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Effective Strategies for Sustaining Massage Small Businesses Beyond 5 Years

Steven Brian Glover
Walden University

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Walden University

College of Management and Human Potential

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Steven Brian Glover

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
and that any and all revisions required by
the review committee have been made.

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Walden University
2026

Abstract

Effective Strategies for Sustaining Massage Small Businesses Beyond 5 Years

by

Steven Brian Glover

MS, Hallmark University, 2019

BS, Hallmark University, 2018

Qualitative Pragmatic Inquiry Business Research Project Submitted in Partial

Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Business Administration

Walden University

May 2026

Abstract

Ineffective business strategies can lead to premature closure. Small business owners who struggle to develop long-term strategies may experience failure as a result. Grounded in the resource-based view and dynamic capabilities theory, the purpose of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry research project was to identify and explore practical strategies used by massage therapy small business owners to sustain their businesses for more than 5 years. The participants were 10 massage therapy small business owners who had sustained their businesses for more than 5 years. Data were collected through semistructured interviews, business documents, and public records. Through thematic analysis, six themes were identified: (a) strategic leadership responsibility, (b) relationship-based niche positioning, (c) strategic workload and resource management, (d) adaptive operational reconfiguration, (e) monitoring of data-driven operational performance, and (f) strategic system planning for long-term stability. A key recommendation is for massage therapy business owners to remain actively involved in strategic and financial decision-making, understand the positive social impact their employees seek, and align business strategies to support both client wellness and employee purpose. The implications for positive social change include the potential for massage therapy small business owners to expand opportunities for their employees and clients, thereby benefiting the communities they serve economically and through local populations.

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Dedication

I dedicate this qualitative pragmatic inquiry research project to my late parents, Leonard and Beverly Glover, whose fearless spirits always inspired me to dream big and achieve more than I thought possible. To my loving wife, Anjelica Glover, whose unwavering support and encouragement have been unmatched throughout this journey, this accomplishment is as much yours as it is mine. To Rachel Corpus, my mother-in-law, whose courage and strength continue to inspire me. Lastly, I dedicate this work to individuals with learning disabilities, whose perseverance and determination in overcoming challenges continue to motivate my efforts and commitment to positive change.

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I am beyond grateful to all of you who supported me in every aspect of my journey, through every setback and success. To my best friends, your voices in times of celebration and trial were key to keeping me balanced. Anjelica, thank you for being my rock. In the darkest days, you believed in me and forced me to keep pushing. Rachel, your presence at all times and at the correct times kept me centered and on track when I had the space to be drawn in other directions. I could always count on your support with one phone call or text.

Thank you, Dr. Kim Critchlow, for agreeing to chair my committee and, most importantly, for mentoring me. What started as a torturous period of finding our styles turned out to be one of the most transformative relationships in my academic/personal growth. You helped me shed the layers of professional writing style I had developed over the last 30 years and embrace a more elegant academic style. Your combination of high expectations, organization, and compassion helped me finish a project I once believed was not possible. Without you, I am not sure I would have made it to the finish line.

To my fellow Critchlow scholars, thank you for the generosity of your wisdom, your wit, and your life stories, which were as educational and inspiring as the academic texts we all spent hours and hours with. Each of you brought a unique perspective to this journey and made me a better person for having been on it with you. I hope your journey is as transformative as mine has been.

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Section 1: Project Foundation

Background of the Problem

Many small business owners (SBOs), including those in the massage therapy industry, struggle to develop and implement effective strategies for long-term sustainability, resulting in high failure rates within the first 5 years. Approximately half of small businesses cease operations within 5 years, in part due to difficulties with managing finances and a lack of available funding (Isichei & Ogbunike et al., 2024; Nwabekee et al., 2024). Furthermore, service-based businesses frequently experience cash flow problems, leading to closure rates exceeding 40% in cities with intense competition (Bhandari et al., 2022). In the context of massage therapy, SBOs face challenges such as regulatory requirements and practitioner availability, which further compound these financial problems (Ijaz & Carrie, 2023). Thus, massage therapy SBOs appear to be at high risk of closure due to both industry-specific factors and financial challenges faced by small businesses in general. Nevertheless, some massage SBOs have managed to overcome these challenges through strategic decision-making. Therefore, it was important to understand how massage therapy SBOs used effective strategies to remain profitable and operational.

Business Problem Focus and Project Purpose

The specific business problem is that some massage SBOs have sustained their businesses for more than 5 years by implementing effective strategies, while many others struggle to identify and apply them for long-term success. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry research project was to identify and explore the effective

strategies that successful SBOs in the massage industry have implemented to sustain their businesses for more than 5 years. The participants in this qualitative pragmatic inquiry research project consisted of ~~at least~~ 10 massage therapy SBOs who have used effective strategies to sustain their businesses for more than 5 years and are located in the Southeastern region of the United States. The sampling method was purposive. The sample size consisted of 10 SBOs with practical strategies to sustain their businesses for more than 5 years. To be project eligible, a participant must (a) be an SBO of a massage therapy firm for at least 5 years, (b) actively participate in business operations and decision-making, and (c) be located in the Southeastern region of the United States. I gained access to participants through internet searches, my professional network, and social media.

I selected the qualitative method because it is well-suited for investigating complex, context-based experiences, such as the procedures massage therapy business owners employ to keep their enterprises afloat. According to Lim (2024), qualitative methods enable the representation of participants' opinions, perspectives, and decision-making in a comprehensive and nuanced way. I used a pragmatic inquiry research design. The pragmatic research design focuses on the practical application of research results and emphasizes the discovery of solutions to meaningful, real-world problems (Sim et al., 2024).

The primary data for the project comprised semistructured interview data. I obtained secondary data from publicly available and relevant documents and artifacts that corroborated the participants' statements. The data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's

six-step thematic analysis. The six steps are (a) familiarize oneself with the data, (b) generate initial codes, (c) search for themes, (d) review themes, (e) define and name themes, and (f) write the report. I asked participants to critically review the researcher's interpretations of their responses for accuracy as part of the member-checking process. The conceptual frameworks adopted in the research project were Penrose's (1959) resource-based view (RBV) and the subsequent extensions by Wernerfelt (1984) and Barney (1991). In addition, Teece et al. (1997), dynamics capabilities theory was incorporated.

I operationalized data saturation through an iterative analytic monitoring process rather than assumed a numerical threshold. Contemporary qualitative scholarship emphasizes that saturation represents a multidimensional construct encompassing informational redundancy, thematic completeness, and analytic sufficiency rather than a fixed interview count (Rahimi & Khatooni, 2024). Accordingly, I adopted an ongoing concurrent analysis approach for this research project, whereby interview transcripts were coded immediately after collection, enabling the assessment of emerging conceptual density and repetition across successive data sets.

Saturation determination followed evidence-based methodological criteria incorporating participant relevance, thematic stability, and coding convergence. Qualitative methodological scholarship indicates that saturation is shaped by multiple interacting factors including interview depth, analytic complexity, and sample homogeneity rather than sample size alone (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). Researchers therefore evaluate saturation through progressive thematic stabilization and diminishing

conceptual yield during iterative analysis (Rahimi & Khatooni, 2024). Accordingly, recruitment ceased when three indicators were observed: absence of new codes during two successive analytic cycles, stabilization of thematic category boundaries, and limited analytical contribution from additional interviews. These indicators are consistent with qualitative interviewing guidelines emphasizing analytic sufficiency and thematic convergence as appropriate criteria for determining data adequacy (Dunwoodie et al., 2023).

In addition, theoretical saturation was evaluated through constant comparison procedures examining whether newly collected data extended, contradicted, or refined existing categories. Theoretical saturation is achieved when additional data no longer contribute explanatory power to category development or conceptual relationships (Yang et al., 2022). This structured assessment ensured transparency and methodological defensibility consistent with doctoral-level qualitative research expectations.

Project Research Question

What effective strategies do massage SBOs use to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years?

Assumptions and Limitations

Assumptions

Assumptions refer to aspects of a research project that the researcher must accept as accurate without proof (Komatsu et al., 2023). In this research project, I assumed that participants provided honest responses to interview questions and that semistructured interviews provided the information needed to answer the research question. It was also

assumed that participants had the relevant information and experience to provide data to answer the research question.

Limitations

Limitations are shortcomings or weaknesses of a research project that may affect the findings (Komatsu et al., 2023). This research project was subject to several limitations, many of which stemmed from self-reporting bias. The research project relied on self-reported data from business owners, which introduced potential recall bias, selective reporting, and subjective interpretation; for example, participants might have overemphasized successful strategies while underreporting past failures. Researcher bias, stemming from my background and preconceptions about small business sustainability, could have influenced data interpretation. Participants might have also presented their businesses more favorably or hesitated to disclose financial or operational challenges, a limitation known as social desirability bias (Nurumov et al., 2022).

Business Project Ethics

In this research project, I was responsible for executing all data collection activities in a way that protected participants' confidentiality, upheld research integrity, and maintained ethical standards. As the sole data collector, I conducted semistructured interviews to explore participants' strategies for sustaining massage therapy businesses beyond 5 years. I was responsible for all aspects of research project design, institutional review board approval, participant recruitment, data collection, and data analysis. I collected relevant business documents to triangulate interview data. The collected data are stored securely and will be maintained for 5 years.

I previously owned a successful massage business for 11 years. Following that, I began serving as an industry consultant and continuing education provider for massage therapists. This work involves traveling throughout the State of Texas to deliver training, advise business owners on effective business practices, and provide professional development for massage therapists. Importantly, no participants were recruited who had current or past professional relationships with me. Because of my involvement in the industry, it was important for me to employ reflexive strategies, such as reflexive journaling, to prevent the intrusion of personal bias. I discussed reflexive strategies to improve data trustworthiness in later sections of this research project (Karcher et al., 2024).

I was also responsible for adhering to the principles outlined in the *Belmont Report*, including respect, beneficence, and justice (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). To honor respect for persons, participants were granted autonomy through the voluntary nature of their participation. The informed consent process also upheld the tenet of respect by ensuring that participants understood the research project's purpose and their right to withdraw at any time, without consequence. Beneficence was maintained by minimizing risks to participants, such as emotional discomfort, while ensuring the benefits of the research outweighed any possible risks. Finally, justice was observed by selecting participants fairly and ensuring that the benefits and burdens of participation were equally distributed across the target population. I avoided dual-role conflicts and maintained objectivity throughout data collection and analysis.

I obtained approval from Walden University's Institutional Review Board prior to participant recruitment and data collection. Before voluntarily participating in this research, each participant was required to provide written informed consent. The research project's purpose, participation requirements, potential risks, and confidentiality measures were outlined in the informed consent form, which was provided to each participant. Participants had the opportunity to ask questions about the research project by phone or email before providing written consent. No incentives were provided for participation to prevent the potential for fraudulent or manufactured responses (Negrin et al., 2022).

I followed strict confidentiality measures to protect the identities of all participants. All participants were assigned pseudonyms (e.g., P1, P2, P3, etc.), and no potentially identifiable information was published. My committee members and I were the only individuals who had access to raw data or participant information. All research project-related materials, including interview transcripts, consent forms, and communications with participants, are securely stored on a password-protected, encrypted cloud system and will be maintained for 5 years. As an extra layer of data security, a key that links participants' actual identities with their pseudonyms was not retained. Data storage security practices were followed in alignment with Walden University's Institutional Review Board standards to ensure complete protection of participants' information. Participants remained free to withdraw from the research project at any point prior to data collection, with no negative consequences or penalties. All research project participants will receive the summary of research findings upon

research project completion. The Walden University Institutional Review Board approval number for this research project is 06-17-25-1226035.

