 2021). Without data saturation, researchers may not be able to

reach comprehensive or conclusive results (Ahmed, 2025). I continued collecting and analyzing data until no additional relevant information emerged in the project.

Transition and Summary

In Section 3, I provided a comprehensive overview of the research methodology for the project, emphasizing the qualitative approach, the role of the researcher, and ethical considerations for this project, in which I explored how small business leaders in the western United States implement CSR practices. I selected the qualitative methodology and the pragmatic inquiry design to support exploring context-specific strategies business leaders use. I served as the primary instrument for data collection and analysis. Semistructured interviews were the primary data collection method to gather in-depth accounts of participants' experiences. Publicly available documents served as secondary data to provide additional context and support in interpreting interview findings. Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns in the data, with themes interpreted in relation to the project's conceptual framework and relevant literature. The results of this project may provide insights into how small business leaders apply CSR practices and navigate challenges in their operational contexts. Ethical considerations, including informed consent, participant confidentiality, and transparency, were upheld throughout the project. Strategies to establish trustworthiness, such as member checking and methodological triangulation, were used to support dependability, credibility, transferability, and confirmability.

Section 4 will focus on presenting the findings of the project. The section will also address the findings in response to the research question. It will contain practical

business strategies and contributions to positive social change. I will discuss future research opportunities based on the project's outcomes.

Section 4: Findings and Conclusions

Presentation of the Findings

The purpose of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry was to explore effective CSR strategies that small business leaders in the Western United States use to improve organizational reputation. The project addressed one research question: What effective CSR strategies do small business leaders use to improve brand reputation? Data were collected through semistructured interviews with small business leaders and supplemented with secondary organizational documents. Using Braun and Clarke's (2022) thematic analysis. Six themes emerged: (a) strengthen ethical practices, (b) engage employees in values-driven CSR, (c) communicate CSR strategies, (d) adapt strategies to feedback and resources, (e) address structural barriers, and (f) formalize processes to overcome barriers. Interpreted through Carroll's (1991) CSR pyramid model, these themes illustrate how small business leaders balance economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic responsibilities to strengthen organizational reputation. Consistent with IRB approval and ethical protections, participants were identified only by pseudonymous codes (e.g., CSR P1) to protect confidentiality.

Table 1

Data Contributing to the Six CSR Themes Identified From Interviews and Documents

Theme	Number of participants	Frequency per interview	Frequency per documents
Strengthen ethical practices	6	27	14
Engage employees in values-driven CSR	6	8	32
Communicate CSR strategies	6	28	15
Adapt strategies to feedback and resources	6	10	27
Address structural barriers	6	12	23
Formalize processes to overcome barriers	6	11	31

Note. Insights from the dataset: Six participant interviews and 10 public industry documents

Theme 1: Strengthen Ethical Practices

The first theme that emerged was that direct community assistance, notably the fair treatment of people, was the most frequently identified CSR strategy applied by small business leaders to improve organizational reputation. Participants emphasized the importance of supporting employees, residents, and community groups in their operations and noted that such actions influenced stakeholders' perceptions of their companies' credibility and trustworthiness. Participant CSRP2 emphasized paying fair salaries to all employees, Participant CSRP4 highlighted maintaining affordable products and services for local residents, Participant CSRP1 described supporting local events, and Participant CSRP5 discussed contributing resources to community organizations. Participant CSRP4 stated, "We use cutting-edge green building practices, and that is kind of our branding strategy," illustrating a commitment to go beyond profitability by incorporating

environmentally friendly practices into current business operations and future expansion plans. The document analysis supported these findings, as community investment and social activity engagement were among the most frequently mentioned topics in the 10 industry CSR documents. This theme was coded 27 times in interviews and 14 times in documents, totaling 41 references across the dataset.

All six participants identified initiatives relating to people's well-being or direct community support as key to their CSR efforts. These categories were coded 27 times during the interviews, making them frequently cited aspects in the dataset and central to addressing the project's research question. Participants consistently highlighted fair compensation, equal treatment, sponsorship of community activities, and local connections as visible behaviors that strengthen stakeholder confidence. For example, participant CSRP6 explained, "fair treatment is central. We're a cooperative, so everyone has a voice and is compensated fairly for their work," aligning with the ethical dimension of Carroll's (1991) CSR pyramid model. Another participant, CSRP5, underlined the value of local exposure, saying, "being part of the community is critical. Our CSR efforts are visible because they're tied to local projects and people see us involved," reflecting the philanthropic dimension of Carroll's CSR pyramid model. These recurrent statements show that small business leaders saw direct community assistance as a realistic and reputationally relevant technique for showing responsibility and maintaining legitimacy with employees, customers, and community stakeholders.

