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Retail Big-Box Development and Small Business Strategy at the Local Level

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This is to certify that the doctoral study by

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Abstract

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MPA, Troy State University, 1988

BBA, University of Texas at Austin, 1982

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

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Abstract

The big-box superstore has created a dramatic effect on the retail landscape since its appearance in 1962. As big-box stores proliferate, small business owners continue to struggle with how to compete. The purpose of this multiple case study was to identify and explore strategies small business owners use to maintain or grow profit margins post big-box store market entry. The sample consisted of 5 small business owners in Kansas City, Missouri who survived the entry of the big-box store for at least 1 year. The conceptual framework was the general systems theory and systems thinking. Data were collected using semistructured interviews, archival data, and data mining. I used Yin's five-phase process of compiling, disassembling, reassembling, interpreting, and concluding for data analysis where 3 themes emerged that contributed to the case study's small businesses maintaining or increasing profits. These themes were employees and customers, finances, and organizational strategies. Key findings within the themes indicated that innovation, product differentiation, and flexibility were keys to profitability. The sustainability of small business in communities brings a variety of benefits to include social, economic, environmental, and aesthetic. These benefits can translate into tangible results such as a reduction in crime, increased social interaction, a stronger sense of identity, increased diversity, and more equity. Empowering local small business owners with sustainable business strategies could result in more businesses remaining profitable, leading to an improved standard of living for business owners and urban redevelopment as businesses flourish while contributing to local economies.

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Dedication

The dedication of this paper is to my family who has graciously allowed me to spend countless hours away from them in the pursuit of this degree. This Doctorate fulfills a dream. Ultimately, my hope is that it inspires my children and those whose lives I touch to reach beyond the ordinary. Thank you to my daughter Heather and my son Ryan who will not finish his Ph.D. until AFTER Mom finishes hers. To my Dad who would be so proud if he could see me now and lastly to my wonderful husband who has been so patient and supportive of this journey.

Acknowledgments

Multiple folks have inspired me to accomplish this goal. My life has been an example of many firsts in my family. Neither of my parents nor three siblings has a college degree, so to attain this level of education was not something I was always confident I could achieve. Many people have encouraged me to hold fast and finish the race.

This research would not be complete without the assistance and guidance of my outstanding chair Dr. Rocky Dwyer and other members of my DBA committee. All of you have been an inspiration to me, and I have learned so much from each of you. It has been an honor to have entered the DBA program at its inception at Walden and ultimately to hang a Walden degree on my wall.

Others who have made a difference in this journey have been my friends Jean and Tom Schmidt. You are always there to lean on and provide words of encouragement. I treasure your friendship and praise God that you are in our lives.

Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

Section 1: Foundation of the Study

Across America, local residents crowd town hall hearings to voice opposition to proposed large-scale commercial development (Yue, Rao, & Ingram, 2013). Residents, local business owners, and leaders of other affected organizations find new big-box store development in urban settings a matter of contention (Yue et al., 2013). Researchers have found mixed results concerning the positive or negative impacts of large-scale commercial developments in areas such as wages, employment, and impacts to small businesses (Vandegrift & Loyer, 2015). In contrast, federal government policies, many offered by the Small Business Administration (SBA), favor small business and are the means that small business owners may use to remain competitive (Gale & Brown, 2013).

Background of the Problem

Big-box retail development has been the target of publicity over many years (Morillo, McNally, & Block, 2015; Vandegrift & Loyer, 2015). In contrast, Delgado-Ceballos, Aragón-Correa, Ortiz-de-Mandojana, and Rueda-Manzanares (2012) found that large retailers provided significant positive spillovers for nearby businesses, and the entry of new business is virtually unaffected. However, researchers and economists have not reached a clear consensus on the overall effects of big-box retail development.

Small businesses may fail or succeed depending on the business organization or the characteristics of management (Blackburn, Hart, & Wainwright, 2013). The impact on small business seems to be greater when in proximity to big-box stores (Goodman & Remaud, 2015). The strategic decisions made by small business owners to compete with big-box retail vary. Armstrong (2012) suggested that small business owners who directly compete with big-box stores show slower or stalled growth; those business owners who develop strategies to offer unique goods tend to succeed. Bressler (2012) noted that exceptional customer service might contribute to business success. The focus in this qualitative multiple case study was to explore competitive strategies involving small business owners within a 2-mile radius of the big-box store.

Problem Statement

The entry of a big-box retailer puts small business owners at a competitive disadvantage and may reduce the likelihood of survival when competing in the same retail sector (Armstrong, 2012). Merriman, Persky, Davis, and Baiman (2012) concluded that 25% of the competing small businesses close within the first year after a big-box store opens in the immediate vicinity of the small business. The general business problem was that small business owners are less effective when competing with the entry of local big-box retailers. Cronin-Gilmore (2012) researched small business strategies for success, finding that some small business owners lack a clear understanding of how to compete profitably with the entry of a big-box retailer. The specific business problem was that some small business owners lack strategies for maintaining or growing profit margins after a big-box store market entry.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to identify and explore strategies for maintaining or growing profit margins that small business owners can use post big-box store market entry. The case study population included five small business owners in a community in Missouri who survived the entry of big-box retailers within a

2-mile radius of their businesses for a minimum of 1 year. The population and geographic location were appropriate for this study since it represented a typical setting for a big-box retailer and was representative of American small business owners (SBA, 2016).

When human behavior results in an improvement of the human and social condition, positive social change occurs. Beltrán (2015) associated urban redevelopment as an element of social change. Empowering and enabling local small business owners with sustainable business strategies might mean more businesses remain profitable, leading to an improved standard of living and urban redevelopment.

Nature of the Study

I employed a qualitative multiple case study methodology and design for this study. Dworkin (2012) defined qualitative methodology as a means of exploring a phenomenon or meaning of a topic, and the intense study on the *how* and *why* of the phenomenon. Petty, Thomson, and Stew (2012a) characterized qualitative research as research using human experiences rather than numbers to gain understanding. The phenomenon, meaning, or human experiences in this study was the identification of the strategies small business owners employ to maintain or grow profit margins when confronted with post big-box store market entry within a 2-mile radius of their business location. While quantitative methodologies can be complementary to qualitative methodologies, the use of quantitative methodologies alone can narrow the understanding of the study (Petty et al., 2012a). Collecting numerical data to test hypotheses is typical of quantitative methodology (Petty et al., 2012a). Alternatively, a mixed methods methodology enables researchers to offset the respective weaknesses in both qualitative and quantitative research (Sparkes, 2014). Because the focus of this study was not on statistical relationships, testing hypothesis, or causal relationships, a quantitative or mixed method methodology was not appropriate.

Case study research can include a variety of data collection methods, including interviews, observation, and document analysis (Petty, Thomson, & Stew, 2012b). I used interviews and document analysis to develop findings, conclusions, and recommendations in the study. Baškarada (2014) posited that case study is ideal when striving for an in-depth understanding of the subject and describing or explaining a phenomenon. Case study is ideal for situations where the researcher has no control over the actual events (Yin, 2014). Researchers using qualitative case studies employ multiple types of data to accomplish inductive analysis to identify and explore meaning from the data (Yilmaz, 2013).

Other qualitative designs I considered were ethnography, phenomenology, narrative, and grounded theory. Researchers using these designs focus on social interactions over time (Ingham-Broomfield, 2015), understanding the phenomenon from lived experiences (Englander, 2012), shared experiences spoken and lived alongside participants (Pearson, Albon, & Hubbal, 2015), or developing theory (Engward, 2013). I chose a case study design in lieu of other qualitative designs because it is useful for identifying trends among phenomena stemming from the data acquired from the small business owners.

Research Question

The central research question for this study was as follows: What strategies do small business owners use to maintain or grow their profits, post big-box store market entry?

Interview Questions

I used the following interview questions for the small business owners to answer the research question.

1. Why do you believe your firm has remained profitable since the opening of the big-box store?
2. What strategies have you employed to maintain or increase profits since the opening of the big-box store?
3. What barriers to implementing the strategies have you encountered?
4. How have you addressed these barriers?
5. What strategies have you employed to attract or maintain customers since the entry of the big-box retail?
6. How do you develop the long-term growth strategy for your firm?
7. How do you measure the success of your strategies for addressing the big-box store opening?
8. What else can you share about your business related to strategies for sustaining profitability within your company since the big-box store has opened?

Conceptual Framework

Systems theory was the framework for this research. Von Bertalanffy founded systems theory in the 1930s although he did not publish his work on general system theory (GST) until 1945 (von Bertalanffy, 1972). Von Bertalanffy identified a mechanism for evaluating real-world systems (Adams, Hester, Bradley, Meyers, & Keating, 2014). GST is relationship-centered and encompasses the whole of an organization, to include the strategies, processes, and people (Frerichs, Lich, Dave, & Corbie-Smith, 2016). Examining the whole of an organization can be a useful tool to management for identifying and evaluating the relevance of internal and external factors (Frerichs et al., 2016). Systems theory aligned with the purpose of this research because the use of systems theory sees the business as a whole with system-wide implications on decision making by small business owners.

Operational Definitions

Big-box retailing: A large retail store with a square footage of 50,000 or more (Schuetz, 2015).

Business churn (or establishment churn): Establishment births and deaths (Ficano, 2013).

Chain stores: A group of similar stores operated by a manager rather than owner (Lebhar, 2010).

Mom and pop stores: Mom and pop stores are single-unit establishments with typically fewer than 50 employees (Cardiff-Hicks, Lafontaine, & Shaw, 2015).

Small business: Small businesses are those that are independent with fewer than

500 employees (SBA, 2016).

Smart growth: Smart growth promotes compact, efficient design that improves neighborhoods appeal for residents and increases property values (Leigh & Hoelzel, 2012).

Superstores: Superstores are large box stores, defined as stores with more than 125,000 square feet of combined retail and grocery inventory, and typically open 24 hours per day (Guttenplan, Munroe, Piszczatoski, Smith, & Sokolow, 2012).

Superettes: Smaller than a superstore, typically between 4,000 to 20,000 square feet (Grubor & Milicevic, 2015).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

Assumptions

Assumptions in a study are conditions taken for granted and that cannot be verified (Leedy & Ormrod, 2014). For this study, the first assumption was that there were at least five business owners (or enough to reach saturation) willing to participate in the interview process. The second assumption was that the small business owners would be truthful and not show bias in their responses. The third assumption was that the interviewees would make themselves available for an interview. The last assumption was that the interviews and documents would produce enough data for analysis and be able to answer the research question.

Limitations

The study also contains limitations defined as imprecisions, inconsistencies, or bias (Brutus, Aguinis, & Wassmer, 2013). Potential weaknesses are of concern to researchers and decision makers. Participants included five small business owners who have survived the entry of big-box retailers within a 2-mile radius of their businesses for a minimum of 1 year located in a community in Missouri. One limitation was the accuracy of the information solicited from the participants and their ability to avoid bias in their responses collected during the interviews. If the business has experienced diminished success, the business owner may be hesitant to share an accurate depiction of the state of the business. Full disclosure was the key to providing the best results in this study and avoiding bias.

Although I was involved with a big-box retailer for more than 10 years, no personal contact has ensued with any big-box store representatives regarding any portion of this study or the jurisdictions expected to participate in the research. I used no proprietary data from any big-box retailer. To reduce the possibility of bias and the interjection of preconceptions, I used bracketing to increase rigor (Tufford & Newman, 2012). The results of the study may be transferable to other regions of the United States for small businesses in proximity to big-box stores. The findings in case study are not causal in nature. Therefore, the findings may not have application outside the bounds of the research other than to increase the existing body of knowledge.

Delimitations

Delimiters, defined as those items not included in the research (Leedy & Ormrod, 2014), help define the bounds of the research. The physical limits of the qualitative multiple case study were within a Missouri community that had a big-box store enter or relocate into their market within the last 10 years. Interviews of small business owners were limited to those within a 2-mile radius of a big-box store. These businesses are small retail establishments that share a common retail segment with the big-box store and did not include service-oriented businesses, restaurants, or banks.

Significance of the Study

Contribution to Business Practice

Small businesses are the backbone of American commerce, comprising 99.9% of U.S. employer firms (SBA, 2016). Small business owners face significant challenges and frequently do not survive past 5 years (SBA, 2016). The results of this study may contribute to the effectiveness of small business owners in their understanding of how to retain or increase their profit margins when located in the same market as a new big-box store. The case study involved multiple stakeholders, each with an independent agenda, which provides a different lens from which to view the outcomes of the case.

