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Developing Small and Medium Enterprises in the Nigerian Oil and Gas Sector

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This is to certify that the doctoral study by

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Abstract

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Abstract

Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) participation in the Nigerian oil and gas industry has remained low despite their importance in income generation, employment, local capacity building, and poverty eradication. The purpose of this multiple case study was to explore the strategies SME owners use to improve profitability in the Nigerian oil and gas industry. The target population consisted of 5 business owners who had successfully managed SMEs in Warri, Delta State, Nigeria for more than 5 years. The resource-based view and Porter's 5 forces of competition served as the conceptual framework for the study. Data collection was through semistructured interviews and review of company documents to triangulate the data. Data analysis included transcription, coding, querying, interpreting and reporting the themes, and the use of member checking strengthened the trustworthiness of interpretations. Findings suggested themes of low-cost strategy, knowledge of the business environment, competent personnel, collaborative partnerships, integrity, and financial management. These findings may contribute to positive social change because SME business leaders could use low-cost strategies, hire competent personnel, collaborate with other partners, and demonstrate integrity in financial management. Doing so may improve profitability, generate employment, reduce poverty, and enhance standards of living.

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to Chief (Dr) Michael Ikuku. Without your unwavering support and encouragement, I would not have embarked on and completed this doctoral journey. To my children: Oluwaseun Damilola Edesiri and Ifeoluwa Abosede Okiemute, for a greater tomorrow. Through it all, my ladies and I got to this! I owe it all to you my heavenly Father; thank you, Almighty God for the life that you have given me.

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And to my father, Daniel Ovwighadjeren Osiobe, I know you are up there, somewhere, smiling and very proud of me. I love you daddy!

Table of Contents

List of Tables

Section 1: Foundation of the Study

The oil sector makes up 95% of Nigeria's foreign exchange earnings (Ayoola & Olasanmi, 2013) yet small and medium enterprises' (SME) participation in the Nigerian oil and gas industry is low. According to Abdulkabir , Sidique, Rahman, and Hook (2015), low technological capacity, slow personnel manpower development, lack of funding by financial institutions, inadequate legislation, poor infrastructural development, and lack of collaboration between indigenous contractors and their foreign counterparts are reasons for low local content participation in the sub-sector. Increasing SMEs' involvement in the oil sector is a means for indigenous entrepreneurs to build their capacities, reduce capital flight, and attain sustainable economic development (Ajayi, 2008).

Background of the Problem

The oil and gas industry is crucial to Nigeria for revenues, investments, countrywide growth, and development (Monday, 2015). Foreign investment has increased in the industry, but participation by SMEs has remained low despite their importance in income generation, employment, and poverty eradication (Odeleye, 2014). The sector yields more than $8 billion in revenue annually, but only about 10% of this revenue accrues to indigenous companies (United Nations Commerce and Trade Department, 2006).

The Nigerian oil and gas industry has flourished since the discovery of crude oil in 1956, but indigenous business leaders began to venture into the industry in the 1990s (Odeleye, 2014). Developments such as the divesting of assets by the integrated oil companies (IOCs), granting of pioneer status incentives to indigenous exploration companies, and selling off of marginal fields by the Nigerian government were opportunities for increased SME participation in the sector (KPMG, 2014).

There are great investment opportunities for SMEs in the upstream, midstream, and downstream sectors of the oil industry (Oyelaran-Oyeyinka, 2012). SME participation is important to the oil industry because SMEs provide direct benefits to Nigerian society. These benefits include employment generation and the significant linkage to industrialization and manufacturing processes.

Problem Statement

SMEs' participation in the Nigerian oil and gas industry is low despite initiatives to encourage involvement (Aigboduwa & Oisamoje, 2013; Okpe, 2015). While oil and gas production accounts for 75.6% of foreign exchange earnings and 84% of budgetary revenues (World Bank, 2014), SMEs in the oil and gas sector account for approximately 3.6% of total SME investments in Nigeria (CBN, 2016; National Bureau of Statistics, 2014). The general business problem is that SMEs are not competing favorably in the Nigerian oil and gas industry. The specific business problem is that some SME owners lack strategies to compete favorably in the Nigerian oil and gas industry.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple-case study was to explore the strategies some SME owners use to compete favorably in the Nigerian oil and gas industry. The target population consisted of five owners of SMEs in Delta State, Nigeria listed on the Nigerian Petroleum Exchange (NiPEX) with ongoing contracts in the oil and gas industry. I used semi-structured interviews and review of company documents to collect data for this study. The implications for positive social change include the potential for SME owners to share best practices and strategies to improve company profitability and growth, generate employment, reduce poverty, and enhance standards of living. Increased profitability can lead to the prosperity of SME owners while benefitting employees, their families, and communities.

Nature of the Study

Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method constitute the three types of research methods (Yin, 2014). Qualitative researchers utilize largely narrative or descriptive methods and inductive reasoning to determine outcomes, make generalizations and predictions (Astalin, 2013). On the other hand, quantitative researchers maintain place a premium on the number and volume of data collected (Anyan, 2013). A mixed methods researcher uses both qualitative and quantitative methods in a single study (Wisdom, Cavaleri, Onwuegbuzie, & Green, 2012).

A quantitative method was not appropriate for addressing the specific business problem in this study, which required gaining insight into the participants’ individual or personal experiences. I did not use the quantitative method because the quantitative methods are numerically oriented, and do not allow respondents to describe their feelings, thoughts, frames of references, and experiences using their own words (Yilmaz, 2013). The basic rationale for a mixed method is that by combining qualitative and quantitative methods, researchers gain access to qualitative and quantitative data (Lund, 2012). A mixed method approach was not appropriate for this study because quantitative data are not required to explore the business strategies of SME owners. Qualitative methodology was appropriate for this research because, as described by Yin (2014), it contains guidelines for deeper exploration of participant meanings to get diverse views on a phenomenon.

Petty, Thomas, and Stew (2012) listed ethnography, phenomenology, and case study as the predominant research designs for qualitative research studies. Dawson (2014) stated that ethnographic research involves the exploration of the social and cultural beliefs, feelings, and meanings of relationships among people. I did not select an ethnographic study design because I was not studying a set of cultural beliefs. Phenomenological researchers use the participants' words to develop a description of events or experiences (Cope, 2011). Phenomenological research was not methodologically appropriate because I was not researching individual worldviews or lived experiences. Case study design provides a framework to understand complex social situations, which can include social behavior as well as managerial and organizational processes (Yin, 2014). The case study design was appropriate for this study because the purpose of this study was to explore the business strategies some SME owners use to compete favorably in the Nigerian oil and gas industry.

Multiple case studies are designed to capture the richness, diversity, and intensity of a given phenomenon from multiple viewpoints (Lauckner, Paterson & Kuupa, 2012). I used a multiple case study design to collect and analyze multiple data sources to explore the business strategies SME owners use to compete favorably in the Nigerian oil and gas industry. While multiple case study researchers use this design to include diverse perspectives (Tsang, 2013), they risk the losing the particularity of individual cases (Lauckner, Paterson, & Kuupa, 2012). To mitigate this risk, I restricted my study to five cases that allowed me to explore individual cases adequately.

Research Question

What business strategies do SME owners use to compete favorably in the Nigerian oil and gas industry?

Interview Questions

1. What business strategies do you implement to be profitable in your business?
2. What factors drive your business competition and profits?
3. What resources and capability in your business help you to sustain a competitive advantage?
4. How do the oil and gas industry forces influence your business?
5. What else would you like to share about your experience of becoming a successful business owner in the oil and gas industry?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual frameworks for this study were the resource-based view (RBV) and Porter's five forces of competition. Researchers use the RBV theory proposed by Wernerfelt (1984) to interpret SME growth on the assumption that a combination of long-lasting resources and capabilities leads to firm performance (Barney, 1991; Peteraf, 1993). According to Barney (1991), the RBV contains assumptions that an organization possesses and exploits resources and capabilities that are valuable, rare, and inimitable/non-substitutable, and the organization may use these resources to develop and sustain a competitive advantage. Wernerfelt (1984) developed the RBV based on his observation that an organization's resources and capabilities provide a strong basis for profitability. The tenets of the RBV are resources, capabilities, and competitive advantage. The successful performance of a firm in any given industry depends on its employees' capabilities and the resources at its disposal (Johnson and Bicen, 2014).

The five forces model developed by Michael E. Porter (1979) provides support to the RBV framework for the study. Porter's model of competition identifies five competitive forces that businesses confront in their environments. The five forces include (a) threats of new entrants, (b) bargaining power of buyers, (c) bargaining power of suppliers, (d) threat of substitute products, and (e) rivalry between existing competitors. Leaders can use their competitive strategies to establish a position within their industries where these competitive forces will do the least harm (Porter, 1980). Porter's model provides an industry-based view for determining long-term profitability within a specific industrial sector (Grigore, 2014).

By combining these theories, I created a conceptual lens to explore both the strategies within organizations and the external forces that help businesses compete favorably. Small business owners face challenges that are relevant to the RBV and the Porter's five forces (Sebestova & Nowakova, 2014). Therefore, the integration of both theories helped me demonstrate how SMEs owners could gain competitive advantage and develop successful business strategies.

Operational Definitions

Business strategy: The means by which an organization sets out to achieve its desired objectives and improve business performance. It contains the details of how the business leaders will compete in the marketplace, maximize competitive advantage, and minimize competitive disadvantage (Alsudiri, Al-Karaghouli, & Eldabi, 2013)

Competitive advantage: The implementation of a value creation strategy not simultaneously implemented by any current or potential competitors (Barney, 1991).

External environment: The industrial conditions, entities, events, trends, and factors faced by an organization that influence its activities and choices (Guo & Cao, 2014). It is within the external environment that the firm relates to customers, competitors, and regulatory bodies (Hulbert, Gilmore & Carson, 2013). External factors determine an industry's opportunities and risks as well as influence the life, growth and the development of the firm.

Organizational capabilities: Practices or routines used to acquire, reconfigure, or assimilate knowledge for the organization. These represent the identity of a firm as perceived by both employees and customers. These capabilities contribute to the firm's ability to perform better than competitors using a distinctive set of resources, systems, and structures (Boonpattarakan, 2012, Uhlaner, van Stel, Duplat & Zhou, 2013).

Resources: All assets, capabilities, organizational processes, attributes, information, and knowledge controlled by an organization to enable employees to develop and implement strategies to improve its efficiency and effectiveness (Barney, 1991). The two main types of resources are intangible knowledge-based resources, and tangible property-based resources such physical and financial resources (Barney, 1991, Franco & Haase, 2013).

Small and medium enterprises (SMEs): Non-subsidiary, independent companies that employ less than a given number of employees. This number varies across countries. The most frequent upper limit designating an SME is 250 employees, as in the European Union. However, some countries set the limit at 200 employees, while the United States considers SMEs to include firms with fewer than 500 employees (OECD, 2005). References to SMEs within this study are SMEs with 20 – 250 employees.

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

Assumptions

Assumptions are beliefs that are essential to the research but are not verifiable (Simon, & Goes, 2011). As the researcher, I assumed the participants in the study had sufficient understanding of their business classification as SME, their operating environment, and their capabilities and resources. I also assumed that participants would give truthful and accurate answers to the interview questions. Finally, I assumed that the geographical area was large enough to provide good data for the study.

Limitations

Limitations are constraints that are beyond the researchers' control that may affect the study's end results (Simon & Goes, 2011). Limitations are inherent in every study as they flow from methodology and design choices. My use of qualitative methods using interviews to collect data may have introduced researcher and participants' biases.

Another limitation to this study may have been that some business owners may not have possessed enough knowledge to answer the questions fully.

Delimitations

Delimitations are factors within a study that can limit its scope and define its boundaries (Simon & Goes, 2011). Delimitations result from specific choices made by a researcher such as choice of research questions, theoretical framework, and participants. In this study, I placed an emphasis on SMEs that provide services to oil companies in Warri, Delta State in Nigeria, and only SME owners participated in the study. I also limited my study to only SMEs that employ between 20 and 250 employees.

Significance of the Study

This study is of value to business leaders because of its significant contributions to business practices and social change. The ability of SME owners to develop strategies to compete in the oil and gas sector may generate best practices in the oil and gas industry. Furthermore, the development of such strategies could become a guide for new and existing entrepreneurs to improve the growth and development of SMEs in the sector. Improved business could result in increased profits and additional job opportunities, thus promoting positive social change for the community.

Contribution to Business Practice

The findings of this study may help improve oil and gas industry business practices and strategies. Leaders' ability to perform well in the oil and gas sector depends on their existing capabilities, specific policy decisions, and their level of interactions within the industry (Tordo, Tracy, & Arfaa, 2010). Researchers may find this study useful in supporting efforts to improve the economy, generate employment, alleviate poverty, and enhance support activities for SMEs.

Implications for Social Change

Recent research by Eniola (2014), Ikharehon (2014), and Onuaguluchi (2015) shows the extent of economic development and performance of SMEs in Nigeria. However, there is limited research that applies to the oil and gas sector. Vast financial investments in the upstream oil and gas sector have not yielded many benefits to the average Nigerian (Ovadia, 2013). SMEs serve the social goal of equitable income distribution (Ongori and Migiro, 2010). The findings of this study may contribute to positive social change if results provide SME owners with best practices and strategies to improve company profitability and growth, generate employment, reduce poverty, and enhance standards of living. Increased profitability could lead to the prosperity of SME owners and benefit employees, their families, communities, and the local economy.

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

Opening Narrative

In conducting the literature review, I used the following databases to search for relevant research studies: ABI/INFORM Complete, Business Source Complete, EBSCO Host, Emerald Management, Google Scholar, ProQuest Central, and ProQuest Dissertations & Theses, Sage Premier, ScienceDirect, and the World Bank Open Knowledge Repository. I used the following keywords when conducting my searches: *SME*, *Nigerian oil industry*, *resource-based view (RBV)*, *Porter's five forces*, *resources and capabilities*, and *competitive advantage*.

Organization of the review. I have organized this review into five significant topic categories including: (a) published relevant conceptual and empirical works, (b) critical analysis and synthesis of the conceptual frameworks, (c) analysis of supporting and contrasting theories, (d) critical analysis and synthesis of the literature themes, and (e) a description of the relationship of the study to previous research and findings.

Literature search strategy. I commenced the literature search with an inquiry of SME development, reviewing literature on the topic published within the last 5 years (2013-2017). Next, I conducted a similar review but with a longer date range, starting with Wernerfelt's (1984) resource-based view theory and Porter's (1979) five forces. The additional searches included led me to seminal scholarly work, articles, and presented papers to explore my topic and research question: What business strategies do some owners of SMEs use to compete favorably in the Nigerian oil and gas industry? I also reviewed articles, government and non-governmental data regarding policies, and data on Nigerian SMEs, its economy, and the oil and gas sector. I limited my search to scholarly, peer-reviewed journals as well as current materials published within the past 5 years. I reviewed a few older but relevant and frequently cited seminal works as well as some pertinent but non-peer reviewed material. I reviewed 108 articles, with 85% published within 5 years of this study. Table 1 shows a breakdown of the resources I used for the literature review, by the reference type.

Table 1.

Summary of Sources Researched in Literature Review

Reference Type	Number	Less than 5 years	Greater than 5 years
Scholarly and peer-reviewed journals	90	77	9
Non peered reviewed journals	10	8	6
Books	1	1	0
Total of sources	101	86	15

Application to the Applied Business Problem

In the subsections that follow, I reiterate the purpose of the study and then organized my review of the literature into five topical categories. The categories include: (a) published relevant conceptual and empirical works, beginning with an overview of SMEs, a description of SME development, the Nigerian economy, and the Nigerian oil and gas industry; (b) critical analysis and synthesis of the conceptual frameworks, (c) analysis of supporting and contrasting theories, (d) critical analysis and synthesis of the literature themes (i.e.business strategies, related to the purpose statement); and (e) evidence that shows the relationship of the study to previous research and findings.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative multiple-case study was to explore the business strategies some SME owners use to compete favorably in the Nigerian oil and gas industry. The target population consisted of five owners of SME in Delta State, Nigeria listed on the Nigerian Petroleum Exchange (NiPEX) with ongoing contracts in the oil and gas industry. To collect data for this study, I used semistructured interviews and reviews of company documents. The findings of the study may contribute to positive social change if results provide SME owners with best practices and strategies to improve company profitability and growth, generate employment, reduce poverty, and enhance standards of living. Increased profitability can lead to the prosperity of SME owners as well as benefit employees, their families, and communities.