The industry document analysis confirmed the participants' emphasis on justice and community participation. Nine of the 10 evaluated industry documents included

community investment, stakeholder fairness, or direct interaction, totaling 41 instances in the dataset. Reports by PwC (2021), KPMG (2024), and the United Nations Global Compact (2024) specifically connected visible community commitments to reputational results, indicating that stakeholders are increasingly evaluating firms based on their contributions to social and environmental well-being. In this project, I found that direct community assistance is both a common small business practice and a generally accepted industry norm. The congruence between participant narratives and larger industry data indicates that fairness and participation are critical, measurable CSR measures for maintaining business reputation.

Prioritizing justice and community participation gave participants two reputational advantages, reinforcing internal and outward views of responsibility. First, equal treatment of employees increased organizational credibility, as employees who felt respected and appreciated became informal ambassadors, sharing their good experiences with customers, colleagues, and community members. This internal campaigning increased trust in the company from the inside out. Second, highly visible donations to the community, such as sponsoring local events, contributing resources, or supporting nonprofit activities, served as external indicators of responsibility. These efforts provided visible evidence to consumers and community partners that CSR initiatives reflected values extending beyond profitability. These impacts resulted in alignment between participants' reputations and larger stakeholder expectations of openness, sincerity, and long-term commitment to community well-being.

The findings are consistent with previous research, emphasizing the reputational benefit of employee and community participation as key components of CSR. According to Deloitte (2022), younger customers and workers increasingly evaluate firms based on their evident social commitment. McKinsey and Company (2022) stressed that persistent investments in stakeholder well-being led to long-term reputational benefits. Interpreted through Carroll's (1991) CSR pyramid, these practices fulfill ethical and philanthropic responsibilities. Fair and equal treatment of workers represents ethical commitments to internal stakeholders, whereas visible contributions to the community fall under the philanthropic category. The consistency of evidence across interviews and documentation confirms that providing direct community help and treating people well are viable and scalable CSR methods for small business leaders looking to improve their organization's reputation and stakeholder confidence.

Theme 2: Engage Employees in Values-Driven CSR

Employee investment in values-driven CSR initiatives emerged as a prominent theme across all data sources. CSRP1, CSRP2, and CSRP4 emphasized that employees were not passive recipients of CSR but active contributors who reinforced and expanded CSR efforts in regular operations. CSRP1 observed that personnel encouraged sustainability initiatives during customer encounters, linking personal pride with increased consumer trust. CSRP1 explained, "many of us wanted to upset what was a dysfunctional business," reflecting employees' desire to replace a profit-only structure with values emphasizing fair compensation and shared purpose. CSRP2 explained how workers championed the firm's fair labor and sourcing standards, serving as CSR

ambassadors inside and outside the workplace. Participant CSRP4 agreed that employees frequently proposed projects or advocated collaborations consistent with company commitments. CSRP4 also explained, "Ninety percent of applicants say something about knowing that we're involved in the community." This observation indicates that many prospective and future employees are already interested in values-driven CSR, demonstrating how community engagement attracts like-minded talent. This finding aligns with Deloitte's (2022) observation that younger generations expect organizations to provide meaningful opportunities to address social concerns, influencing employee retention and strengthening corporate reputation. This theme was coded eight times in interviews and 24 times in documents, totaling 32 references across the dataset.

CSRP3 and CSRP4 emphasized integrating CSR into organizational culture to promote sustained employee involvement and long-term organizational outcomes. CSRP3 noted that community service initiatives enabled employees to take on leadership positions in organizing volunteer efforts, boosting morale, instilling pride, and improving external perceptions of the business. CSRP3 explained, "If they're holding a fundraiser, it's staffed by people who are willing to volunteer their labor to make it happen," illustrating employees' commitment and leadership in community-oriented CSR. CSRP4 promoted employee engagement in equality and inclusion programs, stating that these efforts improved internal cohesiveness, fostered a more inclusive and supportive environment, and appealed to socially conscious customers and stakeholders. Both participants associated authentic participation with increased confidence among workers and external stakeholders, aligning with the ethical dimension of Carroll's (1991) CSR

pyramid model. These findings are consistent with the United Nations Global Compact (2024), which emphasizes that incorporating human rights and labor values into corporate culture increases credibility, reinforces responsibility, and enhances long-term stakeholder confidence.