Implications for Social Change

The focus of the study was how small business owners develop and deploy sustainable business strategies to retain or increase profit margins post big-box retail market entry. Small businesses make up 99.9 % of all U.S. employer firms, with only about half of small businesses surviving 5 years (SBA, 2016). Furthermore, small businesses provided 63.3% of all new jobs between 1992 and 2013, demonstrating their importance to the economy (SBA, 2016). The impact of small businesses on individual lives is significant, contributing to economic growth, recovery, and innovation (U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2014). Understanding what strategies contribute to profitability can create a positive ripple effect inside and outside the organization, thereby contributing to the quality of life for small business owners, employees, their families, and communities.

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

The literature review is a comprehensive examination and synthesis of the research topic and includes my conceptual framework. A review of the literature can also offer insights and fresh perspectives on the research topic (Leedy & Ormrod, 2014). The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to identify and explore strategies for maintaining or growing profit margins that small business owners can use post big-box store market entry within a 2-mile radius of their businesses.

Sources for review included government documents, peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, and dissertations primarily written within the last 5 years. The searches were in the Walden databases as well as Google Scholar, Google search engine, and other websites. Sample search terms included *big-box retail, superstores, large-scale retail, small business, family firms, small firm strategy, Walmart, Target, Kmart, systems theory, systems thinking, case study, sustainability, social change, business churn, interview design, sampling,* and *member checking.* The total number of references in the study is 198, with 171 references (86%) being less than 5 years old. The number of references that are peer-reviewed is 174 plus three dissertations, resulting in 88% of all references that are peer-reviewed.

The literature review begins (as depicted in Figure 1) with a historical review of big-box retail. Researching a variety of big-box retailers offered perspectives from a broader lens to avoid bias to a single retailer (i.e., Walmart). Discussion follows on the impacts that these big-box retailers have had on various aspects of the country such as the suppliers, other retailers, and cities. The discussion then turns to small businesses and their importance in the U.S. economy and strategic planning. Next is a discussion of sustainability and its emerging role in retail markets. The literature review ends with a discussion of systems theory and systems thinking, the conceptual foundations of the study.

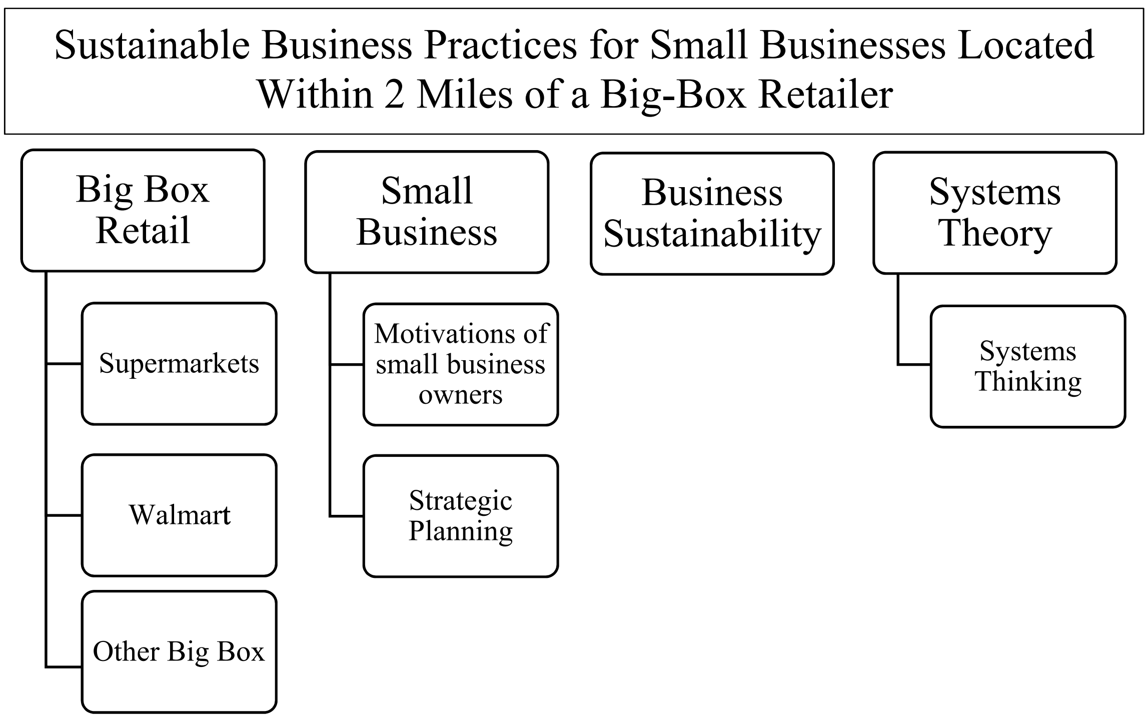

Figure 1. The literature review organization schematic.

Volumes of information related to big-box development exist in traditional media. While such sources are not appropriate for this study, the large media presence alludes to the popularity of the subject area. The impact on the profitability and survivability of small business owners related to auto-dependent big-box development (i.e., cannot be easily walked to) is of particular interest (Guy, 2013).

Big-Box Retail Background

Supermarkets. The supermarkets of the United States are the origins of big-box retailing. Supermarkets have developed in many forms, often causing terminology confusion because of the variety of labels that have developed over time. World War II had significant impacts on the fledgling supermarket industry. Rationing, price ceilings, and shortages caused many buyers to return temporarily to their mom and pop grocery stores (Levinson, 2011). After the war, the economy soared, and in the early 20th-century, chain stores grew quickly (Lebhar, 2010, p. 48). Table 2 illustrates the rapid rise of leading chain stores from 1920 through 1930.

Table 1

Growth of Seven Leading Chain Companies From1920 Through 1930

Chain	Type of store	Number of stores		Percent store growth
		1920	1930	%
A&P	Grocery	4,544	15,737	246%
Kroger	Grocery	799	5,203	551%
Safeway	Grocery	191	2,675	1301%
F.W. Woolworth	Variety	1,111	1,881	69%
Kresge	Variety	184	678	268%
J. C. Penney	Apparel	312	1,452	365%
Walgreen	Drug	19	419	2105%

Note. Adapted from *Chain stores in America, 1859-1950* (p. 48), by G.M. Lebhar, 1963, New York, NY: Lebhar-Friedman, Inc.; Nabu Press 2010, Public Domain

Common big-box retailers are Walmart, Target, and warehouse outlets such as Costco, Sam's, Home Depot, and Lowe's. Figure 2 depicts a graphic that puts square footages of big-box retail into context using a comparison to a 2,000 square foot main-street retailer (S. Mitchell, 2008).

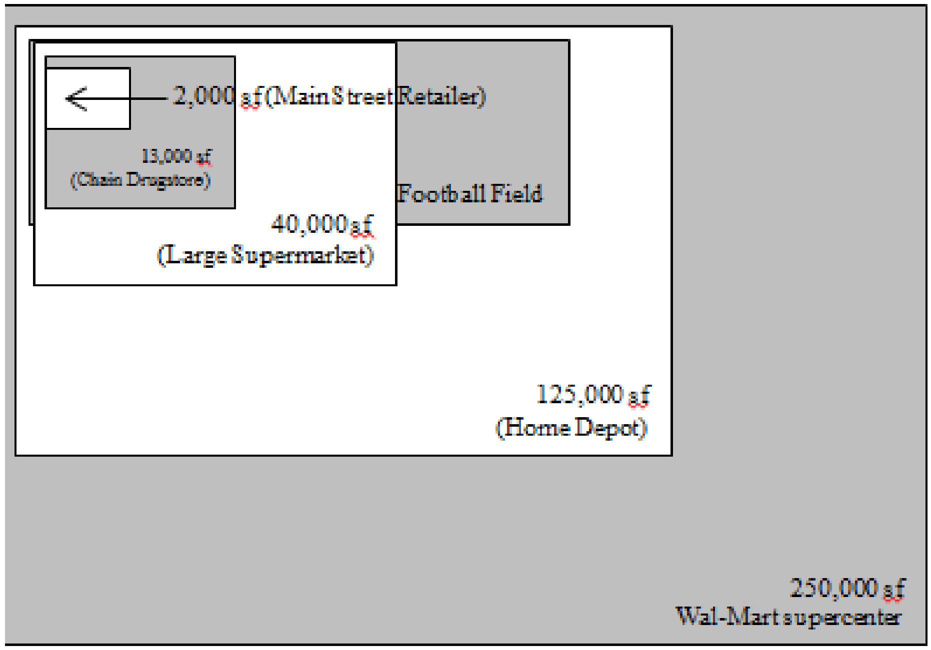

Figure 2. Comparison of Walmart supercenter square footage.
Walmart in relation to smaller format stores, a football field, and a small main street retailer. Adapted from "How Big are Big-Box Stores?" by S. Mitchell, 2008, Institute for Local Self-Reliance a national nonprofit research and educational organization, from http://www.ilsr.org/how-big-are-bigbox-stores/. Reprinted with permission.

In 1998, the world's leading big-box retailer introduced a new grocery store format with an average size of approximately 42,000 square feet (Walmart, 2013). Walmart's leaders used grocery markets to in-fill a market that contained supercenters to capitalize on economies of scale within the region for distribution purposes (Chekwa, Martin, & Wells, 2014). As smaller formats become more numerous, small businesses in similar market segments will be required to become more competitive to remain profitable in their market.

In support of their corporate strategy, the largest big-box retailer promotes growth with the addition of new supercenters and grocery markets using less money for construction (Ghazzawi, Palladini, & Martinelli-Lee, 2014). International growth continues for big-box retail into China, Brazil, and Mexico (Ghazzawi et al., 2014).

Walmart. After spending years as a management trainee for J. C. Penney, S. Walton opened a Ben Franklin store in Newport, Arkansas in 1945 (Kruger, 2012). Walton then opened the first Walmart Discount City store in 1962 in Rogers, Arkansas, a historic turning point for discount retailing (Ghazzawi et al., 2014). While blame for the decline of the downtown often settles on Walmart (Chekwa et al., 2014), the decline began before the advent of the strip mall and rise of Walmart, as evidenced by the previous decline in areas that had yet established a Walmart presence (Kruger, 2012).

The proliferation of big-box stores continued to grow, and by 1980 the number of Walmart stores had grown to 330 (Walton & Huey, 1993). By 1990, the number of stores had increased to 1,573, and in 1991, Walmart became the largest retailer in the United States with 1,700 stores while also opening the first international store in Mexico City (Walmart Corporate, n.d.). In 2012, more than 4,400 stores existed across the United States and an additional 5,200 stores in 27 countries around the world (Walmart, 2012a). The increase in the number of stores had a transforming effect on the local area of Bentonville, Arkansas. Until Walton called Bentonville home, the Ozark region of the United States was a poor farming area (Zieger, 2011). Zieger (2011) posited that Walmart transformed the Ozarks and likened this change of consumer capitalism to that of what was once Detroit and automobiles.

The Walmart effect. Walmart has changed the way we work and live in our communities. Fishman (2006) called this change *The Walmart Effect*. When a single company does more business than Target, Home Depot, Sears, Kmart, Safeway, and

Kroger combined, it will affect the involved communities (Jantzen, Pescatrice, & Braunstein, 2009). In the United States, 92% of all Americans live in proximity to a Walmart store (Jantzen et al., 2009). This proximity equates to serving 19 million customers per day with $.09 out of every U.S. retail dollar spent in a Walmart store (Jantzen et al., 2009). The extant research showed a decline in traditional grocers with the entry of a big-box supercenter (Seenivasan & Talukdar, 2016). Businesses can moderate this decline by avoiding merchandise lines that are in direct competition to Walmart and increasing product assortment (Seenivasan & Talukdar, 2016). Another criticism of big-box stores emerged in the quasi-experimental design conducted by Pope and Pope (2015), who considered the effects of these retail stores on property prices. In this first peer-reviewed work on the impact of big-box retail on residential housing prices, Pope and Pope found that the average home prices increased between 2% to 3% with the addition of a new Walmart store within 1/2-mile and 1% to 2% within 1/2 and 1 mile. Walmart has been the target of criticism for offering low wages, driving small business owners out of downtown areas and moving jobs overseas (Morillo et al., 2015; Vandegrift & Loyer, 2015). Basker (2011) suggested that Walmart sells inferior products, finding that Walmart's revenues increased during difficult economic times where Target's decreased. Walmart employees were so disenchanted with their employer over labor standards that they held strikes, the first ever in the history of this big-box company (Logan, 2014). In 2015, Walmart raised wages to as much as $10 per hour in response to the criticism of low wages (Luce, 2015).