Published Relevant Conceptual and Empirical Works

Overview of small and medium enterprise. Globally, there are various definitions of SME depending on the country's business culture, the size of the country's population, industry, and level of international economic integration. As early as 2005, the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN), defined SMEs as entities with asset bases of N5 million ($30,000) and not more than N500 million ($3 million) excluding land and buildings), and employing between 11 and 200 people (Johnson, George, Owoyemi, & Adegboye, 2014). The Small and Medium Industries and Equity Investment Schemes (SMIEIS) of Nigeria also defines SMEs as any enterprise with a maximum asset base of N200 million ($1.3 million), excluding land and working capital) and employing not less than 10 or more than 300 people.

Two factors, the number of employees and either turnover or balance sheet total determine the European Union's (EU) definition of SME. According to the EU, a small enterprise has less than 50 employees with less than or equal to a €10 million ($11 million) balance sheet total (Brezinova & Prusova, 2014). A medium enterprise has less than 250 employees with less than or equal to a €50 million balance sheet total. Gibson and Van der Vaart (2008) proposed the use of annual turnover to define SME as a formal enterprise with annual turnover, in U.S. dollar terms, of between 10 and 1000 times the mean per capita gross national income, at purchasing power parity, of the country in which it operates.

Despite the lack of a universal definition, SMEs remain harbingers of change and economic catalysts in industrialized states as they are in the developing world (Eniola, 2014). Mukhtar (2013) explored the problems and prospects of SMEs in Nigeria and identified key characteristics of SMEs. These characteristics of SMEs included small start-up capital, low capital intensity, labor-intensive processes, use of local resources, high mortality rate, and simple management structure such as sole proprietorship or family partnership. Popa and Miricescu (2015) further identified characteristics such as high flexibility, a rapid reorientation towards market demand, and reduced size. SMEs have a competitive advantage over large enterprises in the way they serve local markets and produce various goods with small-scale economies for niche markets. Daou and Karuranga (2013) agree that the small size and client proximity of SMEs enables them to respond quickly to changes and adapt by managing the different opportunities or challenges they may encounter.

SME leaders have contributed to the economic and social development of many countries in both developed and developing nations across the globe (Onuaguluchi, 2015). Onuaguluchi (2015) further observed that globally, SMEs constituted 99.8 percent of all businesses. SMEs contribute over 50% of the gross domestic product

(GDP) in developed countries (Tewari, Skilling, Kumar, & Wu, 2013). In Nigeria, SMEs account for about 75% of employment (Ajayi & Morton, 2015). According to de Wit, and de Kok (2014), SME owners play a significant role in creating employment, improving human resources and entrepreneurship skills, supporting large-scale industries, and setting up new businesses. Ikharehon (2014) asserted that the level of industrialization, modernization, gainful and meaningful employment, income per capital, and equitable distribution of revenue determines the development of many nations.

In the same way, other researchers (Ajayi & Morton, 2015; Brezinova & Prusova; 2014, Yi, 2012) have recognized the importance of SMEs, and have widely accepted the role of small businesses in the economic growth of developing countries. Ilegbinosa and Jumbo (2015) acknowledged the advantages of SMEs to include their contribution to the economy regarding their increment in the output of goods and services; generation of jobs at a moderately low cost of capital, and their contributions toward lessening the disparities in income. Franco and Haase (2013) maintained that SMEs promote innovation, put business ideas into practice, foster regional economic integration, and maintain social stability. Obeng, Robson, and Haugh (2014) perceived small businesses to be a potential source of wealth creation and key to facilitating the transition from developing to developed nation status. Chew and Yeung (2001) added that SMEs are potential suppliers of innovative ideas; therefore, they have a proactive and developmental role in the promotion of technological transfer.

Promotion of SME in developing economies like Nigeria thus brings about a significant distribution of income and wealth, economic self-dependence, entrepreneurial development, employment, and a host of other positive, economically-uplifting factors. SMEs exhibit significantly different characteristics from large organizations or enterprises. Ates, Garengo, Cocca, and Bititci (2013) pointed out that the small business is not a scaled-down version of a large one, and we cannot look at the needs of SMEs by making small what was big. In the same vein, Darcy, Hill, McCabe and McGovern (2014) noted that small businesses are not just “little big businesses” but are entities that have their own particular and unique characteristics that affect the way they operate. According to Ismail, Mokhtar, Ali, and Rahman (2014), SMEs have limited resources and little influence on the market compared to large companies. Their survival depends on their ability to take full advantage of the resources available and promptly find and adjust to a market niche. SMEs have simpler, more centralized decision-making structures and rely more heavily on short-term planning compared to larger companies. Crema, Verbano, and Venturi (2014) viewed the scarcity of resources and competencies that often characterize SMEs as a barrier for the activation of innovative paths. Zhang, Jiang, and Zhu (2015) took a different position, suggesting that firm size itself is a useful and manageable resource for gaining competitive advantage

Franco and Haase (2013) found that failure rates of SMEs are high, especially within their first 5 years. Over 20% of new ventures fail within 1 year, and 66% fail within 6 years; only approximately 50% of small start-ups survive for more than 5 years. Afolabi (2013) and Ilegbinosa (2015) identified causes of failure that come from the SME external environment as lack of credit, poor financial management, lack of infrastructure, and a cumbersome regulatory environment. Daou and Karurunga (2013) noted that SMEs could hardly compete with large enterprises in attracting the highly skilled personnel necessary for innovation. Daou and Karurunga outlined the difficulties SMEs faces such as insufficient communication with other companies, foreign markets, and government agencies, and a limited ability to make their voices heard when negotiating and devising government policies. Above all, Daou and Karurunga contended that SMEs in emerging and developing countries are facing problems related to poor quality of human capital and the lack of required institutional capacities; they are therefore experiencing a deficiency in intellectual capital.

Osakwe, Ciunova-Shuleska, Ajayi, and Chovancova (2015) contended that aspiring SME owners must look inward to build the relevant skills and sets of knowledge that could enhance their business practices to be able to compete favorably in the marketplace. Osakwe et al. also suggested that because resources are scarce, entrepreneurs should be wary of investing many of their limited resources in mundane activities that may not significantly contribute to their performance. SME owners should take a strategic “line of action” rather than merely wait for government functionaries to come to their aid. Crema, Verbano, and Venturi (2014) highlighted that to improve performance, SMEs must rely on internal resources exploitation while pursuing a diversification strategy that relies on external resources. They also advocated that SME owners open up their boundaries to the outside through the mechanisms of licensing, technology transfer agreements, collaborations, and partnerships with suppliers, customers, and other organizations to survive and grow in global markets.

SMEs development and Nigeria's economy. In 2012, the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) identified the absence of robust and virile small and medium enterprises sub-sectors as a significant gap in Nigeria's industrial development process in the past years. Johnson, George, Owoyemi, and Adegboye (2014) acknowledged the Nigerian government's efforts towards diversification of Nigeria economy through the promotion of small and medium enterprises and entrepreneurship development. Johnson et al. (2014) recognized SME owners are responsible for 70% of total employment in the country. Onwuegbuchunam and Akujobi (2013) acknowledged SMEs include a broad range of businesses, which differ in their dynamism, technical advancement, and risk attitude. Onwuegbuchunam and Akujobi identified the commonest features of SMEs in Nigeria as either sole proprietorships or partnerships and an over-dependence on imported raw materials and spare parts.

Taiwo, Ayodeji, and Yusuf, (2012) found it is easy to access the impact of SMEs on economic development by their contribution to employment generation, income, capacity utilization, and output. SME owners create more jobs per investment than large-scale enterprises in Nigeria and are crucial to the overall economic development of the country (Ikharehon & Idialu, 2014). Therefore, the government needs to provide incentives as well as create the enabling environment needed by entrepreneurs to manage their businesses. Ozioma-Eleodinmuo (2015) summarized SMEs contribution to Nigeria's economic development as a catalyst for technological development; major source of employment; aid to the process of redistribution of incomes; provision of intermediate or semi-processed goods for use by large-scale companies; and contributions to rural development.

Afolabi (2013) and Onuaguluchi (2015) noted the most common constraints hindering small and medium scale business growth in Nigeria are a lack of financial support, poor management, corruption, lack of training and experience, poor infrastructure, insufficient profits, and weak demands for product and services. These researchers, therefore, recommended government assist prospective entrepreneurs to have access to finance and necessary information relating to business opportunities, modern technology, raw materials, market, plant, and machinery that would enable them to reduce their operating cost and be more efficient to meet the market competitions.

The Nigerian oil and gas industry. Nigeria has natural resources, including oil, gas, and solid minerals in commercial quantities. Odeleye (2014) describes Nigeria as Africa's primary oil producer in 2011 with the second largest oil reserve in the continent. In 2010, the petroleum sector accounted for approximately 25 % of the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP), 95 % of its export earnings, and 80 % of the government's revenue (World Bank, 2010). Also, Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) inflows focused substantially on the oil industry. The United Nations Commission on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) reported US$16 billion of the US$26 billion increase in FDI investments to the West African region from 2007 to 2008 were exclusively the result of a rise in new projects in Nigeria's oil industry. There are over 600 oil fields, 5,284 on and offshore oil wells, ten export terminals, 275 flow stations, four refineries and an LNG project in Nigeria (Ugbomeh & Atubi, 2010).

Despite these appealing statistics, oil production in Nigeria has not translated into meaningful development for the country. Ite, Ibok, Ite, and Petters (2013) studied petroleum exploration and production and revealed that although the oil and gas industry has served as the mainstay of the country for over 50 years, only a microscopic proportion of the accruable profit is available to indigenous oil companies, especially SMEs. Ajayi (2012) and Hennchen (2015) described the oil industry in Nigeria as a complex operating environment and has come to exemplify the ‘‘resource curse’’. The vast financial investments made in the Nigerian upstream oil and gas sector has not resulted in significant benefits for most Nigerians.

The oil resources in Nigeria are along the Niger-Delta coastline. Therefore, it is easy to find oil companies together with the oil service companies having operational bases in the area. Although most of the companies have their headquarters in Lagos and Abuja, cities like Warri, Yenagoa, and Port Harcourt define the oil hubs in Nigeria. SMEs are prone to flourish in the centers where they would have to access the companies quickly and easily.

The primary activities (e.g. exploration, drilling, production, well intervention, and service provision) remained controlled and managed by foreign multinational companies. Multinational and indigenous oil & gas companies appear to be on a high operating pedestal regarding operations, innovations, research and development, performance, and productivity. Consequently, SME owners in the sector may struggle to compete. Nwapi (2015) asserted the oil industry opened up opportunities for SMEs to benefit from integrating into global value chains. Observing that SMEs are in some way, insulated from the threat of larger multinational enterprises (MNEs) since they do not operate in the same market space or compete for the same customer base. However, this is not the case for oil and gas SMEs, as they tend to co-exist with the multinational companies.

Researchers (Ebohon, 2012; Idemudia, 2009) argued foreign oil companies dominate the private sphere of the Nigerian oil industry. Similarly, Atsegbua, (2012) observed multinationals leaders carried out equipment manufacturing, maintenance, engineering, and design in their home countries because Nigerian companies did not have the capacity to domesticate these repairs, maintenance, and design. Aigboduwa and Oisamoje, (2013) concurred this situation necessitated the Nigerian government to enact the Nigerian Oil and Gas Industry Content Development Act, 2010 (NOGIC Act). The purpose of the NOGIC Act is to achieve indigenous participation and to ensure that Nigerians control, and operate all phases of its oil industry.

Van der Weijde (2008) identified complexity, large budget, safety, security, and environmental concerns, budget and schedule overruns as characteristics of projects in the oil and gas industry. SMEs in the petroleum industry are different from those in other sectors that tend to be laborious work, rather than capital intensive (Ates, Garengo, Cocca, & Bititci, 2013). SME owners tend to be responsive and flexible, focusing on niches that big companies often disregard (Moreno, Pinheiro, & Joia, 2012). Direct participation and involvement of local contractors in these activities could serve as a boost to the local economy through the creation of employment, improved infrastructure in society and raise standard-of-living (Nwosu, Nwachukwu, Ogaji & Probert, 2006).

SME in the manufacturing industry appears to depend more on long-term finance and less on short-term debt (Abdulsaleh & Worthington, 2013).

SME linkages to oil companies. The oil and gas sector is a critical component of the national economy (Onwe 2014). Leaders of the oil and gas sector make significant direct contributions to GDP, job creation and provide a crucial contribution to the rest of the economy. Unfortunately, only a few foreign companies can afford the enormous capital requirements that dominate activities in this sector. Nweze and Edame (2016) discussed the political economy of Nigeria's petroleum sector. Nweze and Edame showed joint ventures (JVs) comprise approximately 70% of Nigeria‘s oil production, and production-sharing contracts (PSCs) meet the remaining 25%. Five major integrated oil companies (IOCs): Shell, Exxon-Mobil, Chevron-Texaco, Total, and Agip engage in JV operations with the Nigerian government. The NOGIC Act, 2010 acknowledged the contributions of international companies, national companies, and indigenous SME stimulating investments in the oil industry and have provided the requisite framework. In line with NOGIC initiatives, Nweze and Edame (2016) advocated for schemes such as vocational development, technical skills acquisitions to enable youth and entrepreneurs participate in the industry and make meaningful contributions towards developing the Niger-Delta area.

Ahonsi (2012) in his paper on building capacity in the Niger-Delta region decried the situation where most SMEs are not able to play key roles in the oil and gas industry or the distribution of its products. Ahonsi (2012) attributed SMEs low participation to SME owners undue focus on less relevant skill areas or occupations like carpentry, tailoring, soap making, and basic computing. Ahonsi argued SMEs should develop in skill areas that are more in tune with the needs of today's information-based and increasingly globalized economy. SME owners will be more equipped to compete with skills like e-commerce, software design, telemedicine, biotechnology, marine engineering, green energy engineering, and technology. Thus, SME owners need to develop new models of business or adapt existing models to emphasize entrepreneurship, evaluative and critical thinking, and continuous skills development for competitiveness that can compete favorably in the dynamic oil and gas industry.

Oyejide and Adewuyi (2011) discussed the importance of the linkages between oil and gas industry to the Nigerian economy. Oyejide and Adewuyi viewed the development of SMEs in the sector as important because SMEs are a critical linkage between the oil sector and the rest of the Nigerian economy. Mukhtar (2013) acknowledged SMEs remain vital in the area of subcontracting for big businesses especially in spare part sourcing and construction. Oyejide and Adewuyi identified the lack of linkages between the oil sector and the other sectors of the Nigerian economy as a critical developmental problem. Oyejide and Adewuyi recommended the creation of these linkages through the development of local capacity to participate in the oil sector activities. These ties can take the form of information exchange, joint training, procurement and or purchase or sales, joint product development, machinery lending, cooperation for product or quality development and improvement, actions to improve service delivery, and so on. Also, Oyejide and Adewuyi argued SME involvement in the upstream and downstream oil sector would promote indigenous management of the oil resource, environmental protection, revenue management, and land ownership.

Jegede, Ilori, Sonibare, Oluwale, and Siyanbola (2012) in their study on factors that influence innovation and competitiveness in the service sector observed most oil companies are foreign multinationals and oil servicing companies in Nigeria are SMEs. Jegede et al. (2012) recognized that SMEs in the oil and gas sector often find themselves in a double bind through participating in global value chains. Often, these SMEs simply do not have access to the necessary resources, equipment, materials and professional management skills. Jegede et al. recommended innovation as highly essential for the growth and sustainable competitiveness of small and medium enterprises. Jegede et al. listed age, geography, research & development, staff characteristics, and collaboration with customers and suppliers as key variables for innovation to flourish in oil and gas SMEs.

Aigboduwa and Oisamoje (2013) and Abdulkabir, Sidique, Rahman, and Hook (2015) identified some of the areas that SMEs could engage in the sector as engineering design, fabrication, and construction, materials and procurement, exploration, and well drilling. Other areas include transportation, and installation, commissioning, inspection and testing, project management, surveying, maintenance, shipping, catering services, provision of unskilled laborers, information, and communication technology services, building. Many local small and medium enterprises in the industry are suppliers to large multinational companies (MNCs), providing them with parts and components and other kinds of production-related services.

Nigeria is one of many countries including Saudi Arabia, Venezuela, and Kuwait, whose government had to develop local content policies to create a level playing ground for SME as well as encourage indigenous participation in the oil industry (Atsegbua, 2012). The Nigerian government created many efforts to bring indigenous companies into oil production via marginal fields and other schemes, but so far, they are not major players in the industry (Nweze & Edame, 2016). The thrust of the Nigerian content policy is to promote value addition to the local economy, increase local participation, build local capacity, and increase linkage to other sectors of the national economy (Atsegbua, 2012). Mendonca and De Oliveira (2013) documented Brazil and Norway's government efforts to boost local content participation in the oil industry. Huem, Quale, Karlsen, Kragha and Osahon (2003) argued collaboration between government and oil and gas companies is vital to increasing local content participation in a viable manner.

