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Knowledge Management Strategies for Competitive Advantage in the Convenience Foods Franchise Industry

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Walden University

College of Management and Technology

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Tiffany Moses

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Walden University
2017

Abstract

Knowledge Management Strategies for Competitive Advantage in the Convenience

Foods Franchise Industry

by

Tiffany Moses

MS, Webster's University, 2010

BS, Saint Augustine's University, 1999

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Business Administration

Walden University

December 2017

Abstract

The lack of successful knowledge management (KM) practices significantly hinders competitive advantage in small businesses. This case study was designed to explore what effective KM strategies convenience foods franchise industry business owners or managers use to increase competitive advantage. The study population consisted of 7 fast food franchise owners or managers in or near the Research Triangle Park area of North Carolina. The cognitive model of KM was the conceptual framework that grounded the study. Face-to-face interviews were used for the data collection process. Data were organized into nodes and coded for thematic analysis. The 3 major themes that emerged from the data were training as a KM strategy for competitive advantage, people-focused KM strategy for competitive advantage, and a collaborative team environment for KM implementation. The implications for positive social change include assisting in extending the life and dominance of U.S. based franchised businesses through improved competitive advantage strategies. The sustainment of local franchise businesses could also benefit local communities in the form of job opportunities and economic stimuli.

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Dedication

This study is dedicated to the two greatest blessings in my life, my children, Derrick and Talia. They may not be able to fully understand the importance of this accomplishment at this point in their lives, but I hope this will one day serve as an inspiration and motivation to them to pursue and achieve whatever goals they set their minds to no matter how challenging they may be.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study

Knowledge management (KM) is recognized as a strategic component in business and a critical success factor in establishing competitive advantage (Chatzoudes, Chatzoglou, & Vraimaki, 2015; Chu, KrishnaKumar, & Khosla, 2014). Intangible resources have become as important as tangible resources in establishing and maintaining a strong market presence (Rehman, Ilyas, & Ashgar, 2015). Understanding how to implement KM strategies to transform knowledge into capital is vital for business leaders and managers (Rehman et al., 2015). Efficient KM strategies provide business executives a means to identify, balance, and manage organizational knowledge sources resulting in exceptional organizational performance (Chu et al., 2014; Rehman et al., 2015)

Background of the Problem

Ineffective KM strategies in small businesses may result in loss of competitive advantage, decreased productivity, and loss of intellectual capital that could materialize into profits (Akhavan & Pezeshkan, 2014; Wu & Chen, 2014). Despite these significant risks, many business leaders are unwilling to invest in corrective KM programs because such programs are time intensive and require additional expense (Massingham & Massingham, 2014). Additionally, empirical KM researchers have not revealed any significant findings regarding improved firm performance due to KM investments (Massingham & Massingham, 2014; Wu & Chen, 2014). However, current KM researchers recognized the phenomenon as a critical success factor in establishing and maintaining competitive advantage, specifically in service firms and franchise based

businesses (Paswan, D'Souza, & Rajamma, 2014; Weaven, Grace, Dant, & Brown, 2014).

KM software expenditures for U.S. based companies exceed 70 billion dollars per year (Massingham & Massingham, 2014). Many business leaders do not experience a level of benefits equitable to such a large investment (Massingham & Massingham, 2014). This conundrum impedes future KM investment decisions and hinders business executives in creating and sustaining a competitive edge over rival companies (Massingham & Massingham, 2014).

Problem Statement

The lack of successful KM practices significantly hinders competitive advantage in small businesses (Akhavan & Pezeshkan, 2014; Paswan, et al., 2014). Ineffective KM strategies have contributed to an estimated annual loss of \$31.5 billion among U.S. Fortune 500 companies (Massingham & Massingham, 2014). The general business problem is convenience foods franchise business owners who do not apply effective KM strategies may experience a loss of competitive advantage. The specific business problem is some convenience foods franchise industry business owners lack effective KM strategies to increase competitive advantage.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore effective KM strategies convenience foods franchise industry business owners or managers use to increase competitive advantage. The targeted population consisted of 7 fast-food chicken restaurant franchise owners or managers in or near the Research Triangle Park region of

North Carolina who have successfully implemented effective KM strategies to achieve competitive advantage. Providing franchise business leaders effective KM strategies for competitive advantage impacts social change by potentially increasing the longevity and dominance of U.S. based franchised businesses, contributing directly to job growth and economic stimuli.

Nature of the Study

The methodology options for conducting the research were quantitative, qualitative, or mixed (Counsell, Cribbie, & Harlow, 2016; Molina-Azorin, 2016; Yin, 2014). Yin (2014) posited qualitative methods are best suited for exploring individuals' experiences through direct interaction within contemporary settings. The focus for the research question to elicit responses from participants' circumstantial experiences is characteristically indicative of the need for the qualitative method (Yin, 2014). Quantitative methodologies are most appropriate when examining the relationship or differences among variables (Counsell et al., 2016). Since this study did not involve analysis of relationships or differences among variables, a quantitative approach was not appropriate (Counsell et al., 2016). Lastly, the mixed method is applicable when both examining and exploring multiple forms of data to test and explore a complex phenomenon (Ingham-Broomfield, 2016; Molina-Azorin, 2016). Therefore, since the mixed method approach requires using the quantitative method, the mixed method was not a proper fit for the scope of the research for this study (Ingham-Broomfield, 2016; Molina-Azorin, 2016).

Qualitative researchers can utilize several designs including narrative research, phenomenology, ethnography, grounded theory, and case studies (Garcia & Gluesing, 2013). Narrative research consists of chronological events about an individual's life (Garcia & Gluesing, 2013). Phenomenology is philosophically based and involves longitudinal study of participants to assess the meanings of experiencing phenomena (Santha, Sudheer, Saxena, & Tiwari, 2015; Sarma, 2015). Ethnography is a qualitative design for studying cultural groups in their indigenous setting (Garcia & Gluesing, 2013). Researchers use grounded theory to compare multiple data sets through theoretical sampling with the purpose of developing a generalized theory based on participants' experiences and supporting data (Levers, 2013; Lokke & Sorenson, 2014). Lastly, the case study design consists of in-depth exploration of a phenomenon or process over a specific time period (Lokke & Sorenson, 2014; Yin, 2014). I therefore concluded the qualitative case study design was most appropriate for this research project.

Research Question

The central research question was what effective KM strategies do convenience foods franchise industry business owners or managers use to increase competitive advantage?

Interview Questions

The interview questions follow:

1. How do you define knowledge management in the context of your day-to-day operations as a fast-food chicken restaurant franchise owner?

2. How do you define competitive advantage within the fast-food chicken restaurant franchise industry?
3. What processes do you use to formulate knowledge management strategies for competitive advantage?
4. How do you implement knowledge management strategies to increase the competitive advantage of your business?
5. What specific techniques do you use to identify knowledge sources?
6. Once you have identified knowledge (a new idea, concept, suggestion, best practice), what methods or processes do you use to compile and store that knowledge?
7. What additional insights or comments would you like to add to our discussion?

Conceptual Framework

Organizational science theorists such as Teece (1998), Drucker (1991), and Winter (1987) contributed to the cognitive theory of KM. The cognitive model of KM describes knowledge as a firm's critical strategic asset in maintaining competitive advantage (Kakabadse, Kakabadse, & Kouzmin, 2003). The locus of the theory is tacit knowledge, or an individual's internal, intellectual know-how (Polyani, 1958; Wickramasinghe, 2003). The management of the abstract nature of internal human knowledge is essential in organizational settings (Swan & Newell, 2000). The cognitive theory of KM is a means to address the requirement to manage tacit knowledge in a business environment. The cognitive model of KM includes the key concepts of the effective and efficient (a) creation of knowledge, (b) discovery of knowledge sources, (c)

compilation of knowledge, and (d) sharing of knowledge throughout the organization to maintain a competitive edge (Kakabadse et al., 2003; Swan & Newell, 2000). In application to this study, I would expect the tenets of cognitive KM theory to guide participants in determining KM strategies needed to maintain a competitive advantage in their respective convenience foods franchise businesses.

Operational Definitions

Competitive advantage: Competitive advantage is any unique organizational resource or capability that cannot be imitated or substituted by another organization (Ghapanchi, Wohlin, & Aurum, 2014).

Explicit knowledge: Explicit knowledge is human cognition and/or experience that has been codified or formalized in written form for distributed use or exploitation (Polyani, 1958).

Knowledge management: Knowledge management is the process through which knowledge is created, identified, accessed, stored, distributed, and made actionable in an organizational setting (Giampaoli, Ciambott, & Bontis, 2017).

Tacit knowledge: Tacit knowledge is embedded in human cognition and experience (Polyani, 1958). It is consummately connected with an individual's expertise (Garcia & Coltre, 2017).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

Assumptions

Assumptions are defined as unproven data that researchers perceive as valid (Ngulube, 2015). I assumed all participants received formal training and had business

experience that made them familiar with KM, business strategy, and competitive advantage. I also assumed all participants would answer the interview questions truthfully.

Limitations

Limitations are defined as factors that could negatively impact the findings of a study (St. John et al., 2016). One limitation to this study was the restricted number of participants. The narrow focus on the fast food franchise industry was also a limitation. The case study involved managers and/or franchise owners of three fast food franchise units, and all of the franchises belonged to the same parent company. The inclusion of more participants and franchise companies may have further validated the effectiveness of the KM strategies discussed in the study.

Delimitations

Delimitations are defined as the specific focus area or boundary and scope of the study (Kromidha & Kristo, 2014). This study focused on exploring successful KM strategies of franchise owners and/or managers in the U.S. based fast food franchise industry. Though the findings of this study are valuable to leaders, managers, and business owners in the fast food franchise industry, it may be difficult for KM practitioners in other industries to benefit from the research. The interpretation and application of KM principles is extremely broad and the phenomenon crosses multiple disciplines. Therefore, KM strategies that are beneficial in the fast food industry may not realize the same level of profit in other industries. Additionally, KM practices and processes in foreign countries and industries may also differ dramatically from those

found in U.S. based franchise businesses. Though KM practices in foreign markets were outside the scope of this study, this may be an area for future research for practitioners and researchers seeking to better understand and improve KM efforts outside the fast food franchise industry and outside the U.S.

Significance of the Study

Franchise organizations in the United States (U.S.) produce in excess of 490 billion dollars in GDP, create approximately 18 million jobs, and contribute nearly 2 trillion dollars to the economy (Mishra, Mishra, & Grubb, 2015; Paswan et al., 2014). These economic stimuli make franchise systems vital to the American economy (Akhavan & Pezeshkan, 2014; Weaven et al., 2014).

The findings of this study could assist in extending the life of U.S. based franchised businesses by improving competitive advantage strategies. Specifically, findings surrounding KM strategies may also inform business leaders of best practices that lead to talent development among organization employees, new methods of compiling and preserving knowledge from previous or exiting employees, and continuity of service throughout the organizational structure. The sustainment of local franchise businesses could also serve to strengthen local communities adding a sense of value and pride, and creating opportunities.

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the KM strategies and theories fast-food franchise business leaders have applied to create competitive advantages. I examined peer-reviewed journal articles, book reviews, and scholarly

seminal works from multiple business and management databases to include Business Source Complete, ABI/INFORM, Emerald Management, and SAGE Premier.

Additionally, I researched multidisciplinary databases such as ProQuest Central, Academic Search Complete, and Google Scholar to locate scholarly articles related to cognitive theory and organization science. I used the central research question in combination with key concepts of the cognitive KM model as a strategy for researching the literature. From the research question and conceptual framework, I developed inclusion criteria to guide the research. The results were the inclusion of a total of 103 published studies reporting on foundational KM theories, KM theory in application to business, KM as a strategic tool for competitive advantage, and KM strategy in the franchise industry. Of the 103 peer-reviewed articles, 94 (approximately 97%) were published within the last five years.

The literature review begins with a discussion of the evolution and tenets of the cognitive model of KM. Next, I describe the most prominent knowledge definitions and key concepts of knowledge. The review proceeds with a discourse on KM and competitive advantage as separate constructs. Finally, the review concludes with an analysis and synthesis of literature supporting the concept of KM as a strategic tool for gaining competitive advantage. The key concepts of the cognitive model of KM were applied as the overall lens for each section of the literature review (Kakabadse et al., 2003).

Defining Knowledge

The earliest attempts to define knowledge can be traced to renowned Greek philosophers such as Socrates and Plato (Karami, Alvani, Zare, & Kheirandish, 2015; Olivia, 2014). Though Plato's definition of knowledge as *justified true belief* emerged as the most widely accepted among early scholars, many variations have surfaced throughout the ages (Haider, 2014; Nonaka, 1994). For example, Polyani (1958) is accredited with establishing the most frequently cited and debated knowledge definition in social science since the late 1950's. Though Polyani (1958) did not directly acknowledge justified true belief in his dissertations on knowledge, his ideals reflected similar concepts. The concept of justified true belief simplifies to knowledge that has been validated through experience, extensive verbal conversation, or deductive reasoning (Kakabadse et al., 2003; Nonaka, 1994). Polyani's (1958) description of knowledge as a two-dimensional phenomenon that is borne out of cognitive and empirical processes shares the same theoretical context as justified true belief (Nonaka, 1994). Polyani (1958) theorized knowledge as having a tacit and an explicit dimension. Of the two dimensions, tacit is more complex because it is derived from the cognitive functions of human minds while explicit knowledge is written or otherwise codified, and therefore easily understood (Polyani, 1958). While most scholars accepted Polyani's (1958) assessment of knowledge, a few debated the validity of the two-dimensional theme.