Other big-box retailers. Although Walmart has produced the largest impact on the retail market, other large big-box retailers have also influenced the retail market. Walmart, Target, and Kmart comprise three-fourths of their market sectors, leading to the assumption of a chain store advantage (Ellickson, Houghton, & Timmons, 2013). However, some have not survived the economic market of the early 21st century. In 2008, Walmart's profits increased as the recession began (Allgrunn & Weinandt, 2016). While Walmart appeared to be thriving, others were already feeling the changes in the economy. In 2002, Kmart Corporation filed a Chapter 11 bankruptcy and closed 710 of its stores (Ellickson et al., 2013). Ellickson et al. (2013) asserted that Kmart was unable to leverage local chain store economies or their rivals.

Another large retailer that has thrived is Target, founded by G. D. Dayton (Target, 2012). Target entered discount retailing in 1960, and the first store opened in 1962 in the Minneapolis-St Paul area (Target, 2012). The stores continued to grow in product lines and floor area until Target unveiled a 50% larger footprint in 1990. The first SuperTarget quickly followed this larger footprint with a facility that included full-service grocery in 1995 (Fishman, 2006).

The effect on suppliers. One question for suppliers considering a partnership with big-box retailers is whether the relationship will help or hurt their businesses (Huang, Nijs, Hansen, & Anderson, 2012). During the 1990s, Rubbermaid conducted business with one big-box retailer that resulted in the sale of the Rubbermaid Corporation and the removal of its products from shelves due to a requested cost-based price increase (Huang et al., 2012). Huang et al. (2012) reported that from 2000 to 2004, postentry supplier profits rose an average of 18% while the profits of incumbent retailers marginally decreased. Huang et al. found that wholesale prices were not the primary reason for the changes in profit, but rather market expansion. Furthermore, Huang et al. reported that profit increases were greater in markets where the incumbents offered other products not sold by big-box retailers.

Northrop (2013) looked at profits through a different lens and suggested that some big-box firms took maximizing profits to the extreme with potentially illegal tactics, such as locking employees inside the store or purchasing products from factories that were unsafe for workers. However, maximizing profits is not always the singular objective for firms, particularly small business owners who may forgo profits for additional employee benefits, sustainability, or to hire family members (Northrop, 2013).

The effect on other retail stores. Stone (1988) conducted a study of the influences of big-box supercenters in cities or towns and the impact on business within host and surrounding towns in the state of Iowa. Stone found both positive and negative effects on the location of these big-box stores within the small towns of Iowa (see Table 2). Stone examined 45 small towns within a 20-mile radius of towns with specific big-box stores to analyze surrounding effects. The neighboring towns experienced larger retail sale losses than similar towns of similar size within the state.

Table 2

Effects on Per Capita Retail Sales, on Average Compared to State Average

Positive effects	Negative effects
General merchandise	Food sales
Eating & drinking establishments	Building materials
Home furnishings stores	Specialty stores
Total sales	Apparel stores
	Services

Note. Merchandise groups that showed positive (increased sales) or negative (decreased sales) effects with big-box store entry in towns in Iowa. Total per capita sales in big-box store towns increased at a slightly faster rate than the state average. Adapted from *The effect of Wal-Mart stores on businesses in host towns and surrounding towns in Iowa*, by K.E. Stone, 1988, Ames, IA: Iowa State University. Copyright 1988 by Iowa State University. Reprinted with permission.

Stone's (1988, 1995) findings were consistent with those of Hicks, Keil, and Spector (2012), who also concluded that a big-box supercenter entry does not appear to affect the number of establishments per 1,000 or the number of employees per 1,000. Hicks et al.'s (2012) research contradicted the widespread belief that big-box stores put mom and pop stores out of business. In contrast, Jarmin, Klimek, and Miranda (2009) reported that in 1948, mom and pop stores accounted for 70.4% of retail sales while large retail stores with more than 100 establishments accounted for only 12.3% of retail sales. They further reported a significant drop in mom and pop stores to 60.2% in 1967, with a corresponding increase in large stores to 18.6%. By 1997, mom and pop store retail sales had declined to 39%, and large stores had increased to 36.9% (Jarmin et al., 2009).

Morillo et al. (2015) posited that when big-box stores open, most researchers ignore the concept of creative destruction. The term *creative destruction (schöpferische zerstörung),* which Schumpeter popularized, refers to new ideas or products introduced to cause others to fail while concurrently resulting in a net gain (Norbäck, Persson, &

Svensson, 2016). Morillo et al. suggested that creative destruction is inevitable with new big-box stores.

Ficano (2013) supported the notion of big-box retail entry resulting in creative destruction. The author found heightened retail deaths and retail births with the entry of a big-box store. Hicks (2009) determined there was no effect on small Iowa firms that employed 20 or fewer employees located in the neighborhood of a big-box retailer. A small increase in the number of firms occurred within the same county, and a corresponding decrease occurred in adjacent counties (Hicks, 2009).

Rapid expansion of big-box retail affected grocery competitors who reduced their prices by 1% to 2% when Walmart entered the market (Basker & Noel, 2009). Furthermore, the large grocery chains, such as Albertson's, Safeway, and Kroger, made reductions on Walmart entry, but only .5% to 1%. Basker and Noel (2009) supported the theory that Walmart shoppers received a price benefit when Walmart entered the grocery market.

Ellickson and Grieco (2013) examined the effect of supercenters' entry on supermarkets. The authors concluded that the entry of a supercenter more than 2 miles away did not affect grocery stores. Supercenter entries appeared to have no effect on the start of new firms but rather on large chains that targeted the same segment of shoppers (Ellickson & Grieco, 2013). Glandon and Jaremski (2014) suggested grocers can mitigate losses to big-box retailers in a variety of ways such as lowering all prices, having periodic sales, holding on to key customers, or differentiating themselves with distinct product lines.

The effect on cities and counties. Merriman et al. (2012) examined the economic effect of a specific big-box superstore within a Chicago neighborhood. The specific economic impacts discussed were those on local employment, wages, and sales volumes. The researchers found that within an urban setting, the proximity to this big-box store might lead to a greater risk of smaller local firms going out of business. While Stone, Artz, and Myles (1999) did not examine the possibility of business closure surrounding big-box store entry, they studied the effects on sales within host counties and adjacent non-host counties for a variety of store types. Stone et al. (1999) concluded that stores selling merchandise similar to that sold by big-box retailers might not fare well with the addition of a big-box store. Conversely, stores selling specialized merchandise can see an increase in sales.

As big-box stores plan to enter new markets, they typically cite increases in the tax base in hopes of approval of their plans. Vandegrift and Loyer's (2015) determined that host cities and adjacent cities tax bases were not affected by the entry of a Walmart, but conversely, Target raised the tax base. Bonanno and Goetz (2012) determined a variety of effects including the negative effect on small local businesses, reduced prices, and fluctuating wage effects. A consistent finding throughout literature was that market entry by big-box stores had both positive and negative effects.

Ficano (2013) identified significant business churn with a Walmart entry indicating increased retail establishment death rates (4.4 to 14.4 firms) and increased birth rates (3 to 4 firms). This research supported the positive link found by Brenner and Schmike (2015) between firm size and firm growth. Therefore, medium and large nonlocally owned firms did not grow as quickly as the smaller locally owned firms. Litz and Pollack's (2015) extant research suggested larger competitors had advantages over small businesses, not just in size but market share.

Small Business

Small businesses and entrepreneurs have existed since as early as the 19th century with such prominent innovators as Simeon North and Eli Whitney (Schmenner, 2015). Oriaku (2012) asserted that modern small business owners fail and lose interest within 5 years because of inadequate government funding and a lack of business incentives. However, both small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and entrepreneurs have common goals of economic growth and job creation (Lucky & Olusegun, 2012).

Most businesses within the United States are classified as a small business (Besser & Miller, 2013), making up 99.9 % of all businesses (SBA, 2016). Small businesses are those that are independent with fewer than 500 employees (SBA, 2016). Small businesses often lead to innovation, jobs, and a healthier economy (Gale & Brown, 2013).

Small businesses and their entrepreneur owners are vital to the healthy economy in the US, but statistically not likely to succeed beyond 5 years (Campbell, Heriot, Jauregui, & Mitchell, 2012). Levinson (2011) suggested that those firms that introduce successful products do business differently, put technology to use, and are likely to grow and prosper. Otherwise, Levinson concluded that most small businesses do not grow or innovate. Henrekson and Sanandaji (2014) posited that grouping of small firms and entrepreneurs should not occur, as they are two distinct phenomena.

SMEs face a variety of challenges in today's society including financial constraints and the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act of 2010 (Amato & Schreiber, 2013; Colombo, Laursen, Magnusson, & Rossi-Lamastra, 2012). The lack of human and financial resources can also be a challenge for small business owners (Omri, Frikha, & Bouraoui, 2015). To increase competitive advantage, Bressler (2012) suggested business owners utilize a marketing mix of product, price, place, and promotion.

Yang (2012) contended that small business owners drive economic prosperity by alleviating poverty and job creation. Job creation and the success of SMEs have become increasingly important in international markets with struggling economies; in Vietnam, SMEs constitute 97% of all businesses and 77% of the workforce (Muenjohn & McMurray, 2016). In contrast, Haltiwanger, Jarmin, and Miranda (2013) posited that while it is the perception that small businesses create the most jobs (in the United States), there is an inverse relationship between growth and firm size. Their research showed that firms with employees of 5 to 499 and controlled for age had lower net growth than larger firms.

Kiviluoto (2013) suggested that entrepreneurs have their perception of what defines the success of their business and rarely is this through sales growth alone. Hamrouni and Imen (2012) noted that either a lack of financial resources or financial management resulted in small business failure. Similarly, Omri et al. (2015) found that businesses that invested in innovation tended to be more successful. Owens, Kirwan, Lounsbury, Levy, and Gibson (2013) suggested personality traits correlated strongly with business success. Conversely, Williams (2014) found common reasons for small business failure were location, governance, industry sector, and the size of the firm.

Businesses differentiate themselves from big-box stores with a three-pronged approach of trust, value versus price, and branding (Intihar & Pollack, 2012). Intihar and Pollack recognized the lack of research in the area of competing with big-box stores and noted the need for continued research related to longitudinal data, focus on trust, and customers' emotions. Bressler (2012) took another approach in acknowledging the importance of competitive advantage for new businesses. Bressler (2012) developed a four-stage process for developing a sustainable competitive advantage that included examining industry and business conditions, management actions, and leveraging market variables. These strategies may be helpful to the small business owner in working towards sustainable business practices post big-box entry.

Shimomura and Thisse (2012) determined that large firms cause greater competition within the market than the formation of many smaller firms. Furthermore, Shimomura and Thisse suggested that if a market does not allow the entry of a large retail store, then small businesses will thrive, but they will be less competitive. Moreover, Shimomura and Thisse argued that consumers are worse off restricting small business in favor of larger ones because of reduced competition. In contrast, Krajnakova, Navikaite, and Navickas (2015) emphasized the advantages of SMEs because of their flexibility and adaptability to change. Shimomura and Thisse (2012) suggested that the battles are uneven when a small business is competing with large retail stores. Recommended strategies to compete for low-cost competitors include (a) waiting and watching, (b) not matching prices, (c) matching or coming close to competitor's prices, or (d) offering a store brand (Berman, 2015). Strategies provided by Berman (2015) may provide clues to the business owners interviewed in this study to bolster information to retain profits post big-box store entry.

Motivations of small business owners. Stoll and Ha-Brookshire (2012) concluded that the primary motivation behind the success of small business owners was to fill a market niche. Creating a niche market is a lesson that Walmart also learned when it first entered the market in relatively small rural underserved areas (Rice, Ostrander, & Tiwari, 2016). Gronum, Verreynne, and Kastelle (2012) identified that networks are vital components of innovation that lead to better economic performance. Gronum et al. proffered a correlation between networks and performance, emphasizing the importance of networks for wealth creation, which is always a motivation for business owners. Saunila (2016) suggested the ability to innovate was the basis for SME firms' success. Saunila (2016) further identified a strategic framework for measuring performance to improve innovation capability.

Strategic planning for small businesses. Geho and Frakes (2013) reported that small business owners are optimistic about the future. Geho and Frakes shared that the focus of small business owners was maintaining their current business. Federal government policies, many promulgated by the SBA, favor small business and are the means small business owners may use to remain competitive (Gale & Brown, 2013).

A body of literature exists that promotes strategic planning for small business survival. Cordeiro (2013) reported that small business owners plan poorly because of the high time demands associated with a small or family-owned business. Benefits of strategic planning include (a) understanding the environment, (b) the ability to focus resources on a specific goal, (c) maintaining or improving competitive position, and (d) preparation for the future (Cordeiro, 2013). Fox (2013) promoted the value of strategic business planning and strategic human resource development (SHRD) plans. SHRD plans complement strategic plans to increase performance, innovation, and job satisfaction (Fox, 2013).