Prashantham (2008) observed SMEs intricate knowledge of local conditions presents significant opportunities for collaborating with the multinational companies. The SMEs can counter considerable barriers and risks by ambitious and growth oriented engagement using their complementary resources and capabilities. Peng (2001) argued SMEs can eventually grow to become multinational companies albeit through a time-consuming, sequential process. Therefore, SME owners must provide the necessary strategic interventions that will enhance their productive capacities and integrate into the mainstream activity within the sector.

Various studies (Adobi, 2012; Aigboduwa & Oisamoje, 2013; Nwapi, 2015) contain findings that identified reasons for low SME involvement in the industry. The researchers argue SMEs cannot satisfy stringent quality standards and other contract requirements necessary by multinationals. Factors such as access to finance, infrastructural concerns, and little technical capability have affected the possibilities of acquiring business contracts and subcontracts with oil companies (Ilegbinosa & Jumbo, 2015). Limited access to finance implies that SMEs are unable to raise funds required for the heavily capital-intensive machinery, skills and technological requirements of the sector. Jegede, Ilori, Sonibare, Oluwale, and Siyanbola (2012) also attributed poor SME participation to low labor development, a lack of sustained national economic development, inadequate and incoherent legislations, inadequate infrastructure, unfavorable business climate, lack of collaborating between indigenous contractors and their foreign counterpart and little innovation capability.

Inability to develop the sector despite all of the government initiatives to increase indigenous participation will result in continued low turnout of SME owners in the sector and subsequent unemployment and capital flight of the nation's oil revenue. The implementation of the Nigerian oil and gas industry content development Act of 2010 is a demonstration of government's commitment to the development of local content. This Act includes the creation of a virtual oil and gas marketplace (Nigerian Petroleum Exchange, NiPeX) to facilitate transactions in the industry and monitor the Nigerian content performance of the operators, suppliers, and service providers.

Competitive advantage in the oil industry. Grigore (2014) found the essence of the elaboration of the competitive strategy relies on relating the firm to the environment in which it conducts its business. The company's environment is complex, comprising both social and economic forces. For a company, the central element of this environment represents the sector(s) in which it competes. The structure of a certain sector yields a powerful influence over the establishment of the competitive rules. While a myriad of factors can affect industry profitability in the short run, including the weather and the business cycle. The industry structure, manifested in the competitive forces, sets industry profitability in the medium and long run (Porter, 2012). Porter analyzed the five forces as important factors in determining the effect of the industry structure on participants. Providing a framework for anticipated competition in an industry mean organizations should understand the level of profitability using competitive forces as a metric (Porter, 2008). The type of industry structure drives competition and determines profitability.

The RBV contains the principle that addresses the fundamental issue of the differences in organizations and how they achieve and sustain competitive advantage by deploying their resources. From the resource-based view premise, the survival and performance of a business strongly depend on the ability of the owner to obtain distinctive capabilities that lead to competitive advantages (Franco & Haase, 2013). From the five forces perspective, Wu (2013) noted an enterprise achieves competitive advantage by a strategic choice of a specific positioning in the industry structure and its capabilities to align its activities to fit that industry-specific position. Hinterhuber (2013) reasoned an enterprise has a competitive advantage if it can create more economic value than its competitors. The competitive advantage thus equates to an ability to create customer value. This study contains a focus on the identification of resources and the relation between these resources and the capacity of SMEs to develop within an industry.

The RBV model and Porter’s five forces contains the basis for SME to leverage their resources to gain sustainable competitive advantage within the Nigerian oil and gas industry. Measures of the competitiveness at the internal and external level include company’s profitability, exports, and market share.

Laosirihongthong, Prajogo and Adebanjo (2014) recognized quality, cost, delivery, flexibility, and innovation as primary sources of competitive advantage for the manufacturing sector. Yusuf, Gunasekaran, Musa, Dauda, El-Berishy, and Cang (2014) recommended agility to provide customer-driven product and services in an uncertain market setting. Yusuf et al. termed agility as the successful adoption of competitive bases such as speed, flexibility, innovation, quality and profitability through the integration of reconfigurable resources.

Al-Ansari, Pervan, and Xu (2013) agreed a business can achieve a competitive edge by possessing resources and capabilities that are valuable, unique and difficult to imitate by others; however, the sustainability of a competitive advantage depends on the company's innovative capacities. Conversely, Dejo-Oricain and Alesón, (2014) suggested highly qualified human resources, experience, and the existence of network have a positive effect on SME success. Akinwale (2016) recommended local companies participating directly in oil and gas operations should not farm out contracts to foreign partners due to lack of financial or technical expertise; rather they must live up to the expectations of the Nigerian oil and gas industry local content act by maximizing local capacity.

The African Development Bank (ADB) analyzed issues arising in efforts to mainstream energy financing in developing countries. It identified high transaction costs regarding processing time including requirements on social and environmental safeguards. Other factors include lack of institutional, technical capabilities and experience; and barriers associated with local financing such as the cost reductions generated from energy savings that were not a source of profit or an 'asset' that banks were comfortable to lend against. In fact, Odeleye (2014) maintained the inability of local banks in Nigeria to finance oil and gas projects is not news anymore. Rather, Odeleye (2014) advocated local businesses strengthen their capacity, competence and significantly improve their public image to have more access to funds and motivate potential investors to subscribe to their offers.

Competitive advantage is at the root of the alignment between the RBV and Porter's five forces (Wu, 2013). Combining the constructs of the RBV and Porter's work on industry's attractiveness is essential for SME to secure a competitive advantage (Arik, Clark, & Raffo, 2016). Competitive advantage is how a firm can create and maintain its competitiveness in a complex and dynamic environment. Wu (2013) argued it would be difficult for an individual organization to create a competitive advantage using either of the frameworks alone. Conversely, Camison and Fores (2015) contended firm capabilities are more important than environmental effect and tangible resources. In other to strike a balance, a firm can only achieve superior performance by aligning external industry-specific factors with its internal capabilities.

Critical Analysis and Synthesis of the Conceptual Frameworks

Both the resource-based view (RBV) and Porter's five forces model of competition are management tools to formulate competitive and profitable strategies for organizations. The RVB and Porter's five forces are the conceptual frameworks for this qualitative case study. The focus of the RBV strategists is how to use the internal resources within an organization to an advantage. Jang (2013) argued the RBV increases organizational performances. The Porter's model of competition contains the idea that there are external forces and threats to an organization's business industry (Porter, 1996).

The Resource Based View. The resource-based view (RBV) is a theory that contains the premise that resources are vital to superior performance. The RBV is a strategic management approach to achieving a competitive advantage that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s (Reddy & Rao, 2014). Penrose (1959) pioneered the idea of viewing the firm as a bundle of resources by arguing that the heterogeneity of resources give each organization its unique character. However, Birger Wernerfelt (1984) named the RBV model as a strategic tool researchers use to focus on unique and valuable resources a leader can use to achieve sustained competitive advantage. Wernerfelt's research (1984), building on Porter's (1980) five competitive forces of strategic management, contains guidance for evaluating businesses regarding their resources as using this model could lead to insights that differ from traditional perspectives (i.e. strength and weakness of the firm). Wernerfelt conceptualized each business as a unique bundle of tangible and intangible resources and capabilities. Barney (1991) extended Wernerfelt's work by focusing on companies' internal resources to generate sustainable competitive advantage.

Barney (1991) termed competitive advantage as the execution of a value creation strategy not simultaneously implemented by any current or potential competitors. By extension, the sustained competitive advantage comes from a firm's resources and capabilities and includes management skills, organizational processes and skills, and information and knowledge.

Barney (1991) identified two fundamental assumptions about the resources and capabilities an organization might control. First, resource heterogeneity implies different firms may possess different sets of resources and capabilities, even if they are competing in the same industry. The second assumption of resource immobility implies some of these resources and capability differences among firms may be long-lasting because it may be very costly for firms without certain resources and capabilities to develop or acquire them. These two assumptions explain why some firms outperform other firms, even if these firms are all competing in the same industry. Barney (1991) identified four key attributes a resource must have to yield a sustainable competitive advantage; a resource must be valuable (worth something), rare (unique), imperfectly mobile (cannot be easily sold or traded) and non-substitutable (is not easily copied). Barney further categorized resources into different types of tangible and intangible assets such as brand names, in-house knowledge of technology, skilled personnel, trade contacts, machinery, procedures, and capital.

Jang (2013) in his study on the framework of the RBV chronicled how other theorists helped to position the resource-based view to various other research fields. The research fields include human resources, economics, strategic management (Barney, 2001a; Barney, 2001b), marketing (Srivastava, Fahey, & Christensen, 2001), entrepreneurship (Zahra, Hayton, & Salvato, 2004), and innovation management (Galunic & Rodan, 1998; Hadjimanolis, 2000) among others. Other researchers (Amit & Schoemaker, 1993; Mahoney & Pandian, 1992; Peteraf, 1993) have adopted and even expanded Barney's view to include: resource durability, non-tradability, and idiosyncratic nature of resources. Peng (2001) attributed the prevalence of the RBV to its focus on firm-level determinants of company performance such as resources, capabilities, innovation, and strategic elements.

Maranto-Vargas and Rangel (2007) found a positive correlation between business performance and the development of internal capabilities. Such internal capabilities include soft technology methods and processes that support the company and hard technology (i.e. externally acquired equipment, in-house development of machinery and innovation in raw materials) and a strategy of continuous improvement, innovation, and change. Maranto-Vargas and Rangel (2007) suggested even though financial resources are essential to leverage performance, the development of internal capabilities is more important than limited financial resources to develop competitive advantages. Jang (2013) provided an alternative perspective to the RBV as where companies can obtain a competitive edge in a warlike environment. Jang viewed business as war with warriors, shrewd tacticians, and strategists attacking their enemies through hindrances to others' HR retention and value creation, and innovative activities destroying the value of competitors' resources.

Welter, Bosse and Alvarez (2013) built on the RBV theory to examine how managerial and technological capabilities interact to affect firm performance. Welter et al. (2013) suggested leaders might look inwardly for strategic opportunities, while at the same time, conceptualize how they think of industries and define competitors. Welter et al. viewed internal resources as the principal driver of profitability and strategic advantage. Daou and Karunrunga (2012) compared the RBV to the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) framework. However, Daou and Karunrunga (2012) did not take opportunities and threats stemming from the external environment into account. Daou and Karunrunga (2012) contended SMEs must continually consider external changes, including government legislation, new competitors, and customer needs that are constantly evolving.

The RBV contains an emphasis on the internal organization of companies and factor market imperfections. Garg and De (2013) and Dejo-Oricain and Alesón, (2014) supported the perception that intangible resources provide sustainable competitive advantages and superior performance. The RBV gives priority to the internal resources owned and controlled by the company because internal resources allow the company gain sustainable competitive advantage (Dejo-Oricain & Alesón, 2014). From an SME perspective, Kazlauskaite, Autio, Gelbuda, and Sarapovas (2015) suggested the size of an enterprise from a resource-based lens is an important determinant of a company’s activities, as size proxies the magnitude of managerial and financial resources and strength. Kazlauskaite et al. agreed the resource-based view helps researchers explore how companies can build, access, control, and leverage their resources for sustainable competitive advantage.

Porter (1996) highlighted the RBV limitations when he emphasized that competitive advantage resides in business activities and activity systems, rather than firm resources. Researchers (Garg and De, 2014; Hinterhuber, 2013) argued whether the RBV framework satisfies key requirements for theoretical systems. Shafeey and Trott (2014) faulted the RBV's lack of predictive ability and its inability to identify those resources and capabilities that lead to competitive advantage and superior profitability (Hinterhuber, 2013; Shafeey and Trott, 2014). Godfrey and Hill (1995) criticized the RBV for empirical difficulties encountered in measuring intangible resources such as learning. Conversely, Newbert (2014) argued the disconnection between RBV theory and practice gave rise to the measurement of the firm performance in isolation of its competitors. From a strategic management perspective, Garg and De (2014) questioned the RBV's contribution both to theory building in strategic management and explanatory power. Furthermore, Warnier, Weppe, and Lecocq (2013) highlighted a lack of specific definitions of some key concepts such as resources, capabilities and dynamic capabilities, competencies, and core competencies. Kraaijenbrink, Spender, and Groen (2010) argued the RBV community clung to narrow neoclassical economic rationalities, thereby diminishing their opportunities for progress.

Resources. Business owners' resources are all assets, capabilities, organizational processes, organizational attributes, and information, controlled by a leader who allows the company to develop and implement strategies that improve efficiency and effectiveness (Barney, 1991). Wernerelt (1984) termed resources as the fundamental unit of analysis for RBV and described them as assets that are tied semi-permanently to the company. Barney (1991) categorized resources into three groups: physical, human, and organizational. These groups of resources are either tangible or intangible types. Furthering the specificity of resources, Masakure, Henson, and Cranfield (2009) identified a company's size, family ownership, location, and networks as other tangible resources. Likewise, Parnell and Don Lester (2015) found tangible resources, especially the availability of capital, production efficiency, and employee qualifications and ethics as essential to the survival and development of SMEs. Similar to the ideas of Masakure, Henson, and Cranfield (2009), Dejo-Oricain and Alesón (2014) extended the tangible resource categorization. The categories are domestic resources, capabilities (i.e. human and technological resources), experience-related resources (i.e. organizational and international experience), and foreign resources (i.e. subsidiaries abroad and foreign shareholders). Parnell and Don Lester placed emphasis on tangible resources, especially the availability of capital, production efficiency, and employee qualifications and ethics as essential to the survival and development of SMEs.

Conversely, Obeng, Robson, and Haugh (2014) named culture, relationships, reputation, legitimacy employee's knowledge, experiences and skills, company reputation, brand name, trade contacts and organization procedures as examples of intangible resources. Similarly, Obeng et al. (2014) and Bonneveux, Calmé, and Soparnot (2012) acknowledged the value of intangible resources suggesting they are the only type of resources capable of meeting the resource based criteria of being valuable, rare, and costly to imitate. Similarly, Pop, Stümpel, Bordean, and Borza (2014) agreed intangible assets such as knowledge and intelligence are sources of a competitive advantage all enterprise leaders must develop and or acquire as part of their resources. Parnell and Don Lester (2015) identified additional intangible resources such as product quality and strength of the brand as significant. Eldrede and Dean (2013) conceded sustainable competitive advantage and ultimately performance arises from ownership and application of both tangible and intangible resources.

Kazlauskaite, Autio, Gelbuda, and Sarapovas (2015) in their study on SME internationalization viewed size as an important determinant of the magnitude of managerial and financial resources as well as to assess the strength of SMEs. Etuk, Etuk, and Michael (2014) shared the same view by asserting that there is an advantage to being a small business as it enables SME owners to be more flexible and nimble in making changes and exploiting opportunities. They also acknowledge size represents the magnitude of managerial and financial resources strength. Warnier, Weppe, and Lecocq (2013) viewed resources as heterogeneous and classified them into three types: strategic, ordinary, and junk resources. Franco and Haase (2013) identified commercial and administrative resources, technological resources, teamwork, and experience. Using a grounded theory approach to study relationships between the SME leader’s strategy, resources, and innovation performance, Laosirihongthong, Prajogo, and Adebanjo (2014) found internal resources had a positive effect on SME innovation performance.

Porter’s Five Forces. The lack of an industry-based view of environmental factors led to the inclusion of Porter's model of competition as the second conceptual framework for this study. Porter (1979) identified the following five competitive forces that shape an industry: (a) threat of new entrants, (b) bargaining power of buyers, (c) bargaining power of suppliers, (d) threat of substitutes and (e) competitive rivalry. When applied, the collective strength of these five forces determines the ultimate profit potential of the industry.

Threats of new entrants. Porter (2008) indicated new entrants bring with them new capacity and aspirations to gain market share. Porter suggested that this aspiration puts pressure on the current market shares, prices of products, and profits. The threat of entry depends on two factors: the height of entry barriers and the incumbents' reaction to new entrants. Aigboduwa & Oisamoje (2013) identified the following multiple barriers to entry for new entrants into the oil and gas industry. The barriers are as follows: (a) economies of scale, (b) large capital requirements, (c) governments regulations, (d) product differentiation, and (e) predatory behavior by cartels.

