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## **Sustainability Strategies for Independent, Quick-Service Restaurant Businesses to Survive Beyond 5 Years**

Winston Daniel Pauley  
*Walden University*

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# Walden University

College of Management and Human Potential

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Winston Daniel Pauley

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## Review Committee

Dr. Theresa Neal, Committee Chairperson, Doctor of Business Administration Faculty

Dr. Kathleen Andrews, Committee Member, Doctor of Business Administration Faculty

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

Walden University  
2025

Abstract

Sustainability Strategies for Independent, Quick-Service Restaurant Businesses to  
Survive Beyond 5 Years

by

Winston Daniel Pauley

MS, University of Maryland Global Campus, 2025

MBA, University of Maryland Global Campus, 2023

BS, Sacred Heart University, 2021

Research Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Business Administration

Walden University

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## Abstract

Independent quick-service restaurant owners face challenges sustaining their businesses beyond 5 years of operation. Many independent quick-service restaurant owners are concerned about maintaining sustainable business operations, as failure can negatively affect owners, employees, and the communities they serve. Grounded in the resource-based view theory, the purpose of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry project was to explore the successful sustainability strategies that quick-service restaurant owners used to survive beyond 5 years. The participants were six independent, quick-service restaurant owners operating in the state of Maryland who employed effective sustainability strategies to survive for more than 5 years. Data were collected using semistructured interviews and a review of published articles from local news organizations and trade industry publications. Through thematic analysis, four main themes were identified: (a) dealing with uncertainty, (b) costs to compete, (c) employee focus, and (d) customer focus. A key recommendation is for independent, quick-service restaurant owners to enhance sustainability by forming and managing relationships with their customer base. The implications for positive social change include the potential for independent, quick-service restaurant owners and industry leaders to strike a balance between economic growth and social equity for individuals, communities, and societies.

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## Section 1: Foundation of the Project

### **Background of the Problem**

Owners of small businesses navigate a challenging landscape where limited resources and experience set them apart from larger firms. Their ability to adapt, innovate, and make strategic decisions often determines their success in an increasingly competitive market. Unlike larger firms, they must contend with fewer resources and less experience. Despite this disparity, they employ almost 50% of U.S. workers (Bartik et al., 2020), inextricably linking small businesses to the growth and sustainment of the U.S. economy. Historically, 18% of small businesses fail within their first year, while 50% fail within the first 5 years (Chamber of Commerce Team, 2022). Failure to sustain small businesses for an extended period has had and will continue to have a detrimental effect on the U.S. economy. Fortunately, empirical evidence has shown that successful sustainability strategies can reduce failure rates and enhance the resilience of small businesses in their early stages (Gomes, 2024). Therefore, it can be logically deduced that successful sustainability strategies would also affect the strength of quick-service restaurants.

Quick-service restaurants are a type of small business that primarily provides customers with prepackaged or *quick* meals, often with minimal or no table service (Wallace, 2022). Quick-service restaurants are revered for their independence or lack of affiliation with any franchise or larger corporation (Wallace, 2022). Historically, the high average closure rate of this small business type has had a detrimental impact on local communities and economies, which depend on both immediate and long-term success.

Therefore, the general business problem that prompted me to search the literature is that many independent, quick-service restaurant owners fail to survive beyond the initial 5 years.

### **Business Problem Focus and Project Purpose**

The specific business problem was that some independent, quick-service restaurant owners operating in the state of Maryland lacked effective sustainability strategies to ensure the long-term survival of their businesses beyond 5 years. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry was to explore successful sustainability strategies that independent, quick-service restaurant owners operating in the state of Maryland used to survive beyond 5 years. The targeted population of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry consisted of six purposely sampled independent, quick-service restaurant owners operating within the state of Maryland who had successfully employed sustainability strategies to survive for more than 5 years. I gained access to the participants using publicly available or procured contact information. Data sources for this project consisted of (a) semistructured interviews; (b) public data, such as publicly available government documents, publicly disseminated reports, and public websites; and (c) literature, such as peer-reviewed articles and other bodies of written knowledge that communicate substantive research findings about practices that are relevant to the research topic. Wernerfelt's (1984) resource-based view (RBV) theory served as the conceptual framework for this research project.

## **Research Question**

What successful sustainability strategies did independent, quick-service restaurant owners in the state of Maryland use to survive beyond 5 years?

## **Assumptions and Limitations**

### **Assumptions**

Assumptions are unverifiable facts perceived as accurate (Jackson & Brown, 2021). In this project, I made three assumptions. The first assumption was that selected participants would be honest about their personal experiences during the interview process within a controlled setting. Another assumption was that the selected participants would be knowledgeable about effective sustainability strategies that support the survival of their independent, quick-service restaurants beyond the initial 5 years. I also assumed that, by using effective sustainability strategies, independent, quick-service restaurant owners could increase the likelihood that their small businesses would survive for 5 years.

### **Limitations**

Limitations are potential weaknesses in a study that the researcher cannot control (Coker, 2022). This project had three limitations. The first limitation was that the project results could differ if the scope of the research included other geographical locations or a larger sample size. Another limitation was participant bias; that is, participants could have intentionally answered interview questions to meet expectations or desired results. The final limitation was that the findings could be limited and not transferable beyond the independent, quick-service restaurant industry within the geographic location.

## **Transition**

In Section 1, I outlined the foundation of this project by introducing the background of the problem, the business problem focus, and the project purpose. Moreover, I identified the comprehensive conceptual framework grounding this project. This section was concluded by noting the overarching research question, assumptions, and limitations inextricably linked to the research project.

In Section 2, I will review the professional and academic literature related to the research topic. The following research components will be included: the RBV theory as the conceptual framework, a review of the research associated with the concept of sustainability, and well-established sustainability strategies. In Section 3, I will provide a detailed overview of the research methodology used in the project, while Section 4 will contain a presentation of the findings associated with the project and concluding remarks.

## Section 2: The Literature Review

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

The purpose of this qualitative, pragmatic inquiry was to explore the successful sustainability strategies that independent, quick-service restaurant owners operating in the state of Maryland used to survive beyond 5 years. In literature reviews, authors provide critical analysis and synthesis of the available empirical and theoretical literature to understand the evidence better and create guidelines for practice and policymaking (Younas & Ali, 2021). The literature review provides the basis for explaining the research topic, specifying the methodological approach, and identifying gaps in practice (Harris, 2019). In this literature review, I analyzed various sources of relevant literature to provide context for the project. The remainder of the literature review is segmented into three parts: the RBV theory conceptual framework, scholarly evidence on the business problem, and scholarship on the business topic related to the resolution of the business problem. The literature was sourced from databases and search engines, such as ScholarWorks, SAGE, Emerald, ProQuest, and Wiley. The key terms used in the literature search included *sustainability*, *quick-service*, *independent*, *restaurants*, and *survival*. Of the total number of sources (105) in the literature review, 71 (68%) were published between 2021 and 2025.

#### **Conceptual Framework: RBV Theory**

The RBV theory served as the conceptual framework for this project. Wernerfelt (1984) introduced the RBV theory in 1984 to highlight new strategic options that naturally emerge from a resource perspective. Barney (1991) expanded on the RBV

theory by introducing a basic and analytical equilibrium model of sustained competitive advantage, wherein a firm has a sustained competitive advantage when potential competitors cease their efforts to imitate a successful firm's resources and capabilities. The valuable, rare, inimitable, and organized (VRIO) framework provides a fundamental basis for understanding which firm resources and capabilities, being helpful, rare, difficult to imitate, and not substitutable by competitors, are most important for developing tools for competitive advantage. A combination of organizational resources and competencies must be established, deployed, and protected in the RBV theory (Mahdi & Nassar, 2021). Possessing a holistic understanding of organizational resources and competencies is highly beneficial for small business owners who seek to create and sustain tools for competitive advantage.

A firm can possess several different types of resources. The firm's resources are distinguished by three key attributes, which comprise physical capital resources, human capital resources, and organizational capital resources. Physical capital resources can be categorized into tangible resources, such as financial and technological resources, and intangible resources, including human capital, social capital, and innovation (Kanapathipillai & Azam, 2019). Human capital resources are defined as the stock of skills, knowledge, and personality traits utilized to create economic value and enhance business performance (Adam et al., 2022). They are classified into two distinct categories: general and specialized. General categories refer to the information, abilities, and skills acquired through education and training, while specialized categories denote skills, aptitudes, and knowledge gained through work experience (Adam et al., 2022).

Organizational capital resources are directly derived from the organization's ideology and structure. In an expansion of the RBV theory, Barney (1991) focused on a firm's reporting structure, planning, controlling, and coordinating systems as well as the relationships between groups within a firm. Each of these resource types was distinct but did not directly link to the creation and sustainment of a tool for strategic competitive advantage (SCA) that small business owners can adopt and later leverage to achieve optimal firm performance.

Optimal firm performance achieved through the creation and sustainment of an SCA tool can be influenced by managerial decisions concerning resource management. Historically, the RBV theory has emerged to explain how organizational leaders develop SCAs using internal resources (Ferreira & Ferreira, 2024). Some researchers asserted that capabilities can be categorized according to the corresponding resources, activities, and internal-external focus, which allowed firms to tailor their sustainability strategies to fit their needs and thus engage in competitive leveraging (McDougall et al., 2021). However, several limitations existed within this field of research, hindering the identification of relevant research gaps. The literature lacked a comprehensive understanding of how managerial decisions and behaviors influenced the acquisition, development, and exploitation of resources, hindering a holistic view of resource management within firms (Ferreira & Ferreira, 2024). The lack of attention paid to managerial decisions that impact firm resource management limits the potential contributions that the RBV theory offers small businesses.

Examining the rationale behind this literary discrepancy offered additional insight into how entrepreneurs or small business owners can maximize the potential benefits of the RBV theory. One reason for this void in the literature was the focus on the role that RBV plays in the valuation and selection of resources in the pursuit of competitive advantage (Zahra, 2021). The concept of resource management extends beyond valuation to consider resource definition, assembly, valuation, selection, orchestration, and deployment. In conducting various activities associated with resource management, entrepreneurs use their judgment in applying foresight, insight, and flashes of hindsight as well as their understanding of industry recipes as they currently exist or how they might want them to be (Zahra, 2021). The emphasis placed on including all activities within the resource management process or discretionary managerial decisions makes better-positioned small businesses more likely to experience the benefits associated with the RBV theory and, by direct correlation, bolsters the probability of achieving optimal firm performance.