CSRP5 and CSRP6 stressed that employee-led CSR advocacy contributed to strengthening corporate reputation. CSRP5 outlined a collaborative approach in which staff members directly impacted the creation of sustainable policies, finding that employee participation enhanced organizational commitment and authenticity. CSRP6 noted that staff actively tracked progress toward environmental targets and posted updates on organizational social media channels, increasing the organization's exposure beyond official marketing initiatives. These statements demonstrate how workers can serve as credible ambassadors when they believe they own their CSR efforts. Business for Social Responsibility (2021) also concluded that lessons from supply-chain CSR demonstrate that credibility depends on meaningful employee and stakeholder participation throughout implementation. These findings reinforce the importance of authentic engagement in building reputational value and ensuring CSR efforts resonate with larger communities.

Analyzing evidence from participant interviews and the 10 publicly available industry documents, I found that employee participation in values-driven CSR initiatives fosters trust, strengthens organizational culture, and enhances long-term reputational outcomes. Throughout the interviews, all six participants emphasized the importance of employees in developing CSR, frequently referencing excitement, pride, and willingness

to contribute ideas. For example, some participants stated that staff frequently encouraged community collaborations or proposed issues for organizational engagement. This high frequency of references suggests that workers see CSR as an integral element of their organizational CSR identity and brand reputation. This conclusion is supported by industry data showing that purpose-driven businesses report higher employee retention and engagement rates (PwC, 2021). I found that aligning CSR initiatives with employee values fosters internal cohesion and enhances external perceptions of integrity, fulfilling the ethical responsibility dimension of Carroll's (1991) CSR pyramid model.

Theme 3: Communicate CSR Strategies

Through data analysis, I found a third theme: Small business leaders used multiple communication channels to share CSR initiatives, emphasizing openness, visibility, and direct stakeholder interaction. Participants stated that communication was critical to ensure that CSR practices were adopted, understood, and acknowledged by employees, customers, and community stakeholders. The techniques discussed included public signage and banners, transparency reports or community-facing updates, and direct communication practices inside their companies. Together, these measures strengthened credibility and gave visible evidence of accountability. Document analysis verified similar trends, with eight of 10 industry documents citing CSR communication as critical to stakeholder confidence. This theme was coded 28 times in interviews and 15 times in documents, totaling 43 references across the data set.

All six participants stressed the need to communicate CSR to preserve stakeholder confidence. Communication strategies were coded frequently, making them one of the

most frequently discussed topics in the dataset. For example, CSRP6 highlighted how internal bulletin boards and posted meeting minutes serve as visual reminders of CSR responsibilities in familiar settings, thereby enhancing openness. CSRP6 explained, “We also have an internal communication system we use through Homebase, which is scheduling HR software.” This tool provides an additional virtual method of communication alongside the internal bulletins, enhancing transparency within the organization. Another participant, CSRP2, noted that having open conversations with staff and community members provided direct responsibility and highlighted the organization’s readiness to listen. CSRP2 stated the business has “a policy in favor of direct communication.” This policy promotes open dialogue and transparency and is reinforced through regular training. CSRP2 added, “We have trainings all the time on conflict management and direct communication,” highlighting a consistent organizational emphasis on accountability and employee voice. Together, these accounts demonstrate how communication methods functioned as visible and practical indicators of ethical behavior.

As a result of document analysis, I noted the necessity of open communication as a core CSR strategy. Eight of the 10 analyzed papers, including those by Deloitte (2022), PwC (2021), and EY (2024), underlined the need for regular updates, stakeholder interactions, and public disclosures in establishing confidence. Leaders reported using newsletters, meetings, and social media to keep employees and communities informed, whereas industry insiders emphasized responsibility through frequent reporting. Transparency was consistently connected to trust, with staff and external stakeholders

responding favorably when organizations freely discussed their successes and issues. These findings demonstrate that effective communication is necessary for small businesses, and transparent communication is an established industry standard and is crucial to demonstrating CSR in action and increasing trust and reputation.

