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# Strategies of Competitive Advantage for Small Businesses in the Service Industry

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# Walden University

College of Management and Technology

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

LaKeshia Gardner

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,  
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Walden University  
2019

Abstract

Strategies of Competitive Advantage for Small Businesses in the Service Industry

by

LaKeshia Gardner

MBA, University of Phoenix, 2014

BA, University of Arkansas at Little Rock, 2011

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Business Administration

Walden University

March 2019

## Abstract

Small business owners play a leading role in the United States economy by creating jobs. However, small businesses have a high failure rate, with approximately 50% going out of business during the first 5 years. The purpose of this multiple case study was to explore the competitive advantage strategies that owners of small businesses used to sustain their businesses longer than the first 5 years. A sample of 6 small service industry business owners in Houston, TX that have been in business for 5 years or more participated in semistructured interviews. Additional data were collected from company documents and the review of artifacts related to small business success and longevity. Entrepreneurship theory provided the conceptual framework for the study. Member checking enhanced the credibility of the interpretations of the participant responses. Data were analyzed using Yin's 5 stages of coding: compiling, disassembling, reassembling, interpreting, and concluding the data. From the data analysis, 3 themes were revealed: financial capital, marketing and competitive advantages, and great customer service. Findings of this study might help owners of small businesses to ensure business growth, increase revenues, and stimulate job creation.

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## Dedication

I dedicate this research to my parents, Claudette Barbee (who encourages me and plants seeds of positivity and perseverance) and Jerome Barbee (who taught me to fight to the finish). I also owe a debt of gratitude to my husband, Byron Gardner, for his support, prayers, and patience. To my guardian angel, Lana Dunn, for being a light to so many while fighting her fight with cancer. My hope is that this achievement will be a source of inspiration for my generation and those who follow. With prayer, discipline, and hard work, you will succeed.

## Acknowledgments

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## Section 1: Foundation of the Study

Small businesses are essential to the communities they service. Small businesses create new jobs in the community and contribute to economic growth (Solomon, Bryant, May, & Perry, 2013). Competition in the service industry is high, and maintaining a competitive advantage increases opportunities for sustainability (Millan, Congregado, Roman, Van Praag, & van Stel, 2014). Small business owners in the service industry must learn to set themselves apart to sustain their businesses. Findings from this study may be used to improve the sustainability of, and provide competitive advantages for service industry small businesses in Houston, Texas.

### **Background of the Problem**

The United States economy suffered many crises in the early 21st century. A primary source of the recovered economy was the small business sector (Small Business Administration [SBA], 2016). The success of small businesses is essential to the economy, but the number of viable small businesses is declining (SBA, 2016). Owners of small businesses are accountable for 60-80% of all U.S. jobs (SBA, 2016). In the United States between 2003 and 2012, the U.S. Census Bureau (2015) estimated small businesses created 56.1 million jobs. Kritikos (2014) found that entrepreneurship positively influences economic growth by introducing innovative technologies, products, and services as well as raising the productivity of firms and economies. According to Akaeze and Akaeze (2016), small business owners create 2 out of every 3 new jobs and produce 2.5 times more innovations per employee than large business firms produce. Strategic factors that successful small business owners used to stay in business beyond 5

years could be helpful for new and experienced small business owners. Some small business owners lack the basic management skills that are associated with successful organizations (Lofstrom, Bates, & Parker, 2014). Some of the factors that contribute to successful small businesses are strong management skills, education, and background (Millan, Congregado, Roman, Van Praag, & van Stel, 2014).

### **Problem Statement**

In the United States, more than half of small businesses fail in the first 5 years of operation (SBA, 2014). Small businesses create new jobs within the community and contributed to economic growth by providing 63.3% of net new jobs from 1992 to 2013 (SBA, 2016). The general business problem was that small business owners have insufficient training or preparation to sustain a profitable business. The specific business problem was that some small business owners lack strategies to maintain a competitive advantage that sustains their business beyond 5 years.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the strategies small business owners use to maintain a competitive advantage that sustains their business beyond 5 years. The targeted population consisted of small business owners in Greater Houston, Texas who had successfully sustained their business beyond 5 years. The implications for positive business change included the potential for growth and long-term sustainability for the businesses creating jobs for the community.

### **Nature of the Study**

The three research methods are qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods (Yin, 2017). The nature of this study was a qualitative. Qualitative research is an interpretive and naturalistic approach in which researchers examine the observations and interpretations of people's perceptions of different events (Neuman, 2011). According to Birchall (2014), exploration of individual experiences, meaning, and interpretations is possible through the effective use of qualitative inquiry. A qualitative method was appropriate because I relied on participants to share their experiences. Quantitative researchers rely on the collection of quantitative data and follow the paradigm characteristics of positivist research (Harrison & Reilly, 2011). Using the quantitative method, the researcher can perform data analysis to examine relationships and differences among variables through testing a hypothesis (Bettany-Saltikov & Wittaker, 2014). The quantitative method was not appropriate for this study because I did not test hypotheses. The mixed-methods approach was not suitable for this study due to the lack of flexibility for interpretation of results (see Harrison & Reilly, 2011). The qualitative method was appropriate for this study to explore the strategies some business owners in the service industry use to maintain a competitive advantage that sustains their business beyond 5 years.

Yin (2017) highlighted the principle designs for qualitative method as case study, phenomenology, ethnography, and narrative research. Case study researchers collect multiple types of data over a specified period on one or more participants (Yin, 2017). Case study research is an investigation and analysis of a single or collective case intended

to capture the complexity of the object of study (Hyett, Kenny, & Dickson-Swift, 2014). Phenomenological researchers seek to explore individuals' lived experiences and their shared essence based on shared experiences of a phenomenon (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The phenomenological approach was not appropriate because I did not examine the lived experiences of small business owners to gain an understanding of the problem. Ethnographic researchers study human groups and seek to explore how groups, organizations, or communities. Narrative researchers explore the experiences of individuals to formulate a narrative story (Huber, Caine, Huber, & Steeves, 2013). A narrative approach is suitable for exploring the life stories of small business owners (Marshall & Rossman, 2016); however, I was interested in decision-making strategies leading to long-term success. I selected the qualitative multiple case study method as the most appropriate research design for this study because the case study design required an analysis of data from a variety of sources. Case study was the most suitable design for this study because a case study has a level of flexibility not readily offered by other qualitative approaches. I used a multiple case study design composed of observation, interview, and interpretation.

### **Research Question**

The central research question that guided this study was as follows: What strategies do small business owners use to maintain competitive advantage that sustains their business beyond 5 years?

### **Interview Questions**

1. How do you implement your strategies to sustain your business?

2. What were the key barriers to implementing your strategies for sustaining business beyond 5 years?
3. How did you address the key barriers to implementing your strategies for sustaining business beyond 5 years?
4. What are the challenges you encountered in developing your strategies?
5. What else, if anything, would you like to add to our conversation about the success factors and strategies related to your business' survival during the first 5 years?

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework for this study was entrepreneurship theory. A conceptual framework provides a guide or model to understand the context of the research (Cajaiba-Santana, 2014). Entrepreneurship includes multiple functions correlated to personal responsibility and competence, which related to psychological, sociological, anthropological, and economic theory (Bula, 2012). Entrepreneurship theory is useful for researchers to explore data for predicting and explaining a phenomenon (Kuechle, 2013). Entrepreneurship research is a novel academic endeavor with roots traceable to the Irish-born banker, Cantillon, an entrenched economist (Carlsson et al., 2013). The application of the knowledge helped create an understanding of the exploration of the phenomena and behaviors (Bula, 2012). Entrepreneurship implies the quality of leadership, initiative, and innovation in business (Bula, 2012).

Historians credit Cantillon (1755) for being the creator of entrepreneurship theory. Cantillon was the first to consider the critical role of entrepreneurship in the

economy (Aspromourgos, 2014). Cantillon began using the theory of entrepreneurship in 1775 to view a small business owner as an agent taking risk to equilibrate the markets and economy (Hlady-Rispal & Jouison- Laffitte, 2014; Sánchez, 2013). Cantillon's contribution to the field of entrepreneurship gave rise to the concept of entrepreneurship's financial importance and the entrepreneur's role in commercial growth (Carlsson et al., 2013). Cantillon used the law of supply and demand to drive traditional economics in which rare products are more expensive; supply and demand affects business decisions by influencing what small business owners purchase (Carlsson et al., 2013). Casson (2014) described the entrepreneur as educated and motivated to take advantage of opportunities when presented.

Entrepreneurship theory was suitable for this study to explore business sustainability, resource management, and strategies that were useful in aiding small business owners in staying in business after the first 5 years (see Ahlstrom & Ding, 2014). This theory was appropriate because researchers may provide insight into business, entrepreneur personal characteristics, resource management, strategic management decisions, and strategies vital for business sustainability (Ahlstrom & Ding, 2014). I used this framework to understand how new small business owners achieved success beyond 5 years. Entrepreneurs' skills, capabilities, and characteristics affect the success and survival of small businesses (Frid, 2015). I relied on entrepreneurship theory to guide my analysis and understand the small business owner's determination and commitment to succeed.

## **Operational Definitions**

*Business failure:* Business failure is an independent business that does not survive for at least 5 years (SBA, 2016).

*Business strategy:* Business strategy refers to the decisions made by a small business owner to guide the business on environment, structure, and processes that influence the business's survival (Bozkurt & Kalkan, 2014).

*Business survival:* Business survival refers to businesses that meet the definition of neither failed nor successful because the businesses continue to exist despite previously approaching failure (SBA, 2016).

*Competitive advantage:* Competitive advantage is the benefit an organization has over competitors in the form of a low-cost provider or differentiation (SBA, 2016).

*Small business:* A small business is an independent business with fewer than 500 employees (SBA, 2016).

*Small business owner:* Small business owners are individuals who establish and manage a business for the principal purpose of making profit and growth (SBA, 2016).

*Sustainable business:* Sustainable business is the art of managing a company in such a way as to ensure it stays around for future generations with social and environmental programs intact (Gauthier, 2017).

## **Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations**

### **Assumptions**

According to Marshall and Rossman (2016), assumptions are unconfirmed facts considered truthful and at least plausible, but not personally verified. The first assumption

was that a qualitative multiple case study was the appropriate design to answer my research question. My second assumption was that the data collection method of semistructured interviews would provide the necessary data to answer the research question. My third assumption was that the small business owners would provide me with honest answers to the interview questions.

### **Limitations**

O’Leary (2014) listed limitations as conditions or design characteristics that a researcher cannot reasonably dismiss that could affect the study. Primary limitations for this study were sample size of the participants and potential researcher bias. The participants for this study were small business owners in the service industry in Houston, Texas. The sample size of six small businesses potentially limited the findings because the sample may not have represented the entire small business population throughout Houston, Texas. With the narrow scope of the study, the research findings and conclusions may not have extended to the industry population at large (see Ng, Harrison, & Akroyd, 2013).

### **Delimitations**

As the researcher, I controlled the scope in this study. Delimitations are boundaries that a researcher sets for a study to limit the scope of the project (Childers, 2014). There were three primary delimitations for this study. The first delimitation was the population, which included small business owners who had operated their new businesses for more than 5 years. A second delimitation was the industry, which was the service industry. Yoo (2017) noted that industry specificity is a delimitation in a research

study. The third delimitation was the geographical location of Houston, Texas; this geographical area was large enough to provide me with a sufficient number of successful small business owners in the service industry operating more than 5 years willing to participate in this study.