As previously discussed, a firm can possess several different types of resources. Within the context of resource management, the effective management of human resources is essential to derive the maximum potential benefits offered by the RBV theory. With the assertion that people were crucial for establishing a firm's success and competitiveness, the RBV has had a significant impact on strategic human resource management (Gerhart & Feng, 2021). Through the lens of the RBV theory, scholars in the field of human resource management have argued that only a high-commitment human resource management strategy creates greater firm-level, employee-based

resources that are rare, valuable, and can lead to a firm's competitive advantage (Collins, 2021). Accordingly, by employing this strategy, owners of small businesses create a climate within the firm that stimulated employees, leading to higher levels of innovation, customer service, and operational efficiency. All these outcomes created a dynamic capital system that not only improved efficiency and effectiveness but also played a crucial role in creating an SCA. Given that, SCA can be achieved by attracting qualified human resources with the potential to meet the job requirements and maintaining and developing their skills and abilities (Battour et al., 2021). Therefore, it is not enough to consider resource management alone; instead, a high-commitment resource management strategy must be developed and implemented to achieve SCA and, by direct correlation, enhance firm performance under the RBV theory.

### **Business Problem Scholarship Evidence**

Owners of small businesses have played a crucial role in the United States, serving as the primary driver of job creation. According to the U.S. Small Business Administration (2021), small businesses have long served as the engine of the U.S. economy, accounting for a significant portion of employment and generating considerable economic activity. Although not specific to them, providing a resolution to minor business troubles was crucial in transforming an economy from one experiencing slow economic recovery to one that has sustained economic growth, health, and competitiveness (Engidaw, 2022). Slight business instability, primarily caused by instances of poor leadership, was largely responsible for this detrimental effect; therefore, business sustainability became a key agenda for leadership and management (Kitsios et

al., 2020). Importantly, the literature called for more sustainability-oriented leadership and management studies in entrepreneurial businesses (Suriyankietkaew, 2019). To better discuss sustainability strategies that may be leveraged to overcome firm instability, I further explored the concept of sustainability.

In today's competitive business environment, assessing business sustainability has become essential for maximizing organizational performance and securing long-term success. Sustainability is commonly defined as meeting the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs, ensuring a balance between economic growth, environmental protection, and social well-being (Keeble, 1988). Sustainability must involve the company's ability to remain in business for an extended period while maintaining sound financial performance and effective administrative systems that enhance productivity and profitability (Orobia et al., 2020). The inability of many small businesses to survive beyond their first 5 years of operation highlights their inherent instability. Instability prohibited them from effectively competing as more unforeseen challenges arose.

The concept of sustainability is multidimensional and offers several ways for small businesses to address instability directly, thereby better managing challenges as they arise. The idea of sustainability has been explored through economic, social, and environmental perspectives. Regarding the financial component, the adoption of technology, introduction of new products, and acquisition of service opportunities contributes to corporate sustainability (Begum et al., 2020). Chege et al. (2020) found that entrepreneurial innovation has a positive effect on technology innovation, which

possess the inherent ability to create new business structures, products, and services. Servitization focused on building customer-oriented digital assets and capabilities via value creation by capturing customer behavior and incorporating it (Raihan, 2024). Despite their unique structure, all these customer-oriented creations led to corporate sustainability and, by extension, enhanced firm performance. The ability of small business owners to display entrepreneurial innovation through the development and utilization of technological innovations bolstered the probability of achieving corporate or economic sustainability.

Concerning the environmental element, an environmentally friendly or *green* company strategy, grounded in innovative industrial efforts, is becoming a more prominent approach in today's business landscape. The smart factory strategy requires firms to focus on cost calculation, quantitative benefit analysis, and corporate social responsibility activities to create a green corporate image and add an environmental dimension (J. Lu et al., 2020). Kassem and Trenz (2020) proposed cost-effective, easy, efficient, automated, comprehensive, and simplified sustainability assessment solutions. All these sustainability assessment solutions were combined and later formulated into a tangible product or information system, aimed at continuously evaluating the impact of corporate social responsibility activities and sustainability value added to the firm. Web interfaces were used to compare the computed sustainability value added and identify and mitigate firm weaknesses moving forward. The adoption and utilization of a similar web interface by small business owners enabled the identification of firm weaknesses that

may hinder the progress of a green company strategy, enabling a firm's environmental sustainability.

For the social dimension, the project and implementation of people management techniques have increased over time. Llinas and Abad (2020) analyzed the performance of Spanish small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to demonstrate how high-performance people management techniques enhance business efficiency under the moderation of innovation, specifically the facilitation of Industry 4.0 technology. The authors indicated that people management techniques have a significant influence on firm innovation and, by direct association, positively impact overall firm performance. Practical implications have suggested that business success depends on providing stakeholders with social, logical, and transitional benefits as the organization transforms (Raihan, 2024). Through organizational transformation, the well-being and confidence of company workers are prioritized. Epping and Zhang (2018) highlighted the effect and importance of fair wages and on-duty health and safety for company workers. Owners of small businesses who prioritize providing employees with similar benefits through organizational transformation subject themselves to the possibility of maximizing the impact of their adopted people management techniques and, by direct correlation, enhancing firm social sustainability.

Not only has the concept of sustainability been explored, but each dimension of this multidimensional concept and its impact on firm stability, and by extension, firm performance, has been examined. A crucial question for present-day leaders and entrepreneurs is what they can do to achieve superior performance outcomes and long-

term business sustainability (Suriyankietkaew, 2022). Today's entrepreneurial leaders and managers face challenges from advanced disruptive technologies, volatile changes in market demands, globalization, and uncertainties in highly competitive global environments, which require a focused approach (Suriyankietkaew, 2022). As such, to further resolve this issue, a more in-depth discussion of several available sustainability strategies for small business owners striving to survive beyond the initial 5 years was the focus of this project.

### **Business Topic Scholarship on the Resolution of the Business Problem**

Owners of small businesses seeking to overcome firm instability through sustainable means can do so by adopting a strong leadership style to drive a refreshed business strategy, along with a team of dedicated and motivated colleagues (Hu & Kee, 2021). Various leadership styles have served well under different circumstances and business environments. One prominent leadership style proposed by Burns (1978) was transformational leadership. In principle, transformational leadership is about the moral values of followers, and it involves increasing their ethical consciousness and encouraging them to maximize their energy and resources to change institutions. Although Burns first presented the concept of *transforming leadership*, Bass et al. (1987) expanded it, recognizing that in a changing environment, transformational leadership is effective in widening and uplifting the interests and well-being of workers, creating awareness and recognition of the organization's vision and goals, and stimulating workers to think beyond their self-interests for the betterment of the entire organization. In a later work, Bass (1999) emphasized the importance of influence, inspiration,

intellectual stimulation, or individualized consideration. Now that the concept of transformational leadership has been adequately broached, I will move on to a discussion regarding the linkage between transformational leadership and the idea of sustainability.

As previously discussed, sustainability is a multidimensional concept. Past researchers had verified a positive and significant direct effect of transformational leadership on organizational social sustainability (Ullah et al., 2021). Where the social component referred to the values, norms, and social networks shared among members of the community or social group, they had some bearing on organizational stability (Manafe et al., 2024). Sustainability encompasses concepts, such as trust, social ties, and cooperation (Azis et al., 2022). Each of these concepts plays a significant role in stabilizing the organization. Small business owners who strive to overcome organizational instability through sustainable means, a common pitfall for most small businesses that fail to survive beyond 5 years of operation, can do so by adopting a transformational leadership style. Sustainability, or long-term viability, can also be influenced by other leadership styles.

Small business owners seeking organizational stability through sustainable means can achieve this by adopting another popular leadership style, originally proposed by Westley and Mintzberg (1989), called visionary leadership. They suggested that there were five types of visionary leadership: the creator (originality and improvisation of the vision), the proselytizer (development and forethought of the future potential of the product), the idealist (perfect dream, ignoring the conflict of the real), the bricoleur (uses social ability to recognize situations and put things together to develop future purposes),

and the diviner (insights focus on the process). Each type of visionary leader possessed the capacity to motivate and engage personnel in support of the leader's vision. Farhan (2024) established visionary leadership as a strategic tool for organizational sustainability. The ability of small business owners to better understand and adopt a specific visionary leadership type is inherent in its capacity to bolster organizational sustainability and, by default, mitigate potential firm instability.

The ability of small business owners to understand and adopt a specific visionary leadership style alone is insufficient. They must also have clearly communicated their vision to their followers or employees. Ismail et al. (2021) argued that visionary leadership creates a vision that provides a sense of direction, organizes change, and implements plans through employees' actions. Sibeko and Barnard (2020) discussed different types of vision, including tactical short-term vision, strategic long-term vision, expansionary vision to extend accomplishments, and specialist expertise vision to improve continuously. Being able to distinguish which vision best aligns with their leadership approach facilitates effective communication and collaboration. Together, these elements can increase employees' awareness of their roles in achieving that vision (Farhan, 2024). The capability of any leader or small business owner to distinguish which type of vision they wish to communicate effectively to their followers or employees is beneficial, maximizing the ability of any visionary leader to achieve organizational sustainability and, by direct association, overcome potential firm instability.

Transformational and visionary leadership styles do overlap. Understanding their similarities and differences is necessary to maximize the benefits that would be derived

thereafter. Transformational leaders refine a vision and create innovative work environments that foster employees' creative mindsets and practices (Afzal & Tumpa, 2024). Transformational leaders are inspiring and visionary; such leaders demonstrate spiritual and visionary practices to formulate an organizational vision that inspire employees to think beyond their organizational goals and reach for greater aspirations (Vedula & Agrawal, 2023). However, visionary and transformational leadership differ in the approach the leader undertakes to lead their subordinates/followers. Owners of small businesses who strive to maximize the potential benefits of either leadership style can do so by better understanding their similarities and differences.