Prioritizing communication was often underlined during the six interviews and reinforced by industry documentation as critical to CSR performance. Participants identified two significant benefits. First, internal communication promoted alignment by ensuring workers understood CSR activities and were involved in their results, strengthening ethical responsibility within Carroll's (1991) pyramid. CSRP6 encouraged open conversation and accountability by allowing workers to voice concerns or disagreements with specific actions. Second, external communication, signs, reports, social media, and direct engagement demonstrated philanthropic responsibility by exposing CSR operations to community stakeholders. PwC (2021) also found that transparency impacts customer trust. These methods strengthened trust, enhanced reputation, and built long-term support.

I linked the findings to previous research that ties CSR communication to credibility and trust. According to KPMG (2024), sustainability disclosures are increasingly common across industries. Meanwhile, the World Economic Forum (2020) emphasized standardized reporting standards to increase openness and comparability. Participants emphasized these themes by frequently mentioning direct, open communication with workers, customers, and community partners as necessary for showing accountability. Several leaders prioritized exposure through social media,

community meetings, and public sponsorships, making their CSR efforts more transparent and verifiable. Within Carroll's (1991) CSR pyramid, communication links ethical and philanthropic responsibilities, reinforcing stakeholder trust. Theme 3 illustrates that communication techniques are essential CSR practices for maintaining trust and safeguarding reputation.

Theme 4: Adapt Strategies to Feedback and Resources

The fourth theme I uncovered is that small business leaders actively updated their CSR initiatives to increase effectiveness and stakeholder impact. Participants stressed that CSR was not a static concept but evolved through experimentation, stakeholder feedback, and adaptation to business and community requirements. Adjustments included customizing programs to the requirements of partner organizations, improving narrative for consumer marketing, and changing the content and voice of newsletters and social media to meet stakeholder expectations. Participant CSRP2 explained, "When we partner with an organization, we tend to follow their lead. We see that they're the experts in how they're going to deliver the service." Similarly, CSRP6 emphasized a responsive approach to community needs, stating, "Our goal is to help them in the way that is most helpful." These statements illustrate how small business leaders adapt CSR strategies by deferring to partner and community expertise, ensuring programs remain relevant and impactful. Some leaders cited real adjustments such as establishing a living wage fund, providing more flexible pay and time-off rules, and expanding CSR visibility across multiple communication platforms. These adjustments reflected a pragmatic approach, allowing business leaders to grow CSR activities within their capabilities while

remaining relevant. This theme was coded 10 times in interviews and 27 times in documents, totaling 37 references across the dataset.

Participants explained that these modifications strengthened internal and external perceptions of responsibility. For example, one leader described adapting communication strategies by softening the tone of social media messaging to ensure alignment with community values, as CSRP6 explained, “We definitely made our social media voice a little bit softer, a little gentler in response to feedback we have gotten from customers.” Another emphasized the importance of tailoring outreach to highlight CSR activities more clearly, noting that regular updates through internal postings and public channels reinforced accountability. These changes allowed participants to present CSR in ways that employees, customers, and partners found authentic and accessible. The recurrence of these accounts underscores that modification is essential to sustaining trust, legitimacy, and fulfilling ethical responsibilities outlined in Carroll’s (1991) CSR pyramid model.

Through analysis of the documents, I noted the importance of flexibility and adaptability in CSR activity. Seven of the 10 evaluated reports mentioned adjusting or scaling CSR initiatives to suit changing stakeholder expectations, which contributed to the 37 total references across the data set. For example, the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (2022) emphasized that businesses “need to evolve to support global progress and transformation” by enhancing audience accessibility, communication channels, and materiality evaluations (p. 4). McKinsey and Company (2022) emphasized adjusting employee participation, governance structures, and reporting formats to remain credible in the face of increasing social demands. The consistency of findings across

interviewees and industry publications suggests that adaptability is not only a requirement for small businesses but also an industry-wide criterion for effective CSR.

Using Carroll's (1991) CSR pyramid, I found that Theme 4 illustrates ethical and philanthropic duties by demonstrating how leaders used strategies to overcome constraints associated with limited bandwidth and narrow profit margins. Several participants indicated that budgetary restrictions necessitated careful resource allocation while remaining committed to employees and community partners. Adjustments such as providing living wages, enhancing benefits, or redirecting contributions from in-kind items to direct financial assistance were viewed as reasonable strategies to meet ethical commitments. Industry reports also highlighted these concerns, indicating that small enterprises have difficulty maintaining CSR throughout tight financial cycles (KPMG, 2024). These findings suggest that responsive adjustments assist in retaining authenticity, strengthening reputation, and enabling small business leaders to meet stakeholder expectations despite financial constraints.