### **Significance of the Study**

The SBA (2016) reported that small businesses account for 99.7% of U.S. employer firms and are the largest contributor to net new job creation. The results of this study may contribute to economic growth by helping small business owners struggling to maintain their service industry businesses. By exploring the results of this study, small business owners may implement competitive advantages in their business practice. The findings may provide business owners with information concerning strategies they can use to strengthen their position in the industry. Starting a business is the first step, but sustaining the firm beyond 5 years is another challenge. For this reason, knowledge of strategy and competitive advantages is essential to business development.

The experiences of participants may inform those who are preparing to create new businesses by providing new owners with additional insights. Small business growth and sustainability is important to the community as it produces jobs and contributes to the economy. The findings of this study may support social change by providing information to policymakers who are seeking to support small businesses and mitigate failure rates. Improving success rates for small businesses could expand job creation and mitigate unemployment. Small businesses may give back to the community by creating jobs and providing services to spur economic growth and development.

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

The researcher uses the literature review, a critical component of a research study, to describe and support relevant topic literature (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The process of selecting literature is representative of current knowledge regarding the chosen phenomenon (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The purpose of this study was to identify strategies that successful small business owners used to sustain business in competitive environments beyond 5 years. Within this literature review, I explored strategies related to the profitability of small retail businesses. The literature review has three main purposes: (a) to inform the audience of developments in the field, (b) to establish researcher credibility, and (c) to set the current study within the context of previous research (O'Leary, 2014). In this literature review, I compare, contrast, and summarize sources related to the research topic. An extensive analysis of current strategies for reducing high failure rates among these small business owners is included as well. To provide a clearer understanding of the phenomenon surrounding small business ownership, I used entrepreneurship theory as the framework for the study. The literature review includes an examination of competitive strategies and the application of strategies for small business sustenance. In addition, the literature review includes articles from journals that address business sustenance and competitive advantage.

The following types of sources were included in the literature review: peer-reviewed articles, books, professional trade journals, magazines, and scholarly databases. The literature review contained 235 sources including peer-reviewed journal articles, dissertations, websites, and books. Most sources (87%) had publication dates between

2013 and 2018. One hundred ninety-one sources (85%) were peer-reviewed articles. Most sources were from Walden University's online library through a search in the business and management databases. Other search engines included ProQuest and Google Scholar. The journal articles, dissertations, websites, and books selected were relevant to the research question. Various key words for conducting research on scholarly documents included *small business*, *small businesses in United States*, *business competition*, *performance*, *success*, *failure*, *entrepreneurship*, *business competitive environment*, and *qualitative analysis in the small business enterprise industry*. Other key search terms in this study included *qualitative research*, *competitive advantage*, *small business development*, and *case study* or a combination of key words.

The literature review also included of an overview of small businesses in the Houston, Texas area. According to Fusch and Ness (2015), the literature review might be the basis for developing interview questions for researchers to acquire knowledge by conducting credible interview sessions to achieve data saturation. The subsection addressing small business strategy included the knowledge learned about small business success, sustainability, failure, finance, human capital, competitive advantage, and entrepreneurship theory as a conceptual framework for the study. The literature review comprised major segments regarding the exploration of strategies small business owners used to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years. Small business owners might use strategies for some small business units to compete among smaller businesses (Eboreime & Adedoyin, 2013). The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the strategies small business owners in the service industry used to sustain their

businesses beyond 5 years. The approach I selected for this literature review included a section with background information about entrepreneurship theory and small business survival and demise.

### **Entrepreneurship Theory**

Entrepreneurs create changes in the economy by taking risks, leveraging opportunities, and making decisions for achievement and power (Cantillon, 1755). The entrepreneurship theory of Cantillon provided the conceptual framework for this study. Cantillon (2001) created the theory of entrepreneurship and produced the first analysis of commerce. Cantillon (2001) examined wealth, exchange, and international trade and was the first economist to define *entrepreneur* as an agent who buys products at uncertain prices, makes new combinations of products, and sells at a higher price, thereby taking a risk (Carlsson et al., 2013). Cantillon (2001) divided producers in the economy into hired people and entrepreneurs as an economic function within the market.

Cantillon (2001) asserted that an entrepreneur is an individual who takes on risks with an uncertain income, profit, and price level. Cantillon (1755) noted that shopkeepers and retailers buy and sell products at an unfixed price to make a profit, thereby taking a risk. The dimensions of entrepreneurial orientation, as suggested by Aliyu, Rogo, and Mahmood (2015), include risk and uncertainty, which play an essential role in enhancing small business profitability and sustainability. Cantillon (2001) described examples of the economic phenomenon including the concept of supply and demand. Cantillon (1755) realized that inconsistencies in supply and demand create an opportunity to make

purchases at a lower rate and to retail at a higher rate. Based on Cantillon's (date) original framework, the entrepreneur is a specialist in risk-taking.

Market location is also essential for the entrepreneur because there is an interrelation between the flow of money and the physical placement of the labor market (Brown & Thornton, 2013). Entrepreneurial choices affect the ability to earn and spend money, which is a circular flow (Cantillon, 2001). In a circular flow model, wherever customers spend money, regardless of the physical location, entrepreneurs realize a financial benefit (Cantillon as cited in Brown & Thornton, 2013). Cantillon (as cited in Nunes, 2016) set the stage for entrepreneurs as owners of small businesses within an economic framework. Entrepreneurial actions influence the economy by the infusion of jobs, products, goods, and services. Entrepreneurship theory provides a foundation for researchers to understand how entrepreneurs penetrate and develop markets for new goods, introduce a method of production, and monopolize a new source of raw materials (Dorin & Alexandru, 2014). Flores, Westhead, Wright, and Ucbasaran (2014) stated that small business owners use entrepreneurship theory to make judgments regarding an opportunity for creating wealth.

Scholars have provided viewpoints on entrepreneurship theory. In 1911, Schumpeter (as cited in Hagemann, 2015) described economic development as an evolutionary process. Schumpeter (1983) suggested that an entrepreneur should convert a new idea or invention into a successful innovation. Entrepreneurs must be able to fulfill different functions such as allocating resources, adapting personal strengths and weaknesses, and handling threats and opportunities in a changing environment

(Schumpeter, 1983). Schumpeter (as cited in Cantner & Dopfer, 2015) stated that entrepreneurship involves innovators carrying out new combinations and tearing down previous mixes, leading to the constant change becoming imminent. Schumpeter (1934) relied on innovation as a driver of growth in the global economy. Schumpeter (1934) further noted that the idea of development is a process driven by entrepreneurial innovation. Schumpeter (1983) opposed the entrepreneur being the employer and owner of capital and insisted that an entrepreneur was an innovator. Schumpeter (1983) argued that an entrepreneur relied on profitability, new ideas, and a new combination of existing goods and services including at least one of five approaches: (a) new product launch by adding to a known product, (b) new market, (c) first time new markets, (d) new supplies and markets, and (e) creating a new structure. Schumpeter (date) asserted that there are difficulties with entrepreneurship, and that only innovators can survive these differences. Entrepreneurs are central for new product creation and create without the guarantee of survival (Cantner & Dopfer, 2015). Casson (2003) analyzed Schumpeter's concepts and stated that the primary function of entrepreneurs is decision-making.

Entrepreneurs and small business owners seek economic growth and have a foundational role in the economy (Brown & Thornton, 2013). Ritthaisong, Johri, and Speece (2014) suggested creating wealth and taking a competitive advantage require managers to develop exclusive firm resources that competitors cannot duplicate. The entrepreneurial approach sets the groundwork for commercialization (Sahut & Peris-Ortiz, 2014). Entrepreneurship has affected economic development in the United States and globally (Andersson & Evers, 2015; Khosa & Kalitanyi, 2015). Entrepreneurship

theory provided me with a foundation to analyze the data and interpret the findings in my study. Entrepreneurship theory describes the small business owner as a risk taker who wants to optimize each opportunity so that success or overall firm financial performance can be sustainable beyond the 5 years. The next section of the Literature Review focuses on human and social capital aspects of entrepreneurs.

### **Alternative Theories for Entrepreneurship Theory**

Alternative theories for the entrepreneurship theory include (a) human capital theory, (b) resource-based theory (RBT), and (c) disadvantage theory.

**Human capital theory.** Researchers used human capital theory for a small business research framework as theorists embraced the concept that entrepreneurs were decision-makers in human capital (Cassar, 2014). Santarelli and Tran (2013) posited that there was a positive relationship between the success of start-up businesses and human capital, and business owners made decisions for hiring based on employees' human capital. Wang and Lysenko (2014) stated that human capital theory was vital for understanding labor force and underemployment, which might improve business sustainability as business owners use knowledge to support their business activities. Economists used human capital theory to examine different economic issues and determine individuals' rates of return investments at different levels of education (Fayolle & Gailly, 2015). Human capital theory is suitable for multidimensional, multidisciplinary, and conceptual studies but was inappropriate for the study of small business owners' strategies for competitive advantage related to business sustainability.

**Resource-based theory (RBT).** Individual business owners have various management styles and strategies to avoid barriers and acquire resources for success. Barney (2014) noted that with adequate resources small business owners could earn reasonable revenues. However, owners needed appropriate mechanisms to regulate and monitor their businesses (Day, 2014). Barney developed RBT using the works of scholars who had posited a resource-based view of business. Researchers used strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT analysis) to analyze the sustainable competitive advantage in businesses before the development of RBT (Barney, 2014).

The SWOT analysis model assumed all businesses have similar traits and small business owners could optimize internal strengths by responding to external opportunities (Barney, 2014). Business owners used internal forces to find ways to regulate external threats to balance the faults within their businesses (Kozlenkova, Samaha, & Palmatier, 2014). SWOT and RBT were similar in that the internal and external forces intertwined with internal and external resources, which were suitable tools to assess business success and sustainability (Tomczyk, Lee, & Winslow, 2013). The focus in RBT was on internal attributes of a small business, such as business skills, steady cash flow, and the ability to secure the required capital (O'Donnell, 2014). Lonial and Carter (2015) argued that small businesses could remain resourceful, successful, and profitable to sustain their businesses, and the success of small businesses depended on the owners' efforts to harmonize and sustain the steady flow of resources. Abdelgawad, Zahra, Svejenova, and Sapienza (2013) cautioned against the application of RBT due to uncertainty in assessing

internal resources of businesses. Small business owners with business skills might reallocate and regulate business resources to alter the competition (Barney, 2014).

**Disadvantage theory.** Light (1979) noted that disadvantage theory has relevance to researching business failure. Light suggested that variation in small business owners' abilities were race based, and cultural factors were responsible for creating the problems that individuals experience in business surroundings. Light's innovative work on the disadvantage theory of entrepreneurship received commendation and critiques from Rocha, Carneiro, and Varum (2015). Several researchers have suggested social forces create institutional obstacles prohibiting small business development (Bates & Robb, 2013; Chaumba & Nackerud, 2013; Lofstrom & Bates, 2013). Researchers used disadvantage theory to analyze the difficulties in the market and entrepreneurship involving strategies for business owners' success (Boyd, 2015). Disadvantage theory was not appropriate for the current study because it focuses on the failures of small businesses.