In contrast, research by Parks, Olson, and Bokor (2015) concluded that formal business plans may lead to rigidity, and of the INC500 firms surveyed in their study, fewer than expected used formal business plans. The key to successful business plans according to the authors is to learn from the plan and to react to the environment as it changes. Taneja, Pryor, and Hayet (2016) suggested that using informal plans enables flexibility in responding to changing markets and uncertainties. McDowell, Harris, and Geho (2016) noted that younger firms focused on external strategies while older firms focused on internal strategies depending on the current conditions and company structure, highlighting the importance of strategic flexibility.

Litz and Pollack (2015) identified a gap in the literature related to DIY (do it yourself) stores, and specifically what small businesses can do when big-box stores enter their neighborhoods. One method may be to use social media as a means of marketing (Bakeman & Hanson, 2012). Holland and Weathers (2013) stated that consumers would take advantage of social media to identify buying opportunities. However, Bakeman and Hanson (2012) stated that the future might show that integrating social media into the small business model may become as commonplace as a business having a website. Other tools integral to the success of small business include strategic, resource, and financial planning (Oriaku, 2012). The need to examine the application of the literature gap from Litz and Pollack (2015) in what small business can do when a giant comes to the neighborhood buttresses the purpose statement of this study.

Business Sustainability

Research on sustainability, green building, or environmental performance specific to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) is not as pervasive as that of large firms. Despite the perception that SMEs find it difficult to implement sustainability (Conway, 2014), Dixon-Fowler, Slater, Johnson, Ellstrand, and Romi (2013) suggested that the benefits of environmental performance for small firms can be as much or more than for large firms. Dixon-Fowler et al. (2013) concluded that it does pay to be ‘green’. drawing a positive relationship between corporate environmental and financial performance. Conway (2014) opined that SMEs engaged in sustainability enjoyed higher sales, cost reduction, risk reduction, increased resource productivity, improved reputation/brand value, and many other benefits. While research supports the impact of sustainability on the SMEs’ bottom line, many SMEs do not yet engage in sustainability practices. Conway (2014) suggested reasons that SMEs do not engage include (1) belief that their firm’s footprint is too insignificant, (2) that customers do not seem to be concerned, and (3) that the SMEs lack the resources and time to invest beyond legal compliance.

Sustainability and *green building* have become buzzwords since the beginning of the 21st century. The world’s largest retailer recognizes that sustainability could improve their public persona (van der Ven, 2014). When the big-box retailer that accounts for more than 60% of all consumer purchases within the United States commits to a sustainability program, the long-term effects are dramatic (Lister, Lebaron, & Dauvergne, 2013). In 2005, this retailer established three lofty sustainability goals to (a) operate on 100% renewable energy, (b) create zero waste, and (c) sell products that sustain people and the environment (Walmart, 2012b). Using their leverage as the world's largest big-box retailer, Walmart made considerable progress toward these goals since 2005 (Walmart, 2012b). In 2011, the organization achieved a 69% improvement in operating on renewable energy over the 2005 baseline (Walmart, 2012b). The second goal of creating zero waste resulted in dramatic results (Walmart, 2012b). In the United States alone, this retailer reduced their landfill waste by 80.9% (Walmart, 2012b). Globally, the reduction is not as dramatic as Walmart's 35% reduction in landfill waste (Walmart, 2012b).

Sustainability in terms of green building is but one component of what many businesses are migrating toward to measure their bottom lines. The triple bottom line (TBL) concept of evaluating businesses in terms of impact on people, planet, and profitability has gained popularity in recent years (Schroeder & Denoble, 2014). This bottom line concept of evaluating the impact on people, planet and profit is credited to Elkington (1997). Another name for the TBL is the 3Ps (Schulz, 2016). The challenges in measuring the effect on the social, environmental, and financial dimensions of the business are many. One primary challenge is determining a consistent unit of measure, or the ability to systematically quantify the people and planet paradigms (Milne & Gray, 2013; Shnayder, van Rijnsoever, & Hekkert, 2015). While measuring profits in dollars is straightforward, measuring social and environmental factors is not as clear-cut with no universal standard (Christofi, Christofi, & Sisaye, 2012). Gupta and Kumar (2013) took this research a step further and suggested that firm marketing include a company culture of sustainability aided by company branding. Even without a universal standard, many businesses are embracing the use of the TBL because of the anecdotal evidence of increased profits, competitive advantage, and growth (Glavas & Mish, 2026; Schulz & Flanigan, 2016).

Glavis and Mish (2015) contended that for sustainability to be truly successful, it must be in the mindset of the people in the company. Otherwise, the focus remains on profits alone. In addition, Glavis and Mish (2015) stressed the importance of transparency inside and outside the company, a concept not popular in today's business world. Schroeder and Denoble (2014) further suggested that the success of TBL implementation revolves around the founder or leader of the company as the anchor point for the company culture. One avenue for the success of TBL is to provide products desired by the consumers that are also associated with a social cause, enabling companies to charge premium prices to support the cause (Schroeder & Denoble, 2014).

The TBL firms' leaders studied by Bhattacharya (2016) viewed themselves as doing marketing differently. Although TBL firms are not the focus of this study, the flexibility of small and medium-sized firms (SMEs) as in this study, do not exclude them from becoming TBL firms. Venkatraman (2015) viewed sustainability (one part of the TBL) as an 'integral component' of businesses that seek competitive advantages.

The conceptual framework for this research was systems theory/thinking and is useful for identifying vulnerabilities in processes, elements, and structure of the organization and for identifying potential strategies for sustainability to retain profits (Ludovic-Alexandre, Marle, & Marle, 2012). Using the systems paradigm facilitates problem solving at the firm level to increase quality and profitability (Freeman et al., 2015).

Systems Theory

Historically science relied on linear logic to evaluate problems believing that breaking down the problem into smaller bits would make it more manageable, and the sum of these parts would equal the whole (Bartholomees, 2012). The advent of systems theory supported the belief that the parts were synergistically something more than the whole (Bartholomees, 2012). General systems theory has no definitive definition but is intended to be multidisciplinary dealing with the notion of *wholes* and *wholeness* and offering a way to see things previously overlooked (Adams et al., 2014; von Bertalanffy, 1972). Von Bertalanffy (1972) founded GST in the 1930's. Interest in systems theory grew eventually forming the Society for General Systems Research in 1954 (von Bertalanffy, 1972).

Systems theory definitions abound in the literature, with no one universal definition (Adams et al., 2014). Adams et al. (2014) argued that the lack of a unified definition is because von Bertalanffy provided no constructs or axioms and propositions for the theory.

Systems thinking. Systems thinking is a holistic approach to problem solving applied at the academic and professional levels (Peric & Djurkin, 2014). Richmond is credited with coining the term *systems thinking* in 1987 (Arnold & Wade, 2015). Systems thinking, like systems theory, has no definitive definition with the literature offering a plethora of definitions (Arnold & Wade, 2015). Because of this lack of clarity, Arnold and Wade (2015) have offered a new and somewhat radical definition of systems thinking based on the systems element:

> Systems thinking is a set of synergistic analytic skills used to improve the capability of identifying and understanding systems, predicting their behaviors and devising modifications to them to produce desired effects. These skills work together as a system. (p. 675)

A significant difference in the systems approach is the use of feedback loops rather than a linear approach (Freeman, Peeples, & Anderies, 2015). The application of systems thinking and feedback loops has been applied to a variety of disciplines from evaluation of a £22 million bridge in the UK (White & Fortune, 2012), health equity (Frerichs et al., 2016), and the understanding of community-based participatory research (BeLue, Carmack, Myers, Weinreb-Welch, & Lengerich, 2012). Systems thinking and the ability to view and evaluate the whole organization aligns with the (a) purpose statement, (b) problem statement, and (c) formulating the interview questions, that all contribute toward answering the research question: What strategies do small business owners use to maintain or grow their profits, post big-box store market entry?

Transition and Summary

The big-box superstore has created a dramatic impact on the retail landscape since its appearance in 1962 (Joseph, 2015). While opposition was slow to develop, the eventual rapid expansion of supercenter stores began to concern jurisdictions, officials, citizens, and business owners. As big-box stores continued to proliferate, small business owners struggled with how to compete. The specific business problem in this section is that some small business owners lack strategies for maintaining or growing profit margins after a big-box store market entry.

The literature review described those elements that ground or influence the decisions of small business owners: big-box retail, the Walmart effect, and systems theory. The conceptual framework of systems thinking can support the organizational and individual goals of the firm to answer the research question: What strategies do small business owners need to maintain or grow their profitability, post big-box store market entry?

In Section 2, I restate the purpose of this qualitative multiple case study, which is to identify and explore strategies for maintaining or growing profit margins that small business owners can use post big-box store market entry within a 2-mile radius of their businesses. Details follow on (a) the role of the researcher, (b) the participants, (c) the research method and design, (d) population and sampling, (e) a summary of ethical research concepts, (f) data collection methods, and (g) data analysis techniques, ending with a discussion on reliability and validity.

Section 3 contains the data collected in the research project as well as analysis of the (a) data, (b) conclusions, (c) themes, (d) discussion of the findings, and (e) recommendations.

Section 2: The Project

Small businesses are at risk with the addition of a big-box store in the neighborhood (Litz & Pollack, 2015). Section 2 contains a discussion of the methodology used to address the specific business problem that some small business owners lack strategies for retaining or growing profit margins, post big-box store market entry. Following is (a) a discussion of the participants, (b) how case study research is determined to be the effective method for this research, (c) the collection and analyses of data, and (d) details of the reliability and validity of the research data.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to identify and explore strategies for maintaining or growing profit margins that small business owners can use post big-box store market entry. The case study population included five small business owners who survived the entry of big-box retailers within a 2-mile radius of their businesses for a minimum of 1 year located in a community in Missouri. The population was appropriate for this study since it represented a typical setting for a big-box retailer, and the population was representative of American small business owners (SBA, 2016).

When human behavior results in an improvement of the human and social condition, then positive social change occurs. Belträn (2015) associated urban redevelopment as an element of social change. Empowering local small business owners with sustainable business strategies could result in more businesses remaining profitable, leading to an improved standard of living and urban redevelopment.

Role of the Researcher

In this qualitative study, I performed the data collection in the form of interviews, archival data, and data mining. As such, I became the principal instrument in the research process (Leedy & Ormrod, 2014).

I previously worked as a certified planner for an architectural firm's big-box retail client. I have had no contact with the client, the architect, or the jurisdiction since August of 2014 regarding any subject big-box in this study. I was the primary and sole researcher for the study.

Bias can easily influence research reliability and validity; consequently, it is important to develop carefully crafted questions that do not influence respondent answers (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). As I had an affiliation with a specific big-box development company as a consultant from 2002 to 2013, I avoided bias and the interjection of preconceptions through bracketing to increase rigor (Tufford & Newman, 2012).

The Belmont Report's (1979) origin is in the National Research Act and identifies basic ethical principles for research with human participants. Included are guidelines regarding the identification of risk/benefit criteria for participants, selection criteria for human subjects, and informed consent. I protected the basic ethical principles for research with human participants as outlined in the Belmont Report.

Using an interview protocol allows for the dissemination of important information to each participant as well as reminders for the interviewer. The interview protocol includes not only the interview questions but a reminder to obtain consent, an opening script, prompts during the interview, a closing script, and other reminders as necessary

(Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). To increase rigor in the interview protocol, I used a pilot study (Whitehead, Sully, & Campbell, 2014). Appendix C contains a copy of the interview protocol.

Participants

Simon and Goes (2013) suggested that participants have an interest in the research topic and the findings. I selected participants through purposeful sampling to meet preselected criteria based on their interest in the study. Preexisting relationships with participants can compromise answers during the interview process (Isaacs, 2014). The eligibility criteria assured rigor and prevented the selection of a participant that may have had a preexisting relationship. The selection criteria included the following:

1. Company type (i.e. sole proprietor, small business).
2. Participant has no prior relationship with the interviewer or the research project.
3. Business was open and doing business prior to big-box store for at least one year.
4. The business location is within a 2-mile radius of a big-box store.
5. The company has remained profitable since the opening of the big-box store.

Wigfall, Brannen, Mooney, and Parutis (2013) noted that participant recruitment can be problematic and can be a challenge for the social science researcher. Other researchers have encouraged flexibility in research design while applying planning and approval processes (McCormack, Adams, & Anderson, 2013; Wigfall et al., 2013). After facing considerable challenges in the field, McCormack et al. (2013) improvised participant recruiting *in situ* (on site). Reybold, Lammert, and Stribling (2013) explored the idea of participant selection as a method and much more than a technical process. The authors suggested an acknowledgment of this complex process.