Theme 5: Address Structural Barriers

Participants repeatedly said that limited personnel capacity hampered their ability to implement CSR practices. Many small enterprises have limited management teams, leaving little time to form alliances, document actions, and convey ideas. Participant CSRP6 explained, "I'm our only management staff, and even getting me funded with a salary was difficult at first." This example demonstrated how structural constraints limited the scope and regularity of CSR initiatives. Without committed workers, campaigns were frequently based on ad hoc efforts and individual dedication rather than

formal procedures. KPMG (2024) reported that smaller organizations frequently lack the capacity to handle reporting and stakeholder interaction effectively, limiting their ability to integrate CSR into daily operations and long-term strategy. This theme was coded 12 times in interviews and 23 times in documents, totaling 35 references across the dataset.

Financial restrictions exacerbated bandwidth problems for small enterprises. Several participants mentioned occasions when limited resources required them to scale back or pause CSR initiatives, even if community support remained a priority. CSRP6 further explained, “There were a few years where we had to be more selective about what we were supporting just financially,” highlighting the challenge of balancing financial constraints with CSR commitment. Resource trade-offs highlighted the difficulty of balancing organizational survival with reputational obligations. PwC (2021) reported that 76% of customers disconnect from businesses that handle stakeholders poorly. Small business leaders acknowledged the reputational risks but emphasized that payroll and operations sometimes took precedence over CSR activities. Despite these constraints, participants consistently described CSR as a long-term investment in credibility and trust.

I found that bandwidth limitations also created communication barriers that affected efficiency and trust. Participants described situations where late responses to nonprofit partners or missed deadlines strained collaborations and risked reputational harm. For instance, CSRP3 described a partner expecting 100 loaves of bread without proper notice: “They didn’t contact us, and then a week before they said, hey, we’re expecting bread . . . it caused quite a bit of stress,” which caused significant stress and strained the collaboration. Such lapses reflected structural constraints rather than a lack of

commitment. The World Economic Forum (2020) reported that weak coordination and unclear systems for partner engagement can erode the credibility of CSR initiatives. Business leaders noted that limited staffing often prevented timely follow-through, underscoring the need for clear processes to sustain stakeholder trust.

When taken together, interviews and documents suggest that bandwidth and budgetary constraints limit and define CSR operations in small enterprises. Leaders repeatedly cited limited staff capacity and tight financial margins as hurdles to launching large-scale or ongoing projects. To adapt, they emphasized CSR initiatives consistent with business values and community needs, ensuring authenticity even when efforts are limited in scope. Seasonal swings in demand and tight operational budgets exacerbated these issues, sometimes resulting in uneven implementation. Within Carroll's (1991) CSR pyramid model, these limits were directly related to a company's economic and legal responsibilities, as business leaders prioritized survival and compliance over ethical or philanthropic objectives. These findings imply that small businesses confront structural constraints that necessitate adaptive CSR initiatives rather than scaled-down copies of larger corporate models, highlighting that low bandwidth and tight margins impede CSR in small enterprises. These data suggest that structural barriers, rather than a lack of will, are the key impediments to implementing and sustaining CSR in small businesses.

Theme 6: Formalize Processes to Overcome Barriers

Participants identified structural and procedural improvements as a primary approach to overcoming CSR hurdles. Leaders emphasized that small enterprises

frequently lack time and personnel capability, so they rearranged tasks and implemented clear accountability mechanisms. CSRP2 stated, “We were getting all these things on sale, but we were not communicating it as well as we could,” which reflected a need to redesign CSR communication. CSRP4 stated, “I trusted too much . . . we had to set clearer expectations,” emphasizing the necessity for formal accountability mechanisms. Similarly, CSRP5 highlighted the importance of systematically prioritizing initiatives when resources are limited: “The three main things that we serve is food insecurity, education, especially literacy, and social justice. When I am feeling too stretched, it's like, if your cause isn't quite in my three, I'm going to pass.” This statement illustrates the need for a structured approach to allocating personnel and financial resources, ensuring CSR activities remain feasible and impactful. Other participants agreed they depended on shared accountability, unambiguous work allocations, and integrating CSR into daily operations despite lacking a designated CSR role or department. These changes enabled firms to continue CSR operations despite constrained resources while remaining responsive to workers and community partners. This theme was coded 11 times in interviews and 31 times in documents, totaling 42 references across the dataset.