### **Human Capital**

In the business environment, it is difficult to explain why some companies survive while others close down. A possible explanation may be the business knowledge of the owners/managers of the companies. Morrisette and Oberman (2013) stated that the most important mission or goal of a leader is to keep the organization alive, and to accomplish this leaders need to adopt entrepreneurial practices and activities. Human capital represents the knowledge and skills acquired by entrepreneurs through formal and informal learning, including acquisition of knowledge and learned behaviors from trans-

generational ties (Jaskiewicz, Combs, & Rau, 2015). Human capital also includes an entrepreneur's educational achievement and business experience (Cassar, 2014; Millan et al., 2014). Human capital is an important factor to maintain a profitable small business. The factors of human capital significantly contributed to a business ventures success (Baptista, Karaoz, & Mendonca, 2014).

For the small business owners in this study, that task was starting and sustaining a business. All six participants used their educational knowledge, business background, and managerial experience to formulate business strategies that enabled their small businesses to survive for at least 5 years. Prajogo and Oke (2016) defined human capital as the level of creativity, knowledge, and idea development skills that an individual brings to an organization. Human capital is an asset for achieving competitive advantage through innovation (Prajogo & Oke, 2016). The innovative new products or services would be more difficult for competitors to copy because of company specific features that would give the firm a sustainable competitive advantage. Rauch and Rijdsdijk (2013) posited that general human capital, such as education level, positively relates to the success of growth strategies for small businesses because it was important for making progress during innovative projects.

The long-term success of small businesses was dependent on investment in human capital and training for sustainability (Albuquerque, Escrivão Filho, Nagano, & Junior, 2016). Many professional groups noted the importance of skills and relevant educations had recognized the value of educational programs. Leadership was a key component of organizational success, and there was a concomitant association with low

employee turnover (Berson, Da'as, & Waldman, 2015). Small businesses needed to look at the past and consider the practitioner propensity for new leadership initiatives. There was a need for appropriate leadership training for small businesses practitioners; training programs required flexibility, knowledge relevance, and an environment where practitioners could apply what they learned (Coenen & Kok, 2014). The entrepreneurship theory involved resource management, of which human capital with elements of education and experience was important for business success and sustainability. The next section of this literature review focused on small business success.

### **Small Business Success**

The success of small businesses is imperative for economic viability. Kegel (2016) noted that entrepreneurial motivation is the drive to start a business and make it successful. Small businesses and their owners sometimes referred to as entrepreneurs, have played a critical role in the U.S. economy. Researchers at the SBA (2016) explained that small business owners represent 99.7% of all U.S. firms, employ about half of the private sector, and provide approximately 43% of the total national payroll. Only about half of new small businesses in the United States survive beyond the 5-year benchmark (SBA, 2014). Small business owners need a combination of factors to succeed, including recognition of opportunity, risk-taking ability, leadership, and dedication to the company (Robinson & Stubberud, 2015). To be successful, small business owners need to possess education, talent, and continuing training (Alrhaimi, 2015).

Motivations for people to become small business owners include two types: intrinsic and extrinsic (Martínez-Román & Isidoro, 2013). An intrinsic motivation

implies passion or pleasure to do the activity, which comes from inside of a person. For example, individuals who love to cook might want to open a restaurant business (Martínez-Román & Isidoro, 2013). Extrinsic motivation might refer to the necessity to take action in some situations such as unemployment or dissatisfaction with previous jobs (Martínez-Román & Isidoro, 2013). Entrepreneurship thrives with a mixture of both. Learning more about personal characteristics can assist researchers with the understanding of behaviors of a successful small business owner (Martínez-Román & Isidoro, 2013). The characteristics of a small business owner are significant for the success of the business, which includes individual personality, personal traits, entrepreneur orientation, and demographic characteristics (Martínez-Román & Isidoro, 2013). Other important characteristics include self-confidence, autonomy, innovativeness, risk-taking, motivation, pro-activeness, and competitive aggressiveness (Martínez-Román & Isidoro, 2013). Martínez-Román and Isidoro (2013) stated that younger people have less experience than older people do; therefore, a more experienced executive could make reasoned decisions and address risk management more efficiently than a less experienced manager.

Small business owners are people from a sector who have a new idea or vision and who cannot give up until they present their idea throughout the given industry (Yang, 2016). Entrepreneurship provides a new way to solve old problems and presents a fresh perspective to counter old schools of thought. Researchers have demonstrated that entrepreneurship contributes to new opportunities, innovation, and first-mover advantage (Carsrud & Cucculelli, 2014; Zhang, Duysters, & Cloudt, 2014). To accomplish this, the

business owner must focus more on the strengths of the business and focus less time on the rest (Lan, Bo, & Baozhen, 2014). Fernandez, Malatesta, and Smith (2013) suggested that small business diversification was an important link to entrepreneurial development. Some factors that contribute to small business performance include business strategy, business characteristics, and owner-manager characteristics (Blackburn, Hart, & Wainwright, 2013).

The business owner's decisions about where and what to focus on form the business strategy of the company. The business strategy is how the company owners align the business with its environment to create and maintain a competitive advantage by maximizing its assets, resources, and competencies in a systemic way (Gumusluoglu & Acur, 2016). The decision of what and where to focus form the business strategy. Business characteristics include the number of employees, the company's financial position, and the age of the company (Blackburn et al., 2013; Uhlaner, van Stel, Duplat, & Zhou, 2013). Owner-manager characteristics include age, gender, education, and business style (Blackburn et al., 2013). Frid (2015) explained that based on entrepreneurship theory, a small business owner's personal characteristics, capabilities, and skills could affect both the sustainability and success of his or her business. Management knowledge and strategic ability are significant for the success of small business ownership (Frid, 2015).

Entrepreneurship education promotes personal development for small business owners, which helps them be successful and sustain their businesses (Lourenco, Jones, & Jayawarna, 2013). Small business owners should know their limitations and improve

their knowledge and skills via further education or training (Phillips, Moos, & Nieman, 2014). A small business owner must have talent, education, and continuous vocational training (Alrhaimi, 2015). Successful small business owners focus on potential business opportunities and learn from failure (Lin & Nabergoj, 2014). Furthermore, small business owners as entrepreneurs have the desire to achieve, which motivates them to turn their idea into action (Lin & Nabergoj, 2014). They seek resources as well as knowledge of critical success factors to help them succeed and sustain their companies (Lin & Nabergoj, 2014). Small business owners like the challenge of coming up with new solutions, having a vision, and implementing their dreams (Lin & Nabergoj, 2014).

For small business owners, the task is starting and successfully sustaining a business. Le and Raven (2015) noted that some small business owners come up with their own definition of success, as success is a subjective concept. Based on entrepreneurship theory, an entrepreneur's personal characteristics, skills, and capabilities can affect the success and sustainability of their business (Frid, 2015). Shin, Sung, Choi, and Kim (2015) defined *success* as a firm's overall financial performance. Revenue is possible if the business can make a profit by bringing in more money than required to operate the business. The longer a company remains in business, the higher the overall survival rate tends to be (SBA, 2014). The methods small business owners use to diagnose and address these problems can determine the business' long-term success (Horne & Ivanov, 2015). The next section focuses on small business owners' persistence in doing business that might lead to business sustainability.

### **Small Business Sustainability**

Sustainability is the capacity of a small business owner to predict the future needs while supporting business growth and continuity (Wilson & Wu, 2017). Sustainability refers to the concentration of business growth, support, and entrepreneur's pursuance to add new products and services to the current offerings to increase revenue and manage the four objectives of economy, humankind, community, and morals (Rajasekaran, 2013). Financing is the primary factor for small business success and sustainability. Business sustainability needs innovation and inventive process within the firm to achieve the venture's objectives for social welfare, which has an impact on businesses, society, and market environment (Inigo, Albareda, & Ritala, 2017). Sustainability as a process is a path of conducting business (Inigo et al., 2017). Business sustainability has a positive impact on the permanence of business operations.

Postma and Zwart (2015) stated that organizational leadership is a key factor in the success and survival of a small business. The ability of a leader to adapt to changing environments by adjusting the structural context and strategic goals of the company is critical to the success and survival of the business (Postma & Zwart, 2015). Postma and Zwart (2015) identified various factors for leadership strategic action that ultimately improved business performance. Koryak et al., (2015) determined that small business owners/managers have two key tasks: to identify opportunities and to allocate resources to take advantage of those opportunities. Lussier and Corman (2015) also found that business success came from small business owners examining and understanding key factors and then managing the specific situation at hand. Shinkle, Kriauciunas, and

Hundley (2013) found that a firm must be in alignment with its environment, or it would not be able to prosper.

Glaub, Frese, Fischer, and Hoppe (2014) studied personal initiative in small business managers or owners and the impact it had on small business success. The researchers found that small business owners/managers with personal initiative exhibited self-starting behavior, were proactive and future-oriented, and could overcome barriers (Glaub et al., 2014). In the process of maintaining a sustainable business, business leaders need to consider the gradual change and development of culture, workforce, and the surrounding environment (Ferro et al., 2017). The conception of seeing failure as a problem requires the need to search for new tools for environmental security and social prosperity (Ferro et al., 2017). The consideration of innovation to sustainable business should not discourage business leaders to promote and implement ethical work standards (Ferro et al., 2017). Business leaders need to continue and emphasize the features of power, anticipation, prudence, and trust to originate a sustainable business (Ferro et al., 2017). The leadership of a sustainable business needs to exercise transparency by sharing power, risk, and information with shareholders throughout the life of the business (Blaga, 2013).

A committed business leader practices sustainability through multiple steps (a) secure the safety of business and workers, (b) adopt innovative strategies for a competitive business, (c) fulfill the obligations of shareholders, (d) enhance the workplace and enthusiasm of workers, (e) produce quality products and services to customers, and (f) create employee retention and attraction program (Blaga, 2013).

Sustainability is the capability to preserve the survival scale of the business to continue generating profit (Lourenco et al., 2013). Small business owners strive for sustainability by ensuring continuous growth and steady revenue, which require certain actions and strategies. Leadership skills and knowledge are strategic to the success of small businesses (Frid, 2015). An entrepreneur's strengths, expertise, and capacity can influence the business prosperity and sustainability (Frid, 2015). The next section of this literature review focused on the failures of small businesses.

### **Small Business Failure**

Small business failure rates have been consistent from the time government administrators first tracked it to the present (SBA, 2016). There was no organization tracking small business failures before the 1950s. The U.S. Congress founded the SBA on July 30, 1953 (SBA, n.d.). In 1981 there was a suggestion that research on business failure in the small business sector would prove useful (Gaskill, Van Auken, & Manning, 1993). Small business owners have a difficult time keeping their businesses from failing because few of them have access to enough financial and non-financial resources (Falkner & Hiebl, 2015). Undercapitalization is another reason for business failure; small business owners should have financial and accounting knowledge to avoid this obstacle (Lafuente, Lafuente, Guzman-Perra, & Lafuente, 2013).