Karnani (2013) and Rechberg and Syed (2014) provided discourses on the most prominent points of contention among scholars concerning Polyani's (1958) proposal. Some scholars suggested the moment knowledge becomes explicit it is no longer tainted

by human influence, and is therefore the purest form of knowledge (Rechberg & Sayed, 2014). Other scholars disagreed with Polyani's (1958) suggestion that knowledge must be directly borne out of a lived experience (Karnani, 2013; Rechberg & Sayed, 2014). Being party to another's experience may also be a source of knowledge (Rechberg & Sayed, 2014). Individual practiced skill was thought to be another form of tacit knowledge (Karnani, 2013). Similarly, tacit knowledge could be considered action-based practical intelligence (Karnani, 2013). It could also be argued that knowledge is composed of a third dimension integrating the conspicuous social aspects of knowledge (Karnani, 2013). Though these arguments were all valid, most scholars aligned with Polyani's (1958) assessment that explicit knowledge cannot be completely separated from its human origins (Karnani, 2013; Rechberg & Sayed, 2014). Advocates for and against the two-dimensional view of knowledge introduced concepts that shaped the current status of knowledge and knowledge management relative to business. The debate caused a dramatic shift in how business leaders viewed knowledge in terms of assets and resources, especially with the introduction of the information age (Kakabadse et al., 2003; Purcell & O'Brien, 2015). Since concepts of tacit and explicit knowledge frame the body of literature pertaining to knowledge and KM, this study incorporates elements of both definitions.

Nonaka (1994), a prominent organization science theorist, relied on Polyani's (1958) work and the principles of justified true belief to further define knowledge in terms of organizational knowledge creation. Nonaka (1994) expanded on Polyani's perspectives by further dissecting tacit knowledge into cognitive elements and technical

elements. Nonaka (1994) explained the cognitive elements of knowledge as the medium for developing ideals, beliefs, and viewpoints within an individual's world. The technical elements of tacit knowledge consist of the unique skills, ability, and *know-how* that make knowledge creation possible (Nonaka, 1994). In other words, the cognitive dimension of tacit knowledge is where ideas are formed whereas the technical dimension of tacit knowledge is where ideas are acted upon and brought into being (Nonaka, 1994).

Knowledge intersects multiple disciplines such as economics, organizational science, and philosophy (Anand, Kant, Patel, & Singh, 2015). Within each discipline, scholars have identified various characteristics of knowledge and expounded on the role of knowledge in organizations (Anand et al., 2015; Kakabadse et al., 2003). In fact, economists are credited with defining the marketable aspects of knowledge as a reusable source that must be aggregated and placed into action to be of any value (Kakabadse et al., 2003; Swan & Newell, 2000). Teece's (1998) theories about recognizing and aggregating organizational competencies to lead the market further expanded this concept.

The literature illuminates the multi-faceted essence of knowledge alluding to the complexity of the phenomenon and the need for further study (Ganco, 2013; Tillson, 2013). A review of the multitude of knowledge definitions reveals a common theme of knowledge as a humanistic, socialistic, philosophical phenomenon (Anand et al., 2015; Nonaka, 1994; Polyani, 1958; Rechberg & Syed, 2014). The preponderance of knowledge definitions begin with a form of data, information, or an experience that is internalized in the individual (Kakabadse et al., 2003; Polyani, 1958; Rechberg & Syed,

2014). Olivia (2014) posited mankind possesses the ability to change his environment through the conversion of internal knowledge into external action. Kakabadse, Kakabadse, and Kouzmin (2003) proposed the process of internalizing and then externalizing knowledge as the chain of knowledge flow in which data (external knowledge) matriculates through several stages to eventually become wisdom (internal knowledge). This concept of internal and external, or intangible and tangible (tacit and explicit) knowledge is central to defining knowledge, and it is a pervasive theme in the literature (Nonaka, 1994; Nonaka & Toyama, 2003; Nooshinfard & Nemati-Anaraki, 2014; Wang, Wang, & Liang, 2014).

Tacit and Explicit Knowledge in Business. When tacit knowledge is translated into explicit knowledge in the form of written documents, scientific formulas, databases, or instructional manuals, it becomes formalized and can be used to manage and improve business processes (Omotayo, 2015). Consistent with the tenets of the cognitive model of KM, once codified, explicit knowledge should be captured, stored, and shared throughout the organization to maximize effectiveness (Omotayo, 2015). Some scholars describe information technology as the primary means of storing and disseminating knowledge (Castillo & Cazarini, 2014). Sabri (2014) suggested KM models should be socio-technical in nature since knowledge is borne out of human processes, then exploited technologically. Business leaders place emphasis on achieving the proper balance in managing the social aspects that derive tacit and explicit knowledge and the technological aspects that enable the exploitation of these knowledge types (Ho, Hsieh, &

Hung, 2014). Scholars agreed that such equilibrium yields a greater probability of increased organizational performance (Castillo & Cazarini, 2014; Sabri, 2014).

To understand the application of tacit knowledge in business, one must consider the practical aspects of the phenomenon. While the concept of tacit knowledge is philosophically focused on cognitive processes through which humans form unique perspectives of their environments, practically, the concept is more concerned with intellectual knowledge in the form of individual talents, skills, and abilities (Nonaka, 1994; Polanyi, 1958). These talents, skills, and abilities are what business leaders have come to recognize as intellectual capital, or knowledge resources for exploitation (Donate & Sánchez de Pablo, 2015; Dzekashu & McCollum, 2014). As outlined in the cognitive model of KM, the ultimate goal is to transfer tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge to maximize its use throughout the organization (Kakabadse et al., 2003). These concepts have also been incorporated into modern definitions of knowledge.

Traditional explanations of knowledge focused on origins of knowledge and knowledge development processes (Haider, 2014; Nonaka, 1994; Polanyi, 1958). Modern definitions of knowledge introduce the principles of competition, dominance, and strategy (Caiazza, Richardson, & Audretsch, 2015). In alignment with modern definitions of knowledge, Mousavizadeh, Harden, Ryan, and Windsor (2015) described knowledge in terms of organizations purporting organizational knowledge as intellectual capital to be leveraged to achieve dominance. Qureshi and Gani (2015) defined knowledge not only as an organizational resource, but also as the process of applying and transforming information into competitive advantage. These additions of modern

concepts to classical perspectives of knowledge bridge the phenomenon to KM and KM strategy.

The Evolution of Knowledge Management

The history and evolution of KM has been an enigma to management theorists and academics for decades (Ribiére & Walter, 2013). The origins of KM theory are deeply rooted in economic and management theory though KM overall is indisputably a multidisciplinary phenomenon (Khasseh & Mokhtarpour, 2016). Specifically, KM converges with disciplines such as marketing, organizational learning, economic sociology, and organization science. This cross-disciplinary nature of KM has challenged scholars and practitioners in determining the specifics regarding the origins of KM as a discipline (Serenko & Dumay, 2015). However, recent studies have revealed greater details regarding the genesis of the KM as an academic discipline.

Researchers have used several forms of citation analysis to trace and analyze the life cycle of the KM discipline (Serenko & Dumay, 2015). Normative citation theory is a means of interpreting scholarly citation behaviors to determine the most prominent works within a discipline based strictly on scientific value (Serenko & Dumay, 2015). Based on normative theory citation, Serenko and Dumay (2015) identified the late 90s as the era when concepts of KM began to assemble as a discipline (Serenko & Dumay, 2015). Serenko and Dumay (2015) posited the time period between 1999 and 2003 had special significance for the origins of KM as a scientific discipline (Serenko & Dumay, 2015).

Serenko and Dumay (2015) considered 1999-2003 the introductory phase of the discipline in which scholars were discovering ideas and developing concepts concerning

KM. Omotayo (2015) assessed 1995 as the prominent year in the development of KM as a discipline, but did not cite any specific source to defend that assessment. Serenko and Dumay's (2015) assessment was based on the preponderance of normative research found in the literature versus empirical research. The introductory phase was thought to be the period when the foundations for future KM research were established (Serenko & Dumay, 2015). This was also a time when KM was highly scrutinized by many scholars who questioned the validity of the phenomenon as an authentic scientific field of study (Serenko & Dumay, 2015). Scholars immediately embraced KM as a fresh concept in its early stages, and the concept dominated for a number of years (Serenko & Dumay, 2015). However, many critics believed KM would become a type of management fad that would quickly abate (Serenko & Dumay, 2015). The pattern of ebbs and flows throughout the KM literature proved that KM was much more than a passing management trend.

During the introductory period of KM, the dominant themes in the literature were KM as a process and KM for managing competitive advantage (Serenko & Dumay, 2015). KM in relation to organizational culture, information technology, and communities of practice were less dominant themes (Serenko & Dumay, 2015). It is important to note that Ribi re and Walter (2013) discovered a resurgence of these less dominant themes in KM literature during the time period between 2003 and 2012. These findings further support Serenko and Dumay's (2015) notion that KM was not a temporary management trend, but was beginning to mature as a scientific discipline. Ribi re and Walter's (2013) identification of current dominant KM themes such as intellectual capital, knowledge transfer, tacit knowledge, KM strategy, and competitive

advantage align with contemporary knowledge descriptions that name competition, knowledge transformation, and intellectual capital as key principles in defining knowledge (Caiazza et al., 2015; Mousavizadeh et al., 2015).

While Serenko and Dumay (2015) relied on normative theory citation to analyze the origins of KM, Khasseh and Mokhtarpour (2016) used a modern method to assess KM publications deriving contrasting conclusions. Khasseh and Mokhtarpour (2016) assessed sources spanning 1900-2014 and did not recognize 1999-2003 as a significant time period in the KM life cycle. In fact, Khasseh and Mokhtarpour (2016) highlighted specific years during the mid-1930s to the late 1960s as peak times in KM research activity. Khasseh and Mokhtarpour (2016) acknowledged Serenko and Dumay's (2015) research but pointed out the articles included in their research referred to sources included in the 1900-2014 timeframe. The implication here is that KM research must be historically thorough to obtain a more accurate and comprehensive analysis of the origins of the discipline.

Understanding KM Theory. The multidisciplinary composition of KM contributes to the difficulty in identifying specific KM theories (Ribi re & Walter, 2013). Historically, KM scholars have not cited specific KM theories in published works (Serenko & Dumay, 2015). The majority of KM literature analyzed by Serenko and Dumay (2015) from 1999-2003 completely excluded theory. Nonaka's (1994) theory of organizational knowledge creation emerged as one of the most dominant theories among the small number of works that did mention theory in the research (Serenko & Dumay, 2015). Ragab and Arisha (2013) reached the same conclusion in their review of KM

literature. Ragab and Arisha (2013) named Nonaka's SECI (socialization, externalization, combination, internalization) model as the most widely recognized in KM discourse. The SECI model focused on the conversion processes involved in converting tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge through various means (Ragab & Arisha, 2013). Caganova, Szilva, and Bawa (2015) acknowledged Nonaka's theory as preeminent among KM related theory. Ribiére and Walter (2013) also identified Nonaka as a prominent theorist cited in KM literature, but highlighted another concept from Nonaka's work known as the concept of Ba. The concept of Ba is of Japanese origins and was described as part of the knowledge creation process that constantly monitors interactions between people in specific contexts to identify knowledge creation hindrances and enablers (Nonaka & Toyama, 2003). In sharp contrast to these commonalities is Khasseh and Mokhtarpour's (2016) seem to disagree with the majority exalting Polyani's (1958) offerings and diminishing Nonaka's (1994) contributions.

Along with Nonaka's (1994) and Polyani's (1958) theories, the resource-based view (RBV) of the firm also emerged as a dominant theoretical foundation in KM literature (Serenko & Dumay, 2015). Scholars named strategic management practitioner Jay Barney as the most prominent representative of RBV concepts based on his written works (Bacanu, 2016; Jensen, Cobbs, & Turner, 2016). Other scholars credited economist Edith Penrose as the originator of foundational concepts that became known as the RBV of the firm (Kim, Song, & Triche, 2015; Pei, Li, & Tan, 2015). A fellow economist, Birger Wernerfelt, introduced the concept of firm resources as tools for competitive advantage (Kim et al., 2015; Pei et al., 2015). Wernerfelt considered

knowledge one of many possible organizational resources (Kim et al., 2015). Eloranta and Turunen (2015) applied Wernerfelt's reasoning naming capabilities, information, and knowledge as resources available to firms for increased performance. Barney's perspectives of the RBV also included knowledge or human capital as a potential rare and non-imitable firm resource (Jensen et al., 2016). The consistent linking of knowledge with strategic management principles and theories throughout the literature signaled the evolution of knowledge management theory.

Nadarajah and Kadir (2014) built upon the RBV concept by declaring the necessity to further delineate between resources and capabilities within a firm. On this premise, resources were categorized as tangible, intangible, and human-based while capabilities focused on skills and competencies (Kim et al., 2015; Nadarajah & Kadir, 2014). The concept that performance indicators should be viewed in the context of internal, firm-specific resources rather than external resources underpinned the RBV (Dassler, 2016). The combination of concepts from the RBV and the idea of knowledge as a source of competitive advantage heavily influenced KM theory and permeated the literature (Rehman, Ashgar, & Ahmad, 2015).

The knowledge-based view (KBV) of the firm is another strategic management theory that infiltrated KM literature (Evans, Dalkir, & Bidian, 2014). The KBV features knowledge as the driving force of all aspects of a firm (Evans et al., 2014). Proponents of the KBV promote knowledge as both a strategic and financial asset within a firm (Del Giudice & Maggioni, 2014). KM scholars apply and build upon KBV concepts throughout the literature. For example, Karkoulian, Messarra, and McCarthy (2013)

recognized knowledge as a firm's critical asset categorizing functional knowledge, tactical knowledge, and hypothetical knowledge. These categories describe the differences between knowing how to do something, knowing what to do, and knowing why the task is being done in terms of leveraging knowledge for competitive advantage (Karkoulian, Messara, & McCarthy, 2013). Other KM practitioners view knowledge in terms of operations and strategy (Mousavizadeh et al., 2015). From this perspective, operational knowledge focuses on the exchange of knowledge between individuals while strategic knowledge is more concerned with the application of knowledge to business strategy to gain an advantage over rivals (Mousavizadeh et al., 2015). The idea of strategic knowledge or strategic KM is directly related to the KBV concept.