Evidence-Based Integrative Review

The evidence-based integrative review consisted of a critical analysis and synthesis of sources from ABI/INFORM Collection, Business Source Complete, Emerald, Google Scholar, ProQuest Central, SAGE Journals, and ScienceDirect. I used keywords and phrases such as *massage therapy*, *small business* OR *microenterprise*, *business sustainability*, *long-term viability*, *customer retention* OR *loyalty*, *entrepreneurial leadership*, *financial strategy* OR *cash-flow management*, *service innovation*, *resource-based view* OR *RBV*, and *dynamic capabilities*. The literature review consisted of a critical analysis and synthesis of scholarship on the conceptual framework, the key themes and phenomena relevant to the research, comparisons and contrasts among differing points of view, and the relationship of this research project to previous research and findings.

I included 133 sources in this literature review, of which 123 (92%) were peer-reviewed journal articles and 10 (8%) were non-peer-reviewed sources. Among the 133 sources, 121 (91%) were published within the last 5 years, ensuring recency and relevance to the applied business problem, while the remaining 12 (9%) were published more than 5 years ago to retain foundational scholarship that supports the conceptual framework. Collectively, these sources provided a balanced evidence base that integrated current empirical findings with established theory to inform this research project. I provided a detailed breakdown in Table 1 of the references used in this literature review.

Table 1.*Literature Review Sources*

Journal article criterion	No.	%
Peer review status		
Peer reviewed	123	92
Non-peer-reviewed	10	8
Total	133	100
Time frame of publication		
< 5 years	121	91
> 5 years	12	9
Total	133	100

Note. The table includes a summary of the sources used in the literature review, including peer-reviewed and non-peer-reviewed sources published within the last 5 years and beyond.

Application to the Applied Business Problem

The purpose of this research project was to identify and explore practical strategies used by massage therapy SBOs who sustained their businesses for more than 5 years. Massage therapy SBOs must overcome industry-specific challenges alongside the obstacles faced by smaller firms in general. This required exploring literature that accounted for industry-level factors as well as the general body of research on SBOs.

In recent years, the literature in organizational studies has placed organizational sustainability in the framework of small service businesses as being dependent on the strategic utilization of intangible resources, such as knowledge stocks, relational capital, and adaptive routines. The RBV and its dynamic capability extension offered a theoretical basis for understanding these relationships, positing that firm-specific capabilities create sustainable competitive advantage when they are valuable, rare,

inimitable, and non-substitutable. A recent systematic review showed that empirical research highlights the importance of capability reconfiguration, organizational learning, and resource orchestration as the driving forces by which organizations adapt to environmental uncertainty (Kero & Bogale, 2023). These reflections were especially applicable to the micro-enterprise setting in which agility, instead of scale, is the core element of competitiveness due to structural constraints.

In service-intensive environments, sustainability is not just a matter of operational persistence but indicates the capacity to revise competencies to emerging client expectations and technological change. Evidence suggested that companies that actively develop adaptive capabilities, such as constant knowledge renewal and relationship development, were more resilient and had more strategic longevity than companies that used stable operational strategies (Kero & Bogale, 2023). As a result, the theoretical constructs of organizational performance related to capability were vital to the conceptual alignment between organizational practice and organizational capability in explaining performance variation in small-scale service settings. Recent academic work has moved away from the descriptive cataloging of small business practices and instead has provided an integrative analysis that places sustainability and performance in the context of capabilities-based strategic frameworks.

The results of recent systematic reviews indicated that the benefits of resource possession are delivered through the coordination of entrepreneurial, financial, technological, and relational capabilities. Malesu and Syrovátka (2025) synthesized the empirical literature using the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and

Meta-Analyses guideline. Malesu and Syrovátka determined financial accessibility, network embeddedness, technology acceptance, and strategic planning to be the most common determinants of success for small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) across sectors and proposed that competitiveness is essentially capability-mediated, not resource-deterministic. Such a reconceptualization was congruent with the conceptual framework of this research project, which included the RBV and dynamic capability perspectives. Parallel evidence produced by sustainability-oriented systematic reviews suggested that strategic longevity is becoming conditioned by the introduction of eco-innovation, integration of stakeholders, circularity, and digital transformation. These approaches can help SBOs balance the requirements of economic survival with the demands of the environment and society (Muis, 2025). These results added to the theoretical discussion supporting the fact that sustainability strategies are not disposable corporate responsibility tools but incorporated operating mechanisms that affect organizational survival.

Crisis-context-based research confirmed the need for an adaptive strategic orientation. Integrative reviews on pandemic-related disruptions demonstrated that SMEs able to decipher environmental turbulence and modify operational patterns characterized better resilience trajectories than structurally inflexible counterparts (Biyela & Utete, 2024). For this research project, this meant that sustainability and survivability were determined by adaptive sensing and reconfiguration ability, one of the main pillars of dynamic capability theory, which further supported conceptual congruence between the empirical literature and the analytical lens of this research project.

These pieces of literature created a convergent academic standpoint: SME performance results are determined by the interplay of strategic adaptability, innovation intention, and sustainability combination rather than a single operational choice. This integrative framing provided a theoretically effective basis for the analysis of the experiences of the participants and positioned this research project in the context of current discussions on capability-based enterprise sustainability.

Parallel literature emphasized the importance of customer focus and relational marketing to the continuation of growth patterns. Empirical studies of sustainable marketing models revealed that engagement-based strategies can drive successful customer attraction, loyalty, and reputation positioning to improve revenue stability (Hokmabadi et al., 2024). These results indicated that engagement processes are not limited to promotional activity but are strategic relational processes that facilitate organizational endurance. Furthermore, studies analyzing service strategies in digitally mediated settings demonstrated the importance of partnership creation, marketing responsiveness, and relationship development as factors that predetermine growth. The presence of service innovation and collaborative connectivity has been shown to facilitate market penetration (Isichei & Ogbunike, 2024). These views cumulatively implied that marketing orientation and relational capital act in harmony with capability-based resources, allowing firms to manage competitive pressures.

Conceptual Framework

In this research project, I employed two relevant theoretical frameworks: the RBV (Barney, 1991) and the dynamic capabilities theory (Teece, 2009). The RBV has become

a widely studied approach in strategic management (Ferreira & Ferreira, 2025). It provided a framework for understanding how companies achieved a long-term advantage over their rivals.

The seminal work of Penrose (1959) has been frequently credited as being instrumental to the development of the RBV (Kor & Mahoney, 2004; Lockett & Thompson, 2004). Penrose (1959) outlined principles that explain how firms grow and how they can achieve efficient growth. Alongside a theory of how firms grow, she also provided a framework for managing a firm's resources, identifying productivity opportunities, and planning diversification. Specifically, Penrose (1959) presented several key arguments about the relationship between a firm's resources, potential opportunities, and profitable growth. Firstly, Penrose argued that firms generated economic value not simply by possessing resources, but by managing them effectively and innovatively. Penrose (1959) established a foundational link between firm resources and opportunities for growth and innovation, emphasizing how internal resource constraints shape both the direction and rate of firm expansion. This resource-based perspective highlights efficiency, economic profit, competitive advantage, and profitable growth as central drivers of firm development (Kor & Mahoney, 2004).

However, a limitation of Penrose's (1959) framework is that it does not explicitly account for resource position barriers. Wernerfelt (1984) addressed this limitation by highlighting the importance of examining a firm's strategic choices through its resources. This offered an alternative to approaches that prioritized products. He suggested that businesses can achieve strong strategic positions by evaluating their resources and

identifying their strengths and weaknesses. Wernerfelt advanced the argument that markets are imperfect and that the development and deployment of firm-specific resources can meaningfully influence organizational performance and competitive outcomes.

While both Penrose (1959) and Wernerfelt (1984) highlighted the role of resources in strategic decision-making, neither provided explicit criteria for identifying such resources to ensure competitiveness. Barney's (1991) seminal work proposed that a company's resources, if they possess specific qualities, can lead to sustained competitive advantage. These qualities include being valuable, rare, imperfectly imitable, and nonsubstitutable (Cuthbertson & Furseth, 2022). Resources are broadly defined as everything a company controls, including assets, abilities, processes, characteristics, information, and knowledge (Barney, 1991). I used the RBV to clarify the circumstances under which a company's resources confer a competitive advantage.

Unlike traditional economic models that focus on external factors, the RBV emphasizes analyzing differences in resources across companies, even within the same industry (Chatterjee et al., 2023). These differences can be a source of a lasting competitive advantage. A company has a competitive advantage when it can produce goods or services more efficiently or better meet customer requirements, resulting in better outcomes than other companies (Kero & Bogale, 2023). A firm's performance can be enhanced by its resources, but only when these resources possess specific qualities, namely, meeting the valuable, rare, imperfectly imitable, and nonsubstitutable criteria (Estensoro et al., 2022; Ferreira & Ferreira, 2025). A resource is considered valuable if it

helps a firm operate more efficiently and achieve better results. To provide a competitive edge, resources must also be rare (Barney, 1991). If resources are simply valuable but not rare, they will only allow a firm to perform at the same level as its competitors. A valuable and rare resource can help maintain a firm's competitive advantage if it is difficult for others to copy (Cuthbertson & Furseth, 2022). Finally, a valuable, rare, and imperfectly imitable resource can provide a lasting competitive advantage if no other resource can achieve the same outcome (Barney, 1991).

Although the original RBV model by Barney (1991) constitutes an important development, it has certain limitations. In particular, recent researchers have explored ways to build upon the RBV in the context of dynamic capabilities. Dynamic RBV incorporates the concept of dynamic capabilities, suggesting that resources and capabilities are constantly changing, combining, or being restructured (Helfat & Peteraf, 2003). Consequently, there has been increased interest in how resources relate to the process of implementing a strategy. The potential value of a firm's resources is linked to its chosen strategy, how that strategy is executed, and the use of those resources (Huang et al., 2023). These perspectives suggest that it is becoming increasingly complex for firms to sustain a long-term advantage. Instead, a series of temporary advantages gained over time is more important. The Schumpeterian and hypercompetition views support the dynamic RBV by proposing that firms can achieve a sustained competitive advantage only through ongoing adaptation and reconfiguration of their resources (Wiggins & Ruefli, 2005).

Applying the RBV to massage therapy SBOs allowed for the incorporation of

internal strengths, such as a therapist's specialized skills, a strong client relationship management system, or a unique brand identity. I used the RBV to guide the identification and analysis of these resources and capabilities to understand how they contributed to the long-term survival of massage small businesses. Examining these internal factors alongside external market conditions provided a more complete picture of what enabled smaller businesses to thrive in the long run.

The dynamic capabilities perspective builds upon the RBV of firms (Teece et al., 1997). The RBV focuses on a firm's existing resources and capabilities, including both physical and non-physical assets. In contrast, the dynamic capabilities perspective focuses on planned changes to this resource base (Mele et al., 2024). Strategic business planning can protect SBOs from resource shortages and enable continued investment in innovations, such as new therapeutic techniques and equipment (Alshebami, 2025). In addition to adjusting to consumer trends, strategic planning also involves embedding dynamic capabilities, such as flexibility and rapid responsiveness, into the organization's core (Adam, 2024). Dynamic capability refers to a firm's ability to integrate, build, and reconfigure internal and external competencies in response to rapidly changing environments (González-Samaniego et al., 2023). These capabilities enabled massage therapy SBOs to innovate and respond effectively to market shifts, especially in volatile industries (González-Samaniego et al., 2023).