Evidence from publicly available industry documents supported these results. Theme 6 was referenced 42 times total across the six participant interviews and the 10 publicly available industry documents. The Global Impact Sourcing Coalition (GISC) lessons learned study stressed that long-term CSR requires integrating responsibility within company structures rather than depending on informal activities (Business for Social Responsibility, 2021). Similarly, KPMG’s survey of sustainability reporting

identified an increasing need for formal reporting mechanisms and accountability frameworks to fulfill CSR commitments (KPMG, 2024). These examples illustrate that organizations of all sizes are more effective at maintaining CSR when they create governance structures that make it a regular, systematic process. Analysis of the interview data and secondary materials shows that structural modifications, including assigning responsibility, developing formal rules, and establishing communication channels, were significant strategies for overcoming resource and knowledge constraints in small businesses.

Theme 6 is also strongly related to Carroll's (1991) CSR pyramid model, particularly the ethical and legal responsibilities that drive company conduct. By incorporating CSR into structural processes, participants illustrated how small firms may move beyond discretionary or philanthropic efforts to meet ethical accountability and transparency standards. Carroll's approach highlights the need for firms to address economic survival and social duties, which coincides with the limitations mentioned by participants about limited personnel and resources. Establishing formal structures, such as appointing a general manager or systematizing communication, demonstrates how firms operationalize CSR within their capabilities while maintaining ethical accountability to workers and stakeholders. I found that this link supports the project's overall result that CSR reputation in small businesses improves when responsibility is institutionalized rather than treated as discretionary.

Business Contributions and Recommendations for Professional Practice

Through this research project, I am contributing to professional business practices by demonstrating how small business leaders can improve organizational reputation by implementing accessible CSR initiatives. Unlike research focusing on major organizations, the findings show that CSR is feasible for small businesses when entrenched in ethical, transparent, and organized procedures. Leaders can boost credibility by promoting fair treatment, equal compensation, and community sponsorships while engaging staff in values-based activities. Employee-led projects enhance authenticity and turn employees into brand ambassadors, building trust with internal and external stakeholders. These findings demonstrate that CSR, when implemented successfully, is not optional but essential to small business success.

Analysis of the research emphasizes the necessity of open communication and response. Leaders may boost stakeholder trust by implementing multi-channel communication tactics such as newsletters, bulletin boards, social media, and community-focused updates. Transparency necessitates disclosing successes and difficulties while adhering to larger industry accountability requirements. Flexibility emerged as a reputational asset. Small business leaders may ensure that CSR stays authentic and relevant by incorporating stakeholder feedback into planning cycles. By considering the implications of these findings, I found that small enterprises that communicate freely and adapt pragmatically to changing expectations can better preserve stakeholder confidence and credibility.

Addressing structural impediments was another critical conclusion. Limited human and financial resources sometimes hampered CSR implementation, but participants overcame these obstacles through work reallocation, formal accountability systems, and lightweight reporting tools. Small business leaders can establish defined CSR duties, even within existing roles, and use basic tools like quarterly check-ins or scorecards to track success. Policymakers and business groups may bolster these efforts by providing training programs, simpler reporting forms, and peer-learning opportunities. These methods institutionalize CSR while reducing reputational risks associated with inconsistency, demonstrating that structure facilitates sustainability even in resource-constrained environments.

Finally, the findings contain far-reaching consequences for connecting theory and practice. I found that small organizations may get reputational benefits by implementing CSR through gradual, value-driven initiatives rather than duplicating giant corporate models. Business leaders, industry groups, and politicians should take note of these findings, which suggest that CSR can be both a reputational tool and a community investment. Dissemination through academic publications, practitioner workshops, and professional conferences will broaden the research project's practical significance. This initiative provides a roadmap for small business leaders to integrate social responsibility into their operations while increasing long-term reputation by transforming CSR from abstract theory into tangible strategies.

Implications for Social Change

The implications for positive social change extend to individuals, organizations, and communities through improved well-being, dignity, and development. Identifying effective CSR strategies used by small business leaders in the Western United States provides practical insights that other businesses may adopt to strengthen trust with employees and customers and to improve organizational reputation. Participants explained that CSR practices such as ethical labor policies, environmental stewardship, and community engagement supported social and economic outcomes beyond the firm. These actions reinforced accountability, encouraged responsible leadership, and helped sustain stakeholder relationships. When the participating small business leaders aligned CSR strategies with community needs, they advanced job opportunities, fostered social cohesion, and promoted local development. Insights based on participants' experiences and public industry documents can inform practice and education, expanding small businesses' capacity to contribute to meaningful social outcomes.