Though the RBV and the KBV are considered strategic management strategies, both concepts have significantly influenced KM theories as evidenced throughout the literature (Mazdeh & Hesamamiri, 2014; Serenko & Dumay, 2015). The literature revealed several fields of study that have influenced the KM discipline, and KM theories and models. These disciplines include human resources (Rivera & Rivera, 2016), organizational performance management (Valmohammadi & Ahmadi, 2015), and information technology (Moré, Telles, Marinho, & Corrêa, 2016). This broad range of disciplines makes KM a unique tool accessible to leaders in a variety of industries to leverage for competitive advantage.

The Cognitive Model of KM

The cognitive model of KM emerged as a result of discourses on the relationships between knowledge, business organizations, and human thought processes.

Organizational science theorists such as Teece (1998), Drucker (1991), and Winter (1987) contributed to the cognitive theory of KM. The work of scholars such as Polyani (1958) and Nonaka (1994) is also heavily intertwined in the cognitive theory of KM. The basic commonality among these theorists is the shared view of knowledge as a resource. In the cognitive model of KM, knowledge is a human element that has been codified into ideals and concepts for storage and exploitation (Kakabadse et al., 2003). The idea of knowledge as codified human cognition was the underlying foundation of Polyani's (1958) and Nonaka's (1994) work.

The cognitive model of KM incorporates the concept of knowledge as a firm's critical strategic asset in maintaining competitive advantage (Kakabadse et al., 2003). The underpinnings of this concept can be found in the work of Teece (1998), Drucker (1991), and Winter (1987) who agreed that knowledge should be viewed as a valuable resource to the firm. Therefore, developing processes and mechanisms to manage human knowledge in organizational settings is paramount to the success of the firm (Swan & Newell, 2000). The cognitive theory of KM is a means to address the requirement to manage tacit and explicit knowledge in a business environment. The model includes the key concepts of the effective and efficient (a) creation of knowledge, (b) discovery of knowledge sources, (c) compilation of knowledge, and (d) sharing of knowledge throughout the organization to maintain a competitive edge (Kakabadse et al., 2003; Swan & Newell, 2000).

In the cognitive model of KM, human knowledge and organizational capital are synonymous and serve as the cornerstone for high firm performance (Aribi & Dupouët,

2015). Cognitive capital is another term used to describe the knowledge produced through cognitive processes and used to compete in the market (Bharati, Zhang, & Chaudhury, 2015). Social capital is another term that surfaces frequently in KM literature. However, though social capital possesses a cognitive dimension, the term is not interchangeable with organizational or cognitive capital.

Social capital is centralized on the relationships between organizations and how those relationships facilitate the flow of knowledge between entities (Mozafari & Dadfar, 2016). Understanding the similarities and differences between social capital and organizational and cognitive capital deepens comprehension of the cognitive KM model. Social capital facilitates the creation and exchange of organizational or cognitive capital (Mozafari & Dadfar, 2016). Organizational or cognitive capital is human knowledge that has been codified, standardized, and incorporated into routine workflows to become common knowledge across the organization (Evans, Wensley, & Frissen, 2015). Therefore, organizational or cognitive capital is representative of the codified, exploitable knowledge central to the cognitive KM model (Kakabadse et al., 2003). Social capital is one of several methods through which codification, standardization, and systemization within the model is made possible (Kakabadse et al., 2003; Mozafari & Dadfar, 2016).

The cognitive KM model is richly based in positivistic thinking. (Kakabadse et al., 2003). Proponents of positivism posit knowledge can be created and inferred through empirical means (Hasan, 2016). This positivistic way of thinking directly aligns with the tenets of the cognitive model of KM. Cognitive processes wrought through experience and observation produce useful, actionable knowledge (Hasan, 2016; Kakabadse et al.,

2003). The capture and transformation of experiential and observational knowledge is a central theme in the cognitive model of KM (Kakabadse et al., 2003).

Constructivists criticized the cognitive approach to KM. Constructivists prefer an epistemological approach to KM in which the mechanics of knowledge are more deeply analyzed rather than based strictly on empirical evidence (Echajar & Thomas, 2015). From the constructivist's view, the greatest point of contention concerning the cognitive view of KM is the implication that knowledge is absolute upon codification (Echajar & Thomas, 2015). Constructivists posited knowledge is constantly changing and circumstantially based, and can therefore, never be absolute (Echajar & Thomas, 2015). Furthermore, constructivists suggested knowledge can be attained through physical means (i.e. body signals) and should not be categorized as a strictly cognitive process (Echajar & Thomas, 2015).

Perhaps reconciliation of the constructivist and cognitive approaches to KM is best seen in Nonaka's (1994) work on the creation of organizational knowledge. Rather than focus on whether the origins of knowledge were empirical or epistemological, incomplete or absolute, Nonaka (1994) focused on how the various origins of knowledge interconnected in the knowledge creation process. As Nonaka's work progressed, the influence of social context as advocated by the constructivist view, became more apparent in relation to creating and managing knowledge (Echajar & Thomas, 2015). On the other hand, the cognitive, positivist-based approach accounted for the creativity and written knowledge constructivists forbade (Echajar & Thomas, 2015). Nonaka combined these approaches in the study of organizational knowledge and set the stage for other

scholars and practitioners to further define knowledge and its linkage to KM (Echajar & Thomas, 2015).

Key Concepts of Competitive Advantage

The preponderance of strategic management scholars and practitioners view Michael Porter as the pioneer of the concept (Bacanu, 2016; Dustin, Bharat, & Jitendra, 2014). Porter's views of competitive advantage can be summarized in his Five Forces model for competitiveness (Suwardy & Ratnatunga, 2014). Porter named rivalry, buyers, suppliers, new market entrants, and substitutes as the five primary forces that shape the competitive environment (Suwardy & Ratnatunga, 2014). The model was also heavily based on three types of competitive strategies including cost strategy, differentiation strategy, and focus strategy (Darabos & Dvorski, 2014; Salavou, 2015). Since its inception, Porter's model has served as a guide to assist business leaders in navigating the complexities of remaining competitive in a market-based environment (Salavou, 2015). Business leaders who were more adept at maneuvering through the five forces to create value for stakeholders were more likely to achieve an advantage over rivals (Beaudreau, 2016; Suwardy & Ratnatunga, 2014).

Porter's concepts can be linked to Jay Barney's perspectives on the RBV of the firm (Jensen et al., 2016; Salavou, 2015). Barney's ideals concerning the RBV expanded the basic tenets of Porter's Five Forces model using a specific framework to assist in identifying and exploiting resources for competitive advantage (Ghapanchi et al., 2014). The underlying principle of Barney's framework was that unique company resources that could not be reproduced or substituted by another firm created the foundation for

perpetual competitive advantage (Ghapanchi et al., 2014). Barney's concept could be considered a type of differentiation strategy, which links to Porter's Five Forces model.

Scholars also considered Barney the first to distinguish between temporary and sustained competitive advantage (Bacanu, 2016; Ghapanchi et al., 2014). Identifying and exploiting rare resources leads to temporary competitive advantage while restricting the reproduction of rare resources and eliminating substitutions yields sustained competitive advantage (Barney & Mackey, 2016). Porter did not address the notion of sustained competitive advantage until his later writings (Beaudreau, 2016).

Barney's extension of competitive advantage adds another dimension to the phenomenon that is missing from Porter's model (Darabos & Dvorski, 2014). According to Porter's model, external forces and market position were determinants of competitive advantage while Barney turned the focus to the firm's internal resources as potential advantages (Ferreira, Reis, Serra & Costa, 2014). Specifically, Barney developed the VRIO (value, rare, imitability, and organizational support) framework, which outlined criteria for a resource to be considered strategic in terms of increasing competitiveness (Ghapanchi et al., 2014).

Despite Barney's and Porter's significant and widely accepted contributions to developing the concept of competitive advantage, the literature revealed sharp criticisms among management scholars and practitioners regarding the lack of a conclusive definition of the phenomenon (Bacanu, 2016; Lee, Foo, Leong, & Ooi, 2016). Porter originally associated the concept of competitive advantage with a firm's financial dominance in the market (Dustin et al., 2014; Sigalas, 2015). Those who ascribed to

Porter's views defined competitive advantage as the ability to create the most value for stakeholders without excessive expenditures (Bacanu, 2016; Sigalas, 2015). Other scholars argued Barney's contributions solidified Porter's concepts with the introduction of firm resources as tools for achieving marketplace advantages (Bacanu, 2016; Ferreira et al., 2014). Other scholars criticized defining competitive advantage with objective terms such as *value* and *resource* (Barney & Mackey, 2016; Sigalas, 2015). Value changes over time and the status of a resource may also change depending upon demand and market environment (Barney & Mackey, 2016). Sigalas (2015) suggested competitive advantage be explained in terms of firm performance and profitability rather than value and resources. Bacanu (2016) refuted this idea pointing out the impossibility of determining if an advantage genuinely sparked superior performance, or if superior performance birthed the advantage. Nadarajah and Kadir (2014) purported organizational resources and capabilities were indicative of a firm's capacity to achieve a competitive edge. Dassler (2015) rebutted this notion suggesting the term should not be defined by the parameters of resources, capabilities, nor profitability, but by the firm's ability to respond to customer demand more effectively than rivals.

The competitive advantage definition debate extends well into the current century. Modern definition proposals span a vast array of concepts to include information technology (IT) (Bilgihan & Wang, 2016) innovation (Donate & Sánchez de Pablo, 2015), value co-creation (Gouillart, 2014), and entrepreneurial marketing (Whalen et al., 2016). Each of these new concepts of competitive advantage has clear linkages to the traditional definitions proposed by founding scholars. The new concepts also seem to

resurface the historical debates surrounding the ability to define the concept. For example, some organizations attempt to gain IT-based advantages by investing in IT to improve products (differentiation strategy) and deliver greater value to stakeholders at reduced costs (cost strategy) as a means of improving firm performance (Bilgihan & Wang, 2016). This approach aligns with Porter's (1980) ideologies of competitive advantage, which are centered in three primary strategy types – cost, differentiation, and focus strategies (Dustin, 2014). This particular IT-focused competitive advantage strategy approach also invokes the criticism of oversimplification of the relationship between IT investments and firm performance (Bilgihan & Wang, 2016). Porter's (1980) model was often criticized as being much too simplistic for the dynamic global business environment (Bacanu, 2016).

Though modern competitive advantage definition variations span a wide range of topics and appear misaligned, the literature revealed the most recurring common threads as Porter's (1980) original competitive advantage concepts and Barney's principles concerning the RBV of the firm (Bacanu, 2016; Barney & Mackey, 2016; Darabos & Dvorski, 2014). Scholars who discussed competitive advantage in fields including IT (Bilgihan & Wang, 2016), dynamic capabilities (Kuo, Lin, & Lu, 2017), and business modeling (Purkayastha & Sharma, 2016) built their concepts from the foundations of Porter's (1980) competitive strategy concepts, the RBV of the firm, or both. Though a conclusive definition of competitive advantage eludes the strategic management field, the RBV and Porter's (1980) competitive strategy concepts are undoubtedly the root of the

preponderance of mainstream competitive advantage theories and models (Darabos & Dvorski, 2014; Kuo et al., 2017).

Knowledge Management as a Tool for Competitive Advantage

Influences such as globalization, rapid technological growth, reduced product life cycles, and the emergence of the information age have drastically revamped the business environment (Qureshi & Gani, 2015; Salem, 2014). The knowledge-economy emanated from the information age introducing an era in which individuals relied more on skills, abilities, and know-how as a means of production (Lee et al., 2016; Urîtu, Corcodel, & Tanase, 2017). As knowledge resources began to prevail over fiscal resources, the business economy shifted from a market-based view to a resource-based view with knowledge as the predominant source to be leveraged to gain competitive advantage (Brahma & Mishra, 2015; Drucker, 1991). The perception of knowledge as a critical asset to the success of the firm kindled the requirement for KM programs (Brahma & Mishra, 2015; Lee et al., 2016).

Scholars agree KM is a necessary tool to properly identify, aggregate, store, and share knowledge sources for the intent of dominating competitors (Brahma & Mishra, 2015; Lee et al., 2016; Salem, 2014). However, many scholars purported specific details of how practitioners should use KM to leverage knowledge resources remain elusive (Giampaoli et al., 2017; Stanciu & Tinka, 2017). Dominant themes in the literature pertaining to leveraging knowledge assets for market dominance include KM and innovation (Giampaoli et al., 2017; Kim et al., 2015), leveraging KM through information technology (Cerchione & Esposito, 2017; Wang & Wang, 2016), and

knowledge sharing within the KM cycle (Chu et al., 2014; Rehman, et al., 2015). More specifically, scholars focus heavily on the transformation of tacit knowledge to explicit knowledge and dissemination throughout the organization to maximize performance (Lee et al., 2016).

Knowledge Management, Innovation, and Competitive Advantage.

Innovation within a business environment is defined as creation of a new idea, process, behavior, product, or service to benefit an organization (Ho et al., 2014; Salem, 2014). In simplified terms, innovation could also be defined as the creation of new knowledge (Ho et al., 2014; Nonaka, 1994). Innovation (or the creation of new knowledge) (Ho et al., 2014) involves the merging of cognitive and technical aspects of a human being's internal *know-how* to generate new concepts, some of which are developed into tangible assets (i.e. products and services) (Salem, 2014; Nonaka, 1994). In other words, individuals rely on cognitive functions to envision and spark their imaginations, then rely on technical skills and intelligence to make their visions and imaginations reality in the form of products, services, processes, etc. (Nonaka, 1994; Polyani, 1958). KM is integral to the process because the human (tacit) knowledge must be accessed, harnessed, converted to explicit knowledge, compiled, and disseminated so the entire business network can benefit from the resulting products, services, processes, etc. (Rehman et al., 2015; Venkitachalam & Willmott, 2017).