Understanding the unique nature of the dynamic capabilities perspective requires distinguishing among different types of firm capabilities. These capabilities can generally be divided into two groups: operational capabilities and dynamic capabilities (Teece,

2023). Operational capabilities are used to maintain existing practices and to improve activities, businesses, products, and customer relationships. In contrast, dynamic capabilities are focused on strategic change within the organization. By integrating dynamic capabilities, organizations can adapt to both expected and unexpected changes (Adam, 2024).

Massage therapy SBOs often operate with limited resources and face intense local competition. Their success depended on their ability to respond quickly to changes in client demand, adapt to new therapeutic techniques, and manage operational costs. The dynamic capabilities framework provided a valuable lens for understanding how these businesses developed the organizational processes and routines necessary for long-term survival. The theory provided a natural framework for questions such as how businesses sensed changes in their local markets or how they transformed their operations to remain relevant. In this research project I identified practical strategies for sustaining massage therapy SBOs beyond the initial 5-year period. The framework's focus on ongoing adaptation and learning was particularly relevant to the specific challenges faced by small businesses in a dynamic sector.

The convergence between strategic capability, engagement, and marketing sustainability was identified upon integrative analysis of the modern literature. Resource-based models focus on the internal organization of resources, whereas relational and marketing scholars focus on external interactional processes. Synthesized, these streams showed that the sustainability of enterprises is a result of the interaction between capability development and stakeholder engagement. This synthesis was directly

informative to the conceptual framing of this research project as it showed that strategy implementation needed to be studied as a multidimensional construct that entailed adaptive mobilization of resources, customer-oriented positioning, and relational network involvement. By providing theoretical consistency, the review constituted a consistent conceptual base that allowed the association of the conceptual narrative to the empirical research. This explained how the explanatory coherence and scholarly rigor was enhanced in the analytical framework of the research project.

Business Problem Scholarship Evidence

The problem of massage therapy SBOs lacking effective business strategies to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years remained relevant due to both industry-specific factors and general obstacles faced by small businesses. SBOs dominate the massage therapy sector, with most establishments operating as sole proprietorships or microenterprises (Prasetyo et al., 2024). While this structure fosters flexibility and personalized service, it also creates challenges for operational efficiency and long-term competitiveness. For example, Ijaz and Carrie (2023) found that massage therapy businesses often faced barriers to scalability due to regulatory requirements and reliance on practitioner availability. These constraints made it imperative for SBOs to adopt creative strategies to maintain profitability and client retention.

The scalability problem was also relevant to the United States market. The U.S. massage therapy industry has grown into a recognized component of complementary and integrative health care (Levin & Bradshaw, 2024). Once perceived as a luxury service, massage therapy is now widely accepted for its therapeutic benefits, such as pain

management and stress reduction (Mak et al., 2024). This shift in consumer perception has fueled steady market growth over the past few decades (Gan et al., 2023). The demand for massage therapy is driven by both medical and wellness sectors, with clients often seeking treatment for chronic pain or proactively engaging in preventive care (Levin & Bradshaw, 2024). Additionally, consumer awareness of holistic health practices and growing dissatisfaction with conventional health care services have led to increased demand for massage therapy services (Luo et al., 2025).

The COVID-19 pandemic posed additional challenges for the industry, with widespread shutdowns, evolving health protocols, and client hesitancy toward in-person contact (Ramírez et al., 2022). While many businesses experienced revenue losses and workforce disruption, the pandemic also accelerated digital adoption and forced SBOs to rethink business models, hygiene standards, and client engagement strategies (Fasth et al., 2023; Mishrif & Khan, 2023; Zhang et al., 2022). This period of disruption underscored the importance of adaptability and strategic planning. As massage therapy continues to evolve within the U.S. health care and wellness landscape, SBOs should balance therapeutic practice with business acumen to remain viable and competitive.

The limitations posed by financial constraints and market issues were cited as one of the main challenges to the viability of small businesses, including the massage therapy industry. The academic literature highlights the extent of these problems. For example, approximately half of small businesses fail within 5 years due to poor financial management and inadequate access to capital, as one project researcher on

entrepreneurial problems in emerging markets found (Nwabekee et al., 2024). Moreover, small service-oriented businesses (such as wellness providers) experience cash flow losses, leading to excessive closure rates of 40% or more in competitive cities (Bhandari et al., 2022). These statements of evidence indicated a far-ranging trend: the lack of resources directly translates into the antithesis of operational duration. These financial challenges, combined with a lack of practical solutions, lead to high failure rates among SBOs. This conclusion extended to the widespread references of competition in the market and customer retention as intertwined issues that make business volatile.

Competition and customer resistance in the market further exacerbated the sustainability challenge for SBOs in the massage therapy industry. According to Cristofaro and Lovallo (2022), research indicates that small businesses in the service sector face a failure rate of up to 55% in the absence of differentiation from rivals. Competition gaps can reduce profitability by an average of 50% in saturated markets. Additionally, customers to whom loyalty programs are not applied pose a challenge, as they are less likely to remain engaged, which significantly reduces long-term revenue and client retention (Dwivedi et al., 2024). These measures demonstrated how competitive worlds can short-sell market shares without making evolving responses.

Financial resources remained a controlled zone for many SBOs, creating instability in some businesses, such as those in the massage therapy industry. This barrier was effectively measured through empirical data from recent studies. A product of this is the prevalence of low access, as small businesses that apply for traditional loans are denied nearly half the time (Okeke et al., 2024). Credit histories were the most common

reason for lack of approval, resulting in undercapitalization, and failure rates rise by 35% over 5 years. Concurrently, other feasible financing sources, such as crowdfunding or microloans, have been underutilized by 20% to 30% of small wellness businesses, leading to stagnation in the growth of most companies (Okeke et al., 2024). These numbers indicated the system's capital lockout, which inhibits growth and sustainability.

High failure rates in small massage therapy businesses have long been linked to poor business management and ineffective strategic planning. Research indicates that 40% to 50% of small businesses fail because owners lack formal business training and leadership skills relative to financial expertise, and uneducated entrepreneurs are also less likely to survive in business after 5 years (Cristofaro & Lovallo, 2022). Moreover, the lack of strategic frameworks is linked to operational inefficiencies, as companies that do not require mentorship programs often report a 30% turnover rate and are less profitable (Clayton, 2024). Such information signaled a lack of knowledge that directly impeded long-term sustainability.

The research problem of this research project became even more relevant during economic downturns. When economies enter recessions, small service firms experience a 20% to 40% decline in revenue, and the resulting gaps in adaptation lead to closure rates exceeding 50% in subindustries affected by recession (Okeke et al., 2024). Regulatory compliance requirements, including licensing and tax obligations, increase operating expenses for small businesses. SBOs report that navigating regulatory, tax, and licensing compliance requirements diverts time and resources and imposes significant cost burdens. For example, about half of SBOs indicate that licensing and compliance

requirements impede growth and increase operational demands (U.S. Chamber of Commerce, 2024). The figures highlighted the role of exogenous forces in exacerbating internal problems.

The scholarly evidence was supported by government and industry reports that showed the lack of effective means to sustain the massage therapy business after 5 years was a pressing issue. According to official data, among small enterprises in the wellness industry, such as massage therapy, one in four fails within 5 years due to financial and competitive pressures (Texas Department of State Health Services, 2022). The industry review revealed that customer retention is a challenge for 35% to 45% of massage businesses, primarily due to competition, underscoring the need for targeted efforts (Prasetyo et al., 2024). These reports aligned with broader trends consistent with peer-reviewed findings on resource constraints.

The high failure rate in the massage therapy field necessitated synthesizing evidence to ensure improvement in the future. According to Bhandari et al. (2022), 40% to 60% of small businesses face financial constraints, and 30% to 50% close due to competitive and regulatory pressures (Hokmabadi et al., 2024). This combined perspective highlighted a multifaceted issue rooted in resource deficiency and adaptive lag. All evidence suggested that it was essential to develop customized measures to mitigate such risks. In this spirit, an exploration of dynamic capabilities and resource-based frameworks was considered a natural extension of the concept of sustainability.

The synthesis of the themes confirmed the reality of the business problem through consistent numerical data on failure and inefficiency. The information provided by

government sources supplemented the literature, supporting the notion that another 50% of massage therapy SBOs cannot survive without effective strategies (Meressa, 2023).

This critical synthesis was compelling because it confronted the urgent need for scholarly consideration.

Business Topic Scholarship

Financial mismanagement, inadequate business planning, and limited access to capital were identified as the leading causes of failure among small businesses (Denanyoh & Owusu, 2025). Many SBOs lack financial literacy, which often led to cash flow problems and inefficient operations (Meressa, 2023). Businesses with larger budgets and greater expense control are more likely to reinvest strategically and are better equipped to ensure long-term sustainability (Kariyakarawana et al., 2023). Financial planning is crucial to the massage therapy industry because it helps organizations prepare for seasonal income fluctuations and lower customer demand (Bhandari et al., 2022). To reduce enterprise failure, I found that focusing on financial literacy and capital management was essential.

Other significant problems for small businesses included market competition and customer retention, both of which were key to long-term business success. Businesses that cannot differentiate are less profitable than competitors who can (Cristofaro & Lovallo, 2022). Important strategies for business longevity included establishing a strong brand identity, providing unique services, and fostering high customer satisfaction (Acar et al., 2024). The massage therapy industry required service providers to prioritize customer experience, personalized treatment plans, and loyalty programs for long-term

client engagement (Meressa, 2023). Past research indicated that personalized follow-ups, membership plans, and referral incentives all significantly increased business performance (Lin & Bowman, 2022). Small businesses can enhance profitability and ensure long-term survival by implementing customer-focused strategies.

Another challenge was limited access to financial resources and the difficulty of securing external funding. Obtaining a traditional bank loan was a challenging, and sometimes impossible, task for many SBOs, who were often denied access to the assets they needed to grow their business due to strict lending requirements. As viable solutions for small business growth, alternative financing options such as microloans, peer-to-peer lending, and crowdfunding can be helpful (Camilleri & Bresciani, 2022). Research indicated that businesses with diverse funding processes were more likely to remain stable for over 5 years (Cristofaro & Lovallo, 2022; Okeke et al., 2024). Alternative financing strategies were also crucial to the financial support the massage therapy industry received, given its high startup costs and operational expenses (Bhandari et al., 2022).

In addition, small businesses often failed due to poor management and a lack of strategic planning. Many SBOs started companies without formal training in business operations, marketing, or financial management, which reduced their chances of long-term success (Cristofaro & Lovallo, 2022). Entrepreneurial education, mentorship programs, and leadership training can significantly boost business survival rates (Clayton, 2024). In the massage therapy industry, scheduling management, employee training, service pricing, and customer relationships were vital aspects of strategic planning

(Meressa, 2023). Kotsios (2023) argued that SBOs who continue to learn and develop their leadership skills had more resilient businesses. Formal education, mentorship, and skill development can enhance business longevity and operational efficiency.

External factors, such as economic downturns, regulations, and industry changes, also influenced the sustainability of small businesses. Businesses that failed to adapt to economic shifts experienced declines in revenue and increases in operational costs (Saraiva et al., 2024). Further, business operations were strained by regulatory changes, such as new licensing requirements and tax policies (Akang, 2023). Hokmabadi et al. (2024) found that businesses adopting adaptive strategies, such as cost-cutting measures and service diversification, were more likely to survive economic challenges. Due to considerable changes in the market, competitors' behaviors, consumer preferences, and policies within specific niches (Bhandari et al., 2022), SBOs in the massage therapy sector had to adapt to these trends. Regardless of the market, implementing responsive strategies enhanced business resilience and supported short- and long-term survival.