New businesses failed at a significantly higher rate than existing businesses, and small businesses have failed at a significantly higher rate compared to large corporations (Goetsch & Davis, 2014). Small businesses failure is the subject of considerable debate; however, there is no single accepted theory (Blower & Mahajan, 2013). The lack of

uniformity or consensus on a definition of failure contributed to the confusion about the causes (Besser, 2016). First time entrepreneurs are as likely to fail in a new business venture as a seasoned one (Cassar, 2014). Small business failure is an opportunity to plan; poor strategic planning results in a high failure rate of new businesses (Alstete, 2014). Alstete (2014) suggested that a lack of proper business planning often results in small business failure. Additionally, business survival increases with measured operational growth as suggested by (Fan, Tan, & Geng, 2014).

Proper planning is tool businesses could rely on for continuity. Business failure can have a negative consequence for entrepreneurs. Research related to the exploration of firm failure is recent in the study of entrepreneurship (Jenkins, Wiklund, & Brundin, 2014). Entrepreneurs faced loss, grief, emotional distress, and financial strain due to business failure as noted by Jenkins et al. (2014). Entrepreneurial awareness of stressors related to both individual and firm failure is key for personal wellness (Jenkins et al., 2014). Small Business failure is an opportunity for entrepreneurial growth. Successful entrepreneurs use their failed business attempts as learning tools for future opportunities (Toft-Kehler, Wennberg, & Kim, 2014). According to Toft-Kehler et al. (2014), failure occurs because of barriers to success, such as limited access to capital and ineffective management. The greatest lesson gained from failure was learning what not to do during the next attempt (Toft-Kehler et al., 2014).

Leadership is a factor in the success or failure of a business (Mom, Fourné, & Jansen 2015). Leadership is also the variable that can cause success and failure of sustainable actions. Effective leadership is absent in many businesses, and owners need

clarity and to have specific goals. According to Mom et al. (2015), the fundamental questions of inquiry were; who, how, and what needed particular focus from managers and leaders related to long-term business missions. Entrepreneurs are leaders in organizations. Leadership style is key for a successful entrepreneurial oriented firm (Rauf, 2014). A lack of leadership skills may result in small businesses failing. A leader is a person who leads a group to achieve organizational success (Westcott, 2014). Postma and Zwart (2015) defined a leader as a person who adjusts the business's strategic goals to adapt to changing environments. The leader's role is to communicate a vision to the followers and set expectations (Shatzer, Caldarella, Hallam, & Brown, 2014). In business, an environment of dynamism and continuous change forces leaders to generate new ideas, take risks, and exploit opportunities (Mitchelmore, Rowley, & Shiu, 2014). Leadership education encourages good communication and enhances the skills of business leaders. Bayram and Dinc (2015) added that well-developed and adaptable leadership skills are vital to achieving business success and avoiding failure.

Small business leaders often lacked the skill set to implement measures to avert failure. Khelil (2015) claimed that previous scholars had devoted less time researching the phenomenon of entrepreneurial failure. Despite the lack of resources available, some entrepreneurs refused to give up when faced with underperformance, and others persevere in a substandard environment (Khelil, 2015). Disappointment is an emotional cost for small business failure (Jenkins et al., 2014). Khelil suggested that the causes of entrepreneurial failure are situational and diverse with each business venture.

There is no one accepted theory that explains why some small businesses survive and others do not. Mason (2014) explained that the reasons for some small business failure is a years' long discussion. The SBA (2014) stated that small businesses fail due to lack of management skills and government support, insufficient funds, aggressive growth, competition, poor marketing strategies, and changing market place. There are many potential reasons why a small business could fail. Additional reasons for small business failure are poor financial performances, limited access to funds, and poor financial projections (Karadag, 2015). Creating and sustaining a new business venture can be challenging for a small business owner. They lack key resources, have a limited market presence, and depend on a niche customer base (Bengtsson & Johansson, 2014). Never earning a profit and not having the money to pursue business opportunities presented to the small business owners are some of the challenges facing start-ups (Schumann, Scott, Kalinowski, Kaliski, & Pragman, 2014). Most small businesses fail due to a lack of proper planning (Quan, 2015). Once a business failure occurred, there is a likelihood of subsequent business endeavor (Yamakawa, Peng, & Deeds, 2013). Yamakawa et al. (2013) explored ways that entrepreneurs not only rebound from failure, but also, they learn from failure. Yamakawa et al. noted that failure motivates entrepreneurs to seek new venture creation. Further, Yamakawa et al. found that entrepreneurs renew themselves after a business failure. When business strategy presented, strategy developed as steps that provide direction in conducting business and maintain external relations (Aeron & Jain, 2015). Strategies enable small businesses to gain a positive position in the marketplace.

## **Small Business Strategy**

Strategic planning begins when a business opportunity is developed. Strategy should be a combination of creativity, analysis, planning, and learning (Abdalkrim, 2013). The goal is to enhance the small business owners' performance regarding both the financial outcome and survival. Many entrepreneurs fail to understand the significance of proper strategic planning for business success due to lack of knowledge and skills (Alstete, 2014). Dibrell, Craig, and Neubaum (2014) advocated that formal strategic planning increases business performance. Basuony (2014) advised small businesses that they need to have alignment between the strategy and organizational goals to drive results.

Ibrahim (2015) emphasized the importance of a small business owner selecting the appropriate business strategy. The business strategy sets a pattern of objectives, purposes, and goals for the business (Ibrahim, 2015). Owners and managers design different approaches to try to achieve their goals. Ibrahim studied 220 small firms to try to identify the strategy types that were most frequently associated with profitable small businesses. The researcher identified four strategy types that pursued by profitable small firms: niche, defender, prospector, and differentiation (Ibrahim, 2015).

Strategies reduce the failure rate of small businesses and promote entrepreneurial skills among leaders (Kyndt & Baert, 2015). Entrepreneurial skills include creativity, adaptability, technological skills, innovativeness, and management ability (Mitchelmore, Rowley, & Shiu, 2014). Before launching a venture, small business owners as entrepreneurs should have marketing awareness of the 4Ps. The four Ps of marketing

strategies are product, placement, promotion, and pricing. La and Yi (2015) added that business leaders that use four Ps of marketing strategies in a business process could achieve product visibility, customer satisfaction, and sales goal.

According to (Osiri, 2013), products or services are determined by small business owners understanding the needs of their customers. With a pricing strategy, owner-executives decide on a competitive price for the market, which would then correlate with profit margins (Osiri, 2013). Getting the right price involves examining customer's perceptions, rival products, the cost of manufacturing, as well as cost of management (Osiri, 2013). Reaching potential customers and turning them into clients requires a suitable place or channel of distribution such as wholesalers, retailers, supermarket chains, shopping centers, showrooms, or through online websites (Osiri, 2013).

Promotion is the way to communicate with customers, provide them information, and assist them in making a decision to purchase the product or service (Osiri, 2013).

Standing alone small business owners are unable to take advantage of opportunities, which require large production quantities, or economies of scale. The only way small business owners can address the issues related to their size is through networking (Antonelli, Bruno, Taurino, & Villa, 2015). Small business owners are good candidates for strategic alliances because their businesses are small, there is poor resource availability, and they have limited negotiating power (Garcia-Perez, Yanes-Estevez, & Oreja-Rodriguez, 2014). Paradkar, Knight, and Hansen (2015) found that alliances with partners were an important asset for the startups in their study. A strategic alliance is a cooperative arrangement between small business owners to work together to

improve their competitive positions and performances (Zhao, 2014). This is horizontal networking. The small business owners are at a similar level in the value chain and collectively pool their resources to compete for large-scale orders (Villa & Bruno, 2013). Entrepreneurial and innovative small business owners use strategic alliances to compete effectively in today's markets by improving their internal operations, mitigating risk, and entering new market segments (Zhao, 2014). When forming strategic alliances, small business owners must still take a competitive approach to leverage their limited resources for maximum improvement in business performance (Dunne, Aaron, McDowell, Urban, & Geho 2016). Strategic management is simply the planning strategies for small businesses owners to achieve their business goals, thus strategic management is significant to small business sustainability. The next section of this literature review focused on small business finance.

### **Small Business Finance**

Finance is key for small business operation. Small business owners, despite limited financial resources, must find new and creative ways to pay for the startup and operation tasks associated with every business (Turner & Endres, 2017). Many small business owners use bootstrapping as an internal source of funding the startup and growing of their business when traditional sources of funds are not available.

Bootstrapping is starting and growing a business without external funding or resources from outside (Grichnik, Brinckmann, Singh, & Manigart, 2014). Bootstrapping may consist of personal income, savings, home equity, credit cards, stock/bonds, 401 (K), retirement annuities, potential grants, and personal labor or sweat equity (Winborg,

2015). Bootstrapping includes using personal labor, part of the rented apartment, and using the Internet for advertising and sales (Fatoki, 2014). Bootstrapping becomes less expensive and most suitable alternative form of funding, especially for its benefits as independent ownership, flexibility, and freedom from external debts and interests (Winborg, 2015). When there are additional funding needs, the small business may approach external funding. Small business owners look for external sources of capital when their bootstrapping resources are insufficient and lead to constraints on working capital. External funding comes in a variety of forms such as loans from friends and relatives, bank financing, investors, and equity.

Raising funds by small business owners is an obstacle. Various reasons may underline the need for capital of new ventures. These may include the purchase of a new building, procurement of machinery, vehicles, and product/stock. The entrepreneurial financial market comprises of both traditional and nontraditional sources. Traditional sources include personal, family and friends, and banks. The non-traditional funding sources include venture capitalists (VCs), business angels (BAs), crowdfunding, peer-to-peer funding, franchising, leasing, grants from governments, and international development agencies (Ozmel, Robinson, & Stuart, 2013). To start the business, the entrepreneur often self-finances the initial phase. Small businesses should identify the funding options for their businesses. The funding option chosen by the owner should align with the business strategy. Blackburn et al. (2013) noted that small businesses' identities were favorable when they were distinctive. Small businesses needed to distinguish themselves from others in the marketplace when seeking capital.

Small business owners generally lacked appropriate financing according to Xiang and Worthington (2015). For their research, Xiang and Worthington used a survey of 2,732 SMEs to explore the firm-level determinants of finance-seeking behaviors and outcomes for SMEs. The researchers discovered that the influential factors for small business owners seeking finance were profitability and growth (Xiang & Worthington, 2015). For the small business owner to grow the business there is often a need to borrow money from an outside source. McDowell et al. (2016) posited that new small business owners had little access to financial resources. The availability of funds for new ventures declined sharply due to the economic decline in 2008 (Byrd, Ross & Glackin, 2013). Lechner and Gudmundsson (2014) recommended understanding the importance of identifying investors who could provide long-term funds. Many researchers working on financing focus on large business with access to equity markets. Chhibber (2013) discovered the primary financing sources for small businesses included profits and traditional bank loans. Comeig, Del Brio, and Fernandez-Blanco (2014) researched the financing of small business projects. Following the financial crisis of 2008-2010, there had been a decline in both debt and equity financing to small businesses, which resulted in a negative impact on firm performance (Fraser, Bhaumik, & Wright, 2015). One possible reason for a decline in debt funding to small businesses may have been the high cost of screening smaller and younger businesses (Fraser et al., 2015). The small business owners either needed to have a record of accomplishment or were willing to demonstrate their commitment to the business by providing collateral (Fraser et al., 2015). Small

business owners seeking equity financing also needed to prove their records of accomplishment (Fraser et al., 2015).