Quershi and Ghani (2015) suggested a synergistic relationship between tacit knowledge, explicit knowledge, innovation, and KM. Learning, innovation, and organizational performance form a type of KM process that involves the creation and

exploitation of new knowledge to create marketplace advantages (Lee et al., 2016; Qureshi & Ghani, 2015). Qureshi and Ghani (2015) described the learning process as the constant conversion and of tacit knowledge to explicit knowledge. Knowledge becomes embedded or learned when it is internalized and used to innovate (Qureshi & Ghani, 2015). The new knowledge borne out of the innovation process leads to sustainable competitive advantage, which results in increased firm performance (Qureshi & Ghani, 2015). Though Qureshi's and Ghani's (2015) suggested process lacks some intricate details, the model represented one of few proposed KM cycles that definitively outlines how to use KM to enable innovation and ultimately gain dominance over rivals.

Perez-Soltero and Soto (2017) echoed similar notions about the relationship between KM, innovation, and competitive advantage. KM and innovation may both be considered critical to establishing competitive advantage (Perez-Soltero & Soto, 2017; Qureshi & Ghani, 2015). Therefore, KM should be integrated into the core processes of an organization to ensure knowledge assets are properly developed through technical infrastructures, collaboration, and appropriate application in various contexts within the business (Perez-Soltero & Soto, 2017). Like Qureshi and Ghani (2015), Perez-Soltero and Soto (2017) also posited the creation and dissemination of new knowledge within an organization as a primary determinant of sustained competitive advantage. KM is considered the pivotal factor in leveraging innovation to attain competitive advantage (Perez-Soltero & Soto, 2017; Qureshi & Ghani, 2015).

Knowledge Management, Information Technology, and Competitive Advantage Existing KM literature established the premise of knowledge as a critical

strategic asset in modern business society (Barney & Mackey, 2016; Drucker, 1991; Evans et al., 2014). Accelerated technological advancements have drastically increased knowledge accessibility and the ability to data mine, share knowledge, and collaborate (Cerchione & Esposito, 2017; Ho et al., 2014). Many scholars supported the idea of information technology as a facilitator of KM in the quest to remain competitive in a highly dynamic, global business environment (Cerchione & Esposito, 2017; Ho et al., 2014; Moré et al., 2016).

Information technology may potentially increase effectiveness in several phases of the KM process to include knowledge creation, storage, and transfer (Cerchione & Esposito, 2017; Ho et al., 2014). In the knowledge creation and storage phases, tools including data mining software, data management systems, document management systems, prediction software tools, and decision support systems can assist in developing effective KM strategies for competitive advantage (Cerichone & Esposito, 2017). Additionally, technological collaboration tools such as video and audio conferencing interfaces, internet chat applications, blogs, and other conversational technologies can expand and facilitate knowledge transfer capabilities broadening the internal and external organizational knowledge base (Cerichone & Esposito, 2017; Wang & Wang, 2016). Increasing organization members' access to knowledge better equips them to perform more efficiently increasing the probability of enhanced performance and competitive dominance (Ho et al., 2014).

Scholars agreed though technology is integral to maximizing KM to achieve competitive advantage, KM systems should not be viewed as purely technology

dependent systems (Ho et al., 2014; Wang & Wang, 2016). Though technology eases the burden of managing vast amounts of knowledge, the human element is ever present. Humans operate and supervise KM systems drawing concern to organizational culture, structure, processes, and social environment (Ho et al., 2014; Wang & Wang, 2016).

Organizational culture is important in implementing technology to facilitate knowledge sharing and increase organizational performance (Anand et al., 2015; Wang & Wang, 2016). Scholars have cited management's inability to foster an organizational culture based on open communication and trust as a hindrance to information sharing and a failure factor in successful KM program implementation (Ho et al., 2014; Venkitachalam & Willmott, 2017). In this regard, organizational culture should be considered a primary KM enabler and should be used in conjunction with information technology tools to exploit institutional knowledge, promote widespread information sharing, and enhance firm performance (Anand et al., 2015; Ho et al., 2014).

Knowledge Sharing in the KM Cycle and Competitive Advantage.

Knowledge sharing is defined as the dissemination of tacit or explicit information or expertise throughout an organization for the benefit of all members (Giampaoli et al., 2017; Rehman et al., 2015). However, the true essence of knowledge sharing goes beyond simple dissemination of information. Effective knowledge sharing involves multiple subject matter experts contributing individual knowledge for collaboration, problem solving, decision-making, and other knowledge-intensive functions (Giampaoli et al., 2017; Rehman et al., 2015). Competitive advantage is created through knowledge sharing when various sources of human knowledge are harmonized to derive a common

body of knowledge accessible to all organization members (Lee et al., 2016; Rehman et al., 2015). Competitive advantage emerges when the common body of knowledge is applied to improve efficiency in resource allocation, make process improvements, build organizational capacity, reduce costs, and leverage technology to enhance organizational performance (Giampaoli et al., 2017; Lee et al., 2016; Rehman et al., 2015).

Giampaoli, Ciambotti, and Bontis (2017) purported knowledge sharing as the most critical phase of the KM process. Nonaka (1994) conveyed a similar sentiment acknowledging knowledge sharing as fundamental to the conversion of tacit knowledge into realized benefits or capabilities. Nonaka (1994) dubbed the conversion of tacit knowledge through shared experience *socialization*. According to Nonaka (1994), socialization is one of four processes involved in the spiral of knowledge creation model. The spiral of knowledge depicts the knowledge transfer process flowing from the individual level through the entire organization (Ho et al., 2014; Nonaka, 1994). Socialization is key to the process because it removes the formalities of conversation that can sometimes make individuals hesitant to communicate freely (Nonaka et al., 1994; Rehman et al., 2015). Furthermore, the social aspect of the KM process promotes trust building, fosters creativity, and creates an environment that inspires individuals to naturally share information (Chu et al., 2014; Salem, 2014). This type of free-flowing knowledge exchange is an essential to increased organizational performance (Chu et al., 2014; Salem, 2014).

Organizational culture is another major factor relative to facilitating knowledge sharing for competitive advantage (Brahma & Mishra, 2015; Stanciu & Tinca, 2017).

The process of applying and managing knowledge effectively for competitive advantage is simplified in work cultures rooted in information sharing (Brahma & Mishra, 2015; Stanciu & Tinca, 2017). Chu, KrishnaKumar, and Khosla (2014) suggested the formation of communities of practice or COPs to facilitate a culture of knowledge sharing in which groups of individuals exchange expertise through social interaction on a long-term basis. Wang and Wang (2016) advocated for knowledge-oriented cultures that incentivized learning and creativity, empowered individuals to discover and disseminate new knowledge, and encouraged individuals to share existing knowledge. Anand, Kant, Patel, and Singh (2015) considered organizational culture the primary enabler of effective KM suggesting the use of information technology tools to increase the range and effectiveness of knowledge sharing within organizations. This perspective was consistent with Wang and Wang's (2016) implication that an organizational culture founded on knowledge sharing may increase employee effectiveness in using KM information technology systems to create competitive advantage. Organizational culture is widely recognized in the literature as a critical factor in successful knowledge sharing practices (Akhavan & Pezeshkan, 2014; Ho et al., 2014; Venkitachalam & Willmott, 2017).

Knowledge Management and Competitive Advantage in Franchising

Franchising is a business method involving the expansion of a parent company through distribution of business units by means of a principal-agent relationship between company owners and qualified individuals (Alon, Boulanger, Misati, & Madanoglu, 2015; Altinay et al., 2014). Valued at over \$2 trillion, the U.S. based franchise industry is critical to the American economy (Paswan et al., 2014; Perrigot, Hussain, &

Windsperger, 2015). Franchising accounts for the success of other established economies such as Europe, Germany, and Australia (Paswan et al., 2014; Perrigot et al., 2015). Countries including Brazil, China, and India are also beginning to develop franchise industries as part of economic development strategies (Paswan et al., 2014). The benefits to both franchisors and franchisees may explain the popularity and growth of small business franchises over the years (Alon et al., 2015; Altinay et al., 2014). Franchisors prosper from the franchise relationship through accelerated business expansion at minimum costs and reduced risks (Altinay et al., 2014). Franchisees also benefit by entering the market with an established brand, a reliable business model, and all-inclusive operational support from the parent company (Altinay et al., 2014).

As the franchise industry bloomed, scholars in myriad fields began to study the phenomenon from a multitude of perspectives to include global franchising and comparative studies on single and multi-unit franchising (Paswan et al., 2014; Altinay et al., 2014). More recently, scholars have taken interest in the KM aspects of business format franchising, which focuses on the business system as a whole to include procedural customs and intellectual capabilities (Alon et al., 2015; Weaven et al., 2014). Business format franchising originated in the 1960s in the fast food industry (Alon et al., 2015). Since that time, the U.S. business format franchising model contributed to the growth of thousands of franchise systems employing millions of Americans (Alon et al., 2015; Perrigot et al., 2015).

Weaven, Grace, Dant, and Brown (2014) posited KM as a key component to the successful growth of a business franchise system. The development of KM strategies that

simplify the knowledge sharing process and facilitate the creation of new knowledge is essential to maintaining a firm market position (Weaven et al., 2014). Specifically, tacit knowledge sharing is vital to the success of the franchise system (Okoroafor, 2014; Tsai, Kuo, & Liu, 2017). Paswan, D'Souza, and Rajamma (2014) corroborated the criticality of tacit knowledge sharing in the business franchise system purporting the most effective franchisor focuses on refining tacit knowledge and extending it to franchisees for profit. The continuous exchange of knowledge between franchisor and franchisee creates a system in which intellectual capital is constantly sharpened and managed to create a competitive edge in the market (Paswan et al., 2014; Tsai et al., 2017).

KM processes encourage collaboration, team work, creativity, and learning through knowledge exchange (Okoroafor, 2014; Weaven et al., 2014). It is difficult to identify and exploit business opportunities for competitive advantage if knowledge transfer is not successful across the franchise network (Okoroafor, 2014; Paswan et al., 2014). A key component in successful knowledge transfer within the franchise network is communication (Altinay et al., 2014; Grace, Frazer, Weaven, & Dant, 2016). Methods of communication and frequency of communication are integral to building trust and camaraderie among franchisors and subordinates (Altinay et al., 2014; Grace et al., 2016). Communication, trust, and cohesion among all members of the franchise network are important in facilitating an environment of willingness to share knowledge and leverage it to establish higher market positioning to benefit the entire network (Akremi, Perrigot, & Piot-Lepetit, 2015; Grace et al., 2016; Mishra et al., 2015).

The tenets of the cognitive KM model, competitive advantage, and strategic management theory (KBV) converge in the business franchise system (Kakabadse et al., 2003; Tsai et al., 2017). The cognitive model of KM describes knowledge as codified human cognition that is a resource to be stored, shared, and leveraged for competitive advantage (Kakabadse et al., 2003; Tsai et al., 2017). The KBV and the cognitive model of KM recognize knowledge as a firm's most valuable resource (Kakabadse et al., 2003; Tsai et al., 2017; Weaven et al., 2014). Within the business franchise system tacit (human originated) knowledge is codified and incorporated into business processes and operations, and social processes in efforts to outperform rivals (Akremi et al., 2015; Tsai et al., 2017).

Tacit knowledge is the intangible asset bartered between franchise systems rather than a physical product (Akremi et al., 2015; Paswan et al., 2014). Tacit knowledge is the unique capability that enables firms to achieve superior market position (Akremi et al., 2015; Paswan et al., 2014). Franchisors saturate the market with their brand when they successfully market validated systems for knowledge creation, replication, storage, and dissemination to franchisees (Paswan et al., 2014; Tsai et al., 2017). In return, the franchisee provides the franchisor with local market trend information for strategy development, and increases the pool of available knowledge resources for further exploitation (Tsai et al., 2017; Weaven et al., 2014). This process of knowledge exchange between franchisor and franchisee is directly aligned with the components of the cognitive KM model including creating, compiling, and sharing knowledge as a resource for competitive advantage (Kakabadse et al., 2003; Tsai et al., 2017).

The Future of KM as a Tool for Competitive Advantage

A review of the current KM and competitive advantage literature revealed a possible shift from a theoretical perspective of the phenomenon to a more empirical approach. Early organizational science theorists, economic theorists, and scholars such as Teece (1998), Drucker (1991), Polyani (1958), and Nonaka (1994) attempted to further explain the relationship between KM and competitive advantage based on strategic management theories (KBV/RBV) and KM process (knowledge creation, knowledge sharing, etc.). As globalization and information technology shifted the competitive environment, the need arose for a more practical understanding of how to implement KM to achieve competitive advantage (Karami et al., 2015). Scholars and practitioners became more concerned with attaining specific, proven guidelines on how to acquire, consolidate, distribute, and leverage knowledge to gain superior performance rather than having only a conceptual knowledge (Karami et al., 2015; Mazdeh & Hesamamiri, 2014). A few of the most significant themes indicating the future direction of KM-competitive advantage research trends are information technology as an enabler of KM for competitive advantage (Cerchione & Esposito, 2017; Imran, Ilyas, & Fatima, 2017), the use of KM to develop organizational learning and culture for competitive advantage (Jain & Moreno, 2015; Laeeque, Babar, & Ahmad, 2017), and knowledge creation and innovation as a means of gaining competitive advantage (Giampaoli et al., 2017; Martinez-Conesa, Soto-Acosta, & Carayannis, 2017).

Imran, Ilyas, and Fatima (2017) posited information technology as essential for effective KM. Many organizational leaders rely on technology to compile organizational

knowledge and to circulate it throughout the organizational hierarchy (Choe, 2016; Imran et al., 2017). As technology continues to improve, the business environment continues to shift creating the need for more effective KM systems and processes (Choe, 2016; Li & Herd, 2017). This explains scholars' and practitioners' heightened interest in the relationship between KM, information technology, and competitive advantage. Furthermore, scholars including Choe (2016), Imran et al. (2017), and Li and Herd (2017) consider information technology, organizational culture, innovation, and knowledge creation to be significantly interrelated. This assertion explains the other recognizable trends in the KM-competitive advantage literature concerning organizational learning, knowledge creation, and innovation.