Strategic Planning

Strategic planning and effective financial management were identified as critical for ensuring long-term business viability (Samiun et al., 2024). Nemar et al. (2022) argued that proactive planning could position SBOs to anticipate market trends and adapt operations to changing climates. Two common sustainability challenges for massage therapy SBOs were limited access to financial resources and fluctuating market conditions (Adam, 2024; Okeke et al., 2024). For example, a lack of financial resources could undermine growth and the ability to offer more dynamic services (Sawitri, 2023).

Another challenge for wellness SBOs was the impact of economic downturns, which often led to reduced consumer spending on wellness services (Baydar et al., 2023).

While increased wellness spending has occurred among Generations Y and Z (Alshebami, 2025), the massage therapy industry was not insulated from economic fluctuations. To remain competitive in any economy, especially one characterized by uncertainty, I found that massage therapy businesses had to be adaptive. One way to achieve this was by creating new offerings or services that distinguished these businesses as valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (Mailani et al., 2024). Such proactive approaches to operations and services helped small businesses remain stable in dynamic markets (Pertheban et al., 2023).

Many successful SBOs sustained their businesses by applying strategic planning and efficient financial management (Malesu & Syrovátka, 2025). Strategic planning allowed business owners to anticipate market changes and adjust their services to enhance flexibility and competitiveness (Nemar et al., 2022). In the wellness industry, effective strategic planning involved diversifying offerings by adding complementary services, such as reflexology, aromatherapy, or bodywork packages, to appeal to a broader client base (Cristina et al., 2024).

The ability to tailor offerings based on shifting consumer preferences and spending behaviors was a distinguishing feature of sustainable businesses. For example, Vărzaru and Bocean (2024) found that leaders of successful SMEs adapted to changes in consumer needs, innovation, and available technologies to stay relevant. Talukder (2025) found that hotel businesses that adapted to changes in consumer preferences, such as

offering eco-friendly amenities, were more sustainable and competitive. In the food industry, Alam et al. (2025) described how adapting to consumer preferences through packaging and innovative processing strategies could help companies offer healthier products that aligned with changing customer demands. In addition to adjusting product and service offerings to stay competitive, some SBOs adopted tiered pricing models to attract different income segments, increasing both access and revenue stability (Ali et al., 2023). Others proactively responded to seasonal shifts in demand by adjusting their services to align with changing client needs throughout the year (Dalir, 2023). Strategic alliances, such as referral partnerships with chiropractors, yoga studios, or fitness centers, were also shown to enhance business visibility and client acquisition (Wulandari, 2024).

Resource Management

Strategic planning required the effective use of available resources; therefore, resource management was another key element in the sustainability of massage therapy SBOs. While some successful businesses applied structured resource strategies to overcome industry barriers, others lacked defined approaches tailored to the specific demands of the service sector (Adam, 2024). Another aspect of strategic planning that drove SBO success concerned organizational leadership. For example, financial literacy and business acumen were essential for sustaining small massage therapy businesses. I found that SBOs had to understand the financial complexities of running a business to remain competitive (Culebro-Martínez et al., 2024).

By continuously improving their financial and managerial skills, entrepreneurs were better positioned to make informed decisions that drove growth and sustainability.

For example, SBOs often benefited from targeted financial training programs, especially those focusing on credit management and resilience during economic downturns (Bancoro, 2023; Narain, 2022). Developing financial literacy skills alongside strategic planning strengthened long-term business sustainability and helped massage therapy businesses thrive amid market challenges.

Market Adaptation by Small Business Owners

In addition to recent literature highlighting the roles of strategic planning (Malesu & Syrovátka, 2025) and resource management (Adam, 2024) for smaller businesses, several studies acknowledged the importance of adapting to rapidly shifting market trends. Market research, consumer analysis, and business forecasting were widely acknowledged as highly relevant for small businesses, especially in the massage therapy industry. Business leaders who frequently analyzed their customers' and competitors' behaviors could make more informed decisions to sustain their businesses (Akin, 2024). For example, in an industry trend analysis, Prasetyo et al. (2024) identified consumer needs, such as demand for therapeutic massage to address stress or injury, as essential to the success of wellness businesses. According to Bhandari et al. (2022), small businesses could retain more customers and increase revenue by adapting their market actions based on data-driven insights.

Previous researchers found that massage therapy businesses that adapted to market changes were more likely to survive and thrive. Diversifying services through related offerings, such as wellness treatments or corporate wellness programs, provided massage therapy SBOs with additional income streams (Cristofaro & Lovallo, 2022).

Evidence suggested that offering complementary services such as aromatherapy, acupuncture, or chiropractic could appeal to a broader customer base (Buzhymyska et al., 2024). Incorporating technology through virtual consultations or subscription-based massages also increased customer engagement and appeal (Meressa, 2023). Financially sustainable businesses adjusted their pricing and sales strategies to maintain stability and foster customer loyalty (Bachtiar et al., 2023).

Evidence suggested that numerous opportunities and challenges impacted business sustainability, particularly changes in the regulatory environment and industry competition. For example, Akang (2023) found that licensing, taxation, and health regulations imposed high costs that affected the profitability of SBOs. These regulatory challenges and evolving economic conditions presented both obstacles and opportunities for long-term business sustainability. During economic difficulties, consumers were less willing to spend money on products and services; thus, companies were forced to adjust their pricing and offer more financially manageable payment options. Alshebami (2025) found that businesses that anticipated regulatory and economic changes were more likely to remain viable. Additionally, competition within the massage therapy industry necessitated differentiation through superior service quality, customer engagement, and digital marketing (Bhandari et al., 2022). Strategic market adaptation ensured that business continuity and viability were not compromised, allowing companies to remain viable during volatile economic times.

Analysis of successful small business market adaptation revealed that the key to success included strategies such as service extension, digitalization, and organizational

changes. For example, Cristofaro and Lovallo (2022) noted that massage therapy firms that offered elements of wellness coaching and holistic health services experienced better customer loyalty. Studies of digital adaptation also provided evidence that integrated mobile reservation apps and automated customer relationship management systems led to smoother, more convenient business operations (Koles et al., 2024). However, I found that these studies failed to demonstrate the effectiveness of strategies used by small massage therapy businesses across markets, raising questions about how strategies needed to be tailored to local economies and demands. I filled this void through this research project by exploring how strategic innovations were applied by successful massage therapy SBOs in the Southeastern United States.

Economic Factors. While recent studies on strategic planning (Malesu & Syrovátka, 2025), resource management (Culebro-Martínez et al., 2024), and market adaptation (Bhandari et al., 2022) highlighted firm- and industry-level factors shaping SBOs' strategies, I also considered macroeconomic determinants of business sustainability. The socioeconomic environment plays a significant role in determining the sustainability of small enterprises in the massage therapy industry. In any market, business owners have to navigate fluctuating economic conditions that influenced consumer purchasing behavior and directly impacted business continuity (Siregar, 2024). To remain competitive, massage therapy SBOs have to adopt strategies that included service modification and flexible pricing models to appeal to a broader client base (Ali et al., 2023). Implementing competitive pricing while maintaining financial stability was shown to significantly enhance long-term viability. Culebro-Martínez et al. (2024)

emphasized the importance of integrating socioeconomic awareness into financial education, reinforcing the need for strategic pricing and market adaptation. Therefore, tailoring business strategies to socioeconomic conditions was essential for the sustainability of small businesses in the wellness sector (Kaftan et al., 2023).

Entrepreneurship within the massage therapy sector also influences local economic development. Small massage therapy businesses create jobs by expanding service offerings and stimulating cash flow in the community. As noted by Amoah et al. (2022), the success of these enterprises often correlates with increased employment opportunities and broader socioeconomic engagement. Effective resource allocation across the massage therapy supply chain could enhance operational capacity and foster therapeutic entrepreneurship (Mailani et al., 2024). Adaptive resource management strategies support business expansion and promote long-term workforce stability. Furthermore, by maintaining employee well-being through fair compensation and supportive workplace policies, small massage therapy businesses could meet the evolving health and wellness needs of their local communities.

Policymakers and industry stakeholders can create environments conducive to sustainable growth in the massage therapy sector. For example, supportive policies, such as tax incentives and small business grants, can alleviate financial pressures and encourage innovation among therapeutic entrepreneurs (Chiappini et al., 2022). Additionally, offering sector-specific training in financial literacy and business management can empower owners to make informed decisions and navigate economic challenges more effectively. These initiatives contributed to a thriving ecosystem for

therapeutic entrepreneurship aligned with broader economic integration efforts (Kaftan et al., 2023). When supported by policy and education, small businesses in the massage industry can thrive as integral contributors to the region's economic development and community wellness.

Financial Strategies. Financial strategies lay at the intersection of resource management (Bancoro, 2023) and certain economic factors (Siregar, 2024). Given the central importance of financial performance to business sustainability, I explored these strategies to understand how SBOs remained operational when facing challenges. When managing finances, successful SBOs allocated resources based on close reviews of revenues and forecasted operating costs (Okeke et al., 2024). During economic downturns, careful financial management helped SBOs survive. Research on SBO sustainability during past economic recessions highlighted the importance of strategic financial planning (Samiun et al., 2024). For example, evidence from analyses of the global financial crisis indicated that small businesses engaging in contingency planning and cash-flow management strategies demonstrated greater resilience, often revising budgets, renegotiating vendor contracts, and adjusting pricing to maintain operations (Ali et al., 2023). The ability to pivot services or products, such as offering virtual consultations or adopting e-commerce platforms, also emerged as a hallmark of strategic adaptability and survival (Hokmabadi et al., 2024; Sanasi & Ghezzi, 2022). For massage therapy SBOs, such adaptation included offering mobile services or online self-care education.

Budgeting, resource allocation, and financial planning were important aspects of

the sustainability of small massage therapy businesses. Srbinoska et al. (2023) noted that businesses with structured financial strategies were often more profitable and more likely to survive. Effective budgeting and expense control ensured SBOs used resources efficiently, thereby minimizing operational risks (Tuan & Rajagopal, 2022).

Mismanagement of finances was identified as a leading cause of small business failure (Nkwinika & Akinola, 2023). The key to financial success lay in prioritizing long-term planning, effective cost management, and strategic reinvestment to stabilize revenues (Mengistu & Panizzolo, 2022). Business leaders who periodically reviewed their financial performance metrics and adjusted their operational costs in response to revenue patterns tended to be more financially resilient.

Access to alternative financing tools, such as microloans, crowdfunding, and peer-to-peer lending, also ensured small business sustainability. According to research, SBOs often struggled to secure bank loans because of strict lending requirements (Cristofaro & Lovallo, 2022). However, alternative financing options helped SBOs acquire funds without excessive collateral requirements (Odonkor et al., 2024). For example, crowdfunding platforms enabled entrepreneurs to raise funds from customers, while microloans provided funding to SBOs with limited or poor credit history (Meressa, 2023). Businesses funded through multiple sources tended to demonstrate sustained profitability and long-term survival. Many businesses in the massage therapy industry that relied on alternative financing to expand their operations experienced business longevity.

Case studies of financially stable massage therapy businesses showed that

financial planning was a crucial component of strategic planning and business sustainability, underscoring the importance of financial literacy. Idris et al. (2024) found that SBOs that reinvested earnings in business skill development experienced greater financial growth. These reinvestments not only strengthened service quality and client satisfaction but also positioned businesses to scale and grow.