To begin to identify potential participants who aligned with the overarching research question, I gathered names of small business owners located within a 2-mile radius of the big-box store using the city's geographic information system mapping program. Verification and cross reference of addresses and phone numbers was through the use of the yellow pages. If access to the geographic information system mapping program had not been available, I would have used an alternate mapping system such as Microsoft Streets and Trips™. I took Simon and Goes (2013) advice to determine the business owners' level of interest in participating in the research by contacting each prospective business owner by mail with the introductory/consent letter that invited them to participate and asked them to sign the consent letter. Rowley (2012) asserted that participants would make a quick decision based on the initial approach of the researcher if they would participant in the interview. When business owners were interested in participating, I used telephone interviews.

Prior to actual participant selection, the process of participant selection may seem more mechanical than problematic. As expected, as Reybold et al. (2013) opined, the criticality of participant selection became evident as I "decided who mattered as data" (p. 699). Participant trust occurs after spending significant time with the participants ensuring rich data (Morse, 2015). The ability to connect with the participants early in the study to identify stories facilitated the working relationship for completing my study.

Burnette and Sanders (2014) posited that building trust occurs when one party is willing to risk rejection. It was essential from the very first interaction that I instilled a sense of trust with each potential participant. In the consent form, I provided full disclosure of the process, identified potential risks and benefits, conducted member checking, and offered to provide a copy of the results to build trust. After the interview had been completed, participants received a mailed thank-you note within 2 weeks after the interview. After completion of the research, I will notify each participant that they will receive an executive summary of the study on request.

Research Method and Design

This study was a multiple case study design. Qualitative research provides a lens that enables assimilation across disciplines (Berger, 2015).

Method

Quantitative, qualitative, and mixed method methodologies are all research methods appropriate for academic research. The purpose of quantitative research is to test theory, explain, confirm, and validate, whereas the purpose of qualitative research is to build or buttress one or more theories and to describe, explore, and interpret (Leedy & Ormrod, 2014). Quantitative research is useful in answering questions such as *what* and *how many* where qualitative research answers *why*, *how,* or *under what circumstances* (Watkins, 2012). In qualitative research, the front end of the research is shorter but has more detail to identify the potentially relevant conceptual framework and to establish the case for the research, versus quantitative research that is longer on the front end where the examination of relevance to existing theories through hypothesis testing occurs

(Bansal & Corley, 2012). Mixed methods researchers employ both qualitative and quantitative research, particularly in the use of complex organizational and social problems (Venkatesh, Brown, & Bala, 2013). Employing mixed methods research offers researchers the ability to offset the respective weaknesses in both qualitative and quantitative research (Sparkes, 2014). Using mixed methods research allows for a better understanding of the complete effects of the phenomenon and avoids the loss of important evidence when only one method is used (Pluye & Hong, 2014).

Applying qualitative analysis offers a better and clearer understanding of a single phenomenon or experience (Yilmaz, 2013). Using a qualitative research lens provides a close-up view for a richer understanding of the subject phenomenon or experience not available through quantitative research (Yilmaz, 2013). The qualitative methodology was better suited for the study because the search for meaning in the exploration of small business strategy aligns with the research purpose. I used questions of *what, how* and *why* to compile my data (Watkins, 2012). Thick descriptions throughout the research contributed to assuring internal reliability and facilitated replication (Morse, 2015).

Research Design

Developing and aligning the purpose and research question were key to framing this qualitative multiple case study. Baškarada (2014) addressed the attributes of a case study emphasizing a case study's ability to provide rich descriptions and insights not available in scientific study. Case study designs can inform social sciences (Ruzzene, 2012), organizations, and professional practice (De Massis & Kotlar, 2014). Yin (2014) defined case study as an investigation of real life experiences when the lines blur between the experience and the context. The focus of case study research is the exploration of multiple perspectives of a particular project or real-life concern (Yin, 2014).

I considered other qualitative designs such as ethnography, phenomenology, narrative, and grounded theory. Ethnographers with roots in anthropology describe group relations and social interactions with thick descriptions of culture, communities, or societies over time (Ingham-Broomfield, 2015, 2011; Reeves, Peller, Goldman, & Kitto, 2013). Phenomenologists seek to understand lived experiences (a phenomenon) of individuals and discover meaning from those experiences (Cibangu & Helpworth, 2016; Englander, 2012). While the design of this research shares some characteristics with phenomenology such as shared experiences, the design was not about understanding phenomena from lived experiences. As the focus of this research was not social interactions over time, ethnography was also not an appropriate design.

Two other qualitative designs are narrative and grounded theory. Narrative researchers reflect on shared experiences or stories from participants that are spoken and lived alongside participants or retold by the researcher (Caine, Estefan, & Clandinin, 2013; Pearson et al., 2015; Purnell & Bowman, 2014). Grounded theory researchers seek to develop theory from data collection and analysis within the phenomenon (Engward, 2013; Shelton, Smith, & Mort, 2014; Smythe, 2012; Wolfswinkel, 2013). The focus of this research was not for developing theory. Therefore, the narrative research and grounded theory were not appropriate for the design of this research.

Data saturation occurs when no new ideas or themes emerge (Dworkin, 2012; Walker, 2012). The targeted population size for this study was five interviews with small business owners, and the interviews continued until no new data or themes emerged.

Population and Sampling

Understanding the population and being explicit and transparent in that selection increases the credibility and understanding of the research (Robinson, 2013). As recommended by Robinson, the inclusion and exclusion criteria to create a sample universe were as follows:

- A small business (as defined by the SBA-fewer than 500 employees);
- Open for business at least 1 year before the big-box store opened;
- The company has remained profitable since the opening of the big-box store;
- A retailer rather than a service oriented business;
- A retailer in Kansas City Missouri; and
- Within a 2-mile radius of the big-box store.

The population of five small business owners supported the purpose of this research project to identify and explore strategies for remaining or increasing profit margins post big-box store entry within a 2-mile radius of their business location. Using a purposive sample comprising five small business owners resulted in a unique understanding and perspectives to the research question. Purposive sampling requires information from key stakeholders with rich information (Palinkas, 2014). Elo et al. (2014) posited that using a purposive sample in qualitative research could enable researchers to gather the relevant information on the research topic.

In a qualitative study, the sample size is dependent on the research questions and method (Leedy & Ormrod, 2014). This qualitative multiple case study provided an in-depth lens through which small business owners may gain insights regarding sustainable business strategies to compete successfully with big-box retailers. In quantitative literature, the gold standard in determining sample size is the power analysis (Trotter II, 2012). Understanding how to determine sample size in qualitative research can be challenging. Marshall, Cardon, Poddar, and Fontenot (2013) stated that selecting the proper sample size is one of the most important elements of qualitative research. While there is agreement that saturation is the standard for achieving excellence or rigor, how to achieve that saturation is not (Marshall et al., 2013). Dworkin (2012) stated that the literature supports sample sizes from five to 50. She further opined that it is not a question of how many but rather it depends. The sample size depends on the scope, the nature of the study, the participants involved, and the method (Dworkin, 2012). The population for this study was five small business owners. Kansas City, Missouri is the location of the business owners. The population consisted of five small business owners within this community. O'Reilly (2012) supported the view that the sample size is not determined just by the number of participants but by the appropriateness of the data. Based on Robinson’s (2013) recommendation, interviews continued until additional interviews demonstrate redundancy in data or themes.

Reybold et al. (2013) stated that not only do researchers collect data, they also decide who matters in the selection of the participants. The authors acknowledged the complexity of making the choices of participants and the attending consequences of those relationships. Leedy and Ormrod (2014) offered the practical advice of assuring the participants are representative of the group. In this study, all of my participants were small business owners.

Leedy and Ormrod (2014) suggested that the interviews be at a suitable location. Since the geographic location of the businesses is some distance away from my home, the interviews were by telephone at a mutually agreed time between the small business owners and me.

Ethical Research

Ethical considerations are especially important for studies with human participants. As required by Walden University, when working with human subjects, I have completed the National Institutes of Health (NIH) certification, certificate number 1782015 (see Appendix F). This study conforms to the basic tenant ethics on human subjects with (a) respect of persons, (b) beneficence, and (c) justice (Belmont Report, 1979).

After the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved the proposed research, I provided the Walden IRB approval number to each potential study participant and pilot study participant in an email informational letter within the consent form for signature. The IRB approval number for this study is 04-12-16-0027728. Appendix A contains a copy of the information letter. The consent form contained an explanation of the research and interview process. I received the signed consent form from each participant via email or in person indicating agreement, prior to the time of the interview. Participants could have withdrawn at any time during the study by informing me in writing, by phone, or in person. There were no incentives for the participants in the study. An explanation in the consent form stated that (a) participation in the study was voluntary, (b) the participant could withdraw at any time from the study, (c) there was no compensation for participating, and (d) the participant may receive a copy of the results. Because of geographic challenges, interviews were primarily by telephone except where the participant preferred a face to face interview. To protect the confidentiality of participants, a fireproof locked safe accessible only by me will store all hard data for 5 years. All electronic files are password protected and accessible only by me for 5 years. I will destroy all data after 5 years. To protect the confidentiality of the respondents, I did not include any participant names or business names in the interview data. All personal information such as the consent form and demographic information will remain confidential and private. There will be no shared data, and participants remained anonymous throughout the study.

Data Collection Instruments

To ensure proper alignment, the research question and my study's purpose informed the data and the instrument. I was the primary data collection instrument in this research. Other data collection methods and types included interview recordings and archival data. Rowley (2012) posited that interviews are appropriate when the objectives of the research are (a) centered on understanding experiences, (b) when not enough information is known to create a questionnaire, and (c) when the participants are less likely to respond to other methods. Interviews can be unstructured, structured, and semistructured (Rowley, 2012). Unstructured interviews are conversations around a theme with questions asked in any order and adaptation encouraged during the interview. Structured interviews contain rigid preset questions asked in a specific order with no deviation (Rowley, 2012). Semistructured interviews are the most common interview type, having preset questions but allow for some flexibility (Aleandri & Russo, 2015; Rowley, 2012). Doody and Noonan (2013) stated that using semistructured interviews allows for a certain amount of spontaneity to explore an issue in-depth, and not have to keep exactly to the wording or order of the interview questions. Semistructured interviews were the means to collect data in this study to allow for flexibility in questions and the nature of the in-depth issue.

Archival data from company documents and business license information further supported addressing the research question. I obtained company documents to verify and confirm data from the business owners' interviews, such as profit and loss statements. I obtained the business license data from the city clerk under Chapter 610 of the Revised Statues of Missouri that provides transparency in government documents ("Missouri Revised Statutes," 2014).

The interview protocol is a means for assuring a consistent process for interviewing all participants while adding rigor to the study. The interview protocol can be very structured or loose in nature depending on the needs of the researcher (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). Understanding how to ask the right questions aided in obtaining rich descriptions and allowed the participants to tell their stories while answering the questions. Jacob and Furgerson (2012) provided 14 guidelines for developing an interview protocol:

1. Pick a topic that is interesting to you.
2. Research should guide your questions.

3. Use a script to begin and end your interview.
4. Questions should be open-ended.
5. Start with the basics.
6. Begin with easy to answer questions and move towards ones that are more difficult or controversial
7. The phrase "tell me about…." is great to start a question.
8. Write big, expansive questions.
9. Use prompts.
10. Be willing to make "on the spot" revisions to your interview protocol.
11. Don't make the interview too long.
12. Practice with a friend.
13. Make sure that you have set up a second shorter interview to help you clarify or ask any questions you missed after you have transcribed the interview.
14. If needed, clear your project with your school's Institutional Research Board (IRB). (pp. 2-6)

Underscoring the importance of the right questions in the interview protocol became apparent in research from Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton (2013) who discovered the importance of identifying with the participant's experience rather than putting predetermined labels on them. The result was the alignment of the interview protocol to the research question (Gioia et al., 2013). Appendix C contains a copy of the interview protocol and Appendix D contains a copy of the interview questions.

Member checking, transcript reviews, and pilot studies are all means to increase studies' reliability and validity or to increase rigor of the data collection instruments (Doody & Noonan, 2013; Harper, 2012; Houghton, Casey, Shaw, Murphy, 2013). Demonstrating rigor instills confidence and trust in research (Houghton et al., 2013). Qualitative researchers use member checking to assure that the reporting is an accurate representation of their experience (Harper, 2012). Member checking can occur during the interview where the researcher restates and summarizes the participant's responses and/or during data analysis for verification of themes from the interviews (Harper, 2012). Transcript reviews are similar to member checking in that they are verifications of the participants' meaning during the interview. A third technique to assure the rigor of an interview protocol is through a pilot study. I used a pilot study to assist in finding potential flaws or weaknesses in the interview design and protocol (Bates, 2014). Pilot studies typically consist of a small sample of similar participants as the original research. I used one small business in the pilot study from the same geographic area as the study. The findings from the pilot study indicated that the questions were clear and understandable. The pilot study prompted no changes for the interview protocol.