Intezari, Taskin, and Pauleen (2017) insisted managers cannot manage the vast influx of information in the current business environment solely through technological infrastructures. Effective KM systems must also incorporate organizational culture and innovation processes (Intezari, Taskin, & Pauleen, 2017; Laeeque et al., 2017). Scholars and practitioners are beginning to place emphasis on researching these phenomena because effective innovation practices lead to inimitable capabilities or products that lead to sustained competitive advantages (Laeque et al., 2017). Furthermore, organizational culture may influence the efficiency of knowledge creation, knowledge sharing, and knowledge application within firms (Intezari et al., 2017). If these processes are hindered, competitive advantage is at stake (Intezari et al., 2017; Laeeque et al., 2017).

Globalization, technological advancements, and virtual workforces continue to shape future trends in KM-competitive literature (Karami et al., 2015; Martinez-Conesa

et al., 2017). The emergence of collaborative technologies introduced opportunities to consolidate work teams across multiple geographic regions increasing diversity and innovation (Martinez-Conesa et al., 2017). Many organizational leaders are beginning to recognize the value in creating cooperative learning environments to exploit individual expertise and skill or tacit knowledge (Martinez-Conesa et al., 2017). As globalization and technology continue to expand, the KM-competitive advantage literature will most likely continue to evolve empirically to discover the true relationship between information technology, organizational culture, knowledge creation, organizational learning, and KM.

Transition

In Section 1 of this study, I discussed the foundation of the study, the background of the problem, the problem statement, and I explained the purpose for the research. Additionally, I described the nature of the study and introduced the guiding research question and conceptual framework. Next, I provided a summary of the assumptions, limitations, and delimitations of the study. Finally, I explained the significance of the study and provided a review of the academic literature.

In Section 2 of the project, I focused on collecting data in support of the overarching research question. First, I restated the purpose of the study. Next, I explained the role of the researcher, described the participants, discussed the research method and design, ethical research, and provided details on data collection and analysis. I will conclude Section 2 by addressing reliability and validity of the study.

In Section 3 of the study, I presented the findings of the research, discussed the application of the findings to professional practice, and the implications for social change. I concluded Section 3 with recommendations for action and future research.

Section 2: The Project

Knowledge management is a strategic business component and a critical success factor in a firm's ability to achieve competitive advantage (Salem, 2014). In Section 1, I discussed the specific problem and provided background information. I focused on the problem, purpose of the research, the research question, and the study method and design. In Section 2, I will re-emphasize the purpose statement, describe the role of the researcher, describe participants, and provide further discussion on the research method and design. I will also address ethical research and provide details on the data collection and analysis techniques. Prior to transitioning to Section 3, I will discuss reliability and validity of the study.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore effective KM strategies convenience foods franchise industry business owners or managers use to increase competitive advantage. The targeted population consisted of 10 fast-food chicken restaurant franchise owners or managers in or near the Research Triangle Park region of North Carolina who successfully implemented effective KM strategies to achieve competitive advantage. Providing franchise business leaders effective KM strategies for competitive advantage impacts social change by potentially increasing the longevity and

dominance of U.S. based franchised businesses, contributing directly to job growth and economic stimuli.

Role of the Researcher

In alignment with the qualitative study design, the researcher is considered the primary data collection instrument (Yin, 2014). My role as the researcher was to collect and analyze the data to identify common themes from individual perspectives (Yin, 2014). As the primary data collection instrument, it was also my role to interview participants and document comments and insights accurately (Dikko, 2016). An interview protocol was warranted because of the need to obtain particularized information based on participant perspectives and experiences (Dikko, 2016).

My exposure to KM topics is a result of my professional experience in management and leadership. I became interested in the topic through personal research and observation of the principles in action in the workplace. I have witnessed positive benefits of effective KM practices as well as negative benefits of ineffective KM practices. I wanted to further explore the phenomenon in an entirely different business context. I chose the fast-food franchise industry due to my personal interests in owning a franchise. I had no familiarity or relationship with the participants.

To ensure ethical research, I followed the ethical guidelines outlined in the Belmont Report to include beneficence, respect of persons, and fair research (Bromley, Mikesell, Jones, & Khodyakov, 2015). I informed participants of confidentiality methods to be used, particularly, the use of pseudonyms to protect their identities. I also explained

to participants the purpose of the study, ensured they were aware that participation was voluntary, and obtained participants' informed consent prior to any interviewing.

The possibility for bias existed during each phase of the research process, potentiating a negative impact on validity and reliability of the study (Smith & Noble, 2014). Smith and Noble (2014) posited inadequate study design and misalignment between intended study purposes and methods increase the potential for bias. To mitigate bias, I chose the most appropriate research design to align with the intent of the study. I developed seven open-ended, non-leading interview questions to allow participants to freely express their views without undue influence. I also implemented member checking to avoid misinterpretation of data (Yin, 2014).

Participants

The intent of qualitative case study is to gain insight into participants' views of a particular phenomenon within its natural setting (Mayer, 2015; Ridder, Hoon, & Baluch, 2014). Interviewing a specific sample of participants is one method that may be used to achieve the intent of a qualitative case study (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Mayer, 2015; Paine, 2015). In this case study, the expert knowledge gained through the unique experiences of fast food franchise owners or managers was needed to determine what KM strategies yielded a competitive advantage within the convenience foods industry. I used the following criteria for participant selection: (a) the participant must be a fast-food chicken restaurant franchise owners or manager, (b) participant's franchise must be located in the Research Triangle Park region of North Carolina, and (c) participants must have successfully implemented effective KM strategies to achieve competitive advantage. The

total sample consisted of seven fast-food chicken restaurant franchise owners or managers. Organizational leaders bear the responsibility for developing and implementing business strategies for the firm including KM strategies, innovation strategies, and competitive strategies (Muchiri & Kiambati, 2015; Overall, 2015). Based on this premise, it was most appropriate to interview the franchise owner or representative management to gain the most accurate insight into effective KM strategies convenience foods franchise industry business operators used to increase competitive advantage (Koohang, Paliszkievicz, & Goluchowski, 2017; Micic, 2015; Muchiri & Kiambati, 2015).

To gain access to participants and to establish immediate rapport, I visited the franchise locations in person to introduce myself to the management, provide details of the study, and request their participation in the interview process. It was important to make potential interviewees feel comfortable with the researcher early in the process to increase the probability of participation and facilitate open communication when the interview occurred (Barratt, Ferris, & Lenton, 2015; Palinkas et al., 2015; Rimando et al., 2015). I also offered electronic or telephonic interviews to those who were difficult to access in person. Follow-up correspondence took place primarily by telephone and through email.

Research Method and Design

Research Method

I determined the qualitative research method was most appropriate for this research project based on several factors. First, historically, researchers use qualitative

methods to better understand a phenomenon within its particular contextual setting (Lach, 2014; Sarma, 2015; Yin, 2014). I explored how KM strategies were used to create competitive advantage in the fast food franchise industry. Secondly, qualitative methods are used when the researcher seeks to gain an understanding of a particular topic of study based on participants' experiences and perspectives (Mayer, 2015; McCusker & Gunaydin, 2014; Sarma, 2015). I sought to obtain and understand the participants' insights on KM strategies for competitive advantage based on each individual's observations, experiences, and viewpoints (McCusker & Gunaydin, 2014; Sarma, 2015; Ridder et al., 2014). Lastly, qualitative researchers seek to extract and explain the deeper meaning of multiple participants' subjective views on a specific topic (Hesse-Biber, 2016; Ridder et al., 2014; Sarma, 2015). I analyzed the data collected from participants to extract significant themes and perspectives.

A qualitative method was preferred over a quantitative or mixed method approach for several reasons. First, researchers use the quantitative method when the intent is to test hypotheses statistically to produce results in the form of numeric measures (Counsell, Cribbie, & Harlow, 2016; Hesse-Biber, 2016; Pilcher & Cortazzi, 2016). The focus of the study was exploring and ascertaining meaning based on participant feedback rather than testing hypothesis (Hesse-Biber, 2016; McCusker & Gunaydin, 2014; Sarma, 2015). Secondly, researchers use mixed methods to leverage the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative methods to study highly complex topics (Ingham-Broomfield, 2016; Molina-Azorin, 2016; Razali, 2016). The narrow scope of this study minimized complexity; therefore, a qualitative method alone was sufficient to answer the overarching research

question. Lastly, since quantitative researchers rely heavily on statistics to answer confirmatory research questions, and the focus of this study was an exploratory research question, the qualitative design was most appropriate (Counsell et al., 2016; Molina-Azorin, 2016; Razali, 2016). Furthermore, mixed method research is more useful for complex, multi-phased projects (Counsell et al., 2016; Ingham-Broomfield, 2016; Molina-Azorin, 2016). The mixed method approach was not suitable for use in this study based on the overarching research question and overall intent of the study.

Research Design

I chose to use the case study design for this research project. Case study is the exploration of one or more bounded systems to better understand the intricacies of a phenomenon within a particular context (Hyett, Kenny, & Dickson-Swift, 2014; Santha et al., 2015; Sarma, 2015). The intent of this study was to explore effective KM strategies for competitive advantages within the fast food franchise industry. Using a case study design, researchers become deeply engaged in answering the research question through in-depth interaction with participants who live or have experience with the phenomenon under study (Baporikar, Nambira, & Gomxos, 2016; Hyett et al., 2014; Santha et al., 2015). I conducted in-depth interviews with fast food franchise owners and managers to determine what effective KM strategies they used to attain competitive advantage over rivals. The case study design was appropriate for this study because it is intended for researchers who desire to explore real-world situations primarily through interviewing individuals with unique, applicable knowledge of the subject matter under study (Baporikar et al., 2016; Hyett et al., 2014; Sarma, 2015). I chose the case study design

because the qualitative processes involved most effectively elucidated the research question in comparison to other qualitative designs (Baporikar et al., 2016; Santha et al., 2015; Sarma, 2015).

Researchers use narrative design to study and report on an individual's historical experiences (Carmel-Gilfilen & Portillo, 2016; Santha et al., 2015). The intent of this study was not to report on a single individual's historical life experiences. The study was focused on studying and reporting on a collective group of participants' views on a particular phenomenon in a specific context. Therefore, case study design was more suitable than a narrative approach based on the focus of the project (Carmel-Gilfilen & Portillo, 2016; Hyett et al., 2014; Santha et al., 2015).

Researchers use phenomenology to study and describe common lived experiences among multiple individuals so others may fully understand those experiences without having lived them personally (Santha et al., 2015; Sarma, 2015; Willgens et al., 2016). The overall intent of phenomenology is to capture the essence of a particular occurrence and give meaning to the experience (Santha et al.; Sarma, 2015; Willgens et al., 2016). The overall intent of this study was to identify effective KM strategies for competitive advantage rather than to capture the essence of the participants' experiences. Therefore, the case study design was more appropriate than phenomenology (Baporikar et al., 2016; Sarma, 2015; Willgens et al., 2016).

Ethnographic research design is used to explore and observe a specific cultural group over an extended period of time (Bamkin, Maynard, & Goulding, 2016; Santha et al., 2015; Willgens et al., 2016). Ethnographic researchers aim to describe and

understand the common practices and habits among the members of the cultural group (Santha et al., 2015; Sarma, 2015; Willgens et al., 2015). The topic and scope of this study were completely unrelated to a specific cultural group and were not concerned with particular behaviors among cultural group members. Therefore, ethnographic research design was not suitable for this study.

Grounded theory research design is used to create new theory about unique occurrences or to test current theory (Bamkin et al., 2016; Santha et al., 2015; Willgens et al., 2015). Grounded theory researchers use a combination of data collection techniques such as interviews and field visits to develop or test theories explaining distinct activities or procedures (Bamkin et al., 2016; Sarma, 2015; Willgens et al., 2015). The purpose of this study was not to develop or test theory. Therefore, grounded theory was not applicable to this research project (Santha et al., 2015; Sarma, 2015; Willgens et al., 2015).

In case study research design, data saturation has been achieved when new information or themes no longer emerge (Boddy, 2016; Gladwell, Badlan, Cramp, & Palmer, 2015). Gladwell, Badlan, Cramp, and Palmer (2015) experienced data saturation when no new data or themes were revealed after completing only three interviews using a qualitative case study design. To ensure data saturation, I interviewed participants until new information or themes ceased to emerge (Boddy, 2016; Fusch & Ness, 2015; Gladwell et al., 2015). Malterud, Siersma, and Guassora (2016) suggested the selection of knowledgeable participants assists in achieving data saturation. I selected participants with specialized knowledge of the topics under study to ensure data saturation (Boddy,

2016; Gladwell et al., 2015; Malterud, Siersma, & Guassora, 2016). I also implemented open-ended research questions to encourage rich dialogue with participants facilitating data saturation (Boddy, 2016; Fusch & Ness, 2015; Malterud et al., 2016).

Population and Sampling

I used purposive sampling to determine the participants to be interviewed.

Purposive sampling is commonly used in qualitative research when the topic is specific and can only be addressed by individuals with specific expertise (Apostolopoulos & Liargovas, 2016; Palinkas et al., 2015; Rimando et al., 2015). Purposive sampling is preferred when the researcher aims to explore the intricacies of a phenomenon based on a small segment of the populations' perspectives rather than the perspectives of the entire population (Benoot, Hannes, & Bilsen, 2016). The targeted population for this study consisted of fast-food chicken restaurant franchise owners or managers in or near the Research Triangle Park region of North Carolina who successfully implemented effective KM strategies to achieve competitive advantage.