Customer Retention and Loyalty. A key direction for strategic planning and market adaptation, as discussed earlier, was customer retention. Providing quality service and a positive customer experience was critical to client retention and business success in the massage therapy industry. Businesses that prioritized personalized services and professional expertise were more likely to retain clients (Sivapitak & Sangpikul, 2024). Customer loyalty, which fostered repeat business and referrals, was driven by high service quality (Arli et al., 2024). Further, businesses that provided a relaxing and enhanced customer experience often had higher retention rates and a competitive advantage (Bhandari et al., 2022; Fluhrer & Brahm, 2025). When customer expectations were met or exceeded, loyalty tended to follow (Bhandari et al., 2022). For massage therapy SBOs, investing in customer-focused strategies could lead to long-term profitability and operational stability.

Membership programs, value-added services, and personalized services created high customer engagement and loyalty (Fourie et al., 2022). Similar to a subscription-based massage service, a membership model could foster consistent revenue streams and enhance customer retention (Cristofaro & Lovallo, 2022). Research indicated that offering personalized treatment plans and tailored wellness programs could lead to long-

term customer commitment (Ahsan et al., 2022). Additional services, such as aromatherapy treatments or wellness consultations, increased customer retention and brand loyalty (Meressa, 2023). Finally, loyalty rewards programs supported businesses by increasing customer retention through repeat visits and referrals (Fourie et al., 2022).

Business competitiveness and customer retention were primarily driven by brand identity and service differentiation. Strong branding fostered trust and recognition among customers, enabling small businesses to stand out from their competitors (Fluhrer & Brahm, 2025). The value propositions of niche service businesses were often so distinctive that clients became loyal devotees (Bailetti et al., 2020). Digital marketing, such as social media engagement and targeted promotions, could increase customer loyalty while attracting new customers (Bhandari et al., 2022). Online marketing tools helped massage therapy businesses achieve higher referral rates and foster customer loyalty (Cristofaro & Lovallo, 2022). In the evolving wellness industry, brand consistency, digital outreach, business integration, and forward-looking investments were all key to customer retention and business success.

Entrepreneurial Leadership. Implementing general strategies for effective resource management or specific initiatives to accelerate market adaptation and improve customer retention requires effective leadership. For small massage therapy businesses to succeed in the long term, I found that SBOs needed an entrepreneurial mindset and strategic leadership. Research showed that entrepreneurs with vision, adaptability, and resilience could help businesses survive their first 5 years of critical operation (Sachdev, 2023). Business owners who relied on effective leadership could navigate industry

challenges and capitalize on growth opportunities (Hensellek et al., 2023). Generally speaking, business success rates were higher when SBOs clearly understood business goals, plans, and performance metrics (Nakajima & Sekiguchi, 2025). Leaders with an entrepreneurial mindset could foster business innovation and sustainability.

Decision-making, risk-taking, and skill development could drive business resiliency. According to research, entrepreneurs who made data-driven decisions took calculated risks and were likely to adapt to market changes (Cristofaro & Lovallo, 2022). Business owners who invested in leadership development programs could better manage their employees while optimizing daily business operations (Clayton, 2024). The evidence suggested that risk-taking in expanding services, new product development, and price adjustment generally resulted in long-term growth (Meressa, 2023). Entrepreneurs in the massage therapy industry who considered alternative service models, such as mobile massage or wellness retreats, could broaden revenue streams to include other sources of capital (Budler & Božič, 2024). Further, to maintain market relevance, a competitive business environment required continuous learning, service innovation, and technology adoption. Entrepreneurs who continued learning in business workshops, mentorship programs, and other types of professional development were more likely to remain ahead of competitors (Bhandari et al., 2022).

Summary

Prior studies on factors related to SBO longevity indicated that success could be achieved through flexibility, innovation, and effective leadership. For example, Cristofaro and Lovallo (2022) emphasized the importance of proactive responses to

economic changes, and Arzabe et al. (2024) found that companies that were more diverse in terms of revenue and technology were more likely to survive. Merín-Rodríguez et al. (2024) indicated that flexibility and digitization contributed to increased profitability among massage therapy businesses.

While existing research highlighted characteristics of successful SBOs, little was known about the specific tactics used by successful massage therapy SBOs in the Southeastern United States. Existing literature offered limited insight into which business practices contributed to long-term sustainability in this unique market context, where business owners faced intense competition, strict regulatory requirements, and evolving consumer expectations (Akang, 2023; Akin, 2024). This research project was designed to help fill this gap and provided specific information on finance, operations, and key customer approaches used by successful massage therapy SBOs in this region.

Section 2: Primary and Secondary Industry Data Analysis

Nature of the Project

I selected a qualitative approach for this research project to facilitate a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of massage therapy business owners and sustainable business practices. Qualitative methods are especially valuable for capturing complex, context-dependent phenomena that quantitative approaches may overlook (Demirci, 2024). Further, a qualitative method supported the use of semistructured interviews (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023), which allowed participants to provide detailed information on their financial management practices, strategic planning, and strategies for adapting to market changes. Younas et al. (2023) endorsed qualitative inquiry for its ability to reveal nuanced perspectives, which aligns with this project's focus on long-term sustainability in the massage therapy industry.

I chose a pragmatic inquiry design for this research project. As described by Morgan (2022), a pragmatic inquiry approach provides methodological flexibility and prioritizes practical solutions in business contexts. I used a pragmatic approach to connect theoretical insights to actionable outcomes, offering guidance to business owners and policymakers working to solve practical problems (Cristofaro & Lovallo, 2022; Samiun et al., 2024). In this research project, through the pragmatic inquiry design, I identified practical solutions and strategies that have helped existing small massage therapy businesses stay viable, providing insights that may be helpful to other massage therapy SBOs.

Method and Design

This research project's method was qualitative, with a pragmatic design. The qualitative approach was chosen to explore complex, context-dependent experiences, such as the processes used by massage therapy business owners to maintain viable operations. Unlike quantitative approaches, which aim to measure and generalize, qualitative approaches allowed for the depiction of participants' voices, views, and decision-making in a detailed and nuanced manner (Lim,2024). This was vital for understanding how business owners responded to market changes and maintained their practices in the long run.

The pragmatic inquiry design provided the research project's general structure. Pragmatism focuses on the practical application of research results and emphasizes the discovery of solutions to real-world problems (Sim et al., 2024). The pragmatic design ensured that, besides the theoretical implications captured in the project, there were practical implications, which were converted into fundamental strategies to assist massage therapy SBOs as well as stakeholders in the industry. The design thus connected scholarly research with business implications and was well-suited to research aimed at bridging the gap between theory and practice in the field of small business sustainability.

In this context, the design incorporated two congruent data-collection plans: semistructured interviews and document reviews. These procedures were specifically used to facilitate triangulation and strengthen the credibility of the research project's conclusions. The interviews provided rich personal experiences, and the document analysis gave objective material for sustainability initiatives. When combined, these

approaches ensured that the data did not overlook various aspects of the examined phenomenon.

The research project's conceptual framework, which was based on the RBV and dynamic capabilities theory, had a direct relationship to the design. The RBV emphasizes internal resources—such as knowledge, reputation, and client loyalty—as key aspects in establishing a sustainable competitive advantage (Barney, 1991). Based on this, the research project's semistructured interviews and document reviews investigated how SBOs used and mobilized their unique resources to support themselves. An additional notion in dynamic capabilities theory (Teece et al., 1997) emphasizes how organizations alter, integrate, and reorganize resources in response to environmental change. I applied these conceptual lenses to ensure the discoveries highlighted, when applied to data gathering via the design, ensured that emergent discoveries highlighted not only what SBOs were doing to survive but also why and how they were establishing long-term viability.

Lastly, the design included a systematic plan for data organization and analysis. The coded data were analyzed using the thematic analysis framework introduced by Braun and Clarke (2006) to identify recurring themes and patterns in the sources. I identified links during the analysis between personal experience and general business strategies using open, axial, and selective coding techniques. This methodological and repetitive strategy ensured that the results were not only grounded in the theoretical foundations of RBV and dynamic capabilities theory but also applicable to the massage therapy business.

Reliability

Dependability refers to the stability and consistency of the research process over time, as well as the extent to which research procedures are applied systematically (Ahmed, 2024; Braun & Clarke, 2006). To ensure dependability, I implemented several strategies. First, a transcript review improved the research project's dependability. Each participant was allowed to review their interview transcript for accuracy and completeness prior to coding and analysis. This process allowed participants to confirm or clarify their responses, minimizing transcription errors and enhancing reliability.

Member checking also facilitated dependability. After the initial analysis was complete, a summary of preliminary findings was shared with participants to ensure the findings aligned with the ideas they intended to convey during their interviews. Participants' responses during the member checking process were used to verify whether the interpretations accurately reflected their intended meaning. An audit trail was also kept, documenting all aspects of the research process, including coding decisions, theme development, and data analysis procedures. An audit trail enables readers to trace the research steps and fosters analytical rigor (Ahmed, 2024).

To enhance analytic reliability and methodological rigor, I applied systematic credibility-enhancement methods based on current qualitative research standards. Conceptualization of reliability in qualitative inquiry is procedural consistency and interpretive transparency as opposed to statistical reproducibility. In this regard, the reliability of coding was enhanced by a systematic codebook development documenting code definitions, inclusion criteria, and exemplars illustrating each code, hence

guaranteeing analytic traceability of coding events across coding cycles.

The analytic process was marked by reflexive journaling to document interpretive choices, assumptions that were being formulated, and conceptual connections. Having an audit trail increased the level of reliability, as it allowed an external party review of a pathway in the analysis and methodological decisions. In up-to-date reviews of methodologies, it is stressed that documentation transparency and reflexive engagement are the primary devices deployed to enhance qualitative rigor in contemporary research project settings (Karcher et al., 2024). Accordingly, I utilized documentation transparency and reflexive engagement throughout the research process to ensure methodological integrity.

Trustworthiness was also promoted by means of repetitive data immersion and repetitive involvement of transcripts to reduce superficial interpretation and ensure integrity of contextual meaning. This protracted interaction promoted interpretive authenticity and prevented thematic premature closure. Combined, these actions built reliability, confirmability, and methodological integrity in alignment with institutional assessment standards and the expectations of doctoral research.

Population, Sampling, and Participants

The target population for this research project included licensed SBOs who operate massage therapy establishments in the Southeastern United States and have maintained their businesses for at least 5 years. This population was selected because these business owners possess firsthand knowledge of effective sustainability strategies for service-based small businesses in the wellness industry. I employed a purposeful

criterion-based sampling strategy to ensure that each participant met the following inclusion criteria: (a) ownership of a massage therapy business for 5 or more years, (b) active involvement in business operations and decision-making, and (c) location within the Southeastern region of the United States. This region was selected because of its accessibility and the high concentration of industry professionals. According to the Texas Department of State Health Services (2022), there were 23,918 actively licensed massage therapists in Texas in 2022, indicating a robust population from which to draw a sample.

The research project sample included 10 participants, which aligns with qualitative methodological guidance indicating that thematic saturation may occur within relatively small samples when interviews are in depth and analytically focused (Dunwoodie et al., 2023). I monitored saturation throughout the data collection process and I achieved it within this sample size as no new themes or significant insights emerged during the final interviews. The sample was demographically diverse across gender, business structure (solo practitioner or team-based), and service offerings. This variation facilitated the integration of diverse perspectives while maintaining alignment with the research project's focus on strategies for sustaining massage therapy SBOs. By examining the experiences of SBOs who successfully navigated early business challenges, through this research project, I revealed patterns in resource utilization, strategic adaptation, and client engagement (Bhandari et al., 2022).