Economies of scale. Economies of scale refer to a reduction in unit costs of operation through operational efficiencies. Economies of scale deter entry by forcing the entrants to come in at large scale and risk strong reaction from existing firms or come in on a small scale and accept a cost disadvantage, both undesirable options (Porter, 1998). Established companies in oil and gas industry may achieve economies of scale that would elude a prospective entrant.

Product differentiation. Product differentiation means that established firms have brand identification and customer loyalties. Established firms use differentiation to create unique, innovative products, processes or service to secure market share (Laosirihongthong, Prajogo & Adebanjo, 2014). Differentiation creates a barrier to entry by forcing entrants to spend heavily to overcome existing customer loyalties (Porter, 1998).

Large capital requirements. The need to invest large financial resources to compete creates a barrier to entry. SMEs may find it difficult to put up capital required for risky or unrecoverable up-front advertising or research and development. Even if capital is available, entry represents a risky use of that capital in risk premiums charged the prospective entrant (Porter 1998).

Predatory behavior by cartels. A barrier to entry is the new entrant's need to secure market share among established firms. Established firms may have cost advantages, and potential sophistication SMEs may not attain regardless of size and attained economies of scale (Porter, 1998). The rigors new entrants would undergo to accumulate vital industry experience present an entry barrier.

Government policy. Porter (1998) observed government could limit or even foreclose entry into industries with such control as licensing requirements and limits on access to raw materials. The Nigerian government policy thrust in recent times is reducing the barriers to entry into the oil and gas sector for indigenous companies. Aigboduwa and Oisamoje (2013) observed due to the awaking of local content consciousness; the Nigerian government has put in place a comprehensive framework that guarantees active participation of Nigerians in oil and gas activities without compromising standard to stimulate the growth of indigenous capacity.

Bargaining power of buyers. Buyers play a significant role in determining prices of a product. Buyers have an effect on the industry due to their ability to force down prices, bargain for higher quality or more services and play competitors against each other (Magaisa, Duggal & Muhwandavaka, 2013). Porter (2008) stated buyers are powerful when they possess negotiating power in the industry. Buyers are sensitive to costs and service differences as they earn low profits.

Bargaining power of suppliers. The bargaining power of the suppliers is high when there is a monopoly in the supply of an industry (Porter, 2008). Suppliers can affect an industry through their ability to raise prices or reduce the quality of purchased goods and services. Suppliers are powerful because of the following factors: (a) few companies dominate the supplier industry with many buyers, (b) suppliers can integrate and compete directly without increasing their existing customer base, and (c) if a purchasing industry buys a small portion of the supplier group’s and services and is thus unimportant to the supplier.

Threats of substitutes. Substitute products are those products that appear to be different but can satisfy the same need as another product (Porter, 2008). A threat occurs when substitutes to industry products have the same features as the primary product of the industry. Porter (2008) confirmed the existence of substitutes to a product as an external threat that affects profitability. Substitutes limit the potential returns of an industry by placing a ceiling on the prices that the industry can profitably charge. This threat affects SMEs, as they would most likely lack the capacity to be innovative and produce their products.

Competitive rivalry. Competition for market share is the major reason for rivalry among organizations in the same industry (Altuntaş, Semerciöz, Mert, & Pehlivan, 2014). Competitive rivalry is an external force affecting organizations positively and negatively. Altuntas et al. (2014) stated intense rivalry is related to the presence of several factors which include some competitors, the rate of industry growth, product or service characteristic, fixed costs, capacity, the height of exit barriers and technology. Rivalry among existing competitors takes the familiar form of jockeying to improve market share. Competitors use tactics like price competition, advertising battles, product introductions and increased customer service. In most industries, competitive moves by one firm have noticeable effects on its competitors (Porter 1998).

The use of Porter framework allows a firm to assess both the attraction (potential profitability) of its industry and its competitive position within that industry (El Namaki, 2012). Porter (2008) inferred awareness of the five forces could help a company understand the structure of its industry and stake out a position that is more profitable. Therefore, the implementation of a given competitional strategy relies on relating the organization to the environment in which it conducts its business.

The application of the five competitive forces constructs jointly can help leaders determine the strength of industry competition and profitability, and determine the strongest force or forces needed for their company strategy formulations (El Namaki, 2012). The five forces determine the industry profitability because they influence the price, cost, and the required investment of the firms. Porter’s five forces model contains suggestions that support users of it in the development of organizational strategies.

Business owners and managers must understand and react to those external forces within an industry that determines an organization's level of competitiveness within an industry.

Association of RBV and Porter's Five Forces. Regarding applicability, Sheun, Feiler & Teece (2014) noted both RBV and five forces frameworks apply to the oil and gas industry. The RBV applied properly suggest a firm's intangible assets, not its oil or gas reserve base, are more determinative of its long-term financial performance. While the five forces framework is popular and provides generic guidance for industries, its usefulness for oil and gas firm is limited. The Porter's framework does not utilize internal resources and Sheun et al. argued it is difficult to evaluate a particular strategic opportunity without analyzing the resources a particular firm brings to that opportunity. Similarly, the RBV contains a focus on the analysis of different types of resources possessed by the firm. Conversely, constructs of Porter's five forces focuses on the analysis of the external environment. The two perspectives are diametrically opposite; some researchers (Rivard, Raymond & Verreault, 2006) suggested they contain competing views. However, Cecchini, Leitch, and Strobel (2013) argued both perspectives are complementary since leaders need to find a strategic fit between their internal characteristics (strengths and weaknesses), emphasized in the RBV theory, and their industry external environmental characteristics (opportunities and threats) highlighted within Porter's five forces. Molina-Azorin (2014) agreed a complete model of strategic advantage would require a full integration of models of the competitive environment with a model of firm resources. The RBV and Porter's five forces theories are relevant to all organizations from entrepreneurial start-ups to multinational enterprises because it is about sustainability and competitiveness (Cecchini, Leitch, & Strobel, 2013).

Šebestová and Nowáková (2013) noted leaders often do not actively respond to changes in the external environment because they emphasize their dependence on business resources. Dependence on business resource alone causes leaders behave in a reactionary manner to survive in the external environment. Therefore, Dibrell, Fairclough, and Davis (2015) theory of entrainment becomes necessary to align internal resources with the external environment. Dibrell et al. (2015) termed entrainment as the alignment of an organization's activity cycles to match those of its external environment. Organizations face competition when there is a lack of alignment between the organizations' internal resources and the external environments.

Analysis of Supporting and Contrasting Theories

Support of RBV. The dynamic capabilities approach proposed by Teece, et al. (1977) supports the resource-based view (RBV). Teece, et al. (1997) defined dynamic capabilities as the organization’s leaders ability to integrate, build, and reconfigure internal and external competencies to address rapidly changing environments. Several main elements of the dynamic capabilities (i.e. nature, role, context, creation and development, outcome, and heterogeneity) are similar to the major theoretical underpinnings of RBV.

Dynamic capabilities are relevant to the interior of the company, its resources, competencies, and capabilities. These dynamic capabilities then become internal sources of competitive advantage (Wójcik, 2015). Baretto (2010) using a critical review of the diverse research streams on dynamic capabilities, outlined the similarities between the resource-based view and the dynamic models. First, he emphasized similar to resources and capabilities considered within RBV; dynamic capabilities are heterogeneous across organizations because they are foundational for establishing business paths, unique asset positions, and separate processes. Both the RBV and dynamic capabilities approaches are congruent to the notion that sustained competitive advantage is a direct outcome. Arend, (2014) pointed out while the RBV contains an emphasis on resource choice or the act of selecting appropriate resources, dynamic capabilities contain an emphasis on resource development and renewal through routinized activities directed to the development and adaptation of operating routines. Researchers (Arend, 2014; Garg & De, 2014) criticized the RBV for its focus on only the internal organization of firms while ignoring external relations. Garg and De (2014) identified dynamic capability as useful for bringing new resources into the firm from external sources. Similarly, Wójcik (2015) posited the dynamic capabilities theory contains guidance to help users bridge these gaps by using the constructs as a buffer between resources and the changing business environment.

According to Parnell and Don Lester (2015), two key features distinguish a capability from a resource. First, a capability is an intrinsic quality that remains embedded in the organization and its processes. This character of capabilities means if a company dissolves completely, then its capabilities would also disappear while, in contrast, its resources could survive in the hands of a new owner. The second feature that distinguishes a capability from a resource is the primary purpose of a capability is to enhance the effectiveness and productivity of resources that an SME owner possesses to accomplish its targets. However, organizations must combine resources with capabilities to utilize their potential. O'Cas and Sok (2014) suggested SMEs possess a superior combination of high levels of both intellectual resources and product innovation capability, and high levels of both reputational resources and marketing capability to achieve growth over and above their objectives.

Capabilities refer to a leader's capacity to deploy and coordinate different resources, usually in combination with organizational processes to affect the desired end (Garg & De, 2014; Nedzinskas, Pundzienė, Buožiūtė-Rafanavičienė, & Pilkienė (2013). Glavas and Mish (2015) viewed capabilities as the leader's ability to integrate, build, and reconfigure internal and external competences to address rapidly changing environments. Koryak, Mole, Lockett, Hayton, Ucbasaran, and Hodgkinson (2015) identified two broad forms of capabilities: substantive (growth) capabilities for the SME to compete in its market on a day-to-day basis; and dynamic capabilities, which extend, modify or create new functional (growth) capabilities. SMEs need to integrate and coordinate capabilities to gain a sustainable competitive advantage. According to Franco and Haase (2013), the availability of intangible resources chiefly determines a company's growth and development, in particular, financial, commercial, and administrative resources. Martins and Fernandes (2015) also noted that SME owners are frequently more flexible in adapting their resources to fit within their financial capabilities. Capabilities are the internal contingencies that link business strategy with performance (Benito & Gonzalez, 2009).

Contrasting theory. The resource dependence theory (RDT) is a strategic management theory in direct contrast to the resource-based view model. In 1978, Pfeffer and Salancik developed the RDT to understand the behavior of organizations in the external environment (Hillman, Withers & Collins, 2009). The theory contains an emphasis on the effect of the external environment on organizational behavior and recognizes that although constrained by their context, managers can act to reduce environmental uncertainty and dependence (Drees & Heugens, 2013). The basic tenets of the resource dependence theory are: (a) organizations depend on resources; (b) resources ultimately originate from an organization's environment; (c) the environment, to a considerable extent, contains other organizations; (d) the resources one organization needs are thus often in the hand of other organizations; and (e) resources are a basis of power (Drees & Heugens, 2013).

RDT researchers propose organizations lacking in essential resources will seek to establish dependent relationships with others to obtain needed resources. Zona, Gomez-Mejia, and Withers (2015) discussed the importance of this theory in explaining the actions of leaders through alliances, joint ventures, and mergers and acquisitions in striving to overcome dependencies and improve an organizational autonomy and legitimacy. Frączkiewicz-Wronka and Szymaniec (2012) highlighted the RDT share the same position with Porter five forces because both theories assume the organization’s performance strongly depends on its environment. Therefore, the organizational strategy should be the result of the organization’s competitive position in the industry.

Support of Porter's five forces. The delta model framework, an integrative process for formulating and executing strategy complements the Porter's five forces**.** Hax & Wilde (1999) developed the delta model as a strategic management framework from a conviction by major corporations and faculty of the MIT/Sloan School of Management that modern business had been experiencing transformations beyond the scope of existing managerial frameworks. The emergence of the internet, its impact on communication, technologies and the rise of e-business and e-commerce, made available powerful new tools that allowed the feasibility of completely different business approaches. In response to these new challenges, the delta model provided an integrated strategy development process that offers a new approach to strategic management. Porter (2012) provided a tacit acceptance of the delta model when he recognized the distinctive strategic positioning opportunities of the internet. Porter (2012) further acknowledged the internet accelerated the interactions between the five forces.

Hax and Wilde (2001) focused on creating sustainable competitive advantage by building long-term relationships with customers or "customer bonding." The delta model also contains elements on linking strategy with execution using adaptive processes, aggregate and granular metrics, and experimentation and feedback. Lio (2012) agreed that the delta model is a complementary and valuable tool to develop strategy and bond with customers using modern technology.

Contrasting theory. The institution-based view is a model that is in contrast with the Porter's five forces model. Peng (2002) developed the institution-based view to understand why firm strategies differ by exploring the underlying institutional frameworks that drive strategic choices. Researchers use the institution-based view to highlight the importance of institutional influences on business strategies. Before Peng's research in 2002, strategy researchers have primarily focused on industry conditions (Porter, 1980) and firm's resources (Barney, 1991). Peng, Wang, and Jiang (2008) and Peng, Sun, Pinkham, and Chen (2009) considered the institution-based view as the third leading perspective in strategic management (the first two being the industry-based and resource-based views). Peng, Wang and Jiang (2008) defined institutions as being regulative, normative, and cognitive structures and activities that provide stability and meaning to social behavior. Consequently, an institutional framework is the set of fundamental political, social, and legal ground rules that establishes the basis for production, exchange, and distribution.

Peng, Wang, and Jiang (2008) argued the institution-based view is necessary because a single framework would be insufficient to explain the complex and unstable external environments as well as the heterogeneous internal resources and capabilities of firms. Therefore, integrating resource-based, industry-based, and institutional-based views, the integrated 'strategy tripod' framework is an appropriate approach to examining business strategies. Leaders must respond to a multitude of external forces, including the extra-institutional environment and business systems.

Despite the importance of the Porter's model to strategic management, some areas of the model need useful adjustments. Namaki (2012) argued some assumptions made by Porter's model are not valid in areas like relationships and interactions. The assumption of lack of relationship with buyers, competitors, and suppliers by the Porter's model is not justifiable (Namaki, 2012). The marginal attention on the impact of the capital markets to competition and profitability is a flaw in the Porter's model (2012). Similarly, Dobbs (2014) identified lack of depth, lack of structured analysis, lack of strategic insight, and millennial generation preferences as drawbacks to the use of the Porters five forces.

Critical Analysis and Synthesis of the Literature Themes

This qualitative study began with the business problem that centers on the strategies SMEs owners use to compete favorably in the Nigerian oil and gas industry. This section contains the categories of strategy from the RBV and Porter's perspectives. Arik, Clark, and Raffo (2016) affirmed successful business strategies are those that exploit the strength of the financial, human, physical, technological, reputational and organizational resources of a firm secure to competitive advantage within an industry. This section also contains an explanation of the strategy as an ongoing sequence of actions and reactions determined by the firm resources and the external competitive environment. There are different types of strategies, but this study contains a focus on business-level strategy. Business strategists determine and define how the organization competes in its market and how businesses achieve long-range objectives.

Business strategies for SMEs. The strategy is at the root of the very existence of every organization. Business strategy is the outcome of decisions made to guide an organization on the environment, structure and processes that influence its organizational performance (Bozkurt & Kalkan, 2014). Popa and Miricescu (2015) observed very few companies could survive without a strategy because strategies contain purposeful goals and functioning to organizations. The idea of studying the strategic actions within SMEs arose from the need to determine strategic behavior related to business growth and performance. Popa and Miricescu (2015) therefore argued the introduction of strategic management in small business activity has become a necessity because of the dynamic economic environment in which they operate. For the oil and gas industry in Nigeria, strategy formulation and implementation are important to achieving and maintaining competitiveness.

Romer, Solis, and Monroy (2014) viewed strategy from the RBV perspective as a critical business owner's ability when translated into a unique resource, may help the owners acquire a competitive advantage. Romer et al. contended business strategy is a strategically valuable resource if it is hard to duplicate. Rivals cannot copy resources if the resources are physically unique. There are varied other resources, the most important being the financial and material resources, while human, and information resources are vital to the development of strategies these two resources may impede the owner's strategy development progress. Similarly, Somsuk, Wonglimpiyarat, and Laosirihongthong (2013) supported the notion that business owners require both business and technical assistance for successful strategy development and sustainable business growth. Business owners can attain this growth through appropriate acquisition and application of specific resources and capabilities. Jang (2013) also suggested company-specific resources might be required to implement a strategy successfully, suggesting business owners achieve sustainable competitive advantage by managing the contexts of resource selection.

Although findings from the study of Popa and Miricescu (2015) do not oppose those of Jang (2013), they place emphasis on policy and strategy development within the SMEs sector. Popa and Miricescu argued that when SME owners focus on environmental hazards and opportunities by formulating and implementing strategies, then they become aware of their strengths and weaknesses. Thus, SMEs can identify solutions that trigger positive effects for increasing performance and efficient development. The Sebestova and Nowakova (2014) model of a sustainable strategy for small and medium-sized businesses is in line with Popa and Miricescu's study. Among other things, Sebestova and Nowakova (2014) highlight the influence of the external environment (Porter's five forces) to balance resources (RBV) for strategy success. Porter's (2003) three approaches to competitive strategy include low-cost leadership strategy, differentiation strategy and focus strategy.