Qualitative research literature does not reveal definitive guidelines for determining sample size (Boddy, 2016). Malterud et al. (2016) purported participants' level of knowledge should determine the number of participants required for the study. Other scholars posited data saturation as the primary determinant of sample size for qualitative research (Boddy, 2016; Tran, Porcher, Tran, & Ravaud, 2017). Appropriate sample sizes for qualitative research can range from one to any number the researcher determines to be adequate to achieve data saturation (Boddy, 2016; Fusch & Ness, 2015). I determined 10 fast food franchisees or managers with relevant expertise to be a

sufficient sample size to achieve data saturation (Boddy, 2016; Fusch & Ness, 2015; Malterud, et al., 2016). However, data saturation occurred after interviewing seven participants. The open-ended structure of the research questions facilitated data saturation (Boddy, 2016; Fusch & Ness, 2015; Malterud et al., 2016). To minimize distractions, all interviews took place in the franchise location during times when business was slowest based on the participants' preferences (Rimando et al., 2015).

I used the following criteria for participant selection: (a) the participant must be a fast-food chicken restaurant franchise owners or manager, (b) participant's franchise must be located in the Research Triangle Park region of North Carolina, and (c) participants must have successfully implemented effective KM strategies to achieve competitive advantage. I used these criteria to ensure only the participants most knowledgeable to the topic were included so the research question was adequately addressed and data saturation was achieved (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Malterud et al., 2016).

Ethical Research

It is important to uphold principles of beneficence, respect of persons, and justice in qualitative research (Bromley et al., 2015). Conducting ethical research increases academic integrity and is a means of safeguarding participants providing them the assurance of confidentiality and protection from harm associated with the research (Greenwood, 2016; Petrova, Dewing, & Camilleri, 2016). Institutional review boards and ethical committees provide research oversight and approval in university settings (Gennaro, 2014; Rosales, 2014). The Walden University institutional review board (IRB)

provided oversight and approval for this project to ensure all research was compliant with ethics protocols.

Upon assignment of IRB approval number 09-13-17-0590877, I made initial contact with participants and explained the purpose of the study. I informed all participants that their personal information would not be included in the study or revealed at any point in the process of completing the research project. I also notified individuals that their participation was voluntary and that they may withdraw from the study at any time. I did not offer any compensation for participation in the study. I made initial face-to-face contact with a member of the management team at each franchise location. During the initial contact, I introduced the study to potential participants, presented and explained the letter of cooperation, and requested contact information for the franchise owner. Once I established communication with each franchise owner and obtained the signed letter of cooperation granting permission to interviewee employees, I revisited the franchise locations to recruit participants. I reviewed the consent form with each participant, obtained signatures, and scheduled interviews.

During each interview, I provided a copy of the informed consent form to participants and reviewed the information with each participant. It was important to make participants feel comfortable with the interview process by reassuring them of strict confidentiality (Petrova et al., 2016; Rosales, 2014). One way to protect the identity of participants is to use pseudonyms or coded identifiers known only to the researcher (Petrova et al., 2016). I explained to each individual that his or her name would be replaced with a pseudonym or code known only to me to ensure anonymity. Participants

were informed that the employer's name, organization name, nor brand name would be identified in the study. It was also imperative to make participants aware of procedures for securing any personal information (Hiriscau, Stingelin-Giles, Stadler, Schmeck, & Reiter-Theil, 2014). I informed participants that all written information would be maintained on a password-protected computer hard-drive for a period of 5 years after the date of study completion, after which, I would destroy all information.

Data Collection Instruments

Qualitative researchers commonly use interviews to access rich, detailed data based on participants' descriptions of their experiences (Castillo- Montoya, 2016; O'Keeffe, Buytaert, Mijic, Brozovic, & Sinha, 2016). I acted as the primary data collection instrument using semi-structured interviews to obtain information from participants. The use of a semi-structured interview afforded me the opportunity to develop open-ended interview questions to facilitate the flow of information (O'Keeffe, et al., 2016). The interview protocol consisted of introducing the interview by thanking the participant for his or her assistance and reiterating details concerning the purpose of the study, the length of the interview, and a brief overview of the types of questions to be asked (Castillo-Montoya, 2016; Dikko, 2016; O'Keeffe et al., 2016). Next, I reminded participants the interview would be audio recorded and confirmed consent. After I made participants comfortable and answered any questions they had, I began asking the interview questions. Throughout the interview, I asked probing questions as required to clarify responses or elicit additional information.

To enhance the reliability and validity of the collected data, I conducted member checking and transcript reviews (Castillo-Montoya, 2016; Fusch & Ness, 2015; O’Keeffe et al., 2016). Member checking is often used as a best practice for increasing reliability and validity in qualitative research (Simpson & Quigley, 2016; Wong & Cooper, 2016). Member checking is defined as reconnecting with participants after the initial interview to verify responses and interpretations (Simpson & Quigley, 2016; Wong & Cooper, 2016). Ang, Embi, and Yunus (2016) posited member checking is most effective when the collected data is analyzed and refined prior to a second interview with participants. Interview transcription facilitates data analysis and also enhances trustworthiness of the research (Dasgupta, 2015; O’Keeffe et al., 2016). I provided the recorded interview audio files to a transcription service to produce interview transcripts for analysis and member checking.

The interview questions are included in *Section 1* of this study. The interview questions are also included as Appendix A, and the interview protocol as Appendix B as listed in the table of contents.

Data Collection Technique

Qualitative data collection techniques include interviews, document exploitation, and researcher observation of participants in a particular setting (Barnham, 2015; Castillo-Montoya, 2016; Dikko, 2016). Qualitative data collection techniques present disadvantages, particularly when using interviews to gather data (Lach, 2014). The potential for bias, difficulty in generalizing results, and the possibility of misaligned data interpretation between researchers and participants are all possible disadvantages of

interview-based data collection (Lach, 2014). However, researchers gain advantages of in-depth, thick data through first-hand accounts of those who have lived the phenomenon under study, and enhanced understanding of the phenomenon that would not otherwise be achieved through other techniques (Lach, 2014).

I collected data using semi-structured interviews, note-taking during the interviews, and company websites to retrieve and triangulate publicly accessible documentation. The semi-structured interview format allowed me to ask participants open-ended interview questions to access rich, in-depth information about the participants' experiences in implementing effective KM strategies for competitive advantage (Barnham, 2015; Castillo- Montoya, 2016; O'Keefe et al., 2016). All interviews were audio recorded and the conversations were transcribed for analysis (Dasgupta, 2015; Dikko, 2016; O'Keefe et al., 2016).

I used the interview protocol included in Appendix B to guide the interview process. Researchers use interview protocols to maintain consistency in the interview process and ensure dependability of the findings (Cuthbert & Moules, 2014; Munn, Porritt, Lockwood, Aromataris, & Pearson, 2014; St. John et al., 2016). Several scholars suggested an interview protocol that includes introducing the interview, audio recording the interview in conjunction with manual note-taking, asking probing questions during the interview, and thanking participants at the conclusion of the interview (Castillo- Montoya, 2016; Dikko, 2016; O'Keefe et al., 2016). The interview protocol I developed for this study consisted of introducing and setting the stage for the interview for each participant. In addition to audio recording the interview using my laptop computer and

voice-recording software, I also used a smartphone with a voice-recording app as a secondary recorder. I used a notepad to manually record paraphrases and any additional information as required while asking probing questions. At the conclusion of each interview, I thanked each participant and coordinated follow-up procedures for member checking.

I forwarded the interview recordings to a transcription service within 24-48 hours of completing the interview session. I retrieved a copy of the transcribed interview from the transcription service and reviewed the transcript. I provided a copy of the transcript to the respective participant to verify accuracy of the data. When the participant verified the contents of the transcript, I secured the information in a locked storage container when it was not being used for analysis, coding, and theme development. Upon conclusion of the study, I maintained the documents in a locked storage container. At the expiration of 5 years, I will destroy all documentation.

Data Organization Technique

Research procedures, to include data organization techniques, must be traceable to increase reliability of the data (Cuthbert & Moules, 2014). Safeguarding participant information by ensuring confidentiality and protection from potential harm resulting from the research is a primary consideration in the process of data organization (Greenwood, 2016; Petrova et al., 2016). The recorded audio files from each interview were maintained on a password protected hard-drive using an alpha numeric coded file name that includes the participant pseudonym, underscore, date of the interview, underscore, and time of the interview recorded using military standard time format. For example, the

interview file name for Participant 1 was written similar to P1_05242017_1400. I coded interview protocols and hand-written notes with corresponding participant codes in the top right margin and securely stored the notes in a locked storage container. At the expiration of 5 years, I will destroy all documentation.

I used NVIVO software to conduct data analysis, coding, and theme development. All resulting hard copy products were labeled using the aforementioned file naming convention and filed in the locked storage container for a period of 5 years. Digital data products were stored on the password protected hard drive and will be maintained for a five year period. All physical and digital data will be destroyed at the end of the five year period.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis consists of processes such as reviewing interview transcripts and field notes, organizing data, coding data, thematic analysis, and interpretation and documentation of findings (Fowlin & Cennamo, 2017; Johnson et al., 2017). Coding is a process of categorizing data based on participants' key words or phrases (Sulistiyo, Mukminin, Abdurrahman, & Haryanto, 2017). The purpose of coding is to group like words and phrases into clusters to identify patterns or themes in the data (Sulistiyo et al., 2017; Fowlin & Cennamo, 2017). I organized the data and performed data triangulation among interview transcripts, field notes, and company documentation. Data triangulation was the most appropriate triangulation method since this case study involved a single researcher, a single primary data collection method, and did not focus on comparing theoretical strategies (Fusch & Ness, 2015).

Data pre-coding occurred in the review and organization phase of the analysis (Fowlin & Cennamo, 2017; Johnson et al., 2017; Sulistiyo et al., 2017). Data was triangulated continuously during the process of coding and thematic analysis using NVIVO software to facilitate analysis (Fowlin & Cennamo, 2017; Johnson et al., 2017; Sulistiyo et al., 2017). I coded the data into clusters and labeled accordingly for further study to identify meaningful patterns and themes. Codes were identified within each individual transcript then cross-checked among the set of transcripts to ensure all significant key words and phrases were recognized and the data was thoroughly understood (Fowlin & Cennamo, 2017; Johnson et al., 2017; Sulistiyo et al., 2017). I identified major themes and discussed the correlation with existing literature in the findings section of the study. I also searched the literature to identify the most recent studies that may relate to or corroborate the findings.

Reliability and Validity

Reliability

Reliability refers to the degree to which study techniques can yield consistent results when repeated (St. John et al., 2016; Wong & Cooper, 2016). Reliability involves developing and implementing well-documented research procedures that align with study methodology and result in answering the research question (Cuthbert & Moules, 2014; Munn et al., 2014). An analogous term for reliability is dependability, which also refers to the degree of consistency in study techniques (Connelly, 2016; Cuthbert & Moules, 2014; Munn et al., 2014). Dependability is an indicator of whether or not the research

results are trustworthy (Cuthbert & Moules, 2014; St. John et al., 2016; Wong & Cooper, 2016).

One way to increase reliability in qualitative research is to follow an interview protocol (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). I adhered to the interview protocol I developed for this study to ensure consistency in participant questioning, which increased dependability of the findings. Qualitative researchers also use interview transcription and member checking to enhance dependability of findings (O’Keefe et al., 2016; Simpson & Quigley, 2016; Wong & Cooper, 2016). Interview transcription supports the data analysis process and increases dependability of the research (Dasgupta, 2015; O’Keefe et al., 2016). Member checking enhances dependability by allowing participants to affirm their statements and avoid misinterpretation of data (Castillo-Montoya, 2016; Simpson & Quigley, 2016; Wong & Cooper, 2016). Finally, data triangulation, defined as the use of multiple sources to verify collected information, is another method qualitative researchers use to establish reliability (Ang, Embi, & Yunus, 2016; Fusch & Ness, 2015; Yin, 2014). I triangulated the interview findings with company documentation to further increase dependability of the research.

Validity

Validity refers to the accuracy of the research instrument in addressing the phenomenon under study (St. John et al., 2016; Wong & Cooper, 2016). Connelly (2016) explained validity in terms of credibility or trustworthiness of the research findings. Credibility refers to the efficacy of the research procedures and instruments in establishing fidelity of the findings (Connelly, 2016; St. John et al., 2016). Credibility

ensures the researcher's findings and interpretations are in alignment with original data sources (Cuthbert & Moules, 2014; Munn et al., 2014). Qualitative researchers use member checking and data triangulation to establish credibility in research (Connelly, 2016; Cuthbert & Moules, 2014; St. John et al., 2016). I used member checking as a means of extending the conversation with participants to increase credibility of data. I triangulated company documentation with interview transcripts and member check results to confirm any verifiable participant statements. I strictly followed the interview protocol to ensure consistency in the interview process further enhancing credibility of collected data.

Transferability and confirmability are important aspects of validity in qualitative research. Transferability refers to the relevance of the findings to various contexts (Ang et al., 2016; Connelly, 2016). Confirmability addresses the degree to which the findings are unbiased, attributed to participants, and linked to the data (Ang et al., 2016; Cuthbert & Moules, 2014). The focus of this study was particular to effective KM strategies for competitive advantage in the fast food franchise industry. However, the multidisciplinary nature of knowledge management and competitive advantage make the foundational principles of both phenomena transferable to a vast array of contexts. Several measures were taken to prevent bias and ensure integrity of the data to include member checking, data triangulation, appropriate research design, and the use of open-ended interview questions (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Smith & Noble, 2014; Yin, 2014).

Transition and Summary

The findings of this study could assist in extending the life of U.S. based franchised businesses by improving KM strategies for sustainable competitive advantages. In Section 2 of the project, I restated the purpose of the study, explained my role as the researcher, described the participants, and discussed the research method and study design. Additionally, I explained how I would adhere to ethical research standards while conducting data collection and analysis. I concluded Section 2 by addressing reliability and validity of the study.

In Section 3 of the study, I presented the findings of the research, discussed the application of the findings to professional practice, and the implications for social change. I concluded Section 3 with recommendations for action and future research.