A successful small business owner must have a business plan that indicates the startup funds that needed, investment capital required, working capital to obtain, sales forecasts, and funding requirements (Feenstra, 2014). A business plan is a strategic instrument that an entrepreneur creates and formalizes in the developmental of a startup venture (Frese & Gielnik, 2014). The entrepreneur uses the business plan to demonstrate the structure, viability, implementation, and execution process of a new business venture (Finch, 2013). Business plans serve as investment decision-making tools for lenders, business angels, and venture capitalists (Lerner & Malmendier, 2013). A good business plan represents the businessperson's business ideas and gives a snapshot of the current situation of the company and its projected growth and expansion (Sutton, 2013). A good business plan makes the owner knowledgeable on the elements that can affect continued success and growth (Lerner & Malmendier, 2013). A business plan is necessary to raise funds to start or grow a business and as an instrument to regulate business practice (SBA, 2014). A business plan serves as the communication tool of the company to potential investors, creditors, and banks just like a resume of a job applicant (SBA, 2014). A business plan is not mandatory for all small businesses, but it is a priceless tool to have.

Karadag (2015) pointed out that it is important for small business owners to have financial management skills and financial planning. A business plan helps business owners to calculate their financial targets such as sales made per employee, a strong profit margin, and a good return on investment (Karadag, 2015). In the case of a new

business that has no previous data, the small business owner entrepreneur can use published financial statements of existing companies within the same industry (Karadag, 2015). The three important financial statements that a firm should have are the cash flow statement, the income statement, and the balance sheet (Karadag, 2015). The cash flow statement shows the expected cash inflow and outflow of the company within a given timeframe (Karadag, 2015). The income statement summarizes company revenue and expenses (Karadag, 2015). The balance sheet demonstrates company assets and liabilities (Karadag, 2015). Long-term financial planning is an annual 3-year and 5-year projection (Karadag, 2015). Small business owners should have short-term financial planning on a monthly basis for the first year and a quarterly basis for the second year (Karadag, 2015). The next section of this literature review focused on the need for competitive advantage in small business.

### **Competitive Advantage**

Strategy creation and the entrepreneurial orientation measure of competitiveness are indicators of optimal performance for small businesses (Lechner & Gudmundsson, 2014). According to Zacca, Dayan, and Ahrens (2015), small businesses failed due to the lack of commodity marketing and their inability to adapt to the changes that were essential to maintaining a competitive advantage. Bulley, Baku, and Alan (2014) recommended using competitive intelligence in decision-making and strategic planning. Competitive intelligence includes acquiring and analyzing information related to products, customers, and competitors to establish core competencies (Bulley et al., 2014). Block, Kohn, Miller, and Ullrich (2015) suggested using differentiation and cost

leadership strategies for core competitive advantages. Differentiation strategies include acquiring capabilities to create a unique market, products, and services. Entrepreneurship involves creating, growing, transforming businesses, and investigating the effectiveness of different attributes and actions to gain competitive advantage to achieve the business goals (Banker, Mashruwala & Tripathy, 2014). Small business owners should be aware of how to create value for their clients and how to differentiate their products and services (Wilson, 2015).

Small business owners must engage in competitive strategy analysis to explore how their businesses operate to increase the business's performance (Lechner & Gudmundsson, 2014). Competitive strategy is important because it gives direction to entrepreneurial behavior (Lechner & Gudmundsson, 2014). Bigliardi (2013) stated that innovation has become a prime source through which companies can gain a competitive advantage in the marketplace. The author confirmed through empirical findings that an increase in the innovation level of a company results in an increase in the company's financial performance (Bigliardi, 2013). Bigliardi showed through her research that innovations developed to better address customer needs resulted in the greatest increase on financial performance. The return on investment in innovations meant higher sales and firm growth (Bigliardi, 2013). She also showed that these innovations enabled small businesses to differentiate themselves from their competitors (Bigliardi, 2013). Lechner and Gudmundsson (2014) stated that it is important for a business owner to decide on one type of competitive strategy to avoid being stuck in the middle (Lechner & Gudmundsson, 2014). The small business owner must make the decision based on the

business' resources and the strategic goals of the business (Lechner & Gudmundsson, 2014). The selection of a competitive strategy that can give a business a sustainable competitive advantage enables the business to maintain superior financial performance well into its future (Banker et al., 2014). Strategic business owners have focused on strategies designed around value-based innovation to gain a sustainable competitive advantage (Gehani, 2013).

### **Transition**

Section 1 was an introduction to the study, problem statement, and the lack of knowledge on competitive advantages and how small business owners use the knowledge as part of their business model. Section 1 contains the foundation of this research study including the Problem Statement, Purpose Statement, Nature of the Study, Research Question, Conceptual Framework, Significance of the Study, and Literature Review sections. Section 1 concludes with a literature review of previous studies covering the topic of competitive advantage business strategies for small business survival beyond 5 years.

Section 2 includes details of the project, the purpose, the role of the researcher, the participants, the research method and design, the population and sampling, and a discussion about ethical research. The contents of Section 2 cover data collection instruments and data organization. Section 2 concludes with a description of the reliability and validity elements in the research as well as a summary of key points in the study.

Section 3 includes a review of the purpose statement and research question.

Section 3 includes the results of the study, a detailed commentary of the empirical evidence, and the conceptual framework related to the research question. In Section 3, are the findings and recommendations from the review and analysis of the interviews.

Section 3 includes the discussion regarding implications for social change, research recommendations, and research reflections.

## Section 2: The Project

In Section 2, I provide an explanation of the research purpose and research process. The section contains information about the research methodology and the explanation for selection of a qualitative, multiple case study. The information in Section 2 expands on the study details through explanation of the researcher's role and participant selection. A discussion of the population, sample, and participants is presented. This section also includes an explanation of the research purpose, methodology, and process. Section 2 concludes with a discussion of the reliability and validity of the data.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the strategies small business owners in the service industry used to maintain a competitive advantage that sustained their business beyond 5 years. The population sample consisted of six small business owners in Greater Houston, Texas who had successfully sustained their business beyond 5 years. The implications for positive business change include the potential for growth and long-term sustainability for the businesses creating jobs for the community.

### **Role of the Researcher**

I was the data collection instrument and central figure for this qualitative study. Qualitative inquiry requires both the emotional maturity and strong interpersonal skills of the researcher to listen to and comprehend the expressed experiences of participants who describe a phenomenon of interest (Collins & Copper, 2014). I was the primary data collection instrument. The relationship I had with this topic was that I have owned and

operated small businesses since 2013. My first business has been successful, but others have failed. I did not have any relationship with the participants in the study other than the fact that they also operate small businesses in the service industry. My research responsibilities began with a literature review to develop the scholarly corpus for this doctoral study; additionally, I was the primary data collector, organizer, and interpreter for this study. My role also included presenting the research findings and recommending areas for further research related to small business success in the service industry sector.

Ethics involves the principles of right and wrong. In all phases of a study, the researcher should adhere to the standards and codes of conduct set for quality research (Robson & McCartan, 2016). The Belmont Report included guidelines for involving vulnerable research participants including minority populations (Rogers & Lange, 2013). Included in the Belmont Report are protections against the misuse in research of individuals or groups without consent or any likelihood of benefit (Rogers & Lange, 2013).

I conducted one-on-one interviews. Wolgemuth et al. (2014) conducted studies on the impact of interviews on participants and found that participants described their interviews as emotionally intense, distressful, and sometimes painful. There are three principles outlined in the Belmont Report: beneficence, justice, and respect for persons (Rogers & Lange, 2013). Beneficence requires researchers to take measures to identify and reduce potential risks and to inform all subjects about those potential risks. Justice requires that researchers describe the risks and benefits equally and to disseminate any research findings, both good and bad. Respect for persons requires all researchers to

obtain informed consent from the participants before conducting research. The Belmont principles protect vulnerable populations such as racial and ethnic minorities, women, and children (Quinn, Kass, & Thomas, 2013). I reviewed the three ethical principles in the Belmont Report and complied with the principles throughout my study. Having a specific set of rules to comply with aids ethical decision-making because there are fewer opportunities to make moral rationalizations (Mulder, Jordan, & Rink, 2015). Quinn et al. (2013) found that for researchers to work ethically and effectively in communities in which they differ by race, ethnicity, social class, and culture, training is required. I was and presently still am a small business owner in the service industry. I did not need formal training to interact with the participants in my study.

Working through the data collection process using prepared interview protocols assist in mitigating the influence related to personal biases (Malone, Nicholl, & Tracey, 2014). Biases might create an imbalance of power in an interview based on social, economic, or ethnic characteristics resulting in the interviewer controlling the questions and participant's responses (Anyan, 2013). Eliminating biases to the extent possible ensures validity when interpreting participant responses. Active listening through summarizing responses and asking clarifying follow-up questions provide another bias mitigation strategy (Drabble, Trocki, Salcedo, Walker, & Korcha, 2015). Personal knowledge assisted me in developing rapport with participants to explore comprehensive competitive advantage and sustainability strategies for small business owners.

Biases might create an imbalance of power in an interview based on social, economic, or ethnic characteristics resulting in the interviewer controlling the questions

and participant's responses (Anyan, 2013). However, by analyzing the data and comparing participant responses to articles related on the topic, researchers may mitigate personal bias. An additional measure to guard against unintended bias includes recognizing personal biases through heightened mindfulness to minimize their influence during the interview, interpretation, and analysis processes (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). In the current study, data collection involved the use of semistructured, in-person, and over-the-phone interviews with small business owners in Greater Houston, Texas. Mitigating real or perceived power imbalances included me asking participants to use my first name as a way to emphasize the informal interview tone. A researcher has an obligation to report the study finding in an unbiased way to improve veracity and validity (Amerson, 2011). To mitigate bias and avoid viewing data through a personal lens, I made sure I understood how and why different biases existed. I practiced epoché during the interviews. Suspending judgment helped me mitigate bias and preconceived notions that arose during the interviews. It was important for me to control my reactions to the participants' responses to mitigate personal bias. To remain objective, I did not interview any owners I knew personally or professionally. I referred to the article as a constant reminder of what I needed to avoid as I wrote up my research.

### **Participants**

In qualitative research, researchers develop an action plan for the study, including a strategy for selecting participants (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Many researchers using the qualitative method rely on interviews with individuals with predefined characteristics (Patton, 2015). The eligibility criteria for the selection of the participants for the current

study was small business owners in the service industry who had operated their businesses continuously for at least 5 years and were successful at creating and/or applying strategies related to the specific business problem.

The geographic location for the small businesses was the Houston, Texas area. The purposive sample size of six small business owners fulfilled the data collection requirements and enabled the extraction of meaningful data for this qualitative case study. The rationale for the selection criteria was that over half of new small businesses would not be in operation after 5 years (SBA, 2016). Bewley and Schneider (2013) suggested professional responsibility, executive accountability, and the participants' level of financial investment amplify their insight related to business processes and competitive strategy. The small business owners who were still operating after 5 years might have had strategies that enabled their business to survive. Documenting the mode of operation of successful business owners may reveal the competitive strategies that affected the performance of their small businesses. Although the participants' job titles varied, each person had operational decision-making responsibilities within his or her small business.

Limiting the geographical location of participants to the Houston, Texas area enabled me to recruit an adequate sample size. I sent an open invitation in the form of an e-mail to the members of my business network in the Houston, Texas area. I initiated contact with those who showed an interest in participating in my study. Creating a foundation of genuine trust is important so that participants can feel comfortable about sharing their answers (Kornbluh, 2015). Participants are only able to provide data from

their personal viewpoint (Reybold, Lammert, & Stribling, 2012). I used honesty to establish a working relationship with the participants.