Small business owners striving to achieve organizational stability through sustainable means can do so by considering the adoption of the servant leadership style, initially proposed by Greenleaf (1970). Greenleaf advocated that the servant leader is a servant first. Adopting this style begins with the natural inclination to want to serve. Then, conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. The best test is to determine if those served grow as people and whether they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, and more likely to become servants (Greenleaf, 1970). If a leader assumes the role of a servant, they continuously listen, search, and strive to do better for their followers. Rather than having direct followers be dependent on their leaders for decisions and direction, servant leaders empower direct followers to be independent decision-makers (Greenleaf, 2002). This desired outcome is strongly determined by the behaviors and personality characteristics exhibited by the servant leader. Servant leaders who serve toward a sustainable future typically exhibit

extroversion, agreeableness, openness, conscientiousness, and low neuroticism. Khan et al. (2021) empirically established that these servant leadership characteristics played a more significant role in sustainability by prioritizing the betterment of others or key organizational stakeholders and, by direct correlation, the organization as a whole. Small business owners who attempt to stabilize their organization through sustainable means can do so by assuming the role of a servant leader.

Now that the linkage between a servant leadership style and the general concept of sustainability has been discussed, I am going to describe the environmental dimension of sustainability. The general idea of sustainability considers the needs, wants, and demands of the current generation without compromising the needs, wants, and demands of future generations. In this context, the environmental dimension focuses exclusively on green considerations and ecological protection. Green servant leadership has been discussed as a means to incorporate environmental concerns into organizations' production and processes (Siddiquei et al., 2021). The approach of green servant leadership is intended to motivate employees to achieve the company's pro-environmental targets while ensuring that teammates serve according to the selected environmental profile of the organization (Tuan, 2021). This leadership approach is aimed at fostering a sense of environmental protection among employees and motivating them towards sustainability and other organizational objectives. Sher and Nawaz (2021) revealed a significant positive association between green servant leadership and organizational sustainability. Small business owners who aim to enhance organizational sustainability can achieve this by adopting a green servant leadership approach.

Owners of small businesses who strive for long-term viability by innovating their existing business models consider adopting and leveraging an innovative mindset. A creative mindset is critical for small businesses attempting to remain competitive and adapt to the ever-evolving market requirements. It requires a combination of creativity, risk-taking, and the ability to identify and capitalize on new opportunities (Daykan & O'Reilly, 2023) and is driven by a variety of factors, including technological advancements, changes in consumer preferences, and competitive pressures (Laarman & Akkermans, 2021). Technological advancements encompass incremental improvements to existing technologies or services as well as disruptive technologies that revolutionize entire industries (Manafe et al., 2024). Digital technologies have played a significant role in business model innovation by enabling businesses to track and optimize their resource use, improve operational efficiency, and enhance customer engagement (Hellemans et al., 2022). Small business owners who strive for long-term viability can improve their chances of achieving organizational success by implementing innovative digital technologies informed by a forward-thinking mindset. This innovative orientation is also beneficial during times of mounting technological uncertainty.

Owners of small businesses have used an innovative mindset to overcome mounting uncertainty from a technological standpoint. There is a distinction between innovation and technological innovation. Kariuki et al. (2022) determined that innovation involves creating novel concepts for goods, procedures, services, and markets, whereas technology innovation encompasses new activities that produce new commodities and methods. The COVID-19 pandemic presented a significant opportunity for small

businesses in the restaurant industry to navigate mounting uncertainty by adopting specific technological innovations. B. L. Li et al. (2021) evaluated 153 textual information sources to examine innovative activities of Chinese restaurant firms before, during, and after COVID-19 (Gikonyo et al., 2024). Findings indicated that Chinese restaurants implemented preventative health and safety measures, innovative products, and creative marketing techniques. This combination of technological innovations enabled these small businesses to sustain themselves throughout and eventually survive the COVID-19 pandemic. In the Italian restaurant industry, Esposito et al. (2022) examined how digital technologies were employed as a strategy for enhancing resilience and safety. Their findings indicated that restaurants utilized digital technologies to improve safety and resilience, employing innovative cleaning procedures and technology to mitigate risk perceptions (Esposito et al., 2022). Despite the ability of these firms to survive the COVID-19 pandemic, these technological innovations did result in job loss and increased operating costs. Owners of small businesses bolstered the probability of sustaining their businesses throughout and surviving during mounting uncertainty by utilizing an innovative mindset. Still, they had to contend with the potential detrimental side effects as well.

An innovative mindset can also serve as a competitive advantage for small businesses, enabling them to achieve long-term viability. For example, Jaaffar et al. (2024) found that an innovative mindset plays a crucial role in most successful businesses and serves as the key driver of competitive advantage for organizations. The creation of a creative mindset led to the development and capture of new value products and services,

which in turn enabled the implementation of critical-thinking solutions to both new and old problems, allowing companies to stay ahead of their competitors (McLaughlin & McLaughlin, 2024). Small business owners with an innovative mindset and a deep-seated desire to create a competitive advantage used strategic management practices, intellectual capital management, and innovation as tools to achieve business success (Jaaffar et al., 2024). For small business owners, such innovations can be a key driver of competitive advantage and, ultimately, long-term viability. Small business owners who aspire to create and sustain a competitive advantage can bolster this possibility by adopting an innovative mindset.

Owners of small businesses seeking organizational stability through sustainable means should have a thorough understanding of the overarching market dynamics. Market orientation included identifying customer needs, effectively competing with rivals, and coordinating internal activities to provide meaningful service to clients (Rey-Marti et al., 2020). Firm leaders with a high market orientation should build their brand image, learn about the cultural values in their target markets, and relate their contributions to environmental protection to please or satisfy customers (Hanaysha & Al-Shaikh, 2024). Market orientation among successful firms further necessitated that they introduce innovative products and services regularly (Hanaysha & Al-Shaikh, 2024). Firms adopting a market orientation tend to achieve strong profits, sustainability, and long-term competitiveness. Small business owners who actively compete within their market space can bolster organizational stability, achieve sustainability, and ultimately capture long-term business success by adopting a robust, all-inclusive market orientation.

Owners of small businesses may also better address customer needs and wants by acquiring a robust market orientation. Market orientation has been linked to the ability to identify and meet customers' needs. Habib et al. (2021) identified two behavioral views of market orientation: customer orientation and competitor orientation. Under the pressure of growing environmental concerns, the demand for more environmentally friendly products has increased among the customer base. Firm owners who are market oriented have been able to address this customer demand by manipulating previously identified firm resources to create and offer desirable green initiatives. Market orientation was an intangible resource that enhanced management's knowledge of customer demand for environmental products (Habib et al., 2021). For example, Habib et al. found that, beyond environmental parameters, market-oriented firm owners typically possess higher market knowledge than their competitors. Small businesses with a market-oriented approach can better determine and continuously assess customer demand, allowing them to strategize and allocate previously identified firm resources more effectively moving forward.

The concept of market orientation has evolved to better integrate the idea of sustainability. As previously disclosed, sustainability is multidimensional, involving an environmental element. Green market orientation (GMO) has emerged as a crucial concept in the marketing and environmental management literature, building upon the traditional market orientation (Afum et al., 2023). The concept of GMO has extended the market orientation concept by integrating sustainability (Aboalhool et al., 2024). Borah et al. (2022) noted that firm owners who used GMOs employed a holistic and philosophical

approach to developing, communicating, and providing services and products with a minimal environmental impact. In this modern business landscape, customer demand has shifted towards more environmentally friendly products or green innovation initiatives (GIIs). Jiang et al. (2024) argued that as enterprises navigated the path to sustainability, evaluating and enhancing the efficiency of green innovation initiatives became imperative for long-term viability in an increasingly eco-conscious marketplace. Owners of small businesses can easily solicit green information from their customer base using GMOs. This information was then manipulated to bolster and eventually solidify a firm's sustainability moving forward.

### **Transition**

In Section 2, I provided a review of professional and academic literature related to the research topic, discussing the RBV conceptual framework, the concept of sustainability, and well-established sustainability strategies.

In Section 3, I will provide a detailed overview of the research methodology used in the project. Section 4 will include a presentation of the findings associated with the project and concluding remarks.

### Section 3: Research Project Methodology

In this section, I discuss the project's ethics, nature, population sampling and selection, data collection activities, interview questions, data organization and analysis techniques, reliability, and validity.

#### **Project Ethics**

In qualitative research, researchers play a crucial role in generating knowledge by conducting research, collecting, and analyzing data (Mushafiq, 2023). Researchers should always ensure participants feel free to share their experiences frankly and honestly (Suwedi-Kapesa et al., 2023). I was the primary instrument for data collection and analysis for this project. I did not have any personal relationships or hold a position of direct influence or power over any project participants, which allowed me to maintain and solidify the final project's integrity.

A researcher should strive to ensure high ethical standards when conducting a research project relying on a human element. A researcher can ensure strict adherence to standard ethical practices by following the standards of ethics outlined in the *Belmont Report* (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). I adhered to the *Belmont Report* standards to ensure respect for persons (autonomy), beneficence (well-being), and justice (fairness). Mitigating common issues associated with the investigation of potentially sensitive topics and the utilization of potentially intrusive or emotionally burdening interview questions may inadvertently and negatively influence participant responses (Potthoff et al., 2023). I followed Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocol concerning

informed consent. Obtaining informed consent is crucial for acknowledging participants' autonomy as a sign of respect; effective communication between researchers and participants underpins proper informed consent (Eeckhout et al., 2023; O'Shea, 2022). I explained and provided participants with the informed consent form, requesting signatures after establishing a working relationship and before conducting interviews to gather data and answer the overarching research question. The informed consent document provided participants with a written description of the project's components, interview procedures, the voluntary nature of this research, their right to withdraw, the risks and benefits associated with this research, and measures to maximize confidentiality. In this research project, acquiring informed consent was necessary before data collection activities. I upheld justice by ensuring that participants were free to withdraw from participation or refuse to answer interview questions at any time after giving their consent. Participant procedures for withdrawing included either a verbal or written indication. I clarified with the informed consent form that their right to exit the research project without fear of reprisal was acknowledged. There was no incentive to participate in this project.

As the researcher, I ensured the adequate ethical protection of participants. To protect the identities of individuals and maintain their confidentiality in this research project, the names of participants were masked using basic coding (e.g., P1, P2, P3, etc.). Masking, which involves obscuring the identification of individuals, organizations, and locations, is a key feature of ethical research conduct (Panos et al., 2021). To protect the confidentiality of all project participants, I will also safeguard all collected data (e.g.,

digital records of interviews, informed consent forms) for 5 years in a secure space, as required by IRB protocol. My Walden University IRB approval number is 07-24-25-1204714.