Differentiation. Brenes, Montoya, and Ciravegna (2014) defined differentiation strategy as positioning a brand in such a way as to differentiate it from the competition and establish a unique image. Differentiation strategy, also called segmentation strategy builds up a competitive advantage by offering unique products that are characterized by valuable features, such as quality, innovation, and customer service and may include an increase in prices (Alsoboa & Aldehayyat, 2013). Brenes et al. (2014) argued differentiation selects attributes that buyers in an industry perceive as important and positions itself to meet those needs.

Porter (2001) identified unusual features, responsive customer service, rapid product innovations and technological leadership, perceived prestige and status, market approach, different tastes, and engineering design and performance are examples of approaches to differentiation. Firms that succeed in a differentiation strategy often have access to leading scientific research, skilled and creative personnel, and a strong sales team. Porter (2001) argued this strategy erects competitive barriers to entry, provides higher margins and reduces the power of buyers who feel they lack acceptable substitute products. Differentiation reduces competitiveness and the fight for scarce resources, thereby improving performance.

Cost leadership. Cost leadership strategy seeks to achieve above-average returns over competitors through low prices by driving all components of activities towards reducing costs (Alsoboa & Aldehayyat, 2013). To achieve a low-cost advantage, an organization must have a low-cost leadership strategy, low-cost manufacturing, and a workforce committed to the low-cost strategy. Armstrong (2013) suggested low-cost leadership strategy requires aggressive use of efficient-scale facilities, vigorous pursuit of cost reduction from experience, reengineering, tight cost and overhead control, and cost minimization. A company's cost structure can improve its competitiveness by lowering production and marketing cost, therefore, increasing profitability and market share. For a business strategy based on cost leadership to be effective, capabilities should focus on cost reduction.

Porter (1980) concluded that the position of the low cost provides protection against all five of the competitive forces: rivalry among existing firms, consumer power, the power of suppliers, new entrants to the market and confronting the substitution of products or services. Thus, the low-cost strategy may provide SMEs in the oil and gas industry with a defense against powerful subcontractors and suppliers by fostering long-term contracts or partnership relationships. Alsoboa and Aldehayyat, 2013 observed the challenge of this strategy is to earn a suitable profit for the company, rather than operating at a loss and draining profitability from all market players. For an effective cost leadership strategy, a firm must have a large market share (Hyatt, 2001). There are many areas to achieve cost leadership such as mass production, mass distribution, economies of scale, technology, product design, input cost, capacity utilization of resources, and access to raw materials.

Focus strategy. Focus strategy aims at growing market share through operating in a niche market or in markets either not attractive to, or overlooked by larger competitors (Kyengo, Ombui, & Iravo, 2016). These niches arise from some factors including geography, buyer characteristics, and product specifications or requirements. A successful focus strategy (Kyengo, Ombui, & Iravo (2016) depends on upon an industry segment large enough to have good growth potential but not of key importance to other major competitors. Kyengo, Ombui, & Iravo (2016) recommended companies could choose to concentrate on a product range, market segment, geographical area or service lines. Focus strategy hinges on the premise that companies can achieve their narrow strategic targets more effectively than their counterparts who are competing broadly. Alsoboa, S. (2015) viewed the strategic focus is a combination of differentiation and cost leadership strategies and leading the organization’s efforts to focus on a particular sector (niche) market instead of focusing on the market sector as a whole. Uchegbulam, Akinyele, and Ibidunni (2015) studied competitive strategy and performance of selected SMEs in Nigeria from an RBV and Porter's five forces perspective. Uchegbulam et al. (2015) found competitive business strategies such as product features, customization, better quality products, and added-value had been adopted by SMEs in Nigeria to enhance their customer base, sales growth, returns on investment and revenue growth. Similarly, Nnamseh & Akpan (2015) research on Nigerian SME showed diversification, market development, product development, and market penetration in that order of usage are top strategies for growth.

Business strategies for SMEs in the oil industry are similar to SMEs in other industries in the Nigeria. Chapman, MacKinnon, and Cumbers (2004) advocated for cost reduction, copying, diversification & innovation strategies for oil and gas SMEs using the Aberdeen oil complex as a case study. Similarly, Jegede, Ilori, Sonibare, Oluwale, and Siyanbola (2012) recommended interactions, collaboration, as competitive strategies for SME in the industry. Jegede et al. study further demonstrated collaboration with competitors, suppliers, consulting firms, financial institutions, and trade associations can open up new market opportunities for SMEs.

Relationship of the Study to Previous Research and Findings

The purpose of this qualitative multiple-case study was to explore the business strategies some SME owners use to compete favorably in the Nigerian oil and gas industry. According to Yusuf, Gunasekaran, Musa, Dauda, El-Berishy, & Cang (2014) the nature of the oil and gas supply chain, especially the upstream segment, attracts large numbers of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to provide services and technology to support the operations of the major oil companies. Therefore, SMEs must adopt the right strategies to compete in this dynamic and often turbulent business environment.

There is an abundance of literature on SME development in Nigeria, but there is limited focus on SME development within the oil and gas industry in Nigeria. This qualitative multiple-case study contained an exhaustive literature review that business strategies some small and medium businesses owners use to compete favorably in the Nigerian oil and gas service industry. I analyzed literature on the components of the oil and gas industry about the SMEs and highlighted the Nigerian government initiatives towards development of SME in the sector (Bakare, 2011; Ovadia, 2013; Abdulkabir, Sidique, Rahman, & Hook, 2015; Monday, 2015). This study is comparative to other studies on SME development in the Nigerian oil industry (Nwapi, 2015; Aigboduwa & Oisamoje, 2013). I examined the business strategies that have been adopted by SME owners in general (Uchegbulam, Akinyele, & Ibidunni, (2015); Nnamseh & Akpan, 2015). I also examined business strategies that have been adopted by the oil industry in particular (Chapman, MacKinnon & Cumbers, 2004; Jegede, 2012; Yusuf, Gunasekaran, Musa, Dauda, El-Berishy, & Cang, 2014).

Transition

Section 1 began with a discussion of the foundation of the study, background of the problem, problem statement, purpose statement, and the nature of the study. Section 1 also included the (a) interview questions (Appendix B), (b) conceptual framework, (c) assumptions, (d) limitations, (e) delimitations of the study (f) the significance of the study and (g) review of the professional and academic literature. The literature review included a focus on previous research categories, the resource-based view theory, resources and capabilities, Porter's five forces of competitive strategy, an overview of SME, SME development, and the Nigerian economy, the Nigerian oil and gas industry, SME linkages to the oil and gas industry, and securing competitive advantage in the oil industry.

Section 2 began with a review of the purpose of the research and the role of the researcher, then continues with a discussion of the participants, a detailed description of the research methodology and design, the population and sampling, and ethical research. Section 2 also contained a discussion of data collection instruments, data organization technique, data analysis, and reliability and validity. Section 3 presents the findings of the study, a discussion of the applications to professional practice and the implications for social change. Section 3 also contains a discussion of the recommendations for further research, summary, conclusion and the researcher's reflections.

Section 2: The Project

The oil and gas sector is highly dynamic, often turbulent, and perceived to be the exclusive preserve of multinational companies (Atsegbua, 2010; Hennchen, 2015). It is important that SME owners in the oil and gas sector are aware of how they can compete favorably. With this knowledge, they can better prepare and become more likely to sustain their businesses. This section begins with the purpose statement and includes additional details concerning the role of the researcher, participants, research method and design, population and sampling, ethical research, data collection, data analysis, and reliability and validity.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the business strategies some SME owners use to compete favorably in the Nigerian oil and gas industry. The target population consisted of five owners of SMEs in Delta State, Nigeria listed on the Nigerian Petroleum Exchange (NiPEX) with ongoing contracts in the oil and gas industry. I collected data for this study using semistructured interviews and reviews of company documents. The findings of the study may contribute to positive social change if results provide SME owners with best practices and strategies to improve company profitability and growth, generate employment, reduce poverty, and enhance standards of living. Increased profitability can lead to the prosperity of SME owners and benefit employees, their families, and communities.

Role of the Researcher

In a qualitative study, the researcher is the instrument for interacting and collaborating with participants to collect data (Condie, 2012). As a researcher, my role included the selection of the appropriate research method and design, recruitment of participants for the study, and collection and analysis of the data. Since the research setting was within my profession, I collected the data as an insider researcher as described by Xu and Storr, 2012). I worked for 14 years within the oil and gas industry as a Health, Safety, and Environment (HSE) adviser. As a result, I had direct access to some leaders in oil and gas companies and to SME professionals (e.g. business owners, contractors, suppliers, and consultants) in the industry. I had built a network of people within the industry and maintained close social and professional contact with industry players via social media and telephone contact. Unluer (2012) stressed it is important for social researchers to clarify their roles, especially for those using the qualitative methodology, to make their research credible. Unluer (2012) identified three key advantages of being an insider researcher: (a) having a greater understanding of the culture, (b) not altering the flow of social interaction unnaturally, and (c) having an established intimacy that promotes both the telling and the judging of truth. Unluer also identified disadvantages associated with being an insider including the loss of objectivity from familiarity, and wrong assumptions about the research process based on the researcher's prior knowledge.

To mitigate bias, I maintained the highest standards of transparency. I did not have any personal or professional connections, potential conflicts of interest, or other circumstances that may have led to misrepresentation with the study participants. Another way I mitigated bias was through the use of member checking. Member checking is sharing data and interpretations with participants to verify the acceptability of interpretations of the participants' narratives (Marshall & Rossman, 2014). Member checking allowed me to communicate the summary of the emerging themes and ask for feedback from the participants. Member checking also allows for participants' validation of the findings as many times as possible until there is no need for further review. I identified and reflected on my assumptions and preconceptions to mitigate my bias as a researcher while using a bracketing technique as recommended by Tufford & Newman (2012). Bracketing involves a researcher maintaining a journal to increase clarity and engagement with participants' experiences by unearthing forgotten personal experiences (Tufford & Newman, 2012). Petty, Thomason, & Stew (2012) recognized the reflexive journal as a valuable tool through which the researcher can acknowledge any biases that may affect data interpretation, and so allow the reader to consider the results of the study within its context.

Yin (2014) indicated that a researcher must strive to uphold the highest ethical standards in the conduct of the research activities. Ethics in research required that I protect the dignity and privacy of subjects. *The Belmont Report* identified the basic principles of conduct when research includes human subjects (U.S. National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). The report's key guiding principles are (a) respect for persons, especially those who are vulnerable; (b) beneficence, or an obligation not to harm, especially to avoid any deception of the participant; and (c) justice, treating all participants fairly.

Throughout this study, I enhanced each interview session by using an interview protocol that contained procedures to conduct interviews with the research participants (see Appendix A). According to Jacob & Furgerson (2012), an interview protocol is a procedural guide for directing a qualitative researcher through the interview process. The interview protocol is useful to the researcher in planning the interview questions and increases the reliability of findings (Turner, 2011).

Participants

This study included a purposeful sample of five successful SME owners in the Nigerian oil and gas industry. Yin (2014) assumed that a researcher could compare two or more cases of a phenomenon to study for common experiences among the cases. In qualitative multiple case study research, a researcher must ensure that each participant has experienced the phenomenon (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Patton, 2002; Yin, 2014). The following comprised the criteria I used for selecting participants: (a) the participant is the owner of the SME, (b) the SME must have at least an ongoing contract with a major oil and gas company; and (c) the SME area of operation must be in Warri, Delta state, Nigeria. I obtained approval from the Walden Institutional Review Board (IRB) to ensure I followed proper ethical procedures and avoided human rights violations. I made contact with participants only after the study has received IRB approval.

I selected participants who had the most knowledge and experience to address the research question. The SMEs I selected were listed on the Nigerian Petroleum Exchange (NiPEX) with ongoing contracts in the oil and gas industry. The participants were SME owners whom I had gained familiarity with while working in the oil industry. Business owners are often gatekeepers of information and potential sources of rich data for researchers (Belso-Martínez, Xavier Molina-Morales, & Mas-Verdu, 2013; Drew, 2014; Mikecz, 2012). I selected five established and reputable oil and gas SME owners in the Warri area who provided answers to the interview questions and met the inclusion criteria. The research question for this study was: What business strategies do SME owners use to compete favorably in the Nigerian oil and gas industry?

After I had completed the selection of participants, I placed a call to each participant before sending the letter of invitation (see Appendix D). The letter of invitation contained an explanation of the intent of the study and included the participant consent form. The participants reviewed the email containing the letter and participant consent form, and acknowledged consent by replying to the email with the words *I consent*. After the participants had consented to participate in the study, I began to schedule interview times and dates via phone conversations and emails. I chose only dates and locations that were convenient for the participants. I let participants know that their participation in the study was voluntary, and that they could withdraw from the study at any time. I shared details regarding the participant confidentiality and privacy, and I offered to sign any non-disclosure or confidentiality agreement the participant needed to gain his comfort.

Yin (2014) emphasized the importance of relationship building, and noted that researcher should establish a working relationship with participants to facilitate open and meaningful discussions during their interviews. My strategy for establishing a working relationship with my participants was through trust. Researchers should establish trust and be honest with the participants regarding the intended purpose and outcome of the study (Lauckner, Paterson, & Krupa, 2012). I utilized the participant's consent form, confidentiality, and anonymity clause to secure participants' trust and strengthen our working relationship.

Research Method and Design

Qualitative research allows the researcher to explore a phenomenon through an activity (Marshall & Rossman, 2014). The selected research method and design can help the researcher identify the most effective ways of achieving the goals of the study and answering the research question. In this study, I explored the strategies that some business owners use to compete in the oil and gas industry. I used a qualitative multiple case study design to understand the strategies used by 5 business owners. Multiple case studies allow comparisons in diverse settings (Houghton, Casey, Shaw and Murphy, 2013).

Research Method

Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method constitute the three types of research methods (Clark, 2010). I chose the qualitative research method for this study. Qualitative research facilitates description and analysis of social processes, practices, and phenomena, as well as understandings of how participants view those processes, practices, and phenomena in the contexts of their lives and social environments (Koch, Niesz, & Henry, 2014). Qualitative researchers explore all problems and social situations, offer detailed accounts of data sources and analysis, and cannot simply reference well-known data sets and statistical tests as is often done in quantitative research (Yin, 2014). Qualitative researchers collect data by observing behaviors, exploring documents, and interviewing participants to record their perceptions (Marshall & Rossman, 2014). The purpose of this study was to explore the business strategies some SME business owners use to compete favorably in the Nigerian oil and gas service industry. Qualitative methodology was appropriate for obtaining the meaning of the participants' perspectives and collecting data through participant dialogue (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

A mixed-methods approach combining both the exploratory characteristics of a qualitative study with analytical techniques found in quantitative studies, is another option. Mixed-method is appropriate when neither a quantitative nor a qualitative approach is sufficient by itself to comprehend the research topic (Hayes, Bonner, & Douglas, 2013). Quantitative researchers use scientific methods, conduct experiments, and control phenomenon under investigation by altering the variables to achieve objective results (Arghode, 2012). The quantitative method is appropriate when the research intent is to begin with a theory or hypothesis and then test for confirmation or disconfirmation of that hypothesis (Fassinger & Marrow, 2013). However, this study did not require evaluating data or comparing variables, so a quantitative or mixed-methods approach was not appropriate.

Research Design

The four qualitative designs I considered for this study were case study, ethnographic, phenomenological, and narrative. I have selected the multiple-case study design as the most appropriate for this study. The case study design is best for exploring processes, activities, and events (Yin, 2014). The case study approach for research design contains guidelines the researcher uses to explore a specified boundary of interest, using a multiple data systems collection methods to identify themes (Hadjimanolis, 2006). The two main case study designs are single-case and multiple case designs. The single case study is the critical, unusual, revelatory or longitudinal study of a significant phenomenon (Yin, 2014). A multiple case study is a study organized around two or more cases to understand the similarities and differences between the cases (Baxter & Jack, 2010). Multiple case studies enable a researcher to portray a perspective from various relevant perspectives and allow comparison when conducting multiple experiments on related topics (Marshall & Rossman, 2014; Petty, Thomson, & Stew, 2012; Yin, 2014). I chose the multiple case study because according to Yin (2014), it may result in a more compelling and overall robust study than a single case.