The interview questions were designed to collect demographic information to ensure participants were qualified to participate in the study and to gain insight about their opinions related to competitive advantage and small business sustainability and success. The interview process is an opportunity to gain in-depth information regarding the participants' professional experiences and their views pertaining to competitive advantages (Owen, 2014). Establishing interview protocols and procedures is important to mitigate bias, ensure reliability, and promote repeatability for future research (Jefferies, Brewer, & Gajendran, 2014). Consent forms contained the relevant information that allowed the participants to confirm the authenticity of this study in compliance with published standards of ethical research (Check, Wolf, Dame, & Beskow, 2014). I did not want my educational goals to produce undesirable consequences for any of the participants in my study.

### **Research Method and Design**

I selected a qualitative approach with a multiple case study design for this study. Business scholars and practitioners recommend the case study design as an effective research strategy to gain in-depth knowledge of a phenomenon and understand the issues within the context of real-life experiences (Crowe et al., 2011). I made this selection based on my knowledge of research methods and designs. The research question and my desire to explore the business strategies and competitive advantages that small business owners need to sustain their business beyond 5 years determined the methodology.

## **Research Method**

In academic research, there are three types of research methods: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods (Ma, 2015). If the purpose of my research had been to examine the relationship between variables, I would have selected the quantitative method. Quantitative researchers use closed-ended questions and numerical data to test hypotheses that address relationships or differences among variables (Park & Park, 2016). The purpose of my study was to explore and understand the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a phenomenon of interest; therefore, a quantitative approach was not appropriate.

According to Robson and McCartan (2016), for years qualitative and quantitative methods were the traditional approaches for researchers. The mixed-methods approach is a combination of qualitative and quantitative methodologies (Frels & Onwuegbuzie, 2013). The mixed-methods approach was not consistent with the purpose of this study. I did not have the skills and training required to conduct a mixed-methods study. One reason was timing. Also, the participant sample for my study was small, and the research question did not require quantitative data. Qualitative research is the systematic collection, organization, analysis, and interpretation of people's words from conversations, written texts, or visual forms about a social phenomenon as experienced by individuals in their natural setting (Grossoehme, 2014). Researchers use qualitative research when their aim is to develop an understanding of a phenomenon through the participants' lived experiences of the phenomenon (Kornbluh, 2015; Robson & McCartan, 2016). The objective of the current study was to understand the competitive

advantages of business owners who start and operate a small business during its first 5 years. A qualitative approach is suitable when a researcher wants to interview fewer participants in depth in a natural environment and review written records (Park & Park, 2016). Conducting a qualitative case study was the best approach for this study.

### **Research Design**

Research design is the plan that links the research questions with the data collected and analyzed in a study to draw conclusions (Yin, 2017). Research designs are strategies that link the components of research in the exploration of research questions to draw conclusions in a study (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013). The preferred research design was a case study approach. A case study design is an empirical inquiry involving the exploration of a contemporary phenomenon within a real-life context. The case study design is preferred when studies involve unique and revelatory cases involving an individual, event, or program (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013). I explored three major qualitative research designs: phenomenology, ethnography, and case study to determine the design that was the most suitable for my study.

The purpose of a phenomenological design is to gain an understanding of how humans view themselves and the world around them (Robson & McCartan, 2016). The phenomenological design did not fit because I was not planning to examine human lived experiences attributed to a phenomenon. Ethnography is the study of shared behaviors, beliefs, and language of an intact cultural group (Boden, Muller, & Nett, 2011). Ethnography is used to obtain access to the environment of the participants and make sense of their experiences (Yanow, 2012). Ethnography is better suited for researchers

who plan to immerse themselves in the daily activities of the participants, (Down, 2012).

Ethnography was not a suitable design for my study.

Yin (2017) stated that the selection of a research design is based on three conditions: (a) the type of research question, (b) the amount of control the researcher has over the behavioral event, and (c) whether the focus is on contemporary or historical events. The preferred research design was a multiple case study to explore strategies for competitive advantage for small business owners to succeed beyond 5 years. A case study design is an empirical inquiry involving the exploration of a contemporary phenomenon within a real-life context. The case study design includes a preference when studies involve unique and revelatory cases involving an individual, event, or program (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013). The purpose of a case study design is to collect data and information from a natural environment without external constraints (Kemperaj & Chavan, 2013). The case study design includes an interpretive approach to analyze data based on participants' responses (Logie-MacIver, Piacentini, & Eadie, 2012).

I selected the case study design for the following three reasons. First, my research question deals with how small business owners use competitive advantages to sustain their businesses beyond the first 5 years of operation. Second, controlling the behavior of the event is not a need. I collected data by interviewing business owners involved in the service industry. Third, the focus was on contemporary events. My three reasons met the conditions given by Yin for selecting a case study. Multiple case studies increase the possibility of direct replication, which makes the conclusions resulting from independent cases more powerful than conclusions from a single case (Yin, 2017). I used the multiple

case study design to describe the in-depth experiences of 6 small business owners in the service industry. I explored the business strategies and potential competitive advantages business owners need to sustain their business beyond the first 5 years of operation. Single case, studies may contain up to 15 interviews (Marshall, Cardon, Poddar, & Fontenot, 2013). Marshall et al. (2013) suggested that 6 participants were adequate for this case study based on the principle of data saturation. Paying attention to participant responses and stopping collection of data when the responses become repetitive is an appropriate action to ensure saturation for this study.

### **Population and Sampling**

My intent was to explore the competitive advantages that small businesses require for survival beyond 5 years in Houston, TEXAS. The population for this research study was small business owners. Population refers to all of the cases and a sample is a selection from that population (Robson & McCartan, 2016). I was not able to interact with every member of the research population because it was too expensive and time consuming. I used a sample of 6 small business owners, which is a subset of the research population. The sample size allowed me to conduct this study so that I was able to use the results to derive conclusions that apply to the entire population. I conducted this research with the expectation that my findings benefit the population of small business owners globally.

I used purposive sampling, which means that selected the participants for this research study with a purpose in mind. Patton (Elliott, Combs, & Boyce, 2011) concluded that purposeful sampling involves the search for information rich cases, for an in-depth

study. The purpose was to identify and select participants that can provide information-rich cases of using competitive advantages to successfully operate their small businesses. Purposeful sampling is the technique to obtain a non-representative subset of a larger population to serve a specific purpose (Pirlott1, Kisbu-Sakarya, DeFrancesco, Elliot, & MacKinnon, 2012). I made the selection of the participants based on my expectations that they could inform and lead me to an understanding of the research problem for this study.

Researchers using the case study method rely on interviews with individuals with pre-defined characteristics (Patton, 2015). The characteristics were those defined by the researchers as belonging to the individuals that could provide information that would help answer the interview questions (Kristensen & Ravn, 2015). The sample identified is 6 small business owners in the Houston, TEXAS area. Using 6 business owners increases the possibility of direct replication. This made my conclusions more acceptable because they were the results from multiple independent cases. Selection of a representative group for data collection is important for valid and reliable results in a research study (Ford, 2016). With each interview, I identified new themes and investigated any new questions that arose from the data.

Another factor that can affect the sample size in my qualitative study is data saturation. Researchers use saturation as a guiding principle during their data collection (Mason, 2010). A researcher reaches data saturation when interviewing additional participants does not yield additional insights towards answering the research question (Taylor, Bogdan, & DeVault, 2016). Estimating adequate sample size relates to the concept of saturation, the point when analysts gain no new data and no new meanings

from existing data emerging (Wilson, Thomas, Burns, Hewitt, & Osei-Waree, 2012). Data saturation is the point in data collection when nothing new is coming up (Hagaman & Wutich, 2017; Richards, 2015). I collected data until the topic of competitive advantages used by small business owners to sustain their business beyond the first 5 years became clearer to me. I expected to reach that point at the completion of the sixth interview. To ensure data saturation, I contacted several additional participants to be potential interviewees. The eligibility criteria for the selection of participants for the sample was small business owners in the service industry who have operated their businesses continuously for at least 5 years. Small business owners would have knowledge of the business processes and strategies used in the operation of the business. In addition to knowledge and experience of the phenomenon of interest, the participants needed to be available and willing to participate and able to communicate their experiences and opinions in a clear and reflective manner (Palinkas et al., 2015). Participants who did not meet the criteria were not be eligible to participate in the study.

The interviews were one-on-one. Participants had to have a willingness to participate in the one-on-one interview process for approximately 60 minutes (Samujh & El-Kafafi, 2010). Participants who could not meet the criteria were not eligible to participate in the study. The interview setting would take place in a comfortable and nonthreatening environment that enabled participants to respond with open and honest personal experiences. The one-on-one interviews were at the participants' convenience (Javalgi, Granot, & Alejandro, 2011). I conducted the interviews in a private quiet setting.

## **Ethical Research**

Ethical research concerning human subjects ought to include sustaining the highest form of moral integrity (Haar, Norlyk, & Hall, 2013). Professional associations, government agencies, and universities have adopted specific codes, rules, and policies to guarantee observance of human rights during research studies (Jedynak, 2014). Robson and McCartan (2016) recommended that a researcher focus on ethical principles in his/her actions and way of doing things throughout a research project. For a researcher, having ethical awareness is important, in that the researcher guides a study by considering the participants' degree of harm and risk (Wallace & Sheldon, 2015). Ethical principles are general considerations that a researcher must consider when conducting research-using people. The most common ethical principles are concerned with minimizing harm, respecting autonomy, preserving privacy, and acting equably (Hammersley, 2015). Therefore, I focused on conducting myself in an ethical manner in every phase of my research project.

Ethical research in human subjects includes the process of informed consent (Marrone, 2015). Informed consent is the basic principle of a research study including acquiring individuals' agreement to participate in a study (Schrems, 2014). Informed consent is as well a form of lawful policy, and an implicit social contract between researchers and the public (Kaye et al., 2015). The purpose of the consent form is to document the researchers' intention in obtaining the highest level of integrity and confidentiality of the participants' identities (Marrone, 2015). Informed consent is a significant concept of moral and lawful requirements that protect participants partaking in

a study (Lambert & Glacken, 2011). Researchers must obtain permission from organizations and companies to conduct research by using a cooperation agreement before they can obtain Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, after which they may secure consent forms from participants (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2014). The approval lasts for one year (Walden University, 2014). The IRB is an institutional committee that exists to review a proposed research in a given institution. The IRB faculty review research proposals to ensure the protection of participant's rights and adherence to the regulations set forth by Walden University. During the consent process, many chairs provide participants with a certificate assuring the confidentiality of personal information (Check et al., 2014). The approval number for this study is 12-11-18-0653770.

Request through company contact with an invitation through e-mail facilitated the participation of the small business owners. I emailed the informed consent form to participants so that they had adequate time to email questions back before signing the consent form. After reviewing and signing the consent form, the participants received a signed copy for their personal records. Once I established that the participants meet the criteria for the study and a consent form was signed, I gave the consent form back to them, thus confirming participation.