### **Nature of the Project**

I selected the qualitative method to further explore a real-world problem through the utilization of open-ended questions. Qualitative research is well-suited for studying, describing, and understanding contextual phenomena (Quintao et al., 2020). Qualitative research emphasizes the importance of lived, inherently subjective experiences as a central source of insight and understanding (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). A pragmatic approach to design and analysis entails strategically combining and borrowing from established qualitative methods to meet a researcher's needs, typically with guidance from an existing framework that includes detailed research and practice change goals (Ramanadhan et al., 2021). My approach was inductive, evaluating the actions taken by the owners of quick-service restaurants in the state of Maryland to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years. This was a qualitative, pragmatic inquiry project.

### **Population, Sampling, and Participants**

The targeted population consisted of successful, independent, quick-service restaurant owners operating within the state of Maryland who employed effective sustainability strategies to ensure the long-term survival of their businesses beyond the first 5 years. To gain access to participants, I contacted them through email using Walden's IRB-approved invitation template. Utilizing professional associations can be an effective strategy to gain access to participants due to the existing levels of connection

that mediate legitimacy for a meaningful researcher-participant relationship (Wong et al., 2021). After introducing myself and stating my purpose for initial contact, I provided the informed consent form for signature. After acquiring concurrence, I was able to begin data collection activities. The collected data were analyzed to identify the sustainability strategies employed by project participants to ensure the long-term viability of their businesses. I used this strategy to establish a working relationship with potential project participants and assess each participant's eligibility for the research project.

I used the purposive sampling method in this research project. Researchers have options when using the purposive sample approach, such as choice of site, sampling strategy, and sample size (Yin, 2018). Using this method, researchers can select participants who have experienced the phenomenon studied in a qualitative study (Yin, 2018). Purposive sampling was employed to examine real-world examples. The purposive sampling method enabled me to select a sample of participants that provided a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under review. Determining the sample size was a critical component of the purposive sampling. The number of participants in qualitative research depends on the problem under study (Subedi, 2021). Larger samples do not allow for an in-depth exploration of the study phenomenon in qualitative studies, and a small sample enables the research to focus on an in-depth understanding of the particular social and cultural context (Subedi, 2021). I included six participants in this project to ensure that contextually rich interviews ensued. To ensure data saturation, I iteratively collected data from semistructured interviews, publicly available government documents, and/or public records/archival documents. These

documents primarily included published stories from local news organizations and trade industry publications. Data saturation is a condition in which issues and insights begin to repeat, rendering further collection redundant (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). Achieving data saturation also reaffirmed my intent to use a smaller sample size.

### **Data Collection Activities**

In qualitative research, successful data collection depends on (a) laying the groundwork, (b) a recruitment plan, (c) building rapport, and (d) participant motivations (Negrin et al., 2022). I assumed responsibility as the primary data collection instrument in the research project. The researcher needs to coordinate all aspects of their research and ensure data collection is conducted appropriately to answer the research question (Kandade et al., 2021). Semistructured interviews are a standard qualitative research method used to gather rich, detailed data, especially in exploratory studies (Elhami & Khoshnevisan, 2022). Researchers have found that the advantages of semistructured interviews include the flexibility and adaptability of the format, which allow the researcher to inquire and obtain more in-depth information while staying aligned with the study's focus (Ruslin et al., 2022). I conducted semistructured interviews to collect data from six independent, quick-service restaurant owners operating within the state of Maryland, who used sustainability strategies to ensure the survival of their businesses beyond 5 years. To ensure consistency, safeguard collected data from researcher bias, and bolster reliability and validity, I adhered to a strict interview protocol (see Appendix). The interview protocol included a scripted opening statement, a sequence of interview

questions, and a scripted closing statement. I presented and explained the protocol to participants to ensure complete transparency.

To further solidify the reliability and validity of the research project, I audio-recorded interviews and implemented member checking. Member checking involved providing each participant with the opportunity to review the interview transcript and clarify my interpretations. Qualitative researchers can enhance validity and reliability through strategies, such as member checking, mechanical recording, rich data (i.e., verbatim transcripts), and triangulation (Alam, 2021). Triangulation emphasizes the comparison of data collected from the interview process with data derived from prior document analysis. These documents primarily included published stories from local news organizations and trade industry publications.

### **Interview Questions**

1. What strategies did you use to sustain your independent, quick-service restaurant beyond the initial 5 years of operation?
2. What key challenges/barriers did you encounter to sustain your independent, quick-service restaurant beyond the initial 5 years of operation?
3. What did you do to address the key challenges to sustain your independent, quick-service restaurant beyond the initial 5 years of operation?
4. How did you assess/measure the success/effectiveness of the strategies you used to sustain your independent, quick-service restaurant beyond the initial 5 years of operation?

5. What additional information would you like to share regarding the successful strategies you used to sustain your business beyond the initial 5 years of operation?

### **Data Organization and Analysis Techniques**

Researchers have defined qualitative data analysis as a nonlinear, iterative process where collected data are well-structured, easily accessible, and sufficient for in-depth analysis (Lester et al., 2020). In this subsection, I outline the systems for tracking data, including emerging understandings, such as research logs, reflective journals, and cataloging/labeling systems, and how I utilized them. I used research logs to track detailed information about each interview systematically. The information recorded in research logs may encompass the dates, times, locations, participants, and any relevant observations or insights from the researcher (Al-Ababneh, 2020). I used reflective journals to track my thoughts and interpretations throughout the interview process in a logical manner. Reflective journals contributed to the transparency of the research process, allowing for self-reflection. I used cataloging/labeling systems to organize and manage data extensively. This labeling system facilitated the retrieval of data during the analysis phase, ensuring that data sources were correctly attributed to participants (see Sanders et al., 2022). To maintain compliance, all the raw data I collected and analyzed were safely stored and will be safely stored for at least 5 years after the project's completion to ensure participant confidentiality.

The appropriate data analysis process for this qualitative pragmatic inquiry was Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis. This foundational qualitative data analysis

technique involves developing ideas, meanings, and understanding through systematic coding procedures (Ozuem et al., 2022). By identifying patterns of meaning from an extensive data set, thematic analysis provided a comprehensive answer of the research question. I implemented the following six-step thematic analysis method developed by Braun and Clarke (2006):

1. Familiarization with the data: Researchers dive deep into the available data to better assess the type and number of themes that might emerge.
2. Generating initial codes: Researchers identify recurring patterns and designate them as codes.
3. Searching for themes: Researchers simplify complex data by identifying patterns, relationships, or categories related to the research question.
4. Reviewing themes: Researchers transition from codes and categories to a more abstract interpretation by creating and refining themes.
5. Reviewing and naming themes: Researchers further refine themes by defining them to best align with an overarching research question.
6. Writing the report: Researchers write and consolidate the research findings in a concise, coherent, and logical manner.

Clarke et al. (2021) reported that 81% of participants who used qualitative data analysis software reported a positive user experience. Some qualitative research software (e.g., NVivo and MAXQDA) can be financially burdensome and not easily accessible, but Microsoft Word or Excel can be used as an alternative option (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). I used Excel to analyze the data derived from thematic analysis. Excel was

also beneficial when addressing the smaller proposed sample size. I used reflectivity to emphasize key themes and correlate them to the literature and conceptual framework. Reflectivity helped determine the final themes for analysis from a universe of potentially many that were produced at the intersection of the data, the researcher's subjectivity, and theoretical/conceptual frameworks (see Braun & Clarke, 2022).

### **Reliability and Validity**

#### **Reliability**

Reliability refers to consistency in outcomes over time. Reliability within qualitative studies relates to the subject(s) and object(s) that are under study and how they relate to the truth of the findings (Huttunen & Kakkori, 2020). Reliability also refers to the quality of research, specifically about methods selected and their application and implementation (Rose & Johnson, 2020). Researchers must ensure that their study findings are reliable and accurate. Dependability refers to the consistency and reliability of the study, providing continuous performance over time (Bogna et al., 2020). Gallina et al. (2022) noted that dependability involved participants assessing the project's findings and conclusions to ensure that the data supported them. Implementing interview protocols, using triangulation methods, and conducting member checks enhances the reliability and stability of qualitative research outcomes (Price & Smith, 2021). I employed data triangulation techniques and a member-checking process to achieve data saturation and bolster the stability or dependability of this research project. The member-checking process also helped me reach data saturation by providing participants with a summary of their interview responses to confirm accuracy, continuing the process until

no new information emerged. Reflexive journaling was used to track my thought process. By the sixth and final interview, the information became redundant; hence, data saturation was achieved.

### **Validity**

Validity refers to the state of integrity and appropriateness of the research process and the data, which accurately interpreted the participants' experiences by establishing the trustworthiness of the study (Rose & Johnson, 2020). Qualitative researchers need to ensure that the data they collected were credible, confirmable, and transferable and that the entire research process was trustworthy to prove the validity of their study (De Oliveira, 2023; Hamzah et al., 2023). In qualitative research, credibility refers to the researcher's confidence in the study's findings and the believability of the relationships from the participants' perspective (Hamzah et al., 2023). I ensured credibility by member checking. Demonstrating qualitative credibility ensured that the reviewers understood that the findings were grounded in the participants' perspectives. Confirmability refers to the degree to which researchers can confirm that the results of the study are derived from data rather than from researchers' bias (Rose & Johnson, 2020). I addressed confirmability by ensuring that the results can be confirmed or supported by others. Probing during interviews, the follow-up member checking process, and questioning from different perspectives and triangulation were techniques I used to enhance confirmability. Malthouse (2023) identified transferability as the ability of the qualitative researcher to adapt the study's conclusions to different research contexts and settings. I addressed transferability through purposive sampling and triangulation, coupled with

rigorous attention to data collection and analysis procedures. This approach allowed others to assess the applicability of the findings to different contexts.

Data saturation occurs when no new themes, categories, insights, or perspectives emerge in a study (Guest et al., 2020). The member-checking process helped me reach data saturation by providing participants with a summary of their interview responses to confirm accuracy, continuing the process until no new information emerged. Data saturation was achieved after concluding the sixth and final interview. The newly collected data no longer yielded new information or themes.