An ethnographic researcher focuses on a set of local cultural beliefs, behaviors, and activities (Dawson, 2014). SMEs do not cross into an actual cultural circumstance; therefore, I did not select an ethnographic study design. The phenomenological design is appropriate when the researcher seeks to interpret lived experiences from the perspective of others (Englander, 2012). A narrative researcher focuses on the lives of individuals as told through their stories (Green, 2013). I did not select a narrative study because I was not seeking the life stories of these SME owners.

Data saturation is important component of rigor in qualitative research. Data saturation is the building of rich data within the process of enquiry until the data collected becomes replicated (Morse, 2015). Researchers need to ensure sufficient data to produce an accurate picture of the phenomenon under investigation before exiting the field (Goffin, Raja, Claes, Szwejczewski, & Martinez, 2012). Researchers should aim to achieve saturation as well as to demonstrate clear evidence of saturation. Data saturation may occur when analyzing data collected from the interviews, which is the primary strategy for data collection (Onwuegbuzie & Byers, 2014). To ensure data saturation, I asked participants in this study to expand on answers and ask probing follow-up questions to clarify meanings. Qualitative researchers frequently rely on member checking to ensure credibility by giving participants opportunities to correct errors, challenge interpretations, and assess results to confirm the accuracy and completeness of information provided (Patton 2015; Reilly, 2013 & Richardson, Davey, & Swint, 2013). To achieve data saturation, my interviews involved member checking. I conducted the initial interview, interpreted what the participant shared, and shared the interpretation with the participant for validation as prescribed by Patton (2015), Reilly (2013), and Richardson, Davey, and Swint (2013).

Population and Sampling

The population selected for this qualitative study was 5 SME business owners who used strategies to compete favorably in oil and gas industry in Warri, Delta state, Nigeria. I used purposeful sampling method as it is appropriate for qualitative research and case studies as described by Walker (2012). Purposeful sampling allows a researcher to obtain participants who will enrich the study by providing in-depth knowledge of the phenomenon and allows researchers use their judgment to select participants based on the study criteria (Suri, 2011). The aim of the study was to explore the business strategies of

SMEs; therefore, I used purposive sampling to identify SME owners in the oil and gas industry. I utilized criterion strategy of purposeful sampling because it involves selection of cases that meet predetermined criterion of importance. The predetermined criteria for selecting participants was (a) the participant must be the owner of the SME, (b) the SME must have, at least an ongoing contract with a major oil and gas company; and (c) the SME area of operation must be in Warri, Delta state, Nigeria.

The use of a multiple case study design by a qualitative researcher may raise the question of whether the number of cases in a sample is sufficient (Yin, 2014). Malterud (2012) suggested the selected sample should be sufficiently large and varied to achieve the study objectives. Malterud (2012) further clarified that a larger sample size can add depth to the study but that the goal of the sample size should be to provide the whole of the story, not just to define a set of numbers or quantity of events. Yin (2014) suggested multiple case studies should be a selection of two or more cases with exemplary outcomes about the research question. For this case study, a sample size of 5 participants was sufficient to achieve data saturation. Dworkin (2012) suggested an appropriate number of participants required to achieve data saturation in a qualitative study could range from 5 to fifty. An overly large sample size could result in repetitive information; on the other hand, a minuscule sample size might not provide enough data to form any consensus or triangulation in results. However, a small sample size might achieve saturation quicker depending upon the researcher's goal in the study (Mason, 2010).

Attaining data saturation is essential to the success of qualitative studies. Dworkin (2012) asserted quality of interviews, scope of the study, experience of the participants, number of interviews per participant, sampling procedures, and researcher experience influence data saturation. Saturation is a useful tool for ensuring that quality and adequacy of the data collected will support the research study (Walker, 2012). There is a higher likelihood of reaching data saturation if the data collection is purposeful (Suri, 2011). The member checking process aids data saturation in qualitative research. The process I used involved conducting the initial interview, interpreting what the participant shared, and sharing the interpretation with the participant for validation as prescribed by Patton (2015), Reilly (2013), and Richardson, Davey, and Swint (2013).

Participants chose to engage in face-to-face interviews at their place of business. According to Bell (2013), Stake (2013), and Yin (2014), an appropriate environment for conducting interviews is a place in which the participants are not restricted or uncomfortable. The participants' offices used for the interviews were quiet, private, and free from interruptions, which further enhanced the quality of the interaction.

Ethical Research

Ethical research relates to the day-to-day ethical issues that occur while conducting research (Wallace & Sheldon, 2015). Specific processes and procedures are necessary to ensure an ethical execution of the study. I began data collection only after the Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved my research proposal and I received my IRB approval number. The Walden IRB approval number for this study is 10-06-16-0367199 and expires on October 5, 2017. The IRB approval ensures the researcher adheres to ethical values regarding human research participants in the study (Appendix D). I followed the three basic principles that are relevant to the ethics of research

(Belmont Report, 1979). These three basic principles are (a) the principles of respect for persons, (b) beneficence, and (c) justice (Belmont Report, 1979).

After I have completed the selection of participants, I placed a call to the participant before sending the letter of invitation (Appendix D) via email. The letter of invitation contained an explanation of the intent of the study and included the participants' consent form. The participants reviewed the email containing the letter and participant consent form and acknowledged consent by replying to the email with the words *I consent*. Furthermore, I informed participants that contribution to the study was voluntary and that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time for any reason. As prescribed by Wallace and Sheldon (2015), I informed the participants that I was not offering incentives as it might compromise the ethical consideration of voluntary consent. Head (2009) suggested that instead of monetary compensation, a copy of the final study to participants as an incentive and an offer to discuss the results further is acceptable.

The participants acknowledged their consent to participate in the study by replying the email containing the consent form with the words *I consent*. I remained courteous and professional at all times with participants through email contact, telephone contact, and in person. Yin (2014) urged researchers to protect the rights of the participants, preserve their privacy and ensure paramount care during data gathering, data storage, and data analysis.

I will retain consent forms, along with all recordings, transcripts, and documentation for 5 years, in a locked safe. After the 5 years, I will destroy all consent forms, interviews recording, and transcribed data. To guarantee confidentiality and privacy protection of participants, I did not use names of participants and did not use their official documents in the study. Rather, I assigned participants and their company information a coded label. The assigned label for each participant's audio recordings, transcripts, and documents ensured anonymity and privacy.

Data Collection Instruments

In this qualitative multiple case study, I was the data collection instrument. Data collection took place using interviews and relevant company documentation (e.g. annual business plans, strategy documents, and records) as sources of evidence as defined by Yin (2014). I followed an interview protocol (Appendix A) that outlined procedures to conduct interviews with the research participants. According to Jacob & Furgerson (2012), an interview protocol is a procedural guide for directing a qualitative researcher through the interview process. For this study, I used the interview protocol (see Appendix A) as a guide to ensure I gather all necessary information in a consistent and organized manner.

Semi-structured face-to-face interviews with the SME owner took place at a location mutually selected by the participant and me. By providing a neutral setting, participants may be in an environment conducive to open conversations Yin (2014). Englander (2012) and Thomas and Magilvy (2011) prescribed steps that contained suggestions for researchers to record each interview and maintain a journal with observations and notes made during the interviews. The semi-structured interview involved following a prepared questioning guided in a consistent and systematic manner

(See Appendix C). Semi-structured interviews promote interaction with informants in an interview situation, to foster goal-oriented thinking, and utilize social negotiation and co-production of knowledge (Mojtahed, Nunes, Martins, & Peng, 2014). Along with semistructured interviews, I gathered formal documentation of SME processes specific to strategy and contracts or project execution. The information was in the form of SME annual reports and strategy documents contained in their business plans. Use of documents assisted in my understanding as well as validated that such processes are in place and consistent with the oral responses of the participants.

Member checking is important in a qualitative study, as it enhances the reliability of the research (Harper & Cole, 2015). Member checking allowed participants to review their responses and respond to initial interpretations. Houghton, Casey, and Murphy (2013) noted that member checking allows the participants to have a voice and engagement within the research process. I reviewed options for member checking with participants during the initial interviews to alleviate concerns about expectations and time commitments. Within 5 days of the interview, I provided copies of the transcripts to each participant to request validation of information as described by Thomas and Magilvy (2011). I asked the participants to review the transcribed interviews to look for any errors or missing information. I asked the participants to review the transcript and provide comments that validated, corrected, or clarified the original interview. I gave the summary of my interpretations to each participant and asked if the summary of responses accurately reflected their responses and if they could provide more clarity or give additional information. Providing an opportunity for study participants to review the accuracy of the interview responses can enhance the quality of the data collected (Harper & Cole, 2012).

Data Collection Technique

I utilized interviews and review of relevant company documents (i.e. business plans and annual reports) as additional data sources for this study. Interviews are useful to qualitative researchers to understanding opinions, attitudes, experiences, processes, behaviors or predictions of the subject matter of interest (Rowley, 2012). Mojtahed, Nunes, Martins, and Peng (2014) recognized varieties of interview styles such as structured, unstructured semistructured interview, group interview and focus group interview. For this study, I elected to use the face-to-face, semistructured interviews option as my interviewing tool. I utilized the interview protocol as described in Appendix A to maintain the focus of the interview and provide consistency for my interview with each participant. According to Jacob & Furgerson (2012), the interview protocol assists researchers to solicit consistency by asking same interview questions to all the participants. The interview protocol enhanced the quality of information obtained from participants and helped to mitigate bias.

Semistructured interviews allow a researcher to introduce additional questions to a fixed set of questions to explore the phenomenon. Semistructured interviews can provide reliable, comparable qualitative data and allows participants to express their viewpoints (Turner, 2010). Semistructured interviews are free from barriers and result in the gathering of rich data that enables understanding of the processes, networks, and relationships (Drew, 2014). A potential disadvantage of a semistructured interview is less information collected during each interview when compared with information collected through unstructured interviews (Rowley, 2012). Rowley (2012) also recognized semistructured interviews are labor intensive and may require interviewer sophistication (Rowley, 2012). The reduced amount of data collected during semistructured interviews makes the processing of data more feasible as the researcher is obliged to analyze all data that are collected (Rowley, 2012).

I called the participant to confirm the interview date, time, and location before the scheduled interviews. During the interview session, the interview location, the date, the time, demographics, surroundings, and participant interactions with others was noted and hand-written in a small notepad. Before commencing the interview, I allowed the participant to review a copy of their signed Participant Consent Form. I proceeded with the interview and review of the documents until it became repetitive and no additional information was needed as described by Walker (2012) for a case study design. Each of the interviews did not last longer than one hour. Immediately following the interview, I collected company documents from the participants.

Harvey (2015) described member checking as a process of confirming the responses of members or participants to ensure the accuracy of data gathered, descriptions, and interpretations. Member checking involves the return of interpretative summaries to individual participants for verification and confirmation of their accuracy. Member checking involves the return of interpretative summaries to individual participants for verification and confirmation of their accuracy. I performed member checking, a process which involves conducting the initial interview, interpreting what the participant shared, and sharing the interpretation with the participant for validation as prescribed by Patton (2015), Reilly (2013) and Richardson, Davey, and Swint (2013). After transcribing the recorded interview answers, I asked the participants to read their responses for accuracy by showing the participants the transcripts for their review of errors or discrepancies to enhance reliability as suggested by Stake (2010).

Data Organization Technique

I recorded the interview session by audio recording the participant using Audacity audio recorder software on my Hewlett Packard ProBook 4540 laptop. I had my android mobile phone (a Samsung Galaxy Note5) audio recorder application as an audio recorder back up. I used a note pad to record and reflect on my observations and responses throughout the research process as prescribed by Tufford and Newman (2012). I transcribed the interviews into text for ease of analysis. Then I loaded the data into the NVivo®11 tool, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) for data analysis as prescribed by Hilal, &Alabri (*2*013).

In addition to the interviews, I examined business documents (e.g. business plans, and annual reports) to ensure data alignment and relevance. I organized the information contained in the documentation by the case and compare them for similarities and differences in processes explained in the interviews as described by Irwin (2013). Once the participant validated the transcribed interviews for accuracy and completeness, I entered the data received into the NVivo®11 software for coding the data into similar themes and analysis as advocated by Bloomberg and Volpe (2012).

To protect the identity of the participants and the organization, I removed all identifying labels from the company documents and labeled them with unidentifiable alphanumeric codes. I used alphanumeric codes, P1, P2, P3, P4 and P5 to represent the 5 participants. I also matched each participant to their company's documents, under the same codes. I placed all documents and recordings in a password protected external hard drive. I safely secured the password protected external hard drive and all copies of documentation received from participants; which I will keep in a locked, safe for the required period of 5 years. After 5 years of completion of the study, I will destroy all the collected electronic and written data.

Data Analysis

Data analysis involves making sense of relevant research data to identify and correlate themes from the literature and conceptual framework using computer software. As outlined by Carlson (2010), my data analysis included (a) an audit trail of all recordings, notes, and transcripts, (b) reflexivity by the researcher' (c) thick and rich descriptions across each case study, and (d) member checking. I edited transcriptions into a condensed form removing filler words, off-topic discussions, and repetitive phrases for easier processing and member checking. Researchers should perform member checking in person at the discretion of the participant (Carlson, 2010). Irwin (2013) recommended data gathering and analysis take place concurrently to identify errors and correct them before finalization into the data model.

After the participants had validated the accuracy and completeness of the transcript, I used NVivo®11 software to identify themes. NVivo®11 software is a tool specific to compiling data for analysis of qualitative cases into particular words or phrases and arrange similarities to assist in segmenting the data into primary and secondary groups, depending on the number of categories identified during the collection process (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Yin, 2014). I designed coding themes to coordinate with the research questions as suggested by Stuckey (2014). Prendergast and Maggie (2013) argued that researchers should use identification themes based on significant or noteworthy statements and further divide them into textual or structural descriptions. Within the analysis process, I continued to consider the stages of the interview process for context to reflect on the answers as recommended by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2013).

As part of methodological data triangulation, I reviewed various documents, including the participants organizations' business plans and annual reports. The following is a list of the documents reviewed (a) annual reports that provides financial and performance data; and (b) business plans that show vision and mission statements, procedures, policies and strategies. Data analysis included the use of sorting, diagramming, and integrating different participant and documented processes into logical narratives. As suggested by Lauckner et al. (2012), my analysis utilized line-by-line coding followed by focused coding based on topics that I had identified from my interview questions and conceptual frameworks. The main categories are business strategies, resources and capabilities, and oil and gas industry factors. I outlined core categories for common themes across cases as well as analyzed each case separately. I separated case specific items from common themes held across cases as suggested by Lauckner et al. (2012).

The primary task of qualitative inquiry dwells on the knowledge extracted from the interview process including factors that may be subtle or contextually limited (Kapoulas & Mitic, 2012). I approached the interview data analysis with a cautious self-scrutiny as described by Hartman (2013) where I acknowledged my perspective and the research setting. I made every effort to reflect the expressions of reality as perceived by the participants.

Reliability and Validity

Validity and reliability are two factors that qualitative researchers are concerned about while designing a study, analyzing results and judging the quality of a study (Street & Ward, 2012). Reliability is the ability of others to repeat a study and achieve similar results and enables researchers to replicate study results (Tracy, 2010). Validity involves the ability to confirm the credibility and trustworthiness of the research as presented in the study (Yin, 2014). Over time, both factors have helped to minimize bias or subjectivity and have become criteria to ensure the rigor of qualitative work (Barusch, Gringeri & George, 2011). Various researchers agree that confirmability, credibility, transferability, and dependability are better criteria for evaluating qualitative research (Boesch, Schwaninger, Weber, & Scholz, 2013; Goffin, Raja, Claes, Szwejczewski, & Martinez, 2012; Ihantola & Kihn, 2011). My strategies to ensure rigor of this research included prolonged engagement, methodological triangulation, member checking, reflexivity, and thick descriptions. Another way to achieve study reliability is to document fully and clarify case study boundaries, participants, locations, and processes, which might affect the ability to conduct case studies (Lauckner et al. (2012). Finally, I utilized the interview protocol for cohesion as well as to reinforce validity, consistency, and reliability.

Reliability

Yin (2014) identified reliability as the repetitive and consistent procedures used by the researcher during the case study. Tracy (2010) added the concept of meaningful coherence as a critical element of the research. Tracy (2010) noted that balanced studies must meet four criteria. The criteria include (a) achieve the stated purpose; (b) accomplish what the study was intended to be about; (c) comprise methods and representation practices that align well with espoused theories and paradigms; and (d) interconnect the literature reviewed with research focus, methods, and findings. I achieved reliability by following Tracy’s (2010) criteria of a coherent study. The use of face-to-face interviews using semistructured interview questions and the review of business documents for the study achieved the stated purpose of exploring the strategies of successful SME owners in the Nigerian oil and gas service industry. The multiple case study approach is congruent with the constructivism viewpoint of subjective and shared meanings, and that the academic literature supports the research method, design, and the framework.