Lambert and Glacken (2011) stated that participants had the right to refuse or withdraw at any time without penalty. The invitation to participate included an explanation of the process involved for withdrawing from the study. To exit the study, the participant simply needed to send an email or make the phone call for withdrawal to

inform me. Each participant had the option to withdraw from the study at any time he/she felt discomfort or lost the interest to participate. Additionally, participants received no incentives to take part in the study. Upon publication of the study, participants received an electronic copy of the completed study upon request.

Researchers must take adequate measures to ensure privacy and security of sensitive data for each participant (Check et al., 2014). As I moved forward with my study, it was important that I provided that privacy and security. Conducting interviews in locations of participants' choosing allows for a comfortable and private atmosphere (Kunyk et al., 2016). To ensure the identities of each participant, I assigned them each a number such as "SBO 1, SBO 2, and SBO 3," to ensure their protection. Researchers must provide confidentiality by designating a location and a period for data storage (Ludvigsson et al., 2015). I will destroy the information after 5 years have passed. During those 5 years, I will store the participant data in a secured lock box.

### **Data Collection Instruments**

I was the data collection instrument for my research study. In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary instrument for gathering data (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Sutton & Austin, 2015). Unlike quantitative research, that uses numbers and statistical analysis, qualitative researchers use words to collect and interpret data (Anyan, 2013). The problem and purpose statements provide the design foundation and nature of the data collection process (Merriam, 2014). I collected data through in-depth interviews with my participants. From the perspective of Leedy and Ormrod (2013), research data collection should involve the reuse of an existing instrument or developing new instruments. Other

data collection instruments I used were an audio recording device, a notepad and pen, as well as an introductory statement that reiterates the study's purpose and assures the participants' confidentiality.

Interviews enable researchers to explore the experiences of the participants through a series of questions and answers (Grossoehme, 2014). I asked each participant six open-ended questions during the one-on-one interviews to explore the business strategies for competitive advantage that the small business owner used to sustain his/her business beyond the first 5 years of operation. The interviews were semistructured which means I used an interview protocol with pre-determined questions and potential follow-up questions. Semistructured interviews allow researchers to seek clarification when participant answers are not clear (Doody, 2013). If a topic arises during the interview that the pre-determined questions do not cover, but is relevant to the research, the semi-structured format of the interview allows a researcher to deviate from the predetermined questions to pursue the new topic (Grossoehme, 2014). A researcher uses semi-structured interviews to gain the perspectives, expectations, and assumptions of the participants while building rapport (Silverman, 2017). The semi-structured interviews with participants encouraged the exchange of additional questions for better understanding of research questions, responses, increase trust and rapport during sensitive discussions. The quality of the interview questions determines the quality of the data collected which in turn determine the quality of the research study (Grossoehme, 2014). The data collection instrument for the participant interviews is in Appendix A.

I used member checking to enhance the reliability and validity of the data I collected through the interviews. Construct validity confirmation in the study involved member checking. Varpio, Ajjawi, Monrouxe, O'Brien, and Rees (2017) described member checking as informant feedback, respondent validation, or dependability checking. Yin (2017) suggested that pattern matching, explanation building, exploring rival explanations and logical models are appropriate to ensure internal validity in the data analysis phase for the study. Through member checking, participants (members) check their answers and give feedback about its accuracy so that the transcripts would accurately represent the participants' perspectives or experiences (Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, & Walter, 2016). Finally, demonstrating reliability in the data collection stage occurs following a strict case study research protocol. To enhance dependability in this study, I allotted participants up to 24 hours to check and approve any aspects from the interpretation of the data participants gave during the interviews.

### **Data Collection Technique**

Data collection process began with introductions to explain the purpose of the study, encourage participation, explanation of the withdrawal process through phone calls, and offer of an opportunity to ask questions. The most popular approaches to data collection for qualitative research include observation, participant observation, in-depth interviewing, and analyzing audio-visual materials and documents (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The data collection approach for this research study was one-on-one semistructured interviews. With semi-structured interviews, the research participants can

provide additional insights and explanations, and express their views more freely and thoroughly (Anyan, 2013; Yin, 2017).

I followed the interview protocol and asked the participants the interview questions in a systematic manner while probing for more elaborate responses (see Appendix B). In addition, I gathered information from relevant company artifacts and documents, such as from the participants' websites and other public records. For the study, the interview setting, time and place was the choice of the participant. Each interview began with a review of the purpose and the reason of the study. The review included the consent form and details regarding participant's rights to withdraw. A research field note was appropriate to gather data including names, dates, questions, responses, and general observations for the study. Following the interview, participants could ask questions and reply with personal reflections. I allotted up to 60 minutes for each interview. The advantages of open-ended interview questions included (a) participant is at ease; (b) open-ended interview questions may allow an inquirer to identify participant's habits, attitudes, and beliefs; and (c) the questions may facilitate detailed answers regarding the questions asked (Doody, 2013). The disadvantages of semi structured interviews included (a) interviews require more time and expensive, and (b) participants may have less interest to discuss sensitive topics (Doody, 2013).

An interview protocol was useful to maximize the time spent with the interviewee by ensuring that the interaction is both effective and ethical (Doody & Doody, 2015). I used the interview protocol (Appendix A) to guide the interview process. I created a formalized set of interview questions, which I read aloud individually to each of the

participants. I used a hand-held audio recorder as my audio recorder during the interview to record the questions and responses. A hand-held audio recorder was a common use device so it did not distract the participants or make them feel uncomfortable. I used one audio recorder for the interviews and carefully check it out operationally and carry additional batteries to each interview. After the interview, I transcribed all recorded interviews. Yin (2017) suggested transcribing recorded interviews to make the analysis process easy.

In addition to recording the interviews, I handwrote notes during the interviews. Christie, Bemister, and Dobson (2015) conducted a study on the impact of researcher note taking during an interview session. I gained an understanding about how the participants viewed me as I took notes during the interviews. It is important to learn that note taking will not affect the perception of the interviewee about competency and professionalism (Christie et al., 2015). I took notes on the high points of their responses as well as their non-verbal reactions. I kept track of the research notes by setting up files, which I identify with the same unique participant identification codes.

I began the interview process with a few general topics under the assumption that the participant's perspective would unfold as the interview progresses. Castillo-Montoya (2016) calls these initial questions the introductory questions. The introductory questions included questions regarding specialty, background and education and move to transition questions. Transition questions link the introductory questions to the key questions of the interview (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). The key questions were those that ask about operating the small business and specific competitive advantage business strategies that

sustained them beyond 5 years. I ended the interviews with the closing questions. Closing questions provided an opportunity for the participant to raise any issues not addressed (Castillo-Montoya, 2016).

Restating the summary of information and questioning the participant during the interviews enhanced determination of accuracy in this study. To conduct a good interview, another method is to rephrase the participant's answer and ask for confirmation (Taylor et al., 2016). Houghton et al. (2013) used member checking to ensure the credibility, dependability, and transferability in a multiple case study to illustrate specific research strategies. Member checking was appropriate because it involved participants reading transcription of the interviews to ensure that data was credible and consisted of accurate records (Houghton et al., 2013). If the participant disagreed with the summary, I allowed them to amend the summary appropriately.

### **Data Organization Technique**

Data organization was important to my research study because it enabled a simple retrieval of information whenever I needed it throughout the research process. Effectively organizing my data enabled a simple retrieval of my data for analysis, presentation, and reporting purposes. The purpose of data organization is to retrieve, from a mass of information, the information that is relevant to the research question (Given & Olson, 2013). Retrieval of my data after the completion of my research study was a possible need. I may have to access the data for the reconstruction of the research project, responding to an audit, or to use the data in further research. The data was important to adhere to the research requirements of retaining the data in a locked container for 5 years.

I used a reflective journal to record my mood when starting the interview and my mood after the interview. Reflective journals are written documents that students create while thinking of various concepts, events, or interactions over a period for the purposes of gaining insights and learning (Davies, Reitmaier, Smith, & Mangan-Danckwart, 2013). The act of writing in the reflective journal expanded my thoughts onto paper. Lamb (2013) discovered that reflective journals provide evidence from which researchers can draw conclusions about the research. Reflective writing gives an awareness of the thought processes, for the researcher to monitor and control, so that they do not affect the results of the research study (Henter & Indreica, 2014). For the study, I saved the data in a home safe for 5 years before the final destruction by shredding of the hard copies and erasing the electronic data.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis is the search for patterns in the data, interpreting those patterns, and deciding what the patterns mean (Bernard & Ryan, 2016). The researcher's responsibility is to process the data in a meaningful and useful manner (Robson & McCartan, 2016). A data analysis strategy is the process of bringing order and structure to a mass of collected data (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The data analysis strategy I used is the thematic coding approach.

Through content analysis, I identified, coded, categorized, and labeled the data. There were three main phases or stages involved in qualitative content analysis. Those three phases were preparation, organization, and the reporting of results (Elo et al., 2014). The preparation stage involves data collection (Elo et al., 2014). I organized the raw data

into narrative descriptions with major themes. I examined the data to avoid missing any themes or patterns. The organization or abstraction stage was when the researcher develops the themes or categories (Elo et al., 2014). The main themes I anticipated to emerge were: (a) financial capital, (b) marketing and competitive advantages, and (c) great customer service.

A code in qualitative data analysis is a word or short phrase that captures the essence of the data (Saldana, 2016). The purpose of a code is bringing together the data about a major theme (Taylor et al., 2016). Taylor et al. (2016) suggested that researchers code both the positive and negative incidents for a theme. Leedy and Ormrod (2016) suggested that a researcher begin with a start list of categories or themes derived from the research question. I developed a preliminary set of codes based on my experience as a small business owner since 2013. The codes on the list were not mutually exclusive. The number of codes on the list did grow as new categories or themes arose from the data.

I coded and labeled all or parts of the data. Saldana (2016) emphasized that it was not the quantity of the data that was important but the quality of the data. If the data was salient to the research question, I coded the data. The codes enabled me to arrange the data in a systematic order. I grouped together the codes with the same label to form a theme. By dividing, grouping, reorganizing, and linking the data, the researcher generates meaning and develops explanations from the data (Saldana, 2016).

Triangulation is a qualitative strategy researchers use to test the validity of data by using multiple methods or data sources (Carter, Bryant-Lukosius, DiCenso, Blythe, & Neville, 2014). There are four types of triangulation: (a) data triangulation, (b)

investigator triangulation, (c) theory triangulation, and (d) methodological triangulation (Morse, 2015; Patton, 2015). Researchers use a variety of data sources for data triangulation (Patton, 2015). Data triangulation does not apply to my research study because I did not collect data using more than one method of data collection. Investigator triangulation uses several different researchers (Patton, 2015). Investigator triangulation does not apply to my research study because I am the only researcher for this study. Theory triangulation involves using multiple perspectives to interpret the data (Patton, 2015). Theory triangulation does not apply to my research study because I interpret the data solely from the perspective of the entrepreneurship theory. Methodological triangulation includes multiple methods of data collection to study an event to gain a comprehensive view of the phenomenon (Cope, 2014; Patton, 2015). This method of triangulation applies to my research study because my data collection strategy is to collect data about business strategies through interviews with small business owners and to corroborate and augment the data collected from the interviews by using company documents. Yin (2017) cautioned researchers about the use of company documents describing them as not always accurate and not always free from bias. The use of two different data sources may result in one of three outcomes: (a) convergent, (b) complementary, or (c) divergent or contradictory (Heale & Forbes, 2013). Convergent is when both methods lead to the same conclusions to increase validity through verification. Complementary is when the differing results supplement the individual results thereby highlighting different aspects of the phenomenon. Divergent or contradictory results from the two methods can lead to new insights into the phenomenon under investigation

(Heale & Forbes, 2013). Patton (2015) mentioned that different sources of data may yield essentially the same results but with slight differences due to the sensitivity, different methods have to real world nuances. Patton encouraged researchers to learn the inconsistencies in findings from different sources of data. Therefore, I provided details about the data sources used in the study. I compared the results from each method and described how I planned to integrate the data to arrive at the study results.