### **Transition and Summary**

In Section 3, I provided a detailed overview of the project's ethics, nature, population sampling, population, data collection activities, interview questions, data organization and analysis techniques, reliability, and validity. In Section 4, I will present the findings associated with the project and provide concluding remarks.

#### Section 4: Findings and Conclusions

The purpose of this qualitative, pragmatic inquiry was to explore the successful sustainability strategies that independent, quick-service restaurant owners operating in the state of Maryland used to survive beyond 5 years. The overarching research question was: What successful sustainability strategies do independent, quick-service restaurant owners in the state of Maryland use to survive beyond 5 years? Data were collected from six independent, quick-service restaurant owners in Maryland through semistructured interviews with open-ended questions. Secondary data were collected through published articles from local news organizations and trade industry publications. I analyzed the data using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase process for thematic analysis. The four themes that emerged from analysis were (a) dealing with uncertainty, (b) costs to compete, (c) employee focus, and (d) customer focus. These themes embody overarching patterns of meaning in the data collected and align with Wernerfelt's (1984) RBV theory and those other concepts related to the business topic scholarship on the resolution of the business problem identified in Section 2 (see Table 1).

**Table 1***References for Main Themes*

Main themes	Participants	References
Theme 1: Dealing with uncertainty	5	28
Theme 2: Costs to compete	6	21
Theme 3: Employee focus	3	19
Theme 4: Customer focus	5	34

**Theme 1: Dealing With Uncertainty**

Dealing with uncertainty is one of the main themes that emerged as participants discussed what critical steps they took to sustain their businesses beyond the initial 5 years. Uncertainty, whether prompted by market changes or the broader economic environment, is a factor that small business owners routinely face and learn to live with. What organizations may be ill-prepared for are the episodic uncertainties—those that arise from events that occur infrequently but have high-impact consequences, such as a pandemic, as COVID-19 is an example of this kind of high-impact event (Adober et al., 2021). For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, an adverse impact was visible on the liquidity and operational risks of restaurant firms because there was a sharp decline in customer demand (Ozili & Arun, 2020). To sustain their businesses, quick-service restaurant establishments have shifted their focus to new revenue streams (Balal, 2024). P1, P2, P3, P5, and P6 all referenced a version of episodic uncertainty they had experienced and what strategies they adopted to deal with it. The first emerging theme,

uncertainty, encompasses four subthemes: strategic planning, adaptability, innovative mindset, and forming relationships (see Table 2).

**Table 2**

*Dealing With Uncertainty*

Subtheme	Participants	References
Strategic planning	4	29
Adaptability	6	21
Innovative mindset	4	20
Forming relationships	6	31

***Subtheme 1: Strategic Planning***

Strategic planning is the process of authenticating and establishing direction for business activities by evaluating both current and future objectives (Henderson & Hines, 2019). Strategic planning is the mechanism by which an organization determines its vision and strategies and makes decisions about allocating its human capital and other resources to support these strategies (Allison & Kaye, 2011). P1, P3, P5, and P6 confirmed the importance of strategic planning in making better decisions to allocate human capital and other resources amid uncertainty. P5 emphasized the importance of staying ahead of potential changes or impacts. P3 stressed the importance of having a well-defined plan, specifically a business plan. P6 stated, “When you see things wearing out, you need to make a plan.” P6 also provided specific examples of modifications they made during their tenure. P1 noted that, initially, and then beyond 5 years, expansion and

scale become critical at some point. All these assertions underscore the importance of having a well-crafted business plan to manage uncertainty effectively as it arises.

### ***Subtheme 2: Adaptability***

Restaurants found the COVID-19 pandemic to be quite tricky. Changing customer behavior, social distancing policies, and lockdowns led to operational limitations, financial pressure, and labor management challenges (Antalan, 2025). As consumer expectations evolve, driven by technological advancements and changing demographics, quick-service restaurants must continuously adapt their service strategies to maintain competitiveness (Lambert et al., 2021). To survive, restaurateurs must employ several adaptive techniques, including digital transformation, product diversification, and strategic alliances (Salas-Carrera et al., 2024). By adapting and improving existing products and services to current market needs and through quality control and enhancements, managers can also develop new products (Yi et al., 2021). P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, and P6 all confirmed the importance of adapting during uncertainty. P1 noted the importance of adapting their physical space to remain competitive in a changing climate. P2 stressed the importance of adapting their restaurant operations during the COVID-19 pandemic. P2 stated, “We were going to stay open, and we would convert everything over to carry-out operations.” Expanding beyond COVID-19, P3 noted its adjustment towards advertising in light of the emergence of social media. All these assertions indicate the importance of being able to adapt to deal with uncertain episodic events as they sporadically arise.

### ***Subtheme 3: Innovative Mindset***

Innovation is a crucial means for businesses to survive and remain resilient in the face of external disturbances (Wang et al., 2019). In the quick-service restaurant sector, innovation plays a vital role in driving customer satisfaction by tailoring offerings to meet diverse needs and by enhancing the overall experience (Manhas et al., 2024). Possessing an innovative mindset is a crucial tool for improving an organization's competitiveness and survival in a rapidly changing competitive market (Adewumi, 2022). A creative mindset is considered an asset in organizations because it involves identifying new opportunities and viewing things from an optimistic perspective (Farhan, 2024). P1, P4, P5, and P6 confirmed the importance of innovating to meet evolving customer demands in the face of uncertainty. P1 stated, "Without innovation, on some level, you're automatically going backwards and you will fail." P6 emphasized the importance of making both small and significant changes, depending on the stage of the cycle. P5 noted their use of evolving technologies to track, manage, and allocate their finances more effectively. All these assertions emphasize the importance of adopting an innovative mindset to capitalize on all available opportunities and better manage episodic uncertainty.

### ***Subtheme 4: Forming Relationships***

The quality of a relationship that is nurtured well really helps the owner to control the future and survival of their business (Mardikaningsih et al., 2022). Effective management of these relationships requires a nuanced understanding of relational dynamics, trust-building processes, and collaborative strategies that extend beyond mere

transactional interactions (S. M. Wagner & Bode, 2008). P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, and P6 all confirmed the importance of forming and managing these relationships to survive through periods of uncertainty. P2 noted the importance of using tangible means to connect with their customer base. P2 stated, “I have a newsletter, a paper newsletter that goes out to our clientele. It adds a human side to everything, connecting people on an individual basis.” P4 emphasized the importance of forming relationships right from the beginning, stating, “I found out where people work, who they work for, and what they do at their jobs.” P5 noted their usage of their developed relational networks during COVID-19 for survival, sharing, “The important thing for me, for incoming challenges, is having people to both lean on and ask questions of.” All these assertions underscore the importance of forming and managing relationships to navigate periods of uncertainty more effectively.

### ***Correlation to the Conceptual Framework***

The RBV theory is an approach that emphasizes the utilization of a company’s internal resources to achieve sustainable competitive advantage (Nenta & Astuti, 2023). According to RBV, resources that are unique, rare, and difficult to imitate have a key role in creating competitive advantage (Aisyah et al., 2022). These resources include assets, capabilities, and competencies owned by the firm that, when managed well, can generate high value and differentiate the firm from its competitors (Efrina et al., 2024).

Amidst uncertainty, P1, P2, P3, P5, and P6 referenced strategies they used to deal with periods of episodic uncertainty. Strategically planning the proper allocation of tangible and intangible firm resources fundamentally aligns with the RBV theory. Given

that, the appropriate allocation of these resources directly influences any firm's ability to establish and maintain a competitive advantage and, by direct correlation, generate value for its organization. The ability to adapt, develop, combine, and deploy new or preexisting resources during episodes of uncertainty closely relates to the RBV theory. The ability for an organization to easily identify and control its internal strengths and weaknesses enables a resource-based organization to remain competitive. An innovative mindset represents an intangible human resource. Organizations strategically utilize this VRIO resource to enhance their market position during periods of uncertainty. Interpersonal relationships represent intangible human resources. These VRIO resources are also used strategically by organizations to improve their market position during periods of uncertainty.

### ***Correlation to the Literature***

Theme 1, dealing with uncertainty, aligns closely with existing research. This theme highlights the importance of adopting strategies to manage episodic uncertainty. Findings from this project highlight how strategic planning, adaptability, an innovative mindset, and forming relationships enhance firm performance. Carayannis et al. (2025) found the growing relevance of foresight for SMEs and identified strategies to overcome resource constraints and short-term planning tendencies. Antalan (2025) highlighted the industry's resilience and emphasized the role of innovation and strategic management in navigating crises. Ringo and Elias (2025) found that restaurant owners should prioritize innovation through the development of unique menu items, the adoption of technology, and the implementation of creative marketing strategies to enhance their performance.

Theme 1 highlights the significant impact strategies aimed at dealing with uncertainty have on firm performance, reinforcing the need for independent, quick-service restaurant owners to adopt these strategies to ensure long-term success.

### **Theme 2: Costs to Compete**

Costs to compete are one of the main themes that emerged as participants discussed what critical steps they took to sustain their businesses beyond the initial 5 years. Costs to compete refer to the various expenses that small business owners must incur to remain competitive. The restaurant industry in the United States is facing substantial challenges stemming from recent inflation, which intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic (Olsson, 2024). Thereafter, prices have risen rapidly since the U.S. economy recovered from the COVID-19 pandemic, and consumers are seeking value in their food (Blanchard & Bernanke, 2023). To compete, quick-service restaurants must not only manage rising costs but also leverage firm resources. All participants referenced the costs they were forced to endure to remain competitive and the strategies they employed to overcome these mounting costs. The second emerging theme, costs to compete, encompasses five subthemes: cost management, competitive pricing, experience, involvement, and premium product (see Table 3).

**Table 3***Costs to Compete*

Subtheme	Participants	References
Cost management	4	17
Competitive pricing	3	10
Experience	6	27
Owner involvement	5	29
Premium product	4	13

***Subtheme 1: Cost Management***

Cost management, on the one hand, helps determine the costs; on the other hand, it monitors and controls changes in cost elements (Kariuki et al., 2022). Efficiency is ensured in business activities, including waste prevention and performance control. P1, P3, P5, and P6 confirmed the importance of employing cost management activities not only to manage costs better but also, in doing so, to remain competitive. P1 noted that effective cost management involves the implementation of specific cost controls and the examination of alternatives. P1 stated, “You will spend a fortune on television ads and radio advertisements. That’s a death sentence, and it will never work unless you’ve got a huge budget. Graphic design is very inexpensive, especially with AI.” P3 noted the detrimental effects of rising inflation, prompting them to keep food costs low and proactively look for alternatives. P5 stated that they are willing to adapt their menus to manage costs better, saying, “I can control what I put on my menu, and I can look for ways to offer things that are cost-effective, delicious, and healthy.” All these assertions

emphasize the importance of effective cost management techniques when striving to remain competitive.