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore effective KM strategies convenience foods franchise industry business owners or managers use to increase competitive advantage. To explore this topic, I conducted semi-structured interviews with seven convenience foods franchise managers. The franchise owners were eager to grant permission to interview their employees, but did not wish to participate in the study.

Three major themes emerged through data analysis and triangulation of the participant responses to the interview questions, hand-written interview notes, member checking, and the company website. Further analysis revealed several subthemes. The first major theme was training as a KM strategy for competitive advantage. Subthemes included universal individualized training and internal and external evaluations. The second major theme was people-focused KM strategy for competitive advantage. Subthemes of people-focused KM strategy were selective hiring and organizational culture. The final major theme was the collaborative team environment as a KM strategy implementation technique for competitive advantage. Subthemes included open communication and information technology.

Presentation of the Findings

The central research question was what effective KM strategies do convenience foods franchise industry business owners or managers use to increase competitive advantage? Participants were identified using pseudonyms throughout the data collection and analysis process. The pseudonym consisted of the participant number followed by

the date and time of the interview. All participants were managers in the fast food chicken restaurant franchise industry. All interviews were transcribed and member checked prior to data analysis. Data triangulation occurred using the interview transcripts, hand-written interview notes, and the company website.

Theme One: Training as a KM Strategy for Competitive Advantage

The first major theme identified was training as a KM strategy for competitive advantage. When questioned about methods and processes used for KM strategy formulation and implementation, all seven participants' responses related to training as a key factor in both processes. Though participant responses regarding KM strategy formulation and implementation were similar, each participant revealed a unique aspect of how training was incorporated into KM strategy. For example, Participant 1 discussed a specific training technique that requires leaders to demonstrate a task, skill, or process, have the employee imitate that same task, skill, or process, then repeat the entire cycle until the task is mastered. Participant 4 commented on training as a means of empowering employees to perform at their highest potential. Participant 2 made similar comments citing training as a way to invest in employees who will in turn invest the knowledge gained into customer service. Participant 4 added the concept of training multiple individuals to perform multiple tasks and processes to increase flexibility within the staff. The training methods discussed with each participant commenced with one individual sharing tacit knowledge with another. During this exchange of tacit knowledge, knowledge becomes an actionable task or process that is repeated until mastered. The mastery of that particular skill or task is implemented into the business

system to create, sustain, or increase competitive advantage. This intricate process of tacit knowledge transfer points to the cognitive model of KM, which identifies an individual's tacit knowledge or intellectual know-how as the central component in building and leveraging competitive advantage (Polyani, 1958; Wickramasinghe, 2003). Tacit knowledge sharing has also been touted as a critical success factor within the business franchise model (Okoroafor, 2014; Tsai, Kuo, & Liu, 2017).

Participant 5 highlighted the aspect of leadership training as key to successfully transferring knowledge to subordinates. Participant 2 also mentioned the importance of the role of management in positioning employees to best utilize their knowledge. Sergiu and Lile (2015) posited managers critical to successful organizational KM processes. Exploiting tacit knowledge for competitive advantage is dependent upon how well an organization shares and transfers that knowledge, and the manager plays an important role in facilitating that process (Knowledge Management, 2015; Sergiu & Lile, 2015). In this particular case study, the management team found success in using the training program as a tool for facilitating KM processes to include KM strategy formulation and implementation. An explanation of the emergent subthemes adds clarity to this concept.

Universal Individualized Training. All interviewees referred directly or indirectly to a system of universal training throughout the entire business franchise system. The company provides web-based training accessible to all employees in every location across its operating territories. The overall intention of the training website is to instill a common skillset within the franchise system so the customer experience is the same at every franchise location. Participant 4 expressed the importance of universal

training stating, “We’re supposed to be the same from one [franchise location] to the other, using the exact same product and exact same experience. So, I believe having one central training place for the whole entire company serves as a competitive advantage for the entire company, not just one store.” This centralized training website could be described as a type of knowledge repository where tacit knowledge has been codified and stored for exploitation. The codification and storage of tacit knowledge is central to the cognitive model of KM (Kakabadse et al., 2003; Swan & Newell, 2000). The KM and competitive advantage literature supports the concept of transforming tacit knowledge to explicit knowledge and the distribution of that knowledge throughout the organization to maximize performance (Knowledge Management, 2015; Lee et al., 2016).

Though the universal training may serve as a means of competitive advantage for the franchise system, participant responses indicated the individualized method of implementation was perhaps what made the training successful at each particular franchise location. The organization in this case study chose to implement KM strategy through individualized training beginning with the leadership team. The leadership team received direction, training, and guidance from corporate headquarters. From there, the leadership team returned to their respective franchise locations and conducted hands-on, one-on-one training with each team member. Essentially, each team member received training tailored to his or her skillset, abilities, and training needs, and each member of the management team was directly involved in training the team. Direct leadership involvement is critical to successful KM strategy implementation and increased firm performance (Koochang, Paliszkievicz, & Goluchowski, 2017). The management team

chose to implement the KM strategy through universal, yet individualized training, to create learning opportunities for the entire team. Christian (2016) purported individual attributes such as intelligence, temperament, and talent impact a person's ability to learn, thus necessitating individualized learning opportunities. Christian (2016) also expressed the criticality of training or learning to enabling KM processes. The lack of well-designed training programs may equate to a failure of KM strategy because without the flow of knowledge, KM processes are severely inhibited and knowledge is no longer created or exchanged to be leveraged for competitive gain (Christian, 2016).

Internal and External Evaluations. Continuous internal and external evaluations emerged as a subtheme of training as a KM strategy for competitive advantage. All seven participants named internal and external evaluations as integral to KM strategy formulation. Participant 1 stated evaluations were a daily occurrence within the franchise. "We do it (conduct evaluations) daily, we do it weekly, we do it quarterly." Internal evaluations within the franchise took place mainly through face-to-face meetings with the management team or one-on-one conversations with team members. The internal evaluations were built into daily activities through individualized goal setting between the management and team members. Participant 3 shared the types of questions asked of each team member to determine the specifics of evaluations: "What kind of situation are we dealing with? What are our tasks to address it? What's our task that we're putting down, and what are our action steps to do that? Then what are our results from that?" Participant 1 also stated internal evaluations are conducted through feedback meetings. "We want to know ... what we can do better, how we can

help them inside the store, how we can help them outside the store, where they feel like we're lacking at, where they feel like we're doing a great job at, where they feel like we can do better at." The most important aspect of the internal evaluations is any actionable feedback is immediately incorporated into the KM strategy through the training program.

External evaluations were conducted by a third party company designated by corporate headquarters on a quarterly basis. Customer feedback was used as another source of external evaluations. Participant 2 revealed, "We'll look at primarily the trends of what guests are saying. That's our biggest thing that we're using. We also use third party, but our guests are constant and we get updated...we then plug that into our training and work from there to stay competitive." Participant 5 briefly described how evaluation feedback is integrated into training stating, "We're gonna train all of our leadership first, make sure that they are capable and knowledgeable enough to train other team members how to implement that. Then once it goes fully into effect, there's usually a grace period." Participant 5 went on to explain that team members are observed for a given period of time then the performance evaluation process will begin, and the process repeats.

The pattern of continuous evaluation and incorporation of individual and organizational performance evaluation feedback into training is a critical part of KM strategy formulation and implementation. Arunprasad (2016) acknowledged training as a primary contributing factor in strategic KM implementation. Arunprasad (2016) discovered both performance evaluation and training significantly impacted knowledge management processes to include identifying knowledge sources, generating new

knowledge, storing knowledge, and sharing knowledge, all of which are key processes in the cognitive model of KM (Kakabadse et al., 2003). Individualized training also leads to several benefits including employee empowerment an abundance of individual learning opportunities, and an increased willingness to share knowledge among the team (Arunprasad, 2016). These benefits also lead to increased performance which contributes to sustained competitive advantage (Arunprasad, 2016; Weaven et al., 2014).

Theme Two: People-Focused KM Strategy for Competitive Advantage

The data revealed a common focus among participants when discussing KM strategies for competitive advantage. This focus on employees first, then customers, emerged as the second dominant theme in the data, people-focused KM strategy for competitive advantage. Much of the existing literature supports the concept of people as the greatest asset to an organization because of the tacit knowledge they possess (Aribi & Dupouët, 2015; Aruprasad, 2016; Lewis, 2017). However, in this particular case study, tacit knowledge was not the only asset that made people the focal point of KM strategy. The more in-depth, intangible aspects of human nature such as character and potential were also a major factor in how managers selected and employed members of their team. As expressed by Participant 1, “It’s our people that set us apart. We don’t pick people based on knowledge, we don’t pick people based on talent, we don’t pick people based on experience...we pick people based on character.” This same perspective guided KM strategy in relation to some aspects of customer service such as appealing not only to the customer’s physical desire for a tasty product, but also appealing to the customer’s emotional needs in the form of a well-rounded customer experience during franchise

visits. This humanistic approach to developing KM strategy is directly reflective of cognitive KM concepts which emphasize intangible, human-based assets as potential resources for competitive advantage (Kim et al., 2015; Nadarajah & Kadir, 2014; Nonaka, 1994; Polyani, 1958).

Selective Hiring. The people-focused KM strategy concept was vividly illuminated in the concept of selective hiring, which emerged as a subtheme during data analysis. Participant 5 agreed that the organization's employees afforded a competitive advantage stating, "They really do take time and effort into finding the right people. The hiring process that we use is just, it's really selective." Participant 3 offered further insight stating it was better to expend the efforts to hire the right person from the beginning rather than "hire somebody that's mediocre and you have to get rid of them in three months." The selectivity extends not only to the employees of the franchise, but also to the franchise owner/operators. Participant 2 briefly explained the rigor in the process of becoming a franchise owner/operator stating, "We get 25,000 applications a year and it goes down to 100 people by the end of that. To even get the first interview, it goes from 10,000 to 25. We're very selective." Participant 4 concurred stating, "We are very selective in our hiring process, so we essentially try to find the best of the best." Selective hiring as a component of KM strategy can be found in existing literature. Selective hiring positively impacts organizational learning and enhances KM processes (Arunprasad, 2016). Selective hiring has also been touted as a mechanism to increase firm profitability (Marouf, 2016).

The focus on the human elements of people-focused KM strategy and selective

hiring once again points to the conceptual framework, the cognitive KM model.

Cognitive KM, at its core, is based on a humanistic and positivist approach (Kakabadse et al., 2003). From a positivist point of view, a focus on people becomes profoundly important because the generation of knowledge relies heavily on the human experience (Hasan, 2016; Kakabadse et al., 2003). Therefore, people-focused KM strategy directly aligns with the cognitive model of KM in that human cognition produces actionable knowledge (Hasan, 2016; Kakabadse et al., 2003). The capture, transfer, and exploitation of actionable knowledge is a central theme in the cognitive model of KM (Kakabadse et al., 2003). Furthermore, people-focused strategies assist in the creation of work environments conducive to knowledge sharing and innovation, which facilitates competitive advantage (Black & La Venture, 2017). Deeper exploration of the organization's tendency to emphasize people-focused strategy led to the unveiling of a second subtheme, organizational culture.

Organizational Culture. In this case study, people-focus was not simply part of the franchise leadership team's strategic agenda. Analysis of the data revealed the organization's tendency to prioritize people was actually embedded in the organizational culture. People-centric organizational cultures yield a multitude of firm advantages including inspiring and motivational work environments, talent development within the organization, increased work performance, growth of the business, and increased employee loyalty (Black & La Venture, 2017). These aspects of the franchise's organizational culture were extracted from the participant's responses to questions regarding KM strategy and competitive advantage. For example, Participant 3

commented on the concepts of servant leadership integrated into the organizational culture as a means of developing people. “You have that servant leadership model but we have to train other people to do what we expect of them...that gives them an opportunity to live out their job...” Participant 3 also confirmed the company ideal that people-focused strategy has been incorporated into the organizational culture and, by design, extends to the entire franchise system stating, “So your competitive advantage is not just with the customers, but it’s also with your employees, it’s with your business partners...” Participant 5 stated, “The culture, the philosophies and all of that plays into the training.” Participant 6 shared, “I think it’s all about how the atmosphere that you have for the potential team members that come in. I think the first thing to be competitive is making that atmosphere...somewhere they can grow because I feel like that’s what’s important to people.” These participant comments are all reflective of the people-focused organizational culture that permeates the entire franchise system contributing to the competitive edge. The themes are also reinforced through the company website, which highlights the organizational culture of servant leadership and putting people first within and beyond the organization.

Theme Three: Collaborative Team Environment for KM Strategy Implementation

The third emergent theme from the data was the concept of the collaborative team environment as a means of KM strategy implementation for competitive advantage. Recent literature corroborates the findings that the collaborative team environment enhances KM implementation. The collaborative work environment provides employees with wider access to knowledge and increases the span of knowledge flow (Kandukuri &

Nasina, 2017). Furthermore, when a collaborative environment is present, team members are motivated to achieve common goals and are able to do so more effectively (Ahmed, Shahzad, Aslam, Bajwa, & Bahoo, 2016; Kandukuri & Nasina, 2017). Within a collaborative team environment, innovation is more likely to flourish throughout the entire organization (Ahmed et al., 2016).

The findings of this case study were demonstrative of the aforementioned principles found in the literature. The franchise system leadership in this study built a strong collaborative team environment that heavily influenced successful implementation of their KM strategies for competitive advantage. This system of collaboration included knowledge exchange between the leadership team, the employees, and the customers. Participant 1 briefly explained one aspect of the collaborative team environment stating, “So we have a training team, we have team leaders, and then we have managers. So we have three different levels in place that’ll help our new team members and that’ll help people when they need redirection.” This statement is indicative of how collaborative team work facilitates the implementation of the company’s primary KM strategy technique (training) throughout the organizational hierarchy. Participant 1 shared further, “We also have outings...so that’s kind of a non-formal way to hear from our team members.” When asked how KM strategies were implemented, Participant 5 responded, “We kind of collaborate with the people around you and say okay well I think we should implement it this way and come to a common consensus.” The participant responses to questions relating to KM strategy formulation and implementation within a collaborative team environment revealed a system of open communication within the franchise.