To recruit participants, I conducted an online search to develop a list of massage therapy SBOs in the Southeastern United States, including business names, owner names, and telephone numbers. I then contacted each business to introduce the research project

and assess interest in participation. During these initial calls, I introduced my industry experience and current role as a consultant to establish rapport and trust.

When an individual expressed willingness to participate, I requested their email address and sent the project invitation and informed consent form. Participants reviewed the documents and returned the signed consent forms via email. Following receipt of consent, I sent a follow-up email to schedule a Zoom interview. A reminder email was sent 1 day before each scheduled interview. Recruitment concluded once I secured the target sample of 10 participants.

Data Collection Activities

I gathered two forms of qualitative data for this research project: semistructured interviews and documentation analysis. Each data collection source and associated activities are described as follows.

Semistructured Interviews

The primary data source, semistructured interviews, was used to explore how small massage therapy business owners sustained their businesses via strategies such as sustainability, client retention, and market evaluation. Interviews enabled me to capture detailed, firsthand accounts of the strategies SBOs used to sustain their massage therapy practices beyond the 5-year mark. This method was beneficial for exploring participants' experiences, decision-making processes, and personal insights that were not observable or documented elsewhere (Dunwoodie et al., 2023). I followed the interview protocol (see Appendix) during each semistructured interview to ensure consistent data collection. I developed the protocol based on an in-depth review of the available literature.

I conducted interviews via Zoom to accommodate participant availability. After each participant signed the informed consent form, I contacted them by phone or email to schedule their interview. During this process, I requested that participants share relevant business documentation via email. Each interview session lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes and followed the interview protocol (see Appendix). I included open-ended questions in the protocol aligned with the research project's central research question, allowing for flexibility while ensuring consistency across interviews.

The use of semistructured interviews allowed participants to share rich, detailed narratives about their experiences and the strategies they used to achieve long-term sustainability. Prior to beginning the interviews, participants were invited to ask any questions they had. After questions were answered, I began the interview. I audio-recorded all interviews with participant consent and had them professionally transcribed to ensure accuracy for analysis. This method supported in-depth exploration while allowing participants to elaborate on emergent themes that the protocol did not directly prompt. After all the questions in the protocol were asked, participants were invited to share any additional information they considered relevant. At the conclusion of the interviews, participants were thanked for their time. I then requested that the participants share any relevant business documentation within 2 weeks of the interviews. Additionally, I explained the process for transcript review, which took place within 1 week of the interview.

Document Review

Second, I sought access to non-sensitive documentation from participants'

businesses to corroborate and build upon the interview data. Such business documentation included service pricing lists, marketing materials, flyers, and other ancillary elements related to retention efforts aimed at maintaining a loyal clientele. A review of this documentation helped triangulate interview data and revealed common strategies for ensuring sustainability. Further, business artifacts provided objective evidence of business strategies, reinforced claims made during participant interviews, and revealed patterns in sustainable business practices over time (Morgan, 2022). After obtaining informed consent prior to the interviews, I asked participants to email relevant business documents. As identified in Section 3, these documents were used to verify the strategic themes identified during the thematic analysis.

Data Organization and Analysis Techniques

Step 1 of the analysis process involved familiarizing myself with the data by carefully reviewing interview transcripts and supporting documents to begin identifying patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I reviewed the transcripts first and then sent them to participants. Participants were provided with 1 week to review their transcripts and note any necessary edits or revisions. After finalizing the transcripts, the data forms were prepared for coding and thematic analysis, following the six steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006).

Step 2 of the thematic analysis process involved open, axial, and selective coding to identify recurring patterns and align them with the research project's theoretical framework (Al-Eisawi, 2022; Younas et al., 2023). During open coding, I labeled discrete concepts to establish an initial interpretive structure. Axial coding was then used to

connect these concepts to broader, theory-driven categories such as financial adaptability, resource optimization, and customer loyalty (Cristofaro & Lovallo, 2022; Samiun et al., 2024). Selective coding helped me refine emergent themes and evaluate their alignment with the RBV and dynamic capabilities theory (Barney, 1991; Teece et al., 1997).

Step 3 of the analysis included searching for themes. After the codes were generated, I organized them into initial groups based on similarity. Codes were arranged and rearranged until themes and subthemes began to emerge naturally. I developed themes from recurring ideas and contextual connections observed across the data sources. I gave particular attention to themes substantiated by multiple sources. Next, Step 4 involved reviewing the themes and ensuring they accurately represented the data set. This review process included checking for coherence within themes, consistency across sources, and alignment with the research question and purpose. Themes that lacked sufficient supporting data were revised, merged, or discarded. During Step 5, I defined the essence of each theme and determined the specific aspects of the data that each theme captured. I developed clear names and definitions to convey the meaning and significance of each theme, with illustrative examples drawn from the interviews and documents. Finally, Step 6 involved developing a narrative structure to present the results.

This triangulated approach enhanced the research project's credibility, transferability, and trustworthiness by enabling a deeper understanding and validation of emerging themes across diverse forms of evidence. By synthesizing data from interviews and documents, I triangulated findings and improved the research project's credibility (Bhandari et al., 2022; Donkoh & Mensha, 2023). I secured all research project data and

will store them for 5 years; after that time, all raw data will be permanently deleted.

Analytic robustness was strengthened through methodological triangulation designed to corroborate interpretive findings across complementary evidentiary streams. Triangulation enhanced qualitative validity by enabling cross-verification of emerging patterns through multiple perspectives or analytic procedures, thereby reducing single-source interpretive bias. Contemporary research demonstrates that triangulated analysis improves conceptual depth and strengthens inferential confidence within qualitative inquiry (Donkoh & Mensah, 2023).

To triangulate the data, I relied on three integrated mechanisms. First, data-source triangulation compared participant responses across demographic and experiential contexts to identify convergent and divergent thematic expressions. Second, analytic triangulation involved revisiting coded data sets across successive analytic iterations to test thematic stability. Third, theoretical triangulation aligned emergent themes with constructs derived from the conceptual framework, enabling interpretive validation and extension of theoretical propositions. The application of triangulation provided confirmatory support for thematic coherence while enabling detection of interpretive inconsistencies.

Summary

In Section 2, I defined the qualitative and pragmatic inquiry methodology that guided this research project and described procedures intended to enhance reliability and credibility. The section justified selecting massage therapy small-business owners in the Southeastern United States as the target population. It explained the purposeful sampling

approach used to obtain relevant, information-rich data. Section 2 also outlined the data collection activities, including semistructured interviews, document review, and the methods of analysis used to identify patterns and develop themes from participant perspectives. Taken together, these aspects formed a coherent research design that supported the identification of long-term sustainability strategies among SBOs. The following section presents the research project results and the findings of the data collection and analysis.

Section 3: Data and Professional Practice

Project Results

The purpose of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry was to identify and explore effective strategies massage therapy SBOs used to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years. The overarching research question was: What effective strategies do massage therapy SBOs use to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years? I presented the demographic characteristics in Table 2 of the participants, including solo practitioners and owner-managers with at least 5 to 29 years of experience.

Table 2.*Participant Demographic Characteristics*

Participant	Gender	Business model	Years of experience
1	Female	Massage therapy practice	20
2	Male	Massage therapy practice	29
3	Female	Solo massage practice	20
4	Female	Massage therapy practice	5
5	Female	Solo massage practice	13
6	Male	Massage therapy practice	15
7	Female	Massage therapy practice	7
8	Female	Massage therapy practice	8
9	Female	Solo massage practice	10
10	Female	Massage therapy practice	15

Note. I defined solo massage practice as a single-practitioner operation where the owner was the sole service provider. I defined massage therapy practice as a multipractitioner business model employing additional licensed therapists beyond the owner.

I identified six key themes through the analysis of the data: (a) strategic leadership responsibility, (b) relationship-based niche positioning, (c) strategic workload and

resource management, (d) adaptive operational reconfiguration, (e) monitoring of data-driven operational performance, and (f) strategic system planning for long-term stability.

Theme 1: Strategic Leadership Responsibility

All participants identified as the primary architects of their business strategies. Participants repeatedly stressed that strategic management was not delegable and was critical to 5-year business sustainability. Participant 1 noted employing a manager for operational duties while retaining all strategic decision-making authority. Participant 7 identified as the system builder who designed operational structures and business direction. Participant 9, a solo practitioner, stated that strategic responsibility rested solely with her and emphasized the necessity of monitoring the environment to make active decisions regarding service design and client selection. Participant 10 described maintaining direct control over business processes, such as policy formulation and implementation, to ensure revenue stability. Similarly, Participant 5 characterized herself as the visionary decision-maker, and Participant 6 identified himself as the sole strategist overseeing clinical protocols and market positioning.

Through an analysis of publicly available business artifacts, including business websites, social media profiles, Google Business listings, and state licensing records, I identified convergent evidence that strategic governance remained concentrated at the owner level. I used these artifacts to document owner-authored mission statements, service descriptions, pricing structures, scheduling policies, and professional credentials. An examination of business websites, service menus, and pricing systems indicated that decision-making authority was centralized, with owners controlling strategic positioning.

For example, Participant 1's business website explicitly stated that all therapeutic protocols and service additions required direct approval from the owner. Direct owner authorship was evident in mission statements, and operational structures were described in a manner consistent with participants' assertions of retained strategic control. The homepage for Participant 5 included a personal letter from the owner regarding her vision of healing, directly connecting the owner's personal values with business activities. Similarly, the cancellation and rescheduling policies for Participant 10 were listed as owner-signed directives with clear financial penalties. I used these documents to provide convergent evidence that strategic governance was concentrated at the owner level rather than being delegated.

I aligned the findings regarding strategic leadership with the RBV, which posited that sustainable competitive advantage is derived from valuable, rare, and difficult-to-imitate internal resources (Barney, 1991). The results of this research project indicated that owner expertise, strategic judgment, and governance discipline functioned as critical internal resources that supported operational stability. For example, Participant 9's proactive decision-making and Participant 10's policy enforcement practices illustrated how owner capabilities served as mechanisms for protecting firm performance. These findings position owner leadership as a strategic asset rather than merely an administrative function.

The results of this research project are consistent with prior research identifying owner involvement as critical to micro-enterprise sustainability. First, Zaidi et al. (2023) found owner involvement is a primary factor in micro-enterprise survival. Second,

Hensellek et al. (2023) established that entrepreneurial leadership and strategic flexibility have a significant impact on venture performance when founders maintain control over key decisions. Third, Nakajima and Sekiguchi (2025) established that owner-led strategic clarity enhances survival rates among small enterprises. This research project extends the existing literature by identifying the specific actions through which strategic responsibility is performed, such as deliberate system design, environmental surveillance, and operational policy development.

Theme 2: Relationship-Based Niche Positioning

Nine of the participants cited client retention as being dependent on trust-based relationships and intentional niche positioning. Participants did not perceive retention as a passive outcome but as a deliberate approach based on personalization and community alignment. Participant 1 established a community referral network to enhance growth based on trust. Participant 7 focused on results-oriented therapeutic work and associated client retention with consistent rebooking. Participant 8 introduced systematic service packages and membership schemes to transform episodic customers into regular clients. Participant 9 focused on deep personalization by allocating more time for consultations and developing exclusivity through word-of-mouth. Participant 10 explained the systematic tracking of client preferences and the adjustment of treatments according to feedback to strengthen loyalty.