### ***Subtheme 2: Competitive Pricing***

In a market characterized by intense competition, pricing can be an effective way for owners to differentiate themselves from competitors. Setting the price too high may lead customers to choose less expensive options, while pricing it too low could result in a decrease in the perceived value of the product (Huang & Khantong, 2024). Kotler and Armstrong (2018) suggested that competitive pricing is essential in influencing consumers' purchasing decisions. According to Purnamasari and Murwatiningsih (2015), price affordability, price elasticity, and competitor price comparisons influence consumers in making purchasing decisions. P1, P4, and P6 confirmed the importance of pricing competitively. P1 noted the importance of staying consistent concerning price affordability, stating, "It's a lot easier to take or receive money from someone who has a lot to give than someone who doesn't have a lot to give." P4 highlighted their willingness to set expectations concerning price to increase the perceived value of their product offerings. P4 shared, "There are a lot of times we don't charge people. That's another way we built up our businesses by being kind of flexible on price points." All these assertions underscore the importance of pricing products competitively to remain effective in the market.

### ***Subtheme 3: Experience***

Owner experience is crucial in business because it enables them to solve business problems in uncertain conditions (Eresia-Eke & Okerue, 2020). Experience can deliver a

heightened understanding of available resources and their valuable recombination as well as insight into how to improve their governance and transfer (Foss et al., 2020). P1, P4, and P6 confirmed the importance of being well-experienced. P1 highlighted the significance of being experienced enough to avoid common pitfalls, stating, “You can’t become a victim of the shiny object syndrome. And that is going to come across. You’re going to want to open more stores.” P1 thereafter recommended extreme focus as a means of mitigation. P4 noted how their experience better positioned them for contention within a diverse setting. P4 shared, “We started 30 years ago; we were in Annapolis, and I realized that it was a very diverse town. I just knew that the state employees were pretty diverse.” P4 thereafter noted their in-depth understanding of cultural differences as a means to serve their diverse customer base better. Within the context of competition, these claims amplify the importance of possessing adequate professional experience.

#### ***Subtheme 4: Owner Involvement***

Involvement has been viewed as a central tenet of experience (Akhoondnejad, 2024). The interest in adopting this strategic approach stems from the value that involvement influences customers’ perceptions of experiences and can even lead to unforgettable moments (Lin et al., 2022), which are moments that are vital for businesses to succeed within highly competitive markets (Amoroso et al., 2021). P1, P3, P4, P5, and P6 confirmed the importance of consistently involving themselves in daily operations and market positioning. P3 described their focus on remaining involved in their business by stating, “Even when you see you are successful, you don’t have to, like, step aside and let the business run by itself; you always have to be involved.” P4 highlighted their direct

involvement in eliciting customer feedback by sharing, “You can’t get that if you’re an owner and you are in the back somewhere or you are not on site.” P1 noted their focus on maintaining a position of authority and stated, “You also need to position yourself as the authority. So you have to find what’s unique, and then you have to position yourself in the minds of the customers that you are the authority in that particular niche endeavor.” All these claims denote the significance of being involved in business operations to remain competitive.

#### ***Subtheme 5: Premium Product***

Service quality and product quality are critical in determining client happiness (Dandotiya et al., 2020). The concept of product innovation by Fussenegger (2023) holds significant promise in the culinary sector, offering a method for creating original and appealing food items that provide a diverse selection of menu options. When tactically deployed, novel new product offerings based on sophisticated technology are expected to help achieve a premium position for the latest product, differentiate it from existing products, and improve the competitive advantage (Yi et al., 2021). P1, P3, P4, and P5 confirmed the importance of competing by creating and offering a premium product. P5 highlighted the detrimental effect of not serving a premium or quality product by stating, “I think where you see restaurants fail within the first 5 years, it’s usually the quality of the food.” P5 noted their focus on serving a competitive product in terms of taste, saying, “It doesn’t have to be expensive food; it just has to be good.” P4 noted the importance of amplifying authenticity within their product offering and shared that “I tried to create a

very authentic product.” These claims signify the importance of creating a competitive premium product.

### ***Correlation to the Conceptual Framework***

In the RBV, it is argued that a firm’s valuable, uncommon, inimitable, and nonsubstitutable resources and competencies define its competitive advantage (Barney, 2018). Under this logic, financial management practices can be viewed as organizational competencies that provide a competitive advantage for SMEs when developed and utilized appropriately (Arkundato et al., 2024). All participants referenced how they used these strategies to create and sustain a competitive advantage and, by direct correlation, effectively contend with mounting costs. Effective cost management and competitive pricing not only generate value for an organization but also represent tangible financial resources. These VRIO resources serve as competitive advantages and are part of the RBV framework. Experience and owner involvement are intangible human resources that underscore the RBV theory. These VRIO resources possess distinctive characteristics that contribute towards the development and sustainment of competitive advantages. A premium product represents a tangible resource that, when strategically applied, positions organizations to capitalize on available market opportunities.

### ***Correlation to the Literature***

Theme 2, costs to compete, aligns closely with existing research. This theme highlights the importance of adopting strategies to mitigate rising costs. Findings from the current project highlight how cost management, competitive pricing, experience, involvement, and premium product enhance firm performance. Abdulrasool (2025) found

that budgeting and effective working capital management can enhance competitive cost advantages through higher profit margins, reduced inventory cycles, improved liquidity, and pricing flexibility. Nasir and Gunawan (2025) reported that effective cost control measures are essential for enhancing operational efficiency and guest experiences. Crisolo and Manalo (2025) indicated the importance of a sound approach to fair price, quality, and service delivery in achieving customer satisfaction. Theme 2 highlights the significant impact strategies aimed at overcoming mounting costs have on firm performance, reinforcing the need for independent, quick-service restaurant owners to adopt these strategies to ensure long-term success.

### **Theme 3: Employee Focus**

Employee focus is one of the main themes that emerged as participants discussed what critical steps they took to sustain their businesses beyond the initial 5 years. Employee focus is a management approach that prioritizes the well-being, training, and development of a firm's employees. In these times of stagnating profits and economic uncertainty, restaurant operators are evaluating new ways to generate positive and sustainable financial results while accounting for the ever-changing business landscape (Karatepe, 2013). As a result of this shift in mindset, knowledge from service management and human resource domains has become increasingly important to the industry (C. Lu et al., 2014). Human resource management practices, including compensation management, recruitment and selection, training and development, performance appraisal and management, and benefits administration, significantly influence employees' overall experience within an organization (Ghani et al., 2022). P2,

P4, and P5 referenced how their employee focus has impacted their operations and, by extension, their businesses' performance. The third emerging theme, employee focus, encompasses four subthemes: targeted hiring, training/development, turnover rate, and trust (see Table 4).

**Table 4**

*Employee Focus*

Subtheme	Participants	References
Targeted hiring	3	16
Training/development	2	6
Turnover rate	4	19
Trust	3	5

***Subtheme 1: Targeted Hiring***

To be successful, firms must identify and hire the right workers (D. Li et al., 2025). Recruitment is the process of identifying and selecting the best-qualified candidate (Hamza et al., 2021). Considering the evident need for recruiting new talent in the restaurant sector, the restaurants must recognize the importance of sustainable talent management strategies (Gjerald et al., 2021). Moghtadaie and Taji (2016) investigated the relationship between talent management practices and organizational performance, finding that attracting talent has a significant influence on organizational performance. P2, P3, and P4 confirmed the importance of specific talent management strategies in targeting desired job candidates. P3 noted their focus on recruitment, stating, "The most important thing is to have a good team, in front of the house and in the kitchen." P4

shared their preference for networking as a recruitment method and also noted their willingness to pay a premium for talent. P4 stated, “I recruited good people; I think that’s part of it. But when they come in, maybe they’re \$22 an hour, but I move them up real quick.” P5 also highlighted their willingness to pay for talent, sharing, “You do anything they need, and you pay them well.” These assertions denote the importance of targeting employees who can benefit the organization.

### ***Subtheme 2: Training/Development***

To develop in today’s highly competitive environment, an organization must provide continuous training and development for its employees (Urbancová et al., 2021). Training and development are fundamental structures for a rewarding organization and the existence and continuation of an organization depend on them (Gardi et al., 2020). The improvement of personnel and the level of productivity in any organization can be done by material, social, intellectual, and mental training (Abdullah et al., 2017). P4 and P5 both confirmed the importance of training and developing their employees. P4 noted their willingness to teach staff members soft skills personally by stating, “I taught body language to them so that if somebody walked in the door, you could tell by where they were standing if they wanted to be left alone or if they wanted help.” P4 also reported their focus on training staff members to be authentic, explaining, “I just request that you be authentic and have your own voice.” P5 emphasized the importance of retraining staff by saying, “It’s inevitable, but it really has an impact on the quality of your food and your customer service experiences.” All these assertions underscore the organizational impact of continuously training and developing staff members.

### ***Subtheme 3: Turnover Rate***

People are a significant source of competitive advantage; organizations adopt numerous policies and procedures to retain their talented employees for extended periods (Ghani et al., 2022). Organizations that do not focus on their human resource practices are more likely to lose their skilled and trained employees; in turn, they incur twice the cost due to financial and operational ineffectiveness (Ezeuduji & Mbane, 2017). Through sustainable human resource practices, the hospitality industry can better address its employees' issues and concerns, ultimately helping them develop a positive attitude and a strong commitment to staying longer (M. Wagner, 2011). It not only helps to reduce turnover but also increases productivity and improves employees' performance, job satisfaction, and overall organizational performance. P1, P2, P4, and P5 confirmed the importance of using sustainable practices to reduce employee turnover. P1 noted their willingness to empower their staff through delegation and stated, "You've got to delegate. You've got to task it out." P2 described their dedication to staff during the COVID-19 pandemic, sharing that, "We weren't going to let anybody go unless we had to." P2 also mentioned the positive effect their dedication to staff had on their turnover rate, stating, "We have been really fortunate not to deal with too much in terms of, you know, turnover and, you know, radical changes in the kitchen or the front of the house." These claims indicate the importance of adopting sustainable human resources policies to retain current employees.