Data Collection Technique

Data collection techniques can take the form of interviews, online/paper surveys, observations, and video recordings (Leedy & Ormrod, 2014; Penn-Edwards, 2012). The data collection technique for this study was through recorded semistructured interviews that aligned with the research question (Leedy & Ormrod, 2014). While interviews allow for an in-depth look into the topic, they are also time-consuming (Khan, Habibullah, & Ullah, 2013).

Additional data collection techniques I used for this study included a review of archival documents related to profit and loss documents from the small business owner participants. Coded names and business names provided anonymity for the participants. A request for profit and loss data appeared in the interview protocol. Employing methodological triangulation enables confirmation of previous data to clarify meaning (Denzin, 2009). The collection of profit and loss data and the interview recordings provided the basis for conducting methodological triangulation.

The last data collection technique was data mining of the business license data before and after the big-box construction within the 2-mile radius of the big-box store. Data mining is where large of amounts of data are analyzed for new patterns (Marateb, Mansourian, Adibi, & Farina, 2014). I used data mining with the business license data to identify the number of businesses that have survived the entry of the big-box retail store. Data mining provides the ability to extract information from a large database, in this case, the business license data, to find implicit knowledge (Xu & Recker, 2012). The analysis of these additional data added rigor to the study. I conducted the pilot study after receiving IRB approval. Yin (2014) posited that using pilot studies helps define and improve the data collection plan in the interview protocol (Appendix C). Hazzi and Maldaon (2015) asserted that pilot studies apply to all types of research and contribute to good design. Whitehead et al. (2014) found that pilot studies are helpful in identifying processes, training, and potential problems for issues related to future research.

In addition to using a pilot study, I employed member checking to ensure that the interview data were represented accurately (Elo et al., 2014). Member checking provides a means of quality control (Harper, 2012). Similar to member checking, transcript review provides interviewees with the opportunity to review the verbatim transcript of the interview (Houghton et al., 2013). For the current study, member checking occurred both during and after each interview.

Data Organization Techniques

Research logs and reflective journals are two effective ways to organize and keep track of research data (Hayman, Wilkes, & Jackson, 2012). Svoboda, Williams, Jones, and Powell (2013) emphasized the importance of research logs. Tufford and Newman (2012) noted that reflective journals are an effective means of providing critical and reflective thought. Hayman et al. (2012) suggested using research journals for documenting and reflecting on research or for data collection. For this study, I used a research journal as a basis for reflecting on the interviews and emerging themes as they may align with the conceptual framework.

I will destroy all data stored on the personal computer and back up storage systems after 5 years from my date of convocation. I will shred all paper documents that contain data at the end of 5 years.

Data Analysis

Triangulation enhances credibility or rigor, and trustworthiness of research (Houghton et al., 2013; Isaacs, 2014). Triangulation serves the purpose of comparing multiple sources to confirm conclusions from the data, and to ensure that data are complete (Houghton et al., 2013). The four types of triangulation identified by Denzin (2009) are (a) data triangulation, (b) investigator triangulation, (c) theoretical triangulation, and (d) methodological triangulation. Data triangulation refers to gathering multiple sets of data through varying strategies. Investigator triangulation uses more than one researcher to gather and interpret data. Theoretical triangulation refers to using more than one theory to interpret the data gathered. Methodological triangulation refers to gathering more than one type of data (Joslin & Müller, 2016).

I used methodological triangulation involving multiple types of data collection (e.g., interviews and archival records.) Using multiple types of data can assure rigor as well as a means for checking for completeness to create richness from thick descriptions from multiple perspectives (interviews, business license data, and internal company data) (Isaacs, 2014).

Data analysis involved a search for themes and commonalities to explore and understand potential matches between the organization and the systems approach in the firms. This systems-based approach supports the conceptual framework of systems thinking for this research. This systems paradigm facilitates understanding of the firm as it functions as a whole (Mangal, 2013). System thinking is useful for identifying vulnerabilities in processes, elements and structure of the organization and for identifying potential strategies for sustainability to retain profits (Ludovic-Alexandre, Marle, & Marle, 2012).

I used NVivo software to code the qualitative data collected from interviews, company documents, and the business license data. The software (NVivo) enables analyzing and organizing qualitative data (James, 2012; Onwuegbuzie, Leech, & Collns, 2012). NVivo software supports a hierarchal data structure. Using previous dissertation research and literature on profits and small business, possible themes that may occur during coding are networking, marketing, niche markets, and customer satisfaction (Emrich, 2015; Gandy, 2015). However, the actual collection, coding, and analysis of data determined the final codes and alignments to each of these structures. I analyzed data and built themes from the interviews utilizing Yin's (2011) five-phase process of (a) compiling, (b) disassembling, (c) reassembling, (d) interpreting, and (e) concluding. The compiling phase is the ordering of all data in some fashion to create a database (Yin, 2011). The compiling phase took place after interviews were complete, and I obtained company records and business license information. The disassembling phase required dividing the data into smaller packets and labeling or coding them. The reassembling phase included reorganizing the pieces to create themes (Yin, 2011). Archival documents and data mining provided the means for methodological triangulation (Denzin, 2009) as well as informed phases four and five. The fourth phase of interpreting included analyses of the new data. The last phase was the concluding phase that resulted in conclusions from the entire study.

Reliability and Validity

Since the 1980's reliability and validity have taken on a new meaning in qualitative research. Lincoln and Guba (1985) redefined reliability and validity for qualitative research to include new constructs designed to increase rigor or trustworthiness. The construct of credibility is most similar to internal validity in quantitative studies; while dependability is analogous to reliability, and transferability to external validity, and confirmability or objectivity (Morse, 2015; Munn, Porritt, Lockwood, Aromataris, & Pearson, 2014). Credibility refers to the accuracy of the findings presented. Dependability refers to an adequate description of the design protocols and data analyses processes to enable another researcher to determine the efficacy of the analysis and decision protocol (Onwuegbuzie, Leech, & Collins, 2012). Transferability refers to the ability to use the findings in other settings. Lastly, confirmability refers to the accuracy of the data (Houghton et al., 2013).

Reliability

Describing research and interview protocols for member checking, transcript review, and pilot studies are all methods to enable other researchers to assess the dependability in qualitative research (Houghton et all, 2013; Jacob & Furgerson, 2012; Whitehead et al., 2014). Harper (2012) described member checking as a means participants use to verify that summaries and interpretations stemming from interviews are accurate. After IRB approval, I used a pilot study and member checking during the interview phase to assure the rigor and the dependability of this study. The subjective nature of the interviews increased the threat to research reliability. However, questions were in the same order for each participant to promote consistency and stability.

Validity

To increase trustworthiness or credibility in qualitative research, a variety of strategies is possible. Strategies include using audit trails, reflexivity, thick descriptions, triangulation, and member checking (Houghton et al., 2013). I employed two of these strategies. The first was member checking and the second was methodological triangulation. Employing member checking enables the participants to verify the researcher understands the interview data (Harper, 2012). I sent the study population who participated in the in-depth interviews the findings from the interviews to verify the accuracy of understanding as a means of member checking. I used member checking to identify errors, and it was useful for confirming or identifying new categories from the data (Harper, 2012).

Methodological triangulation is the process of using multiple types of data to clarify and assure the meaning on a topic (Homburg, Klarmann, Reimann, & Schilke, 2012). The purposes of methodological triangulation are to confirm data and to ensure completeness (Houghton et al., 2013). The use of multiple sources of data through interviews, company documents, and archival data can facilitate comprehension and validating findings (Bekhet & Zauszniewski, 2012).

Houghton et al. (2013) opined that conclusions may not apply to all cases, but transferability enables other researchers to draw independent conclusions on the study's relevance to their populations. The transferability of findings is dependent on the narrative associated with it. Thick descriptions enable other researchers to determine if a study's findings research applies to another setting (Morse, 2015). Providing interview protocols assist in providing structure to thick descriptions and aid in the understanding of the research (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). The interview protocol for this research is located in Appendix C. Thick descriptions enhance the possibility of transferability while relying heavily on the structure of the interview protocol to provide details to the reader.

Confirmability

Confirmability occurs when credibility, transferability, and dependability are in place (Morse, 2015). Audit trails, record procedures, paper trails, and reflexive logs are methods to increase confirmability (Cope, 2014). The research process should reflect a continuation of this trail much like a chain of evidence (Verner & Abdullah, 2012). I employed a reflexive journal to aid in organizing potential themes and recording reflections (Tufford & Newman, 2012). To reduce bias, I incorporated bracketing during the research process (Tufford & Newman, 2012).

Data saturation in qualitative research occurs when no new data are received and when no new themes emerge (O'Reilly, 2012; Walker, 2012). Walker (2012) posited that the literature is not clear on the guidelines for determining saturation and that saturation is dependent on the methodology. O'Reilly (2012) asserted that having a sufficient sample number for saturation should not be the issue but rather enough to achieve adequate depth of the phenomenon researched. Interviewing continued until achievement of data saturation was evident, and no new themes emerged.

Transition and Summary

In summary, the purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to gain information regarding sustainable business strategies that small business owners can use to retain or increase profit margins, post big-box store market entry. Next was a discussion on the role of the researcher related to previous relationships with the data, the Belmont Report, bias, and use of an interview protocol. Following was a discussion of the participants, their selection, and methods for gaining access. Essential to the study was the discussion related to the justification of the research method and design as well as the case study population and sampling. I then discussed (a) ethical research, (b) data collection instruments, (c) data collection techniques, (d) data organization techniques, (e) data analysis, and (e) lastly reliability and validity.

Section 3 concludes the study with a presentation of the findings, application to professional practice, and implications for social change. Section 3 concludes with recommendations for further research, reflections, and my conclusions.

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

The focus of this study was on finding strategies for small business owners to maintain or grow profits margins after a big-box store market entry. Section 3 contains (a) a summary of the purpose and findings of the study, (b) presentation of findings, (c) application to professional practice, (d) implications for social change, (e) recommendations for action, and (f) recommendations for further study. I conclude Section 3 with reflections, summary and my conclusions.

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to identify and explore strategies for maintaining or growing profit margins that small business owners could use post big-box store market entry. Small businesses are an integral part of the U.S. economy, and these entrepreneurs are often leaders in risk-taking and economic growth (U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2014).

Data collection methods included semistructured interviews and archival documents from company documents and business license data. The participants were five small business owners within the Kansas City, Missouri metro area who met the set of selection criteria I provided in Section 2. The three themes that emerged from the analyzed data that facilitated the success of the small business owners were (a) employees and customers, (b) finance, and (c) organizational strategies.

Presentation of the Findings

My research question was as follows: What strategies do small business owners need to maintain or grow their profitability, post big-box store market entry?

The semistructured interviews produced the largest amount of data. Interviews continued until data saturation occurred or when no new themes appeared (Tavakol & Sandars, 2014). Using Yin's (2011) five-phase process of (a) compiling, (b) disassembling, (c) reassembling, (d) interpreting, and (e) concluding, as well as NVivo software, three themes emerged that contributed to small businesses maintaining or increasing profits. The three emergent themes were (a) employees and customers, (b) finance, and (c) organizational strategies.

The first theme was people focused, both inside the organization (employees) and outside the organization (customers). Specifically, the people focus was on employee retention and customer growth. The second theme reflected financial aspects of the firm, specifically barriers to maintaining and growing profits. The third theme of organizational strategies contained strategies for business owners to maintain or increase profitability.

Emergent Theme 1: Employees and Customers

The first theme centered on people, specifically employees and customers. One firm consisted of the owner as the only employee. The literature revealed that only 20% of all small firms have employees (SBA, 2016). In this study, four of the five firms interviewed had employees, well above the 20% national average. I discuss employees and customers in this theme, essential elements to run a business. Employee retention, health care, and salary are the three elements of the first theme discussed by several firms' participants. Customer satisfaction included using tools such as databases, marketing, tracking, and relationship building. Table 3 contains the frequencies of each of the employee-centric attributes.

Table 3

Employee-Centric Attributes

Employee Attributes	*n*	%
Retention	4	80
Healthcare	1	20
Salary	3	60

Note. *n* = the number of businesses interviewed that cited this attribute. *%* = the percentage of businesses interviewed that cited this attribute.

Table 4 contains the frequencies of each of the customer-centric attributes.