Dependability refers to the integrity of qualitative studies (Rodrigues, Alves, Silveira, & Laranjeira, 2012). The concept of dependability also aligns with that of reliability (Marshall & Rossman, 2014). Denzin (2012) reported that qualitative researchers establish the trustworthiness of their research through a focus on dependability rather than reliability. I used the interview protocol (Appendix A) to demonstrate dependability to minimize the effect of prejudice and misunderstandings as recommended by Yin (2014). I performed member checking by interpreting the interview data and having the participant verify my interpretation. As suggested by Thomas & Magilvy (2011), I achieved dependability through the articulation of a clear purpose, description of the selection of participants, specification of details in the data collection processes, utilization of a clear and unbiased data analysis system, and demarcation of in-depth discussion results.

Validity

As Yin (2014) noted, a case study analysis meets the criteria of validity if the results match significantly to the predicted outcomes of the study. The goal is to convey an in-depth understanding and encompass the element of explanation. Tracy (2010) noted the importance of credibility through rich description, precise detail, triangulation, and member reflection. The member checking function of allowing participants to review my interpretation of their transcripts to confirm accurate reporting of their contributions to the study achieves creditability, similar to validity (Harper & Cole 2012).

Transferability is a determination of the degree to which research processes might apply to other settings or contexts (Houghton, Casey, Shaw, & Murphy, 2013; Marshall & Rossman, 2014; & Onwuegbuzie et al., 2012). I gave complete details for this study relating to the type of industry, geographic location, and the population to enhance transferability. As recommended by Houghton et al. (2013), a thick description strategy requires the researcher to be able to describe the context of the research rigorously so that readers can make judgments as to similarities with other situations.

Credibility is the opportunity for the researcher to review participant transcripts to verify the accuracy of the interpretation of the experiences (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). I used member checking to aid accuracy and validation of participants' responses to look for discrepancies or errors and ensure credibility. It is a measure of objectivity within the research by keeping detailed records such as notes, journals, recordings, and transcripts (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). Enhancing credibility includes identifying strategies that improve trustworthiness such as prolonged engagement in the field, and use of multiple sources (Lauckner et al., 2012).

Dependability allows other researchers to follow the audit or decision trail of the researcher (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). Thomas and Magilvy (2011) suggested six components to an audit trail. The components are (a) the purpose of the study, (b) the details of participant selection, (c) the details on data collection, (d) the data coding and analysis processes, (d) discussion of findings, and (e) techniques for establishing credibility. I addressed each of the listed components in the final study.

Confirmability refers to whether others can confirm the findings to ensure that the results reflect the understandings and experiences from observed participants, rather than the researcher's preferences (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2015; Houghton, Casey & Shaw, 2013; & Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). Confirmability includes the reflection by the researcher on the study, noting bias, insights, and feelings about each interview

(Houghton, Casey & Shaw (2013). The goal is to develop a sense of trust in the conduct of the overall study for the reader (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011).

Qualitative researchers often use data saturation as a methodological concept for ensuring adequate and quality data collection to support the study (Walker, 2012). To achieve data saturation, I did the following: (a) interviewed 5 participants, (b) used the strategy of member checking, and (c) reviewed documents until no new data emerges. The achievement of data saturation requires the continual collection of data until no new data emerges (Walker, 2012). Member checking involves conducting the initial interview, interpreting participant responses and returning the interpretative summaries to individual participants for verification and confirmation of their responses as suggested by Harvey (2015).

To ensure data saturation, I asked participants in this study to expand on answers, and I asked probing follow-up questions to clarify meanings. Qualitative researchers frequently rely on member checking to ensure credibility by giving participants opportunities to correct errors, challenge interpretations, and assess results to confirm the information provided is accurate and complete (Patton 2015; Reilly, 2013 & Richardson, Davey, & Swint, 2013). To achieve data saturation, my interviews involved member checking. Member checking involves conducting the initial interview and providing participants with a summary of their interview. After conducting the interview, I shared the interpretation with each participant for validation as prescribed by Patton (2015), Reilly (2013), and Richardson, Davey, and Swint (2013).

Transition and Summary

Section 2 consisted of an explanation of the purpose of the planned study approach, including (a) role of the researcher, (b) the participants; (c) research method and design; (d) population and sampling; (e) ethical research; (f) data collection instruments, technique, and organization; and (g) data analysis techniques. Section 2 concluded with a discussion of the methods and techniques for assuring the reliability and validity of my study. Section 3 contains an introduction, the purpose statement, and the research question. Thereafter, I summarize the presentation of the study's findings. Section 3 also includes (a) application to professional practice, (b) implications for social change, (c) recommendations for action, (d) recommendation for further research, (e) researcher reflections, and (f) a conclusion.

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

In this section, I summarize the findings of the study, address the application of the study to professional practice, and discuss its implications for social change. Based on my findings, I offered recommendations for action and recommendations for further research. These recommendations are specific strategies directed toward SME owners in the Nigerian oil and gas industry. Finally, I concluded the section with my reflections on the research process.

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the strategies SME owners use to compete favorably in the Nigerian oil and gas industry. I used a qualitative methodology and a multiple case study design for the study. I conducted semi-structured face-to-face interviews with five SME owners in Warri, Delta State. I also reviewed some of the companies' annual business plans and annual reports. The findings contain specific strategies and resources SME owners use to compete successfully.

I used purposive sampling, obtained via a criterion sampling to identify participants from the population for the study. I used the interview protocol to guide my interviews and recorded the interviews using my laptop and mobile phone as back up. After I transcribed the interview, I returned, via email, my interpretative summaries to individual participants for verification and confirmation of their responses. To achieve methodological triangulation, I compared participants' responses from interviews with a information in their company documents. Subsequently, I uploaded the transcribed data into NVivo 11 Plus computer software, which is useful for analyzing qualitative data.

I replaced the names of the five interview participants with alphanumeric codes P1, P2, P3, P4, and P5. I analyzed the data and identified six themes to describe the strategies SME owners use to compete favorably in the Nigerian oil and gas industry. The identified themes include the following: low cost strategy, knowledge of the business environment, competent personnel, collaborative partnerships, integrity, and prudent financial management. The themes I identified in the interview data correlated with those I found when reviewing company documentations from the past 5 years.

Presentation of the Findings

The presentation and interpretation of findings include (a) the overarching research question, (b) identification of each theme to include analysis and discussion of the associated findings, (c) comparison of the findings to the conceptual framework, and (d) comparison of the findings to the existing literature on effective business practice. The findings of this study are congruent with the research question and the interview questions. The research question for this study was: What business strategies do SME owners use to compete favorably in the Nigerian oil and gas industry? Table 2 shows low cost strategy mentioned 40 times, making 24.39% of the total (164) themes mentioned, and thus ranking as most important of the themes.

Table 2

Frequency of Themes

Theme	*n*	% frequency of occurrence
Low cost strategy	40	24.39
Knowledge of the business environment	36	21.95
Competent personnel	35	21.34
Collaborative partnerships	23	14.02
Integrity	20	12.91
Financial management	10	6.09

Note: *n=frequency*

Emergent theme 1: Low cost strategy. The first theme that emerged from data was low cost strategy. This theme originated from Questions 1 and 2, which I used to explore the business strategies that SME owners use to remain successful in the oil and gas industry. P1, P2, and P4 stated that the use of a low cost strategy is most effective way to compete in the industry. P1 identified a reduction of technical unit cost of product or service as key to minimizing cost. P2 utilized improvement in processes and prudent partnership decisions to achieve a reduction in cost. P4 identified suppliers of lower cost services and prudent financial management as means to achieve cost effectiveness. According to Alsoboa and Aldehayyat (2013), leaders who use cost leadership strategies seek to achieve above-average returns over competitors through low prices by reducing the cost of all activities and components. P3 reported using a combination strategy—specifically a focus strategy and cost reduction strategy—to drive competition. P3 further explained that over time, the advantages of a focus strategy became evident in cost, quality, reputation, and project delivery. Stressing that concentration on only a few interconnected segments in the industry at a time will promote SME services more effectively than SMEs termed as "general contractors."

P5 said that uncertainty in the industry complicates a single strategy, thus a diversified strategy is necessary to sustain the business through "dry periods" which have become quite prevalent. For example, the major oil companies have re-strategized and relocated from Warri to Port Harcourt, forcing SMEs adapt for survival. P5 stressed that the oil and gas industry has become so unstable that one needs to create an alternative steady income stream outside the industry. P5's position is consistent with Parnell's (2015) observation that comprehending the direction and scale of industry change is a key problem facing organizations. Therefore, organizations could design their strategies to shape the competitive environment as one means of addressing strategic uncertainty.

According to Porter (1980), the low cost strategy insulates against all five of the competitive forces: rivalry among existing firms, consumer power, the power of suppliers, new entrants to the market, and the substitution of products or services. The responses from all participants indicated that the use of a low cost strategy provides a level playing field for SMEs, big enterprises, powerful servicing companies, and suppliers to compete in the oil and gas industry. P1, P2, P3, P4 and P5 agreed that there is a higher chance of succeeding in the business with a low cost strategy. Table 3 shows that low cost strategy ranked highest because participants mentioned it 12 of the 20 times they discussed business strategies, followed by cost and focus combined, and then adaptive and diversified strategies.

Table 3

Business strategies

Participant Response	*n*	% frequency of occurrence
Low cost	12	60.00
Cost and focus combined	5	25.00
Adaptive and diversified	3	15.00

Note: *n=frequency*

Emergent theme 2: Knowledge of the business environment. The theme knowledge of the business environment originated from Question 4 which was centered on how oil and gas industry forces influence business for SME owners. All participants agreed SMEs must have extensive knowledge of the industry business environment to be able to compete successfully. P5 discussed awareness of the global nature of the business, its impact on the Nigerian economy, regulatory bodies, the oil companies, powerful suppliers, NGO influences, and immediate communities. P4 replied that political, economic, technological, societal, and environmental factors affect oil and gas business' development. P1 mentioned that SME owners stand to benefit from attending industry events such as conferences, exhibitions, and workshops. Industry events provide a strategic opportunity for networking and help SMEs to (a) connect with the right people in the industry, (b) raise business profile, (c) gain market intelligence and obtain vital industry information, (d) keep track of business opportunities and sharpen business instincts, and (e) strike up new partnerships and gain prime exposure to oil and gas stakeholders.

P1, P2, P3, P4, and P5 all mentioned that the annual update of registration with regulators DPR, NiPeX, and numerous other regulatory bodies as means to comply with the regulatory requirement, creates working relationships with regulators and provides updates on industry news. Furthermore, P1 and P2 stressed that membership in local and international oil and gas trade associations is another strategic way to get information on trends. Organizations such as the Offshore Technology Conference (OTC), Petroleum Technology Association of Nigeria (PETAN), and their more local counterparts are sources for staying knowledgeable on industry trends. P5 said SME owners should establish strong networks with clients, regulators, competitors, communities, and partners at any given opportunity. SME owners must be knowledgeable of the local communities and maintain good relations with the staff of oil companies. P2 stated that SMEs should seek external certification such as ISO9001 to demonstrate commitment to meeting industry standards and continuous improvement. Although the process is expensive at the initial stage, an ISO certification improves SME visibility and reputation within the industry.

P3 said SME owners must use the knowledge gained to their advantage, or it becomes useless. P4 observed that the industry is booby trapped with too many requirements and procedures. Therefore sound knowledge of clients and competitors alike is required to navigate through it. P1, P2, P3, P4, and P5 identified the following trends as prevalent in the sector:

- Security problems relating to oil theft, pipeline vandalism, and piracy.

- Divestment from onshore oil blocks and reduced commitment to onshore. activities to focus on more challenging and profitable frontiers in the deep offshore.
- New and upcoming gas infrastructure projects.
- Drop in oil prices.
- Government aspirations to diversify the economy from oil and gas.
- Alternative energy sources.
- High-risk profile of industry not attractive to banks and funding institutions.

Emergent Theme 3: Competent personnel. The theme competent personnel originated from Question 3 centered on the resources and capabilities SME owners use to sustain a competitive advantage. P1, P2, P3, P4, and P5 replied that competent employees are vital resources to gaining competitive advantage. According to Szymaniec-Mlicka (2014), personnel are valuable organizational resources because they have communication skills, interpersonal skills, analytical skills, technical skills, organizational and planning skills, creativity, innovation, adaptability, and are willing to accept leadership responsibility. P1 and P5 said competent human resources remain the key assets and resources SMEs need to deploy their business strategies. P5 said that for critical positions, SME owners should only employ qualified, skilled, experienced, and trained oil and gas personnel whose skill sets match the company’s goals and strategy. P1, P2, and P5 have maintained key managerial personnel within their organizations for over 10 years. P1, P2, and P5 maintained they will continue to retain their trusted long-term staff because they have built valuable external and international connections for the business. P1, P2, and P4 concurred that the ability to draw on a pool of highly skilled short-term contract staff is valuable to the successful execution of projects. Skilled, competent, and experienced ad-hoc employees understand the nature of the industry and are readily available on the impromptu basis for extended periods of up to 6 weeks at a time.

P1, P3, and P5 stated that they maintain a small team of core staff to reduce costs. However, as projects come on stream, they outsource the recruitment of qualified personnel to external organizations. Organizations may gain in the long term from outsourcing human resources management, and maximize capabilities at a strategic level (Zitkiene & Blusyte, 2015).

Emergent theme 4: Integrity. The theme integrity originated from Question 3 centered on the resources and capability SME owners use to sustain a competitive advantage. P1, P2, P3, P4, and P5 mentioned integrity, honesty, respect, trust, openness, fairness, responsibility, and accountability as values required to remain in the business. Integrity represents the consistency of values, principles actions, methods, measures, etc. of individuals and organizations. P1 stressed integrity as a vital ingredient for fostering partnerships in the industry. Emphasizing that once an SME loses integrity, the word spreads fast and may never be able to regain it. According to Hennchen (2015) integrity is evidenced in actions, values, methods, standards and processes, principles, morals and work performance. P2 stated the need to establish a good reputation for strong values, meeting work specification, following due processes, standards, and procedures, sticking to agreed work scope, quality and timely delivery. Szymaniec-Mlicka (2014) considered the reputation of an organization as a strategic resource. P5 revealed poor quality work, facilitation fees, kickbacks, and bid manipulations are examples of compromised integrity in the industry. P5 further pointed that SMEs fall into integrity traps when they lack knowledge of business laws and processes and are not transparent.

P1 recognized the importance of honesty and building trust in business after being on the 'receiving end' of unethical business practice. Lack of transparency impacts SMEs owners negatively and could affect ability to access financial support from formal institutions (Aigboduwa & Oisamoje, 2013). Therefore, upfront agreement on terms and conditions is highly required in the industry to reduce the risk of litigation, overhead costs, and boost performance. P2 & P5 mentioned that SMEs tend to cut corners sometimes, due to a lack of bargaining power, pressure from competitors, and limited knowledge of industry environment. P2 said elements of certification programs such as ISO9001 helps SME to stay ethical. P1, P2, P3, P4, and P5 enlisted good reputation, better relationships among stakeholders, goodwill, and cost reduction as benefits of integrity to SME owners.

Emergent Theme 5: Collaborative Partnership. Partnerships can achieve business success faster than through independent expansion. P1, P2, P3, P4, and P5 agreed it is impossible to go it alone in the industry. P1, P2, & P5 have utilized partnerships with original equipment manufacturers (OEMs), technical partners, community, and with other SME to deliver projects successfully. P2 used partnerships with OEMs and technical partners to a**ccess** cost effective and innovative technologies. Valuable partnerships arise from sharing resources such as knowledge, competences, connections, and intelligence (Pop, Stümpel, Bordean, & Borza, 2014).

Partnerships if managed effectively have the potential to produce high-quality work due to the combined specialization of each partner in the network at a lower cost for both partners. P1 advocated SME owners to be flexible to adapt to the business changes and be willing to renegotiate terms when conditions change. An unnecessarily unwavering stance will affect business negatively. P2 &P4 discussed the increased capacity for the SME due to exchange of knowledge, technical tools, templates, and models. P2, however, observed that partnership that does not come naturally to any organization and as such collaborative efforts may turn counterproductive due to profit sharing and power plays if integrity where not managed properly. P1, P2, P3, P4 and P5 agreed that alliances and partnerships bring about information flow, trust, and loyalty that is much needed for success. According to Laosirihongthong, Prajogo and Adebanjo (2013), innovation outcomes can be enhanced by developing collaborations with partners, clients, suppliers and technical bodies.