#### ***Subtheme 4: Trust***

Employees who trust management and colleagues tend to exhibit high motivation and are open to new ideas (Manik, 2020). They believe that the organization will appreciate their contributions and treat them fairly (Waskito et al., 2023). They perceive that their work is meaningful and their contributions are acknowledged by the organization (Nuryanto & Pratiwi, 2024). Supervisors can have a significant impact on fostering employee trust in the workplace (Yan et al., 2022). P1, P4, and P5 confirmed the importance of acquiring and sustaining trust with their employees. P4 noted their emphasis on promoting mutual trust, stating, “They’re not going to trust you; you have to trust them first, and then they will trust you.” P5 also mentioned the importance of positioning their employees for success by addressing, “What my employees need and want to be successful in their roles.” P5 further explained by saying, “You don’t hesitate when they ask you or they tell you that they need something, because they’re asking because they need something to help their job be easier.” P5 later emphasized the dedication exhibited by their staff, even during periods of uncertainty, proving that the attentiveness they placed on positioning their employees for success did significantly influence the level of employee trust they gained. These assertions amplify the importance of acquiring and maintaining employee trust.

#### ***Correlation to the Conceptual Framework***

According to the RBV, resources have been classified as tangible and intangible resources (Barney, 2001). Tangible resources include physical assets, while intangible resources encompass brand reputation and intellectual property (Kassa & Worku, 2025).

Human resources, which comprise the skills and knowledge of employees, are essential for leveraging other resource types (Mikalef et al., 2023). P1, P4, and P5 referenced what employee-related human resource strategies they used to influence operations and, by direct correlation, enhance their business performance. Newly hired employees serve as tangible human resources. These resources become an internal strength that enables an organization to strategize and ultimately outperform its competition. Training and development further strengthen these tangible human resources. Making them even more valuable, rare, inimitable, and organized. The retention of these employees is essential for sustaining these VRIO resources and, by default, creating and maintaining this competitive advantage. The ability to acquire and sustain trust is an intangible resource that is not only a VRIO but also included as part of the RBV framework.

### ***Correlation to the Literature***

Theme 3, employee focus, aligns closely with existing research. This theme underscores the importance of adopting employee-focused strategies. Findings from this project highlight how hiring, training/development, turnover rate, and trust enhance firm performance. Alzoraiki et al. (2025) developed a framework designed to promote sustainable human resource management practices by offering businesses a strategic approach to integrating human and technological resources for sustainable business success. Nuñez and Guballo (2025) recommended that quick-service restaurants implement structured recognition programs, leadership development tracks, and internal promotion initiatives to build a more committed workforce. Croes et al. (2024) found that hospitality employers must develop more localized, employee-centric retention strategies.

These tailored approaches consider regional and demographic differences, providing career development opportunities and flexible work conditions. Theme 3 highlights the significant impact employee-focused strategies have on firm performance, reinforcing the need for independent quick-service restaurant owners to adopt these strategies to ensure long-term success.

#### **Theme 4: Customer Focus**

Customer focus is one of the main themes that emerged as participants discussed what critical steps they took to sustain their businesses beyond the initial 5 years. Customer focus is a management approach that prioritizes satisfying customers' wants and needs. Fundamentally, the quick-service restaurants industry is a fast-paced and customer-centric sector, where service quality plays a crucial role in shaping customer satisfaction and business success (Mendocilla et al., 2021). From the customers' perspective, dining in a restaurant is not just about the food; customers also seek an experience that makes them feel appreciated for choosing the restaurant (Norazha et al., 2022). Customers who feel that their needs and desires are met tend to have higher levels of satisfaction, which ultimately increases their intention to repurchase (Alfira & Tuti, 2025). P1, P2, P3, P4, and P6 referenced how their customer focus has impacted their operations and, by extension, their business performance. The fourth emerging theme, customer focus, encompasses four subthemes: customer perception, customer service, simplicity, and consistency (see Table 5).

**Table 5***Customer Focus*

Subtheme	Participants	References
Customer perception	4	18
Customer service	4	26
Simplicity	1	2
Consistency	4	11

***Subtheme 1: Customer Perception***

Customer perception includes customers' opinions, impressions, awareness, or mindfulness about a business (Demakova et al., 2020). It is driven by logic and has a profound impact on the customer's buying habits (Gupta & Barua, 2016). Knowing precisely what consumers want and then working on it can bring a considerable change in operating style in the restaurant business (Sharma et al., 2021). Customers' perceived service quality is significant in reinforcing customer loyalty because it is believed that providing high-quality, value-oriented restaurant services is crucial in attracting and retaining loyal customers in the restaurant industry (Izquierdo-Yusta et al., 2019). P2, P3, P4, and P5 confirmed the importance of focusing on how customers perceive their product or service. P3 discussed the significance of understanding customer perception concerning individual taste by stating, "Of course, you know, the food is very sensitive. Everyone has different tastes." P4 emphasized the importance of being aware of how customers perceive their service quality by explaining, "The people who are supporting you, they're coming in to support you every day. Don't nickel and dime them. I mean,

you know, it's going to pay off in 10 years." These assertions underscore the importance of prioritizing customer perception to meet underlying customer needs better, and, by direct correlation, to better position the organization for success moving forward.

### ***Subtheme 2: Customer Service***

In an attempt to provide good customer service, it is essential to remember that customers have a natural expectation of being treated politely, kindly, and respectfully (Adedeji, 2023). According to Yakhlef and Nordin (2021), businesses that display insincere and selfish behavior will be penalized by their customers. However, if they are catered to appropriately, these customers can provide opportunities for the business (Thomas, 2023). P1, P2, P4, and P5 confirmed the importance of focusing on sustaining, and if possible, enhancing the customer service provided. P1 noted the emphasis they placed on creating and maintaining a welcoming environment, regardless of the circumstances. P1 stated,

You need to make it an oasis for people in whatever capacity you can; do that because they're coming in. They're willing to spend their top dollar, their hard-earned dollar, at your establishment. They want to forget all their woes of the day. And in the restaurant business, a million things can go wrong. But the customer doesn't care.

P4 noted their use of soft skills to make customers feel more comfortable, explaining that, "The whole thing was based on them feeling not intimidated. The ability to look at the menu without anybody pecking at it." These assertions signify the importance of catering to customers' needs and potential desires to enhance their overall experience.

### ***Subtheme 3: Simplicity***

The concept of simplicity has been evolving for a long time and is typically studied in various aspects (Rahman et al., 2024). Eckert et al. (2022) argued that simplifying standard processes can increase efficiency and interaction. P5 noted how they simplified their processes to enhance customer interactions, stating that, “Don’t have 7,000 things on your menu. Keep it simple.” P5 agreed and emphasized the significance of simply retaining and reacting to customer feedback: “So, you know, I think you just have to really listen to your customers. Keep it really simple.” This approach resulted in significant product augmentations. These assertions highlight the positive impact simplicity has on customer experience.

### ***Subtheme 4: Consistency***

Food-service encounters require a high level of interaction with customers, and the level of customer service is a key criterion for determining quality and satisfaction (Sun et al., 2022). It involves ensuring the customer receives the correct product or service, providing them with excellent attention, timely delivery of the product, and assisting them in resolving any issues (Adedeji, 2023). The restaurant industry strives to standardize its operations to deliver consistent service quality to its customers (Chehab et al., 2021). P2, P3, P5, and P6 confirmed the importance of remaining consistent when interacting with their respective customer base. P2 highlighted the significance of setting up and upholding a standard. P6 reaffirmed the importance of remaining consistent over time, saying that, “You have to set yourself up at the very start with standards and then stick with them.” P3 emphasized their commitment to maintaining consistency in

performance, sharing, “I think the most important thing is consistency. You have to be consistent with what you’re doing.” P5 noted their commitment towards consistently procuring and using premium ingredients over their tenure. All these assertions emphasize the importance of implementing a set of standards to ensure that consistent service quality is provided to their customers.

### ***Correlation to the Conceptual Framework***

The RBV perspective maintains that business organizations can enhance their competitiveness (e.g., in terms of cost, quality, or other elements of differentiation) provided they acquire and optimize resources and capabilities considered valuable, rare, inimitable, and nonsubstitutable (Estensoro et al., 2021). Customer focus is recognized as an internal resource of a business organization (Husain et al., 2021). P1, P2, P3, P4, and P6 referenced customer-related internal resources that are used to influence operations and, by direct correlation, enhance their business performance. The ability to effectively fulfill customer needs by remaining cognizant of customer perception is an intangible human resource. The ability to implement a set of standards emphasizing consistent service quality is an intangible resource. The ability to enhance the customer experience is another type of intangible human resource. These intangible resources are not only VRIO but are also encompassed within the RBV framework. The ability to simplify processes to enhance the customer experience is an intangible human resource, while the augmented product developed and deployed thereafter is a tangible resource. This combination of resources creates a competitive advantage.

### ***Correlation to the Literature***

Theme 4, customer focus, aligns closely with existing research. This theme underscores the importance of adopting customer-focused strategies. Findings from the current project highlight how customer perception, customer service, simplicity, and consistency enhance business performance. Aly (2025) found that the quality of epidemic prevention services has a positive impact on both revisit and recommendation intentions and that customer satisfaction also positively influences these intentions. Rusmawati et al. (2025) reported that only firms that can internalize customer information and use it as a basis for continuous learning will consistently create business value. Fouad and Mokhtar (2025) suggested that there was a need for tailored training programs, gender diversity initiatives, and digital service enhancements to align employee service styles with customer expectations. Theme 4 highlights the significant impact customer-focused strategies have on firm performance, reinforcing the need for independent, quick-service restaurant owners to adopt these strategies to ensure long-term success.

### **Business Contributions and Recommendations for Professional Practice**

Small businesses are the backbone of any economy. The success of small businesses is inextricably linked to the health of any economy. Despite the significant roles of small businesses in every economy, they face numerous external and internal challenges. External factors that hinder their development include a lack of available finance to start and grow a business, legal issues, and environmental conditions (Soomro et al., 2019). For example, the impacts of COVID-19 on small businesses across the United States were swift and immediate. Many businesses closed in response to state

government mandates, while others closed on their own accord, and many of those that remained open had to alter their operations sustainably (Balla-Elliott et al., 2020).