Open Communication. Open communication emerged as a subtheme of the collaborative team environment as a KM strategy implementation tool for competitive advantage. Every respondent in the study alluded to open communication as a cornerstone of the collaborative team environment. In this case study, the organization's management team was able to use open communication to their advantage to generate new knowledge, implement new knowledge, and leverage that knowledge for competitive advantage. Open communication within people-focused organizational cultures can be used as a means of improving productivity and stimulating profits (Black & La Venture, 2017). Ahmed et al. (2016) suggested organizational management teams with open communication practices achieve higher performance levels. The findings of this study seem to corroborate the concept of open communication as integral to higher levels of competitive performance.

Many of the participant responses illustrated the system of open communication within the franchise. Participant 5 may have expressed the concept best when discussing the management's efforts to build high performance leadership teams. "In order for that system to work you have to have great communication between everyone to start with." Another manager mentioned one-on-one communication with subordinates as a KM strategy implementation technique. Participant 4 commented on the sense of freedom among employees in regard to communicating with upper management stating, "I really appreciate I guess you can say how much confidence they [employees] have if they just feel like they have an idea. They can come up to us, we're not just gonna brush them off. We'll listen to them, we'll really pay attention." As indicated in the literature, this type

of open communication among the team increases employee loyalty, enhances work relationships, improves quality of knowledge exchange, and minimizes team conflicts (Black & La Venture, 2017). In fact, open communication is hailed as a strategic tool for competitive advantage as it facilitates teamwork and fosters creativity (Black & La Venture, 2017; Kandukuri & Nasina, 2017). Open communication also affords management teams the opportunity to reinforce organizational goals and values and to create transparency within the company (Black & La Venture, 2017). Open communication connects to the conceptual framework in that it is a mechanism for generating knowledge, one of the tenets of cognitive KM (Kakabadse et al., 2003).

Information Technology. The data indicated a combination of traditional and modern techniques to facilitate KM strategies for competitive advantage. Person-to-person communication methods seemed to dominate the organization's KM strategy implementation techniques. However, over time, information technology became a necessity as the franchise developed. Participants mentioned electronic web-based training sites, iPad technology, and QR code scanning technology, and video logs as some methods used to facilitate KM strategies and processes. In particular, the franchise managers described how they use social media tools to facilitate the dissemination of knowledge throughout the team. This combination of old fashioned communication and leveraging social media to enhance KM strategy implementation is in line with current literature. To remain competitive, it is imperative to have diverse communication techniques built into the business strategy (Al Saifi, Saiti, Dillon, & McQueen, 2016). While face-to-face communication leads to benefits such as an atmosphere of mutual

support, building strong work relationships among employees, and improving decision-making processes, social media introduces a more expansive social network for idea generation and knowledge exchange (Al Saifi et al., 2016; Zhang, Chen, de Pablos, Lytras, & Sun, 2016). The social media aspect also affords the opportunity for all members of the franchise system to be involved in the KM process to include customers, suppliers, and community partners as evidenced through the company website and social media sites.

The inclusion of social media outlets to share, collaborate, and disseminate information was discussed by all the participants. Participant 1 described a social media software application used across franchise locations to facilitate knowledge sharing. The application could be customized for specific groups within the franchise such as kitchen staff members, front counter members, or day/night shifts. The various groups could be created to be available to all or available to specific members only. Participant 3 offered further insight into how the application was used for daily operations stating, “That’s our communication tool. Here’s the schedule for the week. Some people like to have it on their phone.” Participant 3 explained the application assists in communicating daily, pertinent information because, “You can’t make everybody come in and sign the sheet acknowledging they’ve seen this. It’s just not practical, especially when you work once a week...or you’re sick one week. It communicates for the majority of the people.” Participant 5 stated within the organization, “There’s a huge platform on social media...there’s tons of different opportunity where every single day there’s seven, eight, nine, ten posts of what people are doing in their restaurants or what problems they’re

having. It's just like a big, massive group of people that are there to help and support you should you be looking to try or do something different.” These findings reinforce the organization's collaborative team environment and organizational culture of relational leadership and interaction, both of which are supported by the literature as critical to successful KM strategy formulation and implementation (Ahmed et al., 2016; Black & La Venture, 2017; Kandukuri & Nasina, 2017)

Applications to Professional Practice

The findings of this study provide franchise owners and managers knowledge management strategies for competitive advantage. Though this case study was specific to KM strategies and to the fast food franchise industry, Ahmed et al. (2016) and Black and La Venture (2017), suggested the principles of training, people-focused strategies, and collaborative team environments can be applied to business strategy in general to create competitive advantages. The results of this case study contributes to what scholars have identified as the lack of empirical findings to support KM strategies as a means of improved firm performance (Massingham & Massingham, 2014; Wu & Chen, 2014). Other findings in the literature identify KM as a critical success factor in establishing and maintaining competitive advantage, specifically in service firms and franchise based businesses (Paswan et al., 2014; Weaven et al., 2014). This confirmation provides franchise business owners and managers a practical example of specific KM strategies that have contributed to the creation or sustainment of a competitive advantage.

The use of training as a tool to develop, simplify, and implement KM strategies was essential to the success of the franchise in this case study. Facilitating knowledge

sharing and knowledge creation in this manner is key to securing a competitive edge in the market (Weaven et al., 2014). Building a people-focused organizational culture to foster a collaborative team environment eases the process of tacit knowledge exchange, which is particularly vital to the success of the franchise system (Okoroafor, 2014; Tsai et al., 2017). Paswan, D'Souza, and Rajamma (2014) posited the most successful franchisor creates KM processes that enable continuous knowledge flow internal to and external of the franchise system to outperform rivals. People-focused KM strategies and cultures of open communication produce the collaborative team environment necessary to refine and leverage knowledge (Tsai et al., 2017).

KM processes require collaboration, cohesive teams, creativity, and learning opportunities through knowledge exchange (Okoroafor, 2014; Weaven et al., 2014). Effective communication across the entire franchise network is essential for this type of knowledge exchange to occur enabling the discovery and leveraging of business opportunities for competitive advantage (Okoroafor, 2014; Grace et al., 2016). The findings of this study present franchise leaders a method of establishing effective communication using both traditional (face-to-face communications) and modern day techniques (social media software applications). It is advantageous to franchise leadership to incorporate diverse methods of communication to build confidence among team leaders and encourage information sharing (Grace et al., 2016; Kandukuri & Nasina, 2017). The results of this case study reflect many of the KM strategy implementation benefits discussed in the literature. The franchise leadership in this case study implemented KM strategies that include training, people-focused strategy, and

collaborative team environments to build a strong franchise network and facilitate knowledge sharing to establish higher market positioning to benefit the entire network (Akremi et al., 2015; Grace et al., 2016; Mishra et al., 2015). Franchise leaders could possibly employ the components of the KM strategies discussed in whole or in part to achieve competitive advantages in their respective businesses.

Implications for Social Change

The findings of this study may lead to a better understanding of how to formulate and implement effective KM strategies to increase competitive advantage in the fast food franchise industry. Specifically, franchise leaders who implement effective KM strategies provide greater learning opportunities for professional development and growth of employees, and develop cohesive teams and favorable work environments. These benefits may serve to increase employee loyalty and enhance work performance. The findings may also inform business leaders of best practices that lead to new methods of generating new knowledge, storing knowledge, and disseminating knowledge to improve continuity throughout the organizational structure. These possible benefits could ultimately impact social change by assisting in extending the life and dominance of U.S. based franchised businesses through improved competitive advantage strategies. The sustainment of local franchise businesses could also benefit local communities in the form of job opportunities and economic stimuli.

Recommendations for Action

The alignment of training with business strategy was the most prominent emergent theme in the research. The data indicated training can be used as a strategic

tool to formulate and implement KM strategies for competitive advantage. KM strategy materializes through training when the training is constantly monitored and evaluated for improvement. The resulting recommended improvements can then be incorporated into the KM strategy formulation process. Training also becomes critical in the KM strategy implementation process. The training program is a means of decentralizing the strategy from corporate, franchisee, or management levels to the franchise workforce, which is primarily where KM strategy takes effect and produces results. Based on these conclusions, the recommendation is for franchise owners and managers to focus on aligning training programs to KM/business strategy and to decentralize those strategies for implementation.

People-focused strategy was very dominant within the culture of the organization in this case study. The emphasis placed on people (employees, customers, and suppliers) gave this particular franchise the competitive edge. Making people the priority facilitated every KM process in effect and contributed substantially to the franchises' success. Specifically, the people-focused strategy began with choosing the best candidates to create the most conducive team chemistry. The franchise leaders also focused on creating a superb work environment to maintain the best candidates. The people-focused strategy was solidified through using open communication and collaborative team work to embed the company values and culture into the workforce to be translated into superior customer service for all patrons of the restaurant. Based on this analysis, the recommendation is for franchise owners and managers to develop people-focused strategies that include selective hiring, building an amiable and engaging work

environment, and motivating employees to deliver a superior customer service experience to patrons. Dissemination and implementation of these strategies should again be incorporated into the training program.

Recommendations for Further Research

The focus of this study was KM strategies for competitive advantage in the fast food franchise industry. The sample consisted of seven fast food chicken restaurant managers. Franchise owners did not wish to participate in the study. Further research should include franchise owners in a broader scope of industries to better understand how effective KM strategies are implemented to outperform competitors. This approach would address the limitations of the study, which were the small sample size and the narrow range of focus on the fast food franchise industry. The inclusion of participants in various types of service-based franchise industries within broader geographical areas may reveal a more diverse set of best practices for KM strategy formulation and employment for competitive advantage. A qualitative multiple case study design could better facilitate a broader focus on a varied set of franchise industries allowing researchers to explore possible similarities and differences in effective KM strategy formulation and implementation processes used to create or sustain competitive advantage across industries.

Reflections

The opportunity to take part in planning, preparing, and conducting an academic research project has positively impacted my professional, intellectual, and personal growth. The learning opportunities have greatly expanded my knowledge of subject

areas that have long been of interest to me to include KM, competitive advantage, and business/business strategy in general. Prior to conducting this research, I was not familiar enough with the subject matter to identify any specific personal biases in relation to the topics. I had general thoughts that KM could positively impact competitive advantage, but I used several measures to guard against the influence of that possible bias. To prevent bias and ensure integrity of the data, I used preapproved interview questions and an interview protocol to maintain consistency in the interview process and ensure dependability of the findings. I also conducted data triangulation and member checking to ensure there was no data misinterpretation or bias influencing the results.

After completing this study, my thinking has changed in that I value research more than I have previously. I apply research to everyday life in a manner that I did not before. I now have a better understanding of the importance of verifying information and substantiating claims. I feel more confident in my ability to use research to my advantage to accomplish specific goals and objectives, and to influence others to support a particular cause. I am even more of an analytical thinker than I was previously, and I believe my ability to evaluate, analyze, and synthesize large amounts of information has greatly improved.

Conclusion

The lack of successful KM practices significantly hinders competitive advantage in small businesses (Akhavan & Pezeshkan, 2014; Paswan, et al., 2014). KM researchers recognized the phenomenon as a critical success factor in establishing and maintaining competitive advantage, specifically in service firms and franchise based businesses

(Paswan, D'Souza, & Rajamma, 2014; Weaven, Grace, Dant, & Brown, 2014). The findings of this study reveal specific effective KM strategies for competitive advantage in the fast food franchise industry.

The three major emergent themes from the data were training, people focused-strategy, and a collaborative team environment as effective KM strategies for competitive advantage. The importance of using training programs as a mechanism to formulate and implement KM strategy is paramount for franchise owners and managers to create or sustain the competitive advantage. People-focused organizational cultures and open communication enable training programs focused on gathering, storing, sharing, and leveraging knowledge to gain superior market positioning. Collaborative team environments are borne out of organizational cultures centralized on developing people through training and open communication. The combination of these elements into a singular KM strategy produces a synergistic effect that leads to competitive advantage. The results of this study provides franchise owners and managers and business leaders in general a proven, effective example of effective KM strategies for competitive advantage.

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Chapter 7 of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, sixth edition*, includes numerous examples of reference list entries. For more information on references or APA style, consult the APA website or the Walden Writing Center website.

Appendix A: Interview Questions

I will ask participants the following interview questions:

1. How do you define knowledge management in the context of your day-to-day operations as a fast-food chicken restaurant franchise owner?
2. How do you define competitive advantage within the fast-food chicken restaurant franchise industry?
3. What processes do you use to formulate knowledge management strategies for competitive advantage?
4. How do you implement knowledge management strategies to increase the competitive advantage of your business?
5. What specific techniques do you use to identify knowledge sources?
6. Once you have identified knowledge (a new idea, concept, suggestion, best practice), what methods or processes do you use to compile and store that knowledge?
7. What additional insights or comments would you like to add to our discussion?

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

1. Introduce the interview: Thank participant for assistance, reiterate purpose of the study, remind participant of length of interview (30-45 mins), and provide inform participant that questions asked will be focused on gaining insight on their perspectives of effective KM strategies used for competitive advantage within their fast food franchises.
2. Present consent form (if not obtained prior), review with participant, obtain participant signature, and provide participant a copy of consent form.
3. Remind participant interview will be recorded. Confirm participant's consent to record and start recording devices (Laptop computer and smart phone with voice recording app).
4. Introduce participant using assigned pseudonym (Participant number_Date_Time in military format). Record participant pseudonym on note pad.
5. Begin interview with Question 1; follow with remaining questions probing as required.
6. Record paraphrasing, observations about the setting, participant demeanor, and any additional information revealed during probing.
7. End interview sequence and coordinate follow-on member checking with participant.
8. Thank participant for assistance and reinforce the importance of their contributions to the overall purpose of the study.
9. End protocol.