Participants emphasized that community-centered CSR approaches promote mutual trust, inclusion, and long-term partnerships. Small business leaders who adapt CSR initiatives to reflect local values build cultural awareness and collaboration among stakeholders. The results highlight the importance of ethical leadership and multi-stakeholder engagement in addressing societal challenges such as transparency, equity, and environmental responsibility. When the participating small business leaders adopted CSR practices aligned with community interests, they helped reduce stereotypes, encouraged collaboration across sectors, and addressed broader systemic issues. These

contributions add to research and practice by framing CSR as a pathway to measurable business outcomes and social well-being improvements.

Recommendations for Further Research

In the following recommendations, I address the project's limitations and provide opportunities for further study on CSR implementation and brand reputation. One weakness was the small sample size of six small business leaders, which limited the transferability of the findings. Future research should cover larger corporations and early-stage startups to widen the reach. Expanding research to businesses of various sizes and maturity levels may highlight how restricted resources in startups differ from scaling demands in bigger enterprises. Comparative case studies, as demonstrated by Tan et al. (2022), enable researchers to examine these contextual differences and determine whether CSR strategies that enhance brand reputation remain consistent across organizational settings. Such studies could strengthen the applicability of findings and clarify how incentives differ based on structure and capabilities.

Another disadvantage was the qualitative design, which allowed for detailed but not generalizable measurements. Future researchers might use quantitative or mixed-method techniques to build on these findings. Researchers could use surveys to examine the statistical links between CSR activities and outcomes, including consumer loyalty, staff retention, and financial performance. This would offer empirical evidence of CSR's demonstrable impact on corporate performance. Mixed-method techniques mix quantitative and qualitative methods to overcome the limitations of depending primarily on qualitative data (Adu et al., 2022). Triangulating across techniques may improve

interpretation and validity by tying numerical patterns to contextual insights, resulting in a more comprehensive knowledge of CSR's impact on reputation and performance.

In this research project, I was likewise constrained regarding geography and demographics, as I concentrated on small businesses in the Western United States. Minority-owned companies, socially disadvantaged entrepreneurs, and rural enterprises may have been underrepresented. Future researchers should purposefully include underrepresented people to analyze how CSR is used in different circumstances. Investigating the experiences of firms in underprivileged communities may reveal distinct CSR practices influenced by cultural expectations, resource limits, or geographical requirements. Recruitment tactics such as snowball sampling and outreach through chambers of commerce, nonprofit groups, and small business development centers might help overcome access issues. Such research would increase the inclusivity of CSR knowledge and give insights relevant to communities frequently excluded from business-focused studies.

Sector-specific analysis is another field for future research. In this research project, I covered firms from several industries, although the conclusions may not reflect sector-specific difficulties. CSR standards vary by technology, retail, hospitality, and healthcare due to legislative frameworks, customer interests, and environmental effects. Future researchers might include sector-specific initiatives to discover the most successful ways to manage reputation and stakeholder trust within specific sectors. For example, technology companies may promote supply chain openness and data integrity, whereas hotel companies may emphasize local employment and environmental programs.

Linking findings to Carroll's (1991) CSR pyramid would enable academics to evaluate how the industrial environment influences the balance of economic, legal, ethical, and charitable duties in CSR implementation.

Future researchers should address the project's drawback of reflecting a single moment in time. Using a longitudinal approach, researchers could investigate the long-term effects of persistent CSR participation on brand reputation, employee retention, organizational resilience, and community development. In such a study, researchers might assess CSR's sustainability as a strategic practice rather than a short-term project. Studying CSR training programs could prove whether educational activities promote staff engagement, consumer happiness, and stakeholder trust. Mixed-method designs might help researchers evaluate training efficacy by integrating quantitative and qualitative data. Together, these techniques would increase knowledge of CSR as a long-term, evidence-based strategy for small businesses looking to improve their reputation and societal impact.

Conclusion

The problem I studied in this doctoral research project was that certain small business executives in the Western United States lacked appropriate strategies for adopting CSR to improve organizational reputation. The purpose of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry was to explore strategies that small business leaders in Western United States used to apply CSR in ways that supported brand reputation and stakeholder trust. The research question was as follows: What effective CSR strategies do small business leaders use to improve brand reputation? I conducted semistructured interviews with six

leaders, along with an examination of 10 industry publicly available materials. Thematic analysis revealed six themes: (a) strengthen ethical practices, (b) engage employees in values-driven CSR, (c) communicate CSR strategies, (d) adapt strategies to feedback and resources, (e) address structural barriers, and (f) formalize processes to overcome barriers.