Participant 1 designed community referral systems and therapeutic positioning based on results, while Participant 8 strategically offered membership-based service packages. These actions demonstrated coordinated relationship marketing and outcome-

signaling processes (Das et al., 2022; Zeithaml et al., 2023). The high-level relational marketing strategies employed by Participant 9, including extended consultation protocols and selective client alignment, manifested relational marketing where identity congruence served as a precursor to trust (Poorrezaei et al., 2023). Furthermore, Participant 10 operationalized customer knowledge management through systematic preference tracking. In this context, data-driven responsiveness developed commitment and reduced the risk of attrition (Kumar et al., 2022).

Through a document analysis of publicly available business artifacts—including business websites, social media profiles, Google Business listings, and template membership agreements. I identified convergent information confirming that personalization and niche alignment were integral to operational design. These artifacts documented detailed service descriptions, pricing systems, and loyalty programs. A review of service menus and online client testimonials reflected deliberate niche positioning. For example, the webpage for Participant 6 included descriptions of specific services for athletes, while Participant 8's Instagram account featured monthly membership benefits. Participant 9's Google Business listing emphasized by-appointment-only exclusivity, and Participant 3's printed brochures detailed multi-generational family packages. These artifacts supported the interview data suggesting that personalization and niche alignment were operational design concepts rather than restricted marketing rhetoric.

Relationship-based niche positioning reflects a dynamic capability based on sensing and responding to changing client needs (Teece, 2009). Participants demonstrated

the ability to remodel service delivery by using memberships and niche specialization to enhance client loyalty. This strategic reorganization of offerings to increase relational depth exemplifies an adaptive ability that is not easily replicated and is central to long-term performance.

The findings of this research project are consistent with prior research establishing the centrality of relational depth to service enterprise sustainability. First, Kamal (2025) identified niche positioning as a determinant of customer loyalty. Second, Sivapitak and Sangpikul (2024) established that relationship outcomes directly predict satisfaction in the wellness sector. Third, Fourie et al. (2022) confirmed that well-organized loyalty programs are effective in increasing customer return rates. This research extends the existing literature by revealing that niche strategy is a matter of ongoing, practice-level adaptation. Participants performed personalization through standard operating procedures and purposeful community building, demonstrating that client retention is fostered through regulated relational work.

For business practitioners, the findings indicate that customer retention depends on the operationalization of relationship depth. The results are inconsistent with the view that niche positioning is a static market segmentation process; instead, they reveal its role as a dynamic capability. Practitioners should implement systematic customer knowledge management and structured membership architectures to transform episodic service encounters into durable relational contracts.

Theme 3: Strategic Workload and Resource Management

Seven of the 10 participants identified operational and personal capacity constraints as factors shaping strategic decisions. Participants reported time constraints, physical exhaustion, and emotional burnout as limitations that required intentional management. Participant 1 and Participant 5 mentioned time constraints as a major limitation to scheduling. Participant 2, Participant 6, and Participant 10 reported physical fatigue due to the physical nature of massage therapy. Participant 9 noted that setting boundaries was essential to avoid overextension. Participant 7 also identified boundary-setting as a critical issue managed through systematic processes and organized workflows.

Through an analysis of publicly available business artifacts, including online booking platforms, Google Business operating hours, and scheduling policy disclosures, I identified convergent evidence of these capacity management practices. These artifacts documented defined work hours, blocked shifts, and predetermined service lengths. An analysis of online reservation systems revealed specific working hours and limited appointment availability consistent with participants' descriptions of boundary-setting. For example, Participant 1's booking system indicated the business was closed every Wednesday for administrative work, while Participant 9's Instagram account featured announcements of full booking weeks alongside self-care imagery. The website for Participant 6 limited daily appointments to four sessions, and Participant 7's automated email replies outlined specific response times. These artifacts supported the interview

data indicating that operational constraints were institutionalized through scheduling systems rather than informal practices.

The findings regarding strategic workload management align with the RBV, which posited that performance depends on the effective management of limited internal resources (Barney, 1991). In this context, time, physical health, and emotional energy functioned as strategically significant resources. Participants demonstrated intentional resource stewardship by reallocating workloads and implementing systems designed to preserve personal capacity. These actions indicate a dynamic capability for safeguarding personal and operational resources to facilitate long-term sustainability.

The findings of this research project are consistent with prior research identifying proactive capacity management as essential to sustainability. First, Lanchimba et al. (2025) identified burnout as a central threat to solopreneur sustainability. Second, Budler and Božič (2024) demonstrated that operational reconfigurations enable small businesses to preserve core service capacity. Third, Tantry et al. (2025) found that sustainable leadership promoted boundary maintenance as a resilience mechanism. This research extends the existing literature by demonstrating that successful practitioners proactively implement boundary-setting as a deliberate strategic practice. Participants reframed personal well-being as a protected business asset.

For business practitioners, the results indicate that practitioner capacity should be treated as a strategic resource demanding active stewardship. The results are inconsistent with reactive strategies for fatigue management; instead, they suggest that formalized

boundary systems safeguard business continuity. Workload limits and recovery times should be institutionalized as part of the formal work structure.

Theme 4: Adaptive Operational Management

Eight of the 10 participants demonstrated adaptive operational management in response to environmental changes and internal performance challenges. Participants reported modifying business models, pricing systems, service delivery mechanisms, and marketing channels to maintain revenue. Participant 1 changed operations during the COVID-19 pandemic and adapted to evolving social media dynamics. Participant 9 transitioned from a commercial studio model to a home-based practice and shifted to a hyper-local, word-of-mouth approach. This reorganization resulted in increased client acquisition and stabilized revenue. Participant 10 addressed income variability by introducing new promotions and adjusting service hours. Participant 8 implemented a membership model to enhance predictable revenue. Participant 7 identified adaptability as an operational philosophy and emphasized the need to adjust systems quickly when performance indicators changed.

Through an analysis of publicly available business artifacts—including archived website screenshots via the Wayback Machine, social media histories, and email newsletter archives, I identified convergent evidence that operational adaptation was formally implemented. These artifacts documented changes in pricing, transitions in business locations, and the introduction of membership programs. For example, Participant 9's archived website from 2019 displayed a commercial studio address, while her 2021 Google Business update indicated a transition to a residential location. Email

newsletters for Participant 1 from March 2020 detailed immediate COVID-19 protocols, followed by September 2020 updates announcing the resumption of services.

Promotional materials for Participant 10 featured iterative pricing experiments that evolved into a regular tiered structure by 2023. These artifacts provided convergent evidence that operational adaptation was formally implemented and publicly communicated.

The findings regarding adaptive operational management are consistent with dynamic capabilities theory, which emphasized sensing, seizing, and reconfiguring resources (Teece et al., 1997). Participants demonstrated sensing through performance monitoring, seizing through the adoption of alternative business models, and reconfiguring through pricing adjustments and location changes. These behaviors indicate that adaptive capacity functions as an embedded strategic process rather than an episodic reaction.

The findings of this research project align with prior research establishing adaptive capacity as central to resilience. First, Ibidunni et al. (2022) found rapid operational changes to be factors facilitating survival during disruptions. Second, Alshebami (2025) discovered that service model pivots are key factors that increase resilience in micro-businesses. Third, Reddy et al. (2024) established that survival depends on the systematic reconfiguration of operational patterns. This research project extends the literature by detailing the micro-level operational adjustments through which adaptation occurs.

For business practitioners, the results indicate that operational adaptability should be based on formalized sensing rather than reactive improvisation. The results are inconsistent with the assumption that static business models promote longevity; instead, the findings demonstrate that deliberate structural pivots enable sustained viability.

Theme 5: Monitoring of Data-Driven Operational Performance

Six of the 10 participants described systematic performance monitoring as central to strategic decision-making. Participants reported using structured metrics to evaluate revenue stability, booking patterns, and retention rates. Participant 1 and Participant 5 utilized spreadsheet-based analytics to monitor revenue trends. Participant 8 tracked client retention and membership enrollments to forecast demand. Participant 10 analyzed booking and cancellation trends to identify scheduling gaps. Participant 9 integrated quantitative and qualitative metrics, evaluating sustainability through forward bookings and client feedback. Participant 7 emphasized schedule stability and personal well-being as performance indicators.

Through an analysis of online booking platform interfaces, membership program terms, and social media posts, I identified convergent evidence that performance data informed operational restructuring. An examination of online scheduling systems indicated structured booking intervals and membership tracking features consistent with participant descriptions. For example, Participant 8's membership documents detailed tiered enrollment goals, while her email newsletters reported 90% rebooking rates. The booking platform utilized by Participant 10 featured real-time availability gaps, while his Instagram feed documented a "fully booked" status 3 weeks in advance. Spreadsheet

screenshots provided by Participant 5 demonstrated revenue trend analyses. These artifacts reinforced interview data indicating that monitoring practices were institutionalized.

The findings regarding data-driven performance align with both the RBV and dynamic capabilities theory. Data systems and analytical tools functioned as valuable internal resources under RBV, supporting informed decision-making (Barney, 1991). Simultaneously, participants demonstrated a dynamic capability by continuously interpreting performance data and reconfiguring operations. The analysis of booking trends and retention rates illustrates an iterative learning process through which operational adjustments were made to sustain performance.

These results are consistent with prior research establishing data-informed decision-making as foundational to sustainability. First, Dieperink et al. (2025) identified metric tracking as a predictor of small service business stability. Second, Hossain et al. (2024) found that data-driven strategies improve decision-making quality. Third, Magableh et al. (2024) established that data-driven decision-making enhances financial performance. This research project extends the literature by demonstrating the integration of leading, lagging, and experiential indicators within a holistic performance framework.

For business practitioners, the results indicate that sustainable operations require institutionalized performance monitoring systems. The results are inconsistent with the use of intuition-based decision-making; instead, they suggest that the proactive development of performance frameworks enables anticipatory adjustments.

Theme 6: Strategic System Planning for Long-Term Stability

Seven of the 10 participants demonstrated a long-term strategic orientation that prioritized stability over short-term gains. Participants described deliberate planning practices designed to ensure predictable operations. Participant 1 engaged in long-cycle event planning to stabilize revenue. Participant 7 emphasized a "systems-first" philosophy, prioritizing infrastructure before expansion. Participant 9 described scheduling appointments months in advance and planning annual business rhythms to balance demand with capacity. Participant 10 implemented client retention safeguards, including flexible "freeze" options during economic downturns. Similarly, Participant 6 and Participant 8 focused on membership models to create predictable income.

Through an analysis of publicly available business artifacts, including online booking calendars, membership policy documents, and email newsletter archives, I identified convergent evidence that long-term strategic orientation was formalized through documented systems. These artifacts documented prior booking windows, recurring appointment provisions, and seasonal planning announcements. For example, Participant 9's booking platform displayed 4 to 6 months of advance booking, and her archived seasonal announcements for an annual summer sabbatical were documented over several years. Participant 7's membership policy documents detailed 12-month commitment structures, and Participant 10's email newsletters reported membership pause provisions. Participant 1's event planning was documented through annual "wellness retreat" announcements posted 8 to 10 months in advance.

Strategic system planning reflects both the RBV and dynamic capabilities theory. From an RBV perspective, strategic resource stewardship, particularly the protection of client relationships, functioned as a durable internal asset (Barney, 1991). From a dynamic capabilities perspective, participants demonstrated the capacity to maintain structural mechanisms, such as membership frameworks, that supported long-term resilience. Sustainability emerged as a deliberate strategic posture grounded in disciplined planning.