However, internal factors also play a significant role in small business success, primarily including owner and business characteristics that either help or hinder the effectiveness, efficiency, and performance of small businesses (Adeola et al., 2021).

The current pragmatic qualitative inquiry involved six small business owners who accepted my invitation to participate. These independent, quick-service restaurant owners, all operating within the state of Maryland, have sustained their businesses for at least 5 years. The results of the project helped narrow the gap between research and its actual implementation. The results identified implementable sustainable strategies that business professionals can leverage to bolster the survivability of their businesses. The present project's findings underscore the significance of addressing uncertainty, overcoming the costs of competition, and implementing employee- and customer-focused strategies. By integrating these strategies, independent, quick-service restaurant owners can increase the likelihood of sustaining their businesses for 5 years and beyond.

To deal with uncertainty, independent quick-service restaurant owners should strategically plan, proactively adapt to episodic events, adopt an innovative mindset, and form relationships for future use. To overcome rising costs, independent, quick-service restaurant owners should employ effective cost management techniques, competitively price their products or services, leverage their prior experience, actively engage in daily operations, and deliver a premium product to their customer base. To prioritize their employees, independent, quick-service restaurant owners should focus on hiring top

talent, training and developing current staff members, actively reducing turnover rates, and fostering mutual trust and respect. To prioritize their customers, independent, quick-service restaurant owners should focus on gauging customer perception, improving customer service, simplifying their products or processes, and continually striving for overall consistency.

### **Implications for Social Change**

The project findings contribute to positive social change by promoting long-term sustainability, at least beyond the initial 5 years. The integration of sustainable practices into business operations not only fosters environmental stewardship but also cultivates a culture of social responsibility, which is a culture in which significant changes can be observed within organizations, communities, and societies (Jin et al., 2024). Small businesses contribute to local economic growth at the community level and, when considered collectively, benefit the broader economy. A restaurant may not only function as a place of community gathering but may also be a well-known employer in the community. Independent, quick-service restaurants also promote inclusivity within their respective communities. Restaurant owners can foster a supportive and inclusive workplace by conducting staff development sessions and strengthening business-client relations (Reyes et al., 2024). This approach emphasizes their focus on improving the well-being of employees and fulfilling the needs and potential desires of customers. This project supports small business owners' ability to balance economic growth and social equity, enabling positive social change for individuals, communities, and societies.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

The purpose of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry project was to explore the successful sustainability strategies employed by independent, quick-service restaurant owners in Maryland to survive beyond the first 5 years. I identified three limitations or potential weaknesses in this project. The first limitation was that the project's results may have differed if the research scope included other geographical locations or a larger sample size. To address the issue of limited sample size, researchers may consider implementing a multisite study design that involves independent, quick-service restaurants located in different states or regions. This research design would enable the collection of a more representative sample of the target demographic.

Another limitation was participant bias. That is, participants may have intentionally answered interview questions to meet expectations or desired results. To address the issue of participant bias, researchers may consider implementing a robust confidentiality framework and innovative data collection methodologies that facilitate the anonymization of sensitive information. This framework would enable the collection of more meaningful and actionable insights. In addition, incorporating mixed-methods approaches, such as combining qualitative interviews with quantitative surveys, could enhance data reliability in future studies by reducing reliance on self-reported data and providing a deeper understanding of the underlying research topic.

The final limitation was that the findings are limited and not transferable beyond the independent, quick-service restaurant industry within the geographic location of this project. To address the issue of transferability, researchers may consider implementing a

cross-industry study design that involves small business owners from different sectors who have also employed sustainability strategies to survive beyond the first 5 years. Comparing different contexts could allow for the identification of best practices while offering insight into region-specific challenges. These recommendations for further research, which include considering a multisite study, a robust confidentiality framework, innovative data collection methodologies, mixed-methods approaches, and a cross-industry design, can significantly help overcome the limitations of the current project.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry was to explore the successful sustainability strategies that independent, quick-service restaurant owners operating within the state of Maryland used to survive beyond the first 5 years. I collected data through semistructured interviews with six purposefully sampled independent, quick-service restaurant owners who successfully implemented sustainability strategies in their businesses, located within the state of Maryland, to survive beyond the first 5 years. The project findings highlight the significance of addressing uncertainty, overcoming the costs associated with competition, and implementing employee- and customer-focused strategies. These valuable contributions addressed several gaps in current business practice and provided an actionable plan for sustainability, specifically emphasizing alignment with four main themes.

This project is beneficial for small business owners, managers, practitioners, and industry professionals who want their businesses to survive beyond the first 5 years in multiple ways. To deal with uncertainty, independent, quick-service restaurant owners

should strategically plan, proactively adapt to episodic events, adopt an innovative mindset, and form relationships for future use. To overcome rising costs, independent, quick-service restaurant owners should employ effective cost management techniques, competitively price their products or services, leverage their prior experience, actively engage in daily operations, and deliver a premium product to their customer base. To prioritize their employees, independent, quick-service restaurant owners should focus on hiring top talent, training and developing current staff members, actively reducing turnover rates, and fostering mutual trust and respect. To prioritize their customers, independent, quick-service restaurant owners should focus on gauging customer perception, improving customer service, simplifying their products or processes, and continually striving for overall consistency.

Beyond the implications for business practice, the project findings also underscore the broader social change potential of sustainability strategies in SMEs in terms of balancing economic growth with social equity for individuals, communities, and societies. The project findings also serve as a basis for future research aimed at further exploring this phenomenon whilst simultaneously overcoming this project's limitations or potential weaknesses. My recommendations for further research include considering a multisite study, a robust confidentiality framework, innovative data collection methodologies, mixed-methods approaches, and a cross-industry design, which can significantly help overcome past limitations.

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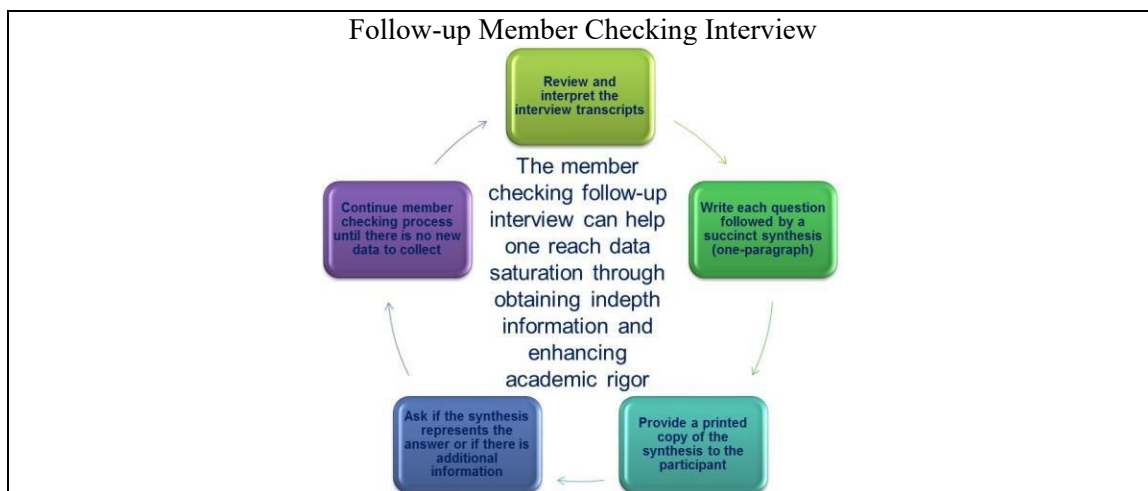
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## Appendix: Interview Protocol for Qualitative Pragmatic Inquiry Research Project

Interview Protocol	
Introduce the interview and set the stage. Introduce myself and the purpose of the interview thereby setting the stage.	Hello, my name is Winston Pauley. I am a Doctoral Candidate with Walden University. The purpose of this interview is to identify successful sustainability strategies that independent quick-service restaurant owners operating in the state of Maryland used to survive beyond 5 years. I am going to ask you five questions to which I would like your responses. Then, I will conclude the interview. Do you have any questions?
Watch for nonverbal cues. Paraphrase the participant response. Ask follow-up probing questions to get more in depth	Interview Questions: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What strategies did you use to sustain your independent quick-service restaurant beyond the initial 5 years of operation?</li> <li>2. What key challenges/barriers did you encounter to sustain your independent quick-service restaurant beyond the initial 5 years of operation?</li> <li>3. What did you do to address the key challenges to sustain your independent quick-service restaurant beyond the initial 5 years of operation?</li> <li>4. How did you assess/measure the success/effectiveness of the strategies you used to sustain your independent quick-service restaurant beyond the initial 5 years of operation?</li> <li>5. What additional information would you like to share regarding the successful strategies you used to sustain your business beyond the initial 5 years of operation?</li> </ol>
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 in a week to schedule a time for us to review the accuracy of my interpretations of your interview responses.



*Graphic adopted from DBA Qualitative Pragmatic Inquiry Research handbook (2023). Not needed in proposal or research project. A visual reminder during proposal stage when creating interview protocol*

<p>Introduce myself and purpose of the follow-up interview to set the stage.</p>	<p>Hello Interviewee,</p> <p>Thank you for taking this time to meet with me again to review the accuracy of my interpretations of your interview responses.</p>
<p>Share a copy of the succinct synthesis for each individual questions. Bring in probing questions related to other information that I found – note the information must be related so that you are I am probing and adhering to the IRB approval. Walk through each question, read the interpretation, and ask: Is my interpretation correct? Did I miss anything? Or Would you like to add anything?</p>	<p>I will read the questions one at a time and my interpretations of your responses to them and ask you if my interpretation is correct.</p>
	<p>1. Question and succinct synthesis of the interpretation—perhaps one paragraph or as needed</p>
	<p>2. Question and succinct synthesis of the interpretation—perhaps one paragraph or as needed</p>
	<p>3. Question and succinct synthesis of the interpretation—perhaps one paragraph or as needed</p>
<p>4. Question and succinct synthesis of the interpretation—perhaps one paragraph or as needed</p>	