In this initiative, I advanced scholarship and practice by applying Carroll's (1991) CSR pyramid to small firms. Participants described CSR as a strategic practice incorporated into business rather than a purely discretionary activity. Through interviews and reviewing public records, I found that transparent communication, ethical leadership, and accountability increased stakeholder confidence and promoted organizational sustainability. Extending Carroll's approach showed that CSR duties may be tailored to the needs of small businesses while remaining committed to ethical and community commitments. Practically speaking, the findings will help small business leaders by outlining techniques for overcoming obstacles, such as using community networks, cooperating with industry peers, and implementing scalable CSR procedures. These strategies improve brand reputation, develop trust, and increase resilience in competitive marketplaces.

In this research project, I highlighted the implications of constructive social transformation. When small company leaders matched CSR with community needs, they improved employee well-being, promoted environmental stewardship, and increased consumer and community confidence. Participants described CSR as a way to help local communities, build social harmony, and increase company responsibility. Encouraging

small firms to include CSR in their operations may foster inclusive development, equitable employment, and stronger stakeholder connections. Through these contributions, I show that CSR advantages go beyond business reputation and may lead to demonstrable improvements in community outcomes. In this research project, I demonstrated that, despite limited resources, small enterprises can significantly contribute to organizational survival and broader social prosperity by connecting ethical leadership with sustainable practices.

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Appendix: Interview Protocol for Qualitative Pragmatic Inquiry Research Project

Interview Protocol	
Begin recording	I am now starting the recording for this interview.
Review Informed Consent	I will go over the key points of the Informed Consent Form with you.
Confirm consent	Do you still agree to participate under the terms outlined in the Consent Form?
Introduce the interview and set the stage. Introduce myself and the purpose of the interview, thereby providing context.	Hello, my name is William Cativo. I am a Doctoral Candidate at Walden University. The purpose of this interview is to explore how small business leaders in the Western United States implement corporate social responsibility (CSR) strategies to improve brand reputation, along with the challenges and motivations involved in this process. The interview will last approximately 45 to 60 minutes. Participation is voluntary; you may skip questions or stop the interview at any time. Your responses will remain confidential, and your identity will not be included in any published materials. The data will only be used for this research project and will be securely stored. Do you have any questions before we begin?
Watch for nonverbal cues. Paraphrase the participant's response. Ask follow-up probing questions to get a more in-depth understanding of their answers.	Interview Questions: What effective CSR strategies did you use to improve brand reputation? How did your employees respond to those CSR strategies? How were CSR strategies used to improve reputation, communicated throughout the organizational ranks, and among stakeholders? What modifications did you apply to any CSR strategy to improve its effectiveness in improving brand reputation?

	<p>What were the key barriers to implementing successful CST strategies to improve brand reputation?</p> <p>How did you overcome the key barriers to implementing successful CSR strategies to improve brand reputation?</p> <p>Would you like to share any additional information about your successful CSR strategies used to improve brand reputation that we have not already discussed?</p>
Wrap up the interview thanking participant.	Thank you for participating in the interview, an integral part of my research project.
Schedule a follow-up interview to perform member checking with the participant.	I will contact you to schedule a time for us to review the accuracy of my interpretations of your interview responses.
End recording.	I am ending the recording. Thank you for your participation.
Follow-up Member Checking Interview	
Start recording.	I have started this member checking interview recording.
Introduce myself and explain the purpose of the follow-up interview to provide context.	Hello again. Thank you for taking the time to meet with me. Today, we will review my interpretations of your interview responses to ensure they accurately reflect your insights.
Provide a clear, concise synthesis of responses for each question. Incorporate probing questions based on related information uncovered, ensuring all questions remain aligned with the approved IRB protocol. Review each question with the participant, present the interpretation, and ask: Does this interpretation accurately reflect your input? Is there anything I overlooked? Would you like to clarify or add any additional information?	I will go through each question and share a summary of your responses. Please let me know if the interpretation is accurate or if you want to clarify or add additional information.
	Question and succinct synthesis of the interpretation—perhaps one paragraph or as needed

End recording.	I have ended the member checking interview recording. Thank you for your participation.
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