The findings of this research project are consistent with prior research establishing long-horizon planning as essential to sustainability. First, Mohammed et al. (2025) identified strategic patience as a core component of sustainable service models. Second, Malesu and Syrovátka (2025) found that forward-oriented operational design constitutes a critical success factor. Third, Putrevu and Mertzanis (2025) established that holistic management approaches enhance survival rates. This research project extends the literature by demonstrating how long-term orientation is operationalized through advance scheduling and relationship-preserving pricing flexibility.

For business practitioners, these results indicate that long-term viability requires formalized planning systems that entrench stability mechanisms directly into operational infrastructures. The results are inconsistent with growth-centric models that prioritize expansion over sustainability. Practitioners should implement annual planning cycles and structured client commitment mechanisms to institutionalize a long-horizon strategic orientation.

Confirmation, Extension, and Practice Relevance of Knowledge

The findings of this research project are consistent with prior scholarship identifying financial instability as a primary threat to small business sustainability (Bhandari et al., 2022; Isichei et al., 2024). Consistent with this literature, participants acknowledged revenue volatility and operational strain as persistent risks. However, the results of this research project extend existing research by detailing the internal mechanisms through which wellness micro-enterprise owners mitigate financial instability. Rather than relying primarily on external capital, participants emphasized owner-led strategic planning, relationship-based retention systems, and adaptive operational management. These findings contrast with prior research that framed access to financing as a central driver of growth (Okeke et al., 2024), thereby reframing sustainability as an internally generated capability.

The results further confirm the applicability of dynamic capabilities theory within wellness micro-enterprises (Adam, 2024; Gonzalez-Samaniego et al., 2023). Participants demonstrated continuous sensing, seizing, and reconfiguring behaviors through pricing adjustments, service diversification, and system restructuring. Additionally, the findings extend strategic decision-making literature by illustrating that niche positioning and personalization function not merely as marketing tactics, but as embedded operational capabilities essential to client retention and revenue predictability (Cristofaro & Lovallo, 2022; Levin & Bradshaw, 2024).

This research project also contributes new insights into pricing as a strategic capability. Consistent with Bachtiar et al. (2023), the results indicate that price stability is

associated with revenue stability; however, participants described proactive pricing adaptations in response to inflationary pressures and shifts in client financial capacity. These findings reinforce prior evidence that adaptive orientation and responsiveness are central to service-sector sustainability (Vărzaru & Bocean, 2024), while extending the discussion by demonstrating how pricing flexibility operates as a deliberate strategic mechanism, such as Participant 10's iterative pricing experiments, rather than a reactive adjustment.

From a professional practice perspective, the findings provide a structured model for service-based entrepreneurs operating within constrained economic environments. Participants combined internal capability development, disciplined boundary management, adaptive restructuring, and relational depth to sustain long-term viability. The results suggest that resilience in niche service industries depends less on expansion and external financing and more on strategic resource stewardship, data-informed adaptation, and sustained client alliances.

Business Contributions and Recommendations for Professional Practice

In this research project, I synthesized the experiences of 10 successful SBOs into a boundary-driven sustainability model. The central contribution of this research is the identification of strategic boundary-setting as a critical managerial competency. Participants demonstrated that deliberate limits regarding time allocation, client selection, marketing channels, and growth pacing functioned as governance mechanisms that supported long-term sustainability. Boundary management emerged not as a restriction,

but as a disciplined strategic posture enabling the effective coordination of financial, relational, and operational practices.

Based on the findings, I identified three evidence-based recommendations for business leaders. First, practitioners should conduct a strategic boundary audit across four domains: time, clients, services, and growth. Time boundaries include defined work hours, structured scheduling blocks, and planned recovery periods, as described by Participant 9. Client boundaries involve defining and consistently serving a target segment, consistent with Participant 7's deliberate market focus. Service boundaries require stabilizing a repeatable core offering before expanding, as demonstrated by Participant 7 and Participant 9. Growth boundaries involve prioritizing operational stability before scaling, a principle reinforced across participants. Formalizing these limits as written operating policies strengthens strategic discipline.

Second, leaders should implement a hybrid performance dashboard integrating leading, lagging, and experiential indicators. Leading indicators may include forward bookings and waitlist volume. Lagging indicators include monthly revenue and retention rates. Experiential indicators encompass client feedback and practitioner capacity measures. Weekly and monthly review cycles enable informed adjustments aligned with sustainability objectives. Prior research supports structured performance monitoring as a predictor of small business resilience (Alshebami, 2025; Kariyakarawana et al., 2023).

Third, practitioners should develop a formal adaptation protocol. Rather than reacting informally to challenges, leaders can institutionalize semi-annual review cycles consisting of sensing environmental shifts, analyzing key risks or opportunities,

implementing targeted pilot adjustments, and evaluating measurable impact. This structured rhythm operationalizes dynamic capability development. Evidence suggests that businesses employing systematic review cycles demonstrate higher resilience during economic disruption (Capoani et al., 2025; Senin et al., 2024).

Collectively, these recommendations translate theoretical constructs from the RBV and dynamic capabilities theory into actionable managerial practices. The findings indicate that sustainability in wellness-based micro-enterprises depends on disciplined boundary governance, integrated performance monitoring, and structured adaptation rather than expansion alone. For business leaders, these strategies provide a practical framework for maintaining stability within volatile and capacity-constrained environments.

Implications for Social Change

The results of this research project suggested several implications for social change within small business ecosystems and community-based service industries. First, the findings indicate that economic viability can coexist with structured boundary-setting, ethical client engagement, and practitioner well-being. By prioritizing sustainable work practices and long-term relationship development, participants modeled an alternative entrepreneurial approach that challenges high-burnout, growth-centric business models. This reframing supports healthier occupational practices and promotes more stable local business environments.

Second, the results of this research project illustrate how small wellness enterprises can strengthen community resilience. Participants described relationship-

centered service models that provided continuity of care, pricing flexibility during economic downturns, and localized engagement strategies. For example, home-based and neighborhood-focused business models enhanced accessibility and trust within communities. Such practices contribute to localized economic stability and reinforce social networks during periods of financial uncertainty.

Third, the results suggest a broader conceptualization of business success. Rather than defining performance solely in terms of short-term profit maximization, participants emphasized owner well-being, client loyalty, and community embeddedness as indicators of sustainability. This shift in orientation supports regenerative business practices that balance financial performance with social responsibility. By promoting disciplined resource stewardship, adaptive capability, and relational depth, the results of this research project provide a framework for service-based entrepreneurs seeking to contribute to both economic and social sustainability. Collectively, these implications indicate that structured strategic management within micro-enterprises can enhance individual well-being, strengthen community cohesion, and promote resilient local economies.

Recommendations for Further Study

The results of this research project indicated three primary directions for future research. First, future researchers should consider longitudinal intervention studies to evaluate the boundary-driven sustainability model as a structured training framework. Researchers could collaborate with small business development centers to implement the model as an educational intervention and track participating SBOs over multiple years. Such research would enable the examination of survival rates, practitioner well-being

indicators, and financial performance outcomes, thereby providing empirical validation of the model's long-term effectiveness.

Second, cross-sector comparative research is recommended to assess the transferability of the identified themes beyond the massage therapy industry. Future researchers could examine customized service-based micro-enterprises, such as fitness training, counseling, or personal care services, to determine whether owner-led strategic responsibility, boundary governance, adaptive operational management, and data-driven performance monitoring operate similarly across industries. Comparative analysis would strengthen theoretical generalizability and contribute to the development of a broader micro-enterprise sustainability framework.

Third, policy-oriented impact analyses should be conducted to explore the economic and social contributions of stable wellness-based small businesses within local communities. Quantitative researchers could assess indicators such as employment stability, client retention continuity, and community engagement patterns. The results of such research could inform local and state policy initiatives, including infrastructure support for home-based enterprises or targeted incentives for businesses demonstrating sustained client loyalty and community integration. Collectively, these research directions would extend the understanding of sustainability mechanisms in micro-enterprises while addressing limitations related to geographic scope, industry specificity, and cross-sectional design.

Scholarly Contribution to Knowledge

I developed a boundary-driven sustainability model grounded in empirical evidence from service-based micro-enterprises based on the results of this research project. While prior scholarship has identified financial instability, niche positioning, and adaptive capability as factors influencing small business survival, the results of this research specify the operational mechanisms through which these factors are enacted in wellness-based enterprises. The findings extend the RBV by identifying practitioner capacity, boundary governance, and relational depth as strategic resources within micro-enterprises. Additionally, through this research project, I operationalize dynamic capabilities theory at the micro level by detailing structured sensing, seizing, and reconfiguring behaviors embedded in routine managerial practice rather than episodic strategic shifts. This research therefore extends descriptive accounts of small business resilience and contributes a structured, integrative framework. This framework links owner-led governance, adaptive operations, performance monitoring, and boundary discipline into a coherent sustainability system.

Conclusion

In this qualitative pragmatic inquiry, I identified six interrelated strategies that support the sustainability of massage therapy small businesses beyond 5 years. The results of this research project indicate that long-term viability is achieved through deliberate owner-led strategic responsibility, relationship-based niche positioning, strategic workload and resource management, adaptive operational management, monitoring of data-driven operational performance, and strategic system planning for

long-term stability. In this context, sustainability emerged as a structured and iterative process grounded in internal capability development rather than reliance on external expansion.

The results of this research project indicate that successful practitioners operate as strategic system designers who integrate boundary governance, relational depth, and data-informed decision-making into daily practice. Participants consistently emphasized the protection of core resources, including practitioner capacity, client relationships, and operational stability. These elements functioned collectively to sustain performance within constrained and evolving market environments.

For business leaders in wellness-based micro-enterprises, the central implication is that sustainability depends on disciplined resource stewardship, structured adaptation, and intentional boundary-setting. By institutionalizing these practices, SBOs can enhance economic stability, strengthen community relationships, and support long-term professional well-being. The findings of this research project contribute to a practical and theoretically grounded model for sustaining service-based enterprises in competitive and resource-constrained contexts.

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Appendix: Interview Protocol for Qualitative Pragmatic Inquiry Research Project

Action	Script
Provide preliminary information.	Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research project. While we will keep our cameras off for the duration of the session, I would like to audio record our conversation. Do you provide your consent to be interviewed and recorded? Thank you.
Introduce the interview and set the stage. Introduce myself and the purpose of the interview, thereby setting the stage.	Hello, my name is Steven Glover, and I am a doctoral candidate at Walden University. The purpose of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry is to explore the effective strategies that massage therapy small business owners use to sustain their businesses for more than 5 years. I will ask you six questions, after which we will conclude the interview. Do you have any questions before we begin?
Watch for nonverbal cues. Paraphrase the participant's response. Ask follow-up probing questions to get more in-depth	Interview questions: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How would you describe your role in creating effective strategies to sustain your businesses beyond 5-years.? 2. What effective strategies have you implemented to sustain your business beyond 5 years.? 3. What challenges did you face in implementing the strategies? 4. What did you do to mitigate the impact of the challenges? 5. How did you measure the effectiveness of the strategies you implemented? 6. What additional information regarding the strategies you implemented to sustain your businesses beyond 5-years?
Wrap up the interview thanking participant.	Thank you for sharing your expertise. Your insights are an integral part of this research project.

Action	Script
Schedule a follow-up interview to perform member checking with the participant.	I will contact you within the next week to schedule a brief follow-up. This will allow us to review the accuracy of my interpretations of your responses to ensure they reflect your intended meaning.