Emergent theme 6: Financial management. All participants marked the importance of a comprehensive financial understanding of the industry, contracting process. All the participants stated that availability of capital, strong financial performance, and liquidity are essential to the survival and development of oil and gas SMEs. P1, P2, P3, P4 and P5 sourced their funds from banks, internal sources of funding, owner's savings, retained earnings, or funding through the sale of assets and some informal financial institutions. P2 and P3 stated they utilize the purchase orders (PO) received from clients to secure loans from banks. P4 said it is common knowledge that out of desperation to obtain funds, some companies secure loans from informal moneylenders to execute projects at cut-throat interest. P4 suggested interests from loans to finance projects are one of the reasons why SMEs do not survive in the industry. P1, P2, & P3 observed that some businesses mismanaged loaned funds even before executing projects. P5 stressed the understanding of financial implications before making decisions about funding is a "make or break" skill for SME owners. P5 utilized dedicated financial manager as part of a financial strategy that includes financial analysis and interfacing with financial institutions. Good financial management includes investing profits into the business and long term investing in equipment instead of leasing (P2, P4, and P5). P3 said when conditions allow, direct sourcing of materials is a preferred route. P1 said though difficult, maintaining a zero-debt profile is achievable through prudent financial management.

Summary of Themes. The emergent themes indicate that SME owners stand a better chance to compete more favorably within the industry if they adhere to the following strategies: low cost strategy, knowledge of the business environment, competent personnel, collaborative partnerships, integrity, and financial management. By using the resource based view and Porter's five forces, I was able to identify the resources and strategies that SME owners might use to compete within the oil and gas industry. Emergent themes 3, 4, 5, & 6 align with my first conceptual framework, the resource based view proposed by Wernerfelt in 1984 to interpret SME performance to a combination of long-lasting resources and capabilities. The themes that align with the RBV are (a) competent personnel, (b) collaborative partnerships, (c) integrity and (d) financial management. According to Barney (1991), resources are the assets, capabilities, organizational process, firm attributes, information, and knowledge that enable an organization to choose and implement strategies that improve its effectiveness and enhance competition.

Emergent theme 1, low cost strategy, aligns with Porter’s generic approach to competitive strategies. In this study, participants identified the use of the low cost strategy to provide protection against all five of the competitive forces: rivalry among existing firms, consumer power, the power of suppliers, new entrants to the market and confronting the substitution of products or services. Emergent theme 2, knowledge of the business environment relates to how the oil and gas industry forces influence business. SMEs should be knowledgeable of the business environment before they can adopt the right strategies to compete within the environment.

Comparing findings with other peer-reviewed studies. The findings from this study confirmed the strategies oil and gas SME owners implement to maintain competitiveness. The following six themes representing categories of strategies emerged: low cost strategy, knowledge of the business environment, competent personnel, collaborative partnerships, integrity, and financial management. A previous study by Armstrong (2013) showed the successful pursuit of a cost leadership position provides competitive advantage because that firm can still earn positive returns after competitors have competed away their profits through rivalry. Uchegbulam, Akinyele, and Ibidunni (2015) and Nnamseh and Akpan (2015) revealed strategies like improving employees' skills, product quality, customer quality, and efficiency in production costs helped in profitability. Parnell and Don Lester (2015) found availability of capital, production efficiency, and employee qualifications and ethics as essential to the survival and development of SMEs. Franco and Haase (2013) identified commercial and administrative resources, technological resources, teamwork, and experience. The findings from this study have contributed to the body of knowledge by relating low cost strategy, knowledge of the business environment, competent personnel, collaborative partnerships, integrity, and financial management to oil and gas SME development.

Findings tied to the conceptual framework. The six emergent themes align with the conceptual frameworks for this study. The first conceptual framework for this study was the RBV theory developed by Wernerfelt in 1984. The RBV theorists view resources as internal strengths that firms can use to dev and implement their strategies including resources, capabilities, attributes or knowledge (Dejo-oricain, 2014). The secondconceptual framework for the study is the five forces of competition developed in 1980 by Michael E. Porter.

The internal resources are the assets owned and controlled by the organization to gain competitive advantage (Appiah & Burnley, 2014). The findings tied with the RBV theory because four of the emergent themes from the study are internal resources of organizations. The four emergent themes that aligned with the RBV are competent personnel, collaborative partnerships, integrity, and financial management. Competent personnel linked with the RBV as human resources help build the internal assets of the organizations for competition and collaborative partnerships also tied with the RBV theory are assets. Building strategic partnership is vital for competition as SMEs are more likely to need collaborative agreements to leverage their relatively constrained resources (Tokman, Richey, Morgan, Marino & Dickson, 2013). Financial management is a core requisite for harnessing financial resources in a controlled and effective mannertowards competitive advantage (Bonpattarakan, 2012). Integrity is an internal asset of an organization essential to the survival and development of SME. Integrity promotes the SMEs reputation and brand and affects the SMEs ability to access financial resources from formal institutions. Szymaniec-Mlicka (2014) considered the reputation of an organization as a strategic resource.

Emergent theme 1 and emergent theme 2 both align with Porter's five forces model. Low cost strategy aligns with Porter's (2003) low cost leadership strategy that seeks to achieve above-average returns over competitors through low prices by driving all components of activities towards reducing costs. Knowledge of the business environment aligns with the Porter's five forces model. Knowledge of the business landscape is vital for strategy selection and deployment to gain a competitive advantage in any given industry.

Findings from participants' companies document review. I supported the participants' responses from the interviews with the business plans and annual reports of the companies. The business plans contained 3-5 years business projections and outlines of the company's strategic direction. The plans also contained the vision and mission statement, policies, business description, organizational chart, business environment analysis, industry background, market analysis, operations plans and financial plans. Companies of P1, P2, P3 and P4 confirmed the strategies that they implement to promote profitability as stated by the participants. In addition, I recognized each business plan contained guidelines to every activity of the company. Business description and industry background showed industry description, regulatory requirements, described opportunities and threats, and market knowledge. Financial plans for P1, P2, P3, P4 and P5 companies contained forecasted income statements, balance sheets, cash flow statements, and capital expenditure budgets. The organizational charts showed ownership of the company and key management personnel. This section also described the staffing levels, competence and experience, and guidelines for the recruitment of permanent and ad-hoc personnel.

I also reviewed the annual reports of P1, P2, P3, P4 and P5 companies for the last 5years. The annual reports contained an overall snapshot of the companies' operations for the previous year. The reports included, financial reports, performance plans, staffing levels, and set goals for the coming year. The annual reports are a summary of performance and descriptions of core strategies the business owners use. The annual reports included the actual performance against planned performance. The difference between actual and planned performance show indication of profitability in the companies.

Application to Professional Practice

A multiple case study is relevant to understanding the strategies for SME success. The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the business strategies SME owners use to compete favorably in the Nigerian oil and gas industry. The findings from the interviews with participants and review of documents included strategies that are vital for SME owners to adopt to compete in the gas and oil industry. The findings and recommendations may be used by existing and potential SME owners in the Nigerian oil and gas industry to compete and their (i.e. findings and recommendations) use may lead to the growth and development of SME owner's businesses. This study contains findings that when contributed to the existing body of literature, some SMEs in the oil and gas sector may find the study helpful. SME owners may utilize low cost strategy, knowledge of the business environment, competent personnel, collaborative partnerships, integrity, and financial management to improve company profitability and growth.

In terms of improving professional practice, the findings of this study may help researchers improve oil and gas industry practices and strategies. Leaders ability to perform well in the oil and gas sector depend on their existing capabilities, specific policy decisions and their level of interactions within the industry (Tordo, Tracy & Arfaa, 2010). Researchers may find that this study could support efforts to improve the economy, generate employment, alleviate poverty, and enhance support activities for SMEs.

Implications for Social Change

SME owners must rise up to the challenge of creating sustainable organizations by utilizing best strategies, adapting to changing business environment and maintain integrity. The findings of the study may contribute to positive social change if results provide business leaders utilize the identified strategies and resources to improve company profitability and growth, generate employment, reduce poverty and enhance standards of living. Increased profitability could lead to the prosperity of SME owners as well as benefit employees, their families, communities, and the local economy.

A finding from this study on integrity has far-reaching effect on social change. When SME leaders shun corruption, bribery, cutting corners, poor quality, and shortcuts the effect will bring positive social change to individuals, organizations and by extension to society. Business leaders must propagate discipline, integrity, trustworthiness, and honesty as attributes that bring about success in business (Olu-Daniels & Nwibere , 2014).

Recommendations for Action

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study is to explore the business strategies SME owners use to compete favorably in the Nigerian oil and gas industry. The business strategies contained in this study is applicable to existing, and potential oil and gas SME owners could extend to SME outside the sector. The recommendations I made in this study could benefit SME owners with best practices and strategies to improve company profitability and growth, generate employment, reduce poverty and enhance standards of living. Oil and gas entrepreneurs should leverage on a low cost strategy to get a level playing field with established businesses in the sector to secure competitive advantage. SMEs must be knowledgeable on industry trend for easy adaptability and survival when changes happen in the industry. In addition, I recommend the finding of integrity should be a wake-up call for entrepreneurs to shun the widespread corruption that has eaten into the fabric of society. In their own way, SME owners in Nigeria should incorporate actions, processes, and procedures that would restore integrity in the sector.

I will share the complete doctoral research study after publishing with participants and SME owners in the industry. For ease of retrieval and application, I will provide the participants and other stakeholders with a summary of the results and findings. My final recommendation is for not only the SME owners in Warri, Delta State but also SME owners in the Nigerian oil and gas sector. Therefore, I will seek opportunities to share findings at national local content development and oil and gas forum.

Recommendations for Further Research

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the business strategies SME owners use to compete favorably in the Nigerian oil and gas industry. The findings indicate some useful strategies that SME owners use to compete favorably in the Nigerian oil and gas industry. To achieve methodological triangulation, I used responses from interviews with five SME owners and a review of their company documents. I also utilized member checking to achieve data saturation. Despite the rigor I applied in the course of this research, there remains a need for further research in this area. The limitations for this study included the small sample size of participants and the small geographical area. This study was limited to five SME owners located in Warri, Delta State Nigeria where oil and gas business activities are not as high as Port Harcourt and Lagos.

I recommend a future study based on a different oil and gas hub other than Warri, Delta State Nigeria. This study utilized a qualitative methodology and multiple case study design. I also recommend the use of other methodologies and designs for further research; for example, researchers conducting mixed methods, studies could expose additional findings relevant to the strategies SME owners use to compete favorably in the Nigerian oil and gas industry. I further suggest studies directed at SME participation in a domestic gas generation industry. Researchers can gain additional insights by studying the impact of the Nigerian government diversification from oil and gas to agriculture.

Reflections

This doctoral study process has proven to be a life changing experience for me. I have learned a lot from my lecturers, mentors, peers and study participants. This research has expanded my knowledge base on academic research and kindled my interest in a career in academics. This doctoral journey has also made me appreciate the rigors of writing, and I hope to apply this thoroughness in every single aspect of my work, hobbies, and life in general. Conducting this study has increased my understanding of the challenges SME owners face in within the Nigerian oil sector. Interviewing the participants in the course of this study has contributed to my professional experience in the oil and gas sector. I appreciate even more, the extent of information available to SME owners within the industry. All participants have greatly inspired me with the depth of information and knowledge they possess regarding business strategies.

As a researcher-practitioner, I knew about the participants from their reputation in the industry. However, I had never met the participants before the interviews neither did I have any preconceived notions regarding their business strategies. I am now more appreciative of the challenges SMEs encounter within the industry and the rigors they go through to surmount them. The study has expanded my interest in local content development in the Nigerian oil and gas industry. I am inspired to contribute to increasing indigenous participation using the appropriate strategies from this study.

Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the business strategies SME owners use to compete favorably in the Nigerian oil and gas industry. Five SME owners based in Warri, Delta State, Nigeria participated in this study. I utilized semistructured interviews and examined participants' company documents to provide answers to the research question. The research question was: what business strategies do SME owners use to compete favorably in the Nigerian oil and gas industry?

I discovered six themes from data collection and analysis: (a) low cost strategy, (b) knowledge of the business environment, (c) competent personnel, (d) collaborative partnerships, (e) integrity, and (f) financial management. The emergent themes were consistent with the literature, the existing body of knowledge, and the conceptual frameworks used for the study. The findings of my study indicated that low cost strategy, adaptation to industry changes, and integrity are important strategies to improve company profitability and growth.

The oil and gas industry should not be the exclusive preserve of large enterprises or multinational companies. Indigenous SMEs must rise up to the challenge and contribute to wealth creation and distribution by utilizing appropriate business strategies. SME owners, who create a competitive edge utilizing their internal resources to leverage on the industry opportunities to generate employment, reduce poverty and enhance standards of living in the society.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

I. Introduce self to the participant(s).

II. Present consent form, go over contents, answer questions and concerns of participant(s).

III. Give participant copy of consent form.

IV. Turn on the audio recording device.

V. Follow procedure to introduce participant(s) with pseudonym and coded identification; note the date and time.

VI. Begin interview with question #1; follow through to the final question.

VII. Follow up with additional questions.

VIII. End interview sequence; discuss member-checking with participant(s).

IX. Thank the participant(s) for their part in the study. Reiterate contact numbers for follow up questions and concerns from participants.

X. End protocol.

Appendix B: Interview Questions

The following interview questions are for this qualitative case study. In order to address the research question of this study, I developed five interview questions to capture the participants' perspectives on successful business strategies for oil and gas SMEs. Question 1 is a general question on business strategy. Questions 2-4 pertain to the tenets of the RBV and Porter's five forces. Question 5 is to ensure depth of interview.

1. What business strategies do you implement to be profitable in your business?
2. What factors drive your business competition and profits?
3. What resources and capability in your business help you to sustain a competitive advantage?
4. How does the oil and gas industry forces influence your business?
5. What else would you like to share about your experience of becoming a successful business owner in the oil and gas industry?

Appendix C: Certificate of Completion for Ethical Research

Certificate of Completion

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) Office of Extramural Research certifies that **Blessing Inubiwon** successfully completed the NIH Web-based training course “Protecting Human Research Participants”.

Date of completion: 09/08/2014

Certification Number: 1547046

Appendix D: Letter of Invitation

Dear xxxx,

I am Blessing Inubiwon, a doctoral student at Walden University seeking a Doctor of Business Administration degree with a specialization in Project Management. I am asking for your help in gathering data towards the completion of my doctoral dissertation. In the conduct of this study, I am not looking for intellectual property and confidential or propriety information. I am looking for best practices on how to develop SME in the Nigerian oil and gas sector. Your input will provide valuable insight into answering my research question “what business strategies do some SME owners use to compete favorably in the Nigerian oil and gas industry?”

The Nigerian oil and gas industry has been largely dominated by multinational corporations or international oil corporations (IOCs). Recent developments such as the divestment of assets by IOCs, granting of pioneer status incentive to indigenous exploration companies, and sale of marginal fields by the Nigerian government have presented opportunities for increased SME participation in the sector (KPMG, 2014). These opportunities however, have not been sufficiently utilized by SMEs despite government and non-governmental bodies’ interventions. Therefore, this study contains perspectives on the oil industry from an SME point of view to develop strategies for increased participation and development. My inquiry shows that your company has been operating successfully for over 10 years; have running contracts with major oil and gas companies and have gained reputation for the implementing of success business strategies in the oil industry. Your participation in this study could serve as model for favorable competition by SMEs and develop potential entrepreneurs.

Participation in this research is voluntary and anonymous. This means that everyone will respect your decision of whether or not you want to participate in the study. If you decide to participate in the study now, you can still change your mind during the study. If you feel stressed during the study, you may stop at any time. You also have the option not to answer any questions that you feel are too personal. No personally identifying information will be used when you participate in the research. Participation in this research means you will be asked to**:**

- Return the signed consent form within 3 days of receiving of the form.
- Review the interview questions prior to the scheduled interview date
- Participate in a one-hour face-to-face interview.
- Provide copies of documents related to successful business strategies such as annual business plans, strategy documents, and records that your organization is comfortable sharing.
- Participation in reviewing the researcher's summary of the interview to ensure accuracy of data, which may take approximately 25 to 30 minutes

Your participation will be helpful and the time you spend will be appreciated.

Please feel free to contact me at blessing.inubiwon@waldenu.edu or 2348037***859 if you have any questions. Again, your help and your contribution will be greatly appreciated.

Yours sincerely,

Blessing Inubiwon