Table 4

Customer-Centric Attributes

Attributes	*n*	%
Success strategies	5	100
Consistency	2	40
Loyalty/Trust	3	60
Service	5	100
Word of mouth	5	100

Note. *n* = the number of businesses interviewed that cited this attribute. *%* = the percentage of businesses interviewed that cited this attribute

Employee retention. All business owners who had employees placed an emphasis on the importance of employee retention. Three of the firms relied on long-time employees. Participant A employed several strategies to maintain employees including paying a fair wage, periodic raises, and overtime resulting in the average employee turnover of 3 to 6 years. Participant B, a firm composed of part retail products and part services, encountered heavy employee turnover because of the difficulty in finding qualified employees. Participant B strived to treat employees with respect and pray that they stayed with you. Participant D used a unique strategy to retain customers by hiring semiretired workers with decades of experience in trades related to products the store sold. This respect for employee excellence is consistent with appreciative leadership (Moore, Cangemi, & Ingram, 2013). Appreciative leaders search for the best in their employees, providing a culture of positivity that later translates to employee retention and loyalty.

Employee healthcare. Although I did not ask interview questions related to healthcare costs, one firm's participant cited the high cost of healthcare as an issue. Participant B said that healthcare costs were killing them, and the firm could not afford to buy coverage for their employees.

Employee salary. A third dimension of the people theme was employee salaries. Participants A and E mentioned they offer fair salaries. Participant B said their firm does not have a lot of money but treats their employees with respect.

No single action or strategy by employers in the 21st Century workplace can expect to keep employees in their workplace. An employer must be equipped to deal with the cultural shift in employee attitudes toward achievement to include a job hopping mentality (Ramesh & Vasuki, 2013).

All firms recognized the importance of maintaining synergistic relationships with their customers. Participants mentioned a number of attributes as important to leading to profitability. These included consistency, loyalty/trust, service, and word of mouth.

Consistency. Owner dedication is essential to the survival of the small business. Owners must be active in their business to allow customers to see them on a regular basis. Participant D said that as the owner, customers like to see him every day. Participant E said that consistency is more than conceptual; the owner must be willing to put the work behind it.

Loyalty/Trust. Participants A, B, and D stated that customers' loyalty and trust also play an important part in maintaining profits. Customers are confident that these small business owners will be honest and not lie, instilling trust and loyalty to their firms.

Customer service. As expected, service is important to small business owners, one of the hallmarks that differentiate them from big-box stores. Service takes on a variety of forms in small businesses. Participant C attempts to memorize names of frequent customers to make them feel welcome. Participants A and D offer unique items not offered at big-box stores. A defining attribute of small business is their ability to give the personal touch to customers by greeting them, helping them find merchandise, offering suggestions, and remembering who they are. All five business owners indicated that customer service was critical to the success and profitability of their firm.

Word of mouth advertising. Because small business' owners are usually on small budgets, they must rely on means other than expensive advertising to promote their businesses. All five participants cited word of mouth as an important element in their firms' survival. Participant B indicated that word of mouth was a principal marketing tool for them. Older firms that were well established also relied on word of mouth and did not feel the need to advertise since "everyone knows where they are." Mitchell, Hutchinson, Quinn, and Gilmore (2015) concluded that these businesses are doing branding using word of mouth communication. Mitchell et al. acknowledged that most branding by SMEs is informal and difficult because of a lack of resources. However, branding occurs each time a customer interaction occurs that leads to word of mouth communication (Mitchell et al., 2015).

Emergent Theme 2: Finance

Theme 2 centers on financial issues of the small business. In Interview Questions 4 and 5, I asked business owners how they addressed barriers encountered since the arrival of the big-box store. Table 5 summarizes the barrier attributes and the percent of firms affected.

Table 5

Financial Attributes

Attributes	*n*	%
Business practices	2	40
Government regulations	2	40
Location and time	2	40
Marketing	5	100
Profits	5	100

Note. *n* = the number of businesses interviewed that cited this attribute. *%* = the percentage of businesses interviewed that cited this attribute

Business practices. Two participants (B and E) cited business practices by the big-box stores as a barrier to their profitability. Specifically, they cited the purchasing power of the big-box and what they consider unfair business practices by pricing products below cost. Bressler (2012) stated that one effective strategy for competitive advantage is that of offering a tactic that is difficult for the competitor to duplicate. The big-box store has successfully employed this strategy through bulk purchasing and below market pricing, neither of which are an option for a small business owner with relatively scarce resources.

Government regulations. Small business owners often struggle to meet government regulations and requirements, particularly when those regulations are expensive to meet. As mentioned earlier regarding healthcare, Participant B found that meeting the healthcare requirements of “Obamacare is killing us. If something doesn’t happen, more and more people are going to go out [of business].” Participant E also struggled meeting government regulations because of complex requirements associated with his type of business.

Location and time. Only Participant C indicated that location was a barrier. Participant C’s business is located one block from an arterial road and is not easily seen from that road to take advantage of the drive-by traffic and potential business. A poor location can cause higher costs and reduced profits (Khaleda & Murayama, 2015). Likewise, only Participant E cited the time required to run a business as a barrier. He said that most people are not willing to put in the time investment needed to be successful. His firm has been in its current location for over 75 years, but sacrifices were required to have that type of longevity.

Marketing. Several business owners talked about the difficulties of marketing as a small business owner. Participants B, C, and D indicated that the cost of advertising was prohibitive. Most of the firms no longer engage traditional advertising such as newspaper ads or bulk mailings. Three business owners (Participants A, B, and E) mentioned employing social media (primarily Facebook) to stay in touch with customers. Taneja and Toombs (2014) stated that the use of social media marketing has exploded in small businesses providing a means for visibility, viability, and sustainability.

Participant B engaged in several innovative methods to reach out to customers besides traditional marketing. This same firm posted the largest net profit of firms interviewed that provided profit/loss statements. Marketing strategies employed by this participant include community involvement, creating databases, tracking, and a rewards program. Literature supports the concept of improved sales when community involvement increases (Gerhardt, Hazen, & Lewis, 2014). Participant B was very active in community events and local fundraising. Particiapnt B was also a proponent of local Chamber of Commerce participation.

To provide customer service excellence and a method to reach out to customers on a periodic basis, Participant B created a database to follow previous visits to their store and a method of tracking to prompt customers when it is time to come in again. In addition, each customer who visits their business in a given week receives a personal contact within a week or two with a phone call or a thank you card. Participant B follows all sales dollars and expenses very closely and uses software to track how much profit they generate week to week compared to the previous year, which enables them to see trends.

Lastly, Participant B provides a rewards program for customer loyalty. The rewards card is similar to those used at many grocery stores where the buyer receives points or discounts towards future purchases based on the dollar amount of their purchase.

Profits. As could be expected, each of the small business' owners were concerned about their financial bottom line. I asked each participant in Question 1 why they believed they have remained profitable since the opening of the big-box store. Two participants (B and E) responded that they do not try to compete with the big-box store. They believe they probably cannot compete on price, but they can offer superior customer service that does not exist at the big-box store. Participant B tells customers they may be able to purchase a similar product at the big-box store, but they will not have the superior service to follow up on that product after installation. In addition, Participant B stated that products with similar names sold at the big-box store do not have the same physical composition and do not have the same quality standard as their products. Participant C no longer works “to increase profits” but strives to meet at least last year’s sales. Participant A and D stated they stock products not carried at the big-box store, creating product differentiation for their stores. Participant D shared that when the big-box store opened there was a small dip in sales, but eventually those customers returned looking for the personal service and unique items participant D offers in addition to competitive pricing. These attributes of generating customer value and providing an experience or product that is difficult to replicate and provides a competitive advantage, which is consistent with the findings from the literature (Bressler, 2012).

Emergent Theme 3: Organizational Strategies

Theme 3 addresses additional issues and strategies small business owners use that affect profitability. As more firms turn towards the triple bottom line for evaluation, environmental or sustainability concepts becomes more important. I also explored innovative strategies, attitudes, and organizational structure as they relate to profitability.

Table 6 contains a summary of the operational strategies demonstrated by the small businesses. Three businesses indicated the presence of environmentally conscious customers, while two participated in networks to gain market advantage and three created niche markets.

Table 6

Organizational Strategies

Strategies	*n*	%
Environmental	3	75
Networks	2	40
Niche market segment	3	60

Note. *n* = the number of businesses interviewed that cited this attribute. *%* = the percentage of businesses interviewed that cited this attribute

Environmental. Three participants indicated the presence of environmentally conscious customers (Participants A, B, and C). The types of businesses interviewed in this study varied widely, producing responses regarding organics to recycling, depending on the nature of the business. Though Question 5a specifically asked about environmental sensitivities of their customers, participants did not identify environmental sustainability as a major issue in maintaining or increasing profits. The literature supports sustainability as a growing dimension, though often ignored by business owners unless there is perceived or actual economic gain (Gupta, 2013)

Networks. Participant B is an independently owned and operated business that belongs to a network of similar businesses. This network provides invaluable guidance to the small business members who meet periodically to discuss common issues and problems. Mitchell et al. (2015) confirmed the importance of networks to small business as a means of exchanging ideas and innovations. This network association led

Participant B to hire an outside consultant who helps businesses grow. Participant B stated that because of this action “our business exploded within a year.” Participant B stated that to make money, you must spend money, indicating it was well worth the investment of the consultant. Some of the innovative tools mentioned in the marketing section above were born out of advice from the consultant. Participant D is also part of a larger network of independent business owners that enables his business to offer competitive pricing because of the larger volume purchasing power.

Niche market. Three of the five business owners interviewed said they had created niche markets to compete with the big-box retail. Prior to the entry of the big-box store, Participant A did not consider his business to be servicing a niche market. Once the big-box store entered within 2 miles, Participant A changed the focus of his business and moved from selling items in the same market segment to those that differentiated his business from the big-box. Participant D made no changes with the entry of the big-box store towards differentiation since it already existed in his extensive line of inventory for a specific market segment. Participant C also created a niche market for products not sold at the big-box store while still maintaining some inventory similar to the big-box store. While two participants did not have niche markets, they had specialized business that exhibited exceptional customer service that offered personalized care and followup.

Reviewing the findings in this study revealed that a variety of strategies is required to be successful. Business owners using all three themes of (a) people concepts, (b) financial concepts, and (c) organizational concepts were the most successful as demonstrated by their profit and loss statements. These themes somewhat parallel existing literature related to the triple bottom line (TBL) that measures the success of a business using social, economic and environmental criteria. While measurement of the TBL constructs is quite controversial and difficult to quantify, the literature supports growing interest in doing so to gain competitive advantage (Venkatraman, 2015).

While not all of the participants in this study were innovative, some were. Innovation is essential to creating competitive advantage. The ability of small business owners to be flexible and respond rapidly encourages innovation on a continual basis (Taneja, 2016). Operating in niche markets enables the business owner direct contact with customers and the ability to innovate spontaneously because of customer feedback (Taneja, 2016). Three of the five firms were niche markets while the remaining two were specialized.

Networking or other strategic alliances allow small business to capitalize on economies of scale. The literature supports strategic collaboration for SMEs who experience economic, small markets, and fluctuating demand (Taneja, 2016). Participant B and Participant D are both participants in larger networks. While the profit/loss statement for Participant D was not available, the profit/loss statement for Participant B showed the largest profit of participants interviewed.

Toften and Hammervoll (2013) suggested the following five actions for successful niche market owners: (a) Provide the best products possible that meet the needs of your customers, (b) develop internal capabilities that foster sustainability, (c) protect your niche market through customer relationships, product specialization and similar means, (d) promote word of mouth communication, and (e) have a growth plan. While the literature offers no definitive definition of a niche market, Toften and Hammervoll (2013) offered that it is a firm that offers a "valued product to a narrow part of the market with differentiated needs" (page 280). This definition fits all five of the businesses in this study. While I did not observe all five actions in any one business, the data collected supported the presence of at least one of them in each business.

The conceptual framework for this study was systems theory. A systems approach works best when it is both effective and efficient (Mangal, 2013). Some characteristics of efficient systems include resiliency, self-organization, and hierarchy, though not all elements are present in every system (Mangal, 2013). As demonstrated from their profit and loss statements, the small businesses in this study that exhibited these key elements were also the most successful financially. The resilient firms were those that had the ability to recover when facing difficulties or to adapt to changing circumstances. Participant B exhibited resiliency in the hiring of a consultant when business was waning. Several firms (Participants B and D) exhibited self-organization with the formation of networks. The last key element in this systems approach, hierarchy, was present only in the sense that small business owners fit within a hierarchy of business types within their community. The ability to work efficiently supports firm goals and greater functionality with the least amount of detractors (Mangel, 2013).

Using a systems approach, I identified three themes that contribute to competitive advantage. The data support that no one strategy is sufficient for success to maintain a competitive advantage in their markets since a big-box store opened. Using systems theory enabled me to review the businesses as a whole with system-wide implications on decision making by small business owners (Frerichs et al., 2016). The examination of the people involved (customers and employees), the financial aspects, and the organizational attitudes and structure provided a holistic view of the firms supporting the use of systems theory conceptual framework.

Applications to Professional Practice

The findings in this study contribute to the understanding of small business owners' survival and competitive advantage with the entry of a big-box store within 2 miles. The findings are significant for small business owners who want to maintain or increase profits in their niche markets despite the entrance of the big-box retailer. Employee and customer satisfaction are particularly vital to the success of small businesses. The ability to leverage these groups to create employee retention and grow customers is one facet for creating competitive advantage. The findings indicate that respect, instilling a sense of loyalty, and fair treatment of employees was keys to successful employee retention. Growing the customer base required innovative strategies and flexibility.

The findings showed a variety of barriers faced by the small businesses in maintaining or increasing profits since the entry of the big-box store. Methods used by the small businesses to break down these barriers included innovative strategies such as becoming more involved in the community, using a database to track customer needs, providing a customer rewards program, word of mouth, and social media communications as primary means of communication. While the use of social media complements and reinforces word of mouth communication, innovation in meeting customer needs provides the highest form of competitive advantage.

As noted from their profit and loss statements, the small business owners who developed organizational strategies were more successful than those who did not. The adoption of innovative strategies at the organizational level can lead to increased profits and competitive advantage. Innovative strategies demonstrated in this study include networking, hiring outside consultants, and using technology to track and reach out to the customers. Clearly, small business owners develop synergies from networking and collaboration. Adopting innovative strategies is one-step toward creating synergies for developing and sustaining a competitive advantage.

Implications for Social Change

Small businesses are the largest source of job creation in the United States providing 63.3% of all new jobs between 1992 and 2013 (SBA, 2016). The results of this study could provide strategies for small business owners faced with the entry of a big-box store within 2 miles of their location. The sustainability of small business in communities brings a variety of benefits to include social, economic, environmental, and even aesthetic (Beltrán, 2015). These benefits translate into tangible results such as a reduction in crime, increased social interaction, a stronger sense of identity, increased diversity, and more equity (Beltrán, 2015). While the business license data revealed a steady decline in commercial properties within the jurisdiction studied (between 2008 and 2016), clearly small businesses are worth preserving and protecting. Empowering local small business owners with sustainable business strategies can enable more businesses to remain profitable, leading to an improved standard of living and urban redevelopment for local communities.

Recommendations for Action

Small business owners located within proximity to a big-box store with a similar market mix should pay attention to the results of this study. I identified three themes that were common to these surviving small business owners. Existing and future small business owners and entrepreneurs should focus on people (employees and customers), barriers to financial growth, and organizational constructs supporting organizational strategies, processes, and tools.

The findings indicate that innovation, product differentiation, and flexibility lead to achieving and sustaining profitability. Business owners can catalyze innovation from their people, finances, and organizational structure. Investment and reinvestment into the business with capital, time and sweat equity lead to success.

Secondly, I recommend that small business owners collaborate and build upon the synergies collaboration creates to brainstorm about business problems and opportunities common to all small business. Opportunities for collaboration occur at the local level at the Chamber of Commerce and through cooperatives of similar business types.

Lastly, I recommend local governments investment in their communities to ensure small businesses continue to survive and thrive. The American Planning Association (APA) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to providing leadership in the development of communities. Local governments are often composed of land use planners who are members of the APA. These people can play a vital part in drafting ordinances, regulations, and policies to ensure the future of small business in America. Annual conferences by the APA are an ideal place to share findings from this study. In addition, I will share a summary of this study with the local Chamber of Commerce, the city involved in the study, and each participant. Upon request, I will provide a complete copy of the study.

Recommendations for Further Research

Because this qualitative study is not generalizable, researchers should consider other small businesses in different jurisdictions that have survived the entry of big-box retail (Leung, 2015). Quantitative researchers could also investigate the possibility that a change in the number of small businesses was a result of the big-box entry. A longitudinal study would be most reflective of this type of study. Taking this study a step further to investigate a specific small business type industry across several jurisdictions could also reveal additional strategies for small business survivability.

The primary limitations or weaknesses in this study were the accuracy of data from the business owners and their potential biases. I minimized these limitations with member checking and methodological triangulation to assure the accuracy of the data in this study.

Reflections

My time in this DBA journey has been an incredible learning experience. Not only have I grown as a practitioner but as an academic. I have learned it is difficult to put aside biases not just my personal ones, but also those of the small business owners interviewed. I had to remind more than one business owner that this study was not about bashing big-box retailers. Though I worked in a firm that worked closely developing big-box stores across the nation, I took steps to control my bias through bracketing and setting aside my personal beliefs and bias during the study.

I learned that there are common elements in successful small businesses. These include passion, investment in your business and your people, and hard work, which translate into intense hours and sacrifices to achieve success. My respect for the hard working small business owners in America has greatly increased, and I will gladly support local small businesses whenever possible.

Conclusion

Small businesses are the backbone of the United States creating job, wealth and in turn a sense of community. The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to identify and explore strategies for maintaining or growing profit margins that small business owners can use post big-box store market entry.

The findings are significant to informing small business owners located within proximity of a big-box store on possible strategies to maintain and grow profits. Preserving and growing small businesses influences where and how we live through social, economic and environmental benefits. This preservation of small businesses results in positive social change.

The study concluded with three emergent themes that can contribute to small business maintaining or increasing profits. The three themes were (a) employees and customers, (b) finances, and (c) organizational strategies. Key findings within the themes indicated that innovation, product differentiation, and flexibility were critical to profitability. The ability to maintain and grow profits for small business owners depends on a combination of elements. These are (1) their ability to provide employee and customer satisfaction, (2) to overcome barriers with the use of innovative strategies such as community involvement, databases, customer tracking, word of mouth advertising, and social media, and (3) developing organizational strategies for networking, hiring consultants, and using technology. Leveraging the people, finances, and organizational strategies of the firm can create synergies for developing and sustaining competitive advantage. Investment and reinvestment into the business with capital, time and *sweat equity* were catalysts for success.

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Appendix A: Informational Letter

Date

Name of Business Owner
Name of Business
Address
City, State Zip

Dear Business Owner

This letter is to ask for your assistance in an upcoming project that may benefit small businesses within your community.

I am a doctoral student at Walden University and will be conducting a study with the purpose to explore how local small business owners can remain or increase profit margins with a directly competing big-box retailer. One portion of the study will conduct interviews with five small business owners in Kansas City, Missouri that have survived the entry and are located within a 2-mile radius of a big-box retailer.

Any information you provide during the course of this study will be held strictly confidential. Your personal information will not be used external to the research project, nor will your name or any other identifying information be reflected in any study reports.

Attached is a consent form that is required to be signed should you agree to participate. I will contact you within the next week by phone to arrange the transmission of the consent form and to schedule a date for the interview.

Thank you for your consideration in taking part in this research project that will benefit you as a business owner in learning strategies for retaining profits for your firm.

Respectfully,

Katherine Kem
DBA Student
Walden University

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

- Record Start Time
- Introduce myself
- Review Consent Form
- Confirm participant has a copy of sign consent form
- Answer any questions
- Turn on recording device
- Review demographic information and eligibility criteria
- Ask interview questions

Demographic information

1. Participant name
2. Participant coded name
3. Interview date
4. Participant’s title (i.e. President, CEO, Manager, etc.)
5. Participant’s company name
6. Participant’s coded company name
7. Current business address

Eligibility criteria

1. Company type (i.e. sole proprietor, small business)
2. Participant has no prior relationship with the interviewer or the research project.
3. Business was open and doing business prior to big-box store for at least one year?
4. The business location is within a 2-mile radius of the big-box store.

5. The company has remained profitable since the opening of the big-box store.

Interview Questions

1. Why do you believe your firm has remained profitable since the opening of the big-box store?

   a. What method of evaluation do you use for determining your success? (e.g. Profits alone, growth of the company, triple bottom line: people, planet & profits)

2. What strategies do you employ to maintain or increase profits since the opening of the big-box store?

3. What barriers to implementing the strategies have you encountered?

4. How have you addressed these barriers?

5. What strategies have you employed to attract or maintain customers since the entry of the big-box retail?

   a. Do your customers seem to be concerned with sustainability (i.e. green building or environmental concerns)?

   c. What strategies have you employed related to employee retention and profits?

   d. How do you compete with the big-box store for your products that are in the same market sector? How is your firm marketing different from others?

6. How do you develop the long-term growth strategy for your firm?

   a. How long have you had a strategic plan in place? How often is it updated?

7. How do you measure the success of your strategies for addressing the big-box store opening?

8. What else can you share about your business related to sustaining profitability within

your company since the big-box store has opened?

End interview

Discuss member checking

Request profit and loss information

Ask participant if they wish to receive a copy of the executive summary

Thank participant and confirm contact information for follow-up questions

Record Interview End Time

- End Interview Protocol

Appendix C: Interview Questions for Small Businesses

1. Why do you believe your firm is profitable or unprofitable since the opening of the big-box store?
2. What strategies do you employ to maintain or increase profits since the opening of the big-box store?
3. What barriers to implementing the strategies have you encountered?
4. How have you addressed these barriers?
5. What strategies have you employed to attract or maintain customers since the entry of the big-box retail?
6. How do you develop the long-term growth strategy for the firm?
7. How do you measure the success of your strategies for addressing the big-box store opening?
8. What else can you share about your business related to sustaining profitability within your company since the big-box store has opened?

Appendix D: Permissions

Original E-mail

From : Stacy Mitchell [redacted]
Date : 08/17/2012 11:41 AM
To : Katherine Kem [redacted]
Subject : Re: Permission to use Graphic in Dissertation

Hi Kathy,

You are welcome to include the graphic in your dissertation as long as you include a line saying:
This graphic is from the Institute for Local Self-Reliance, a national nonprofit research and educational organization, and is reprinted here with permission.

Best wishes!

All the best,
Stacy

+
Stacy Mitchell
Institute for Local Self-Reliance

http://www.ilsr.org

[redacted]

The Hometown Advantage Bulletin
delivered monthly to your inbox
http://bit.ly/hometown-advantage

On Jul 26, 2012, at 9:07 PM, Katherine Kem <[redacted]> wrote:

Ms Mitchell
I am currently a DBA student at Walden University working on my final paper. I am requesting permission to use your graphic in my research from the ISLR website that shows the relationship of big box stores to other formats that is found at the following webiste http://www.ilsr.org/how-big-are-big-box-stores-graphs/.
Thanks,
Kathy Kem
DBA Student
Walden University

Katherine Kem [redacted]

RE: Permission to reprint table

Stone, Kenneth E <[redacted]		Wed, Oct 28, 2015 at 11:29 PM
To: Katherine Kem <[redacted]>

Katherine,

Yes, you have my permission to use the adaptation shown below in your DBA program work.

Best regards
Ken

Kenneth E. Stone, Ph.D.
Professor Emeritus of Economics
Iowa State University
[redacted]

From: Katherine Kem [redacted]
Sent: Wednesday, October 28, 2015 5:42 PM
To: Stone, Kenneth E
Subject: Permission to reprint table

Dr. Stone, I am currently enrolled in the DBA program of Walden University and am writing to ask permission to use an adaptation of some information found in "The effect of Wal-Mart stores on businesses I host town and surrounding towns in Iowa (1988). Below is the table that I am proposing to use based on your writing.

Thank you for your consideration.

Table 4
Effects on Per Capita Retail Sales, on Average Compared to State Average

Positive effects

Negative effects

General merchandise

Eating & drinking establishments

Home furnishings stores

Total sales

Food sales

Building materials

Specialty stores

Apparel stores

Services

Note. Merchandise groups that showed positive (increased sales) or negative (decreased sales) effects with big-box store entry in towns in Iowa. Total per capita sales in big-box store towns increased at a slightly faster rate than the state average. Adapted from The effect of Wal-Mart stores on businesses in host towns and surrounding towns in Iowa, by K.E. Stone, 1988, Ames, IA: Iowa State University. Copyright 1988 by Iowa State University. Reprinted with permission.

--
Kathy Kem

Appendix E: NIH Certificate

Certificate of Completion

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) Office of Extramural Research certifies that **Katherine Kem** successfully completed the NIH Web-based training course "Protecting Human Research Participants".

Date of completion: 06/23/2015

Certification Number: 1782015