Qualitative researchers use computer software to help them organize and interpret their data (Leedy & Ormrod, 2016). I purchased a subscription to NVivo 11 Pro® and used the software to facilitate my data analysis. I transcribed the recorded interviews into Word and then imported them into NVivo®. I used NVivo® to sift through and sort the data based on my interview questions. Furthermore, I used NVivo® to sift through and sort the data based on themes and sub-themes. The software created models and graphs to visualize the connections in the data. The data analysis process was time consuming (Evers, 2016). I sped up the data analysis process by learning to use the capabilities within the NVivo software.

## **Reliability and Validity**

### **Reliability**

The concept of reliability, in a qualitative research study, is that if other researchers choose to follow the same research procedures, they would achieve results similar to those presented by the initial researcher (Mariotto et al., 2014). I gathered my data by strictly adhering to my interview protocol. I used the interview protocol to guide the interview process. I had a list of basic questions like those about background and

education. I moved to the more difficult questions about operating the small business and specific business strategies once initial questions are complete. The interview protocol kept me focused on the questions that provided me with the data that I could use in the research study. An interview protocol is a procedural guide to direct the researcher through the interview process (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012).

Data is trustworthy if it has established dependability. Dependability shows that the results are consistent and replicable (Amankwaa, 2016). I showed that the data is consistent through member checking. I gave the participants the opportunity to check the transcripts and give feedback about their accuracy. All six participants should confirmed that the information, on the transcripts, were an accurate representation of what they shared during the interviews. Member checking ensures that the transcripts accurately represent the participants' perspectives or experiences (Grossoehme, 2014; Thomas, 2017).

### **Validity**

Validity is how accurately the data represents the participant's view of a phenomenon (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Document how one developed the results (Elo et al., 2014). Readers should be able to follow the researcher's analysis process to the results (Elo et al., 2014). I was the data collection instrument for this research study. I used an audio recorder to capture the participant's answers. I kept a written journal entry for each participant. I used data triangulation to validate that I recorded the information accurately. In data triangulation, the same data from different sources is collected with the hope that the information will converge to validate the data (Leedy & Ormrod, 2016).

**Credibility.** Credibility in the research world means that the researcher conducted the research in a manner that would ensure the proper identification and description of the subject and that the research is a valued contribution to the knowledge on the subject (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; O’Leary, 2014). Cope (2014) recommended including audit trails to support credibility when reporting a qualitative study. An audit trail could be notes or materials the researcher used to arrive at assumptions or decisions (Cope, 2014). Sorenson (2016) recommended that researchers conduct their research study with competence, goodwill, and trustworthiness. I attained credibility for my research because I followed Sorenson’s advice. I demonstrated my competence by discussing my doctoral coursework and other relevant education since I did not have previous research experience (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). A researcher can demonstrate discipline and rigor by documenting the research process in detail (O’Leary, 2014). To demonstrate goodwill, a researcher should discuss the effort made and the time spent to get a sense of the subject (Kelley, 2016). To demonstrate trustworthiness, I ensured that the findings were from the perspective of the participants through two methods: transcription verification and member checking. I personally transcribed the audio recordings of the interviews. I transcribed the interviews verbatim. I documented each question and answer given by the participants. I gave the transcripts to the participants for member checking. Inviting participants to give feedback on the data interpretation enhances the trustworthiness of results (Birt et al., 2016).

I used the best methods available to triangulate the data. Triangulation is the use of more than one data source to authenticate the data collected (O’Leary, 2014). Using

more than one data source enhances the credibility of the data when the data from the different sources are consistent (Houghton, Casey, Shaw, & Murphy, 2013).

Triangulation enables a researcher to get a better fix on the object of the research study (Robson & McCartan, 2016).

**Transferability.** Transferability is the findings of a research study is useful to others in similar situations (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Researchers do not have a clear understanding about the specific factors that determine whether the findings of a research study are transferable (Burchett, Mayhew, Lavis, & Dobrow, 2013). Burchett et al. (2013) identified six dimensions of applicability/transferability from their research: congruence, ease of implementation, adaptation, setting, effectiveness and study design and methods. I documented the details of my research with these dimensions in mind. By providing a rationale for my research and providing details on the case studies, I hoped to provide enough information about my research to ensure that others can make judgements about my findings; whether those findings can provide some answers to their research questions (Houghton et al., 2013). I adhered to the interview and data collection protocols designed for this study. I also followed the guidelines for data saturation.

**Confirmability.** Confirmability means that another researcher or study can confirm or support the results of my research study (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Cope (2014) recommended that a researcher describe how he/she formed the conclusions and provide examples of how themes emerged from the data. I documented my logical inferences and interpretations in detail so that my analysis made sense to another person. I carefully documented the research decisions I made during the research process. As I

made my decisions, I recorded them immediately in a research journal. I also had the documents that were member checked by the participants.

**Data saturation.** Data saturation is the researcher seeing the same patterns repetitively and sensing that there is nothing new to gain from further data collection (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Fusch and Ness (2015) listed the general principles that researchers agreed on regarding data saturation. Data saturation is the point in data collection when nothing new is coming up (Hagaman & Wutich, 2017; Richards, 2015). A researcher reaches data saturation when interviewing additional participants does not yield additional insights towards answering the research question (Taylor, Bogdan, & DeVault, 2016). There is no specific number of interviews that provides enough data for a research study to reach data saturation (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Hennink, Kaiser, & Marconi, 2017; Malterud, Siersma, & Guassora, 2016). My plan was to initiate my research study with six participants. Malterud et al. (2016) recommended that researchers continuously evaluate their sample size during the research process. I reached data saturation with the fourth interview, but to ensure data saturation, I interviewed the fifth and six participants. Since there are no specific sample size recommendation for qualitative research studies, the method most often used is experiential or rule of thumb (Hennink et al., 2017; Palinkas et al., 2015). Experienced researchers calculate the approximate numbers of participants needed for their research studies based on the analysis of previous comparable studies (Malterud et al., 2016). It is important for researchers to describe their sampling strategies in detail and to provide the rationale for the selection of the strategies (Palinkas et al., 2015).

### **Transition and Summary**

In Section 2, I restated my purpose statement, described the role of the researcher, the relationship with participants, and initiated a discussion about ethical research. I provided details about data collection: the instrument, technique, data organization, and data analysis. I discussed reliability and validity. I also described how to mitigate researcher bias, discussed standardize interviews by using appropriate protocols, and wrote about the use of eligibility criteria to choose the participants suitable for my research question. I explained why I chose a qualitative case study as my research method and design and discussed the ethical concerns for a research study.

Section 3 focused on the presentation and analysis of the findings of the study; highlights the applications to professional practice, and implications for social change. This section also incorporates recommendations for future action based on the results of the study and identifies options for future research by reflecting on the issues related to the research problem. The presentation of the findings included a discussion of the themes, and how they link to the conceptual framework. In Section 3, I presented my findings relevant to the research question: what strategies do small business owners use to maintain competitive advantage that sustains their business beyond 5 years? After I conducted the interviews and analyzed the documents, I transcribed and coded the themes to compare the findings with the literature review, supplementary sources of the data, and the conceptual framework. I included a reflection of my experience during the DBA Doctoral Study Process, and discussed my individual biases, ideas, or values that I had about the study, which could have affected the participants or the interview situation.

### Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the strategies small business owners in the service industry used to maintain a competitive advantage that sustained their business beyond 5 years. The failure rate of small businesses was as high as 70% in 2014 (SBA, 2016). Small business owners have generated significant economic growth and job creation in the United States (Ahlstrom & Ding, 2014). Finding strategies for small businesses to sustain in their business beyond the first 5 years made this study significant.

Entrepreneurship theory was the foundation of the conceptual framework. To gain a clear understanding of the phenomenon, I conducted semistructured interviews with six small business owners in the Houston, Texas area who had been in business beyond 5 years. The selected small business owners answered six open-ended interview questions. The answers from the interview questions helped me to answer the central research question for this study: What strategies do small business owners use to maintain competitive advantage that sustains their business beyond 5 years?

After reviewing and transcribing the data from each of the interviews, I entered the data into the NVivo11 for Mac software, which helped me to categorize major themes. Three themes emerged concerning strategies small business owners used to stay competitive in business beyond 5 years: (a) financial capital, (b) marketing and competitive advantages, and (c) great customer service. I performed member checking to

ensure data saturation, reliability, and validity of the study results. My findings may help small business owners improve their competencies and sustainability.

### **Presentation of the Findings**

The central research question that guided this study was the following: What strategies do small business owners use to maintain competitive advantage that sustains their business beyond 5 years? The interview questions were open-ended to allow the participants to explain strategies used to remain in business beyond 5 years. Yin's (2014) five-step process consisting of (a) compiling, (b) disassembling, (c) reassembling, (d) interpreting, and (e) concluding the data. This process was used to analyze the responses of the interviewees and my field notes.

Entrepreneurship theory was the foundation for the conceptual framework I used for this study. Using entrepreneurship theory, I was able to explore the phenomenon of small business sustainability, the management of resources, and key strategies. Entrepreneurship theory served as a model to help me understand the context of the research, and as an outline during the data collection phase that helped me stay focused on the research question. I found entrepreneurship theory to be a suitable framework to understand the findings of my inquiry.

To ensure confidentiality, I labeled the participants SBO 1, SBO 2, SBO 3, SBO 4, SBO 5, and SBO6. A case study design (using interview data) enabled me to understand the phenomenon, the participants' experiences, and the participants' viewpoints (see Dasgupta, 2015). One of the important concerns in a qualitative case study is the researcher's bias. To mitigate my bias, I used an interview protocol and

member checking in the data collection process. Member checking helped me clarify the meaning of what was said by the participants (see Koelsch, 2013). I found the main strategy to overcome the high failure rate in small businesses was a methodical approach to small business planning. Quan (2015) asserted the primary problem for business owners was poor planning. I entered all of the collected data into NVivo 11 for Mac software to identify nodes or themes for analysis. I found three emerging themes from the content analysis process. The themes indicated strategies needed for small business owners to sustain their business beyond the first 5 years, which consisted of (a) financial capital, (b) marketing and competitive advantages, and (c) great customer service.

### **Theme 1: Financial Capital**

Small business owners need financial capital throughout the life of the business. Small business owners use personal savings, borrowed funds, and retirement funds to maintain profitability throughout the business life cycle. Access to capital is imperative for growth, stability, and profitability (Brau, Cardell, & Woodworth, 2015). In the entrepreneurship theory, Cantillon (1755) indicated that entrepreneurs allocate resources to maximize financial return and to equilibrate supply and demand in the economy. Lack of funds results in small business failure (SBA, 2014). Lee et al. (2015) said the problem stems from some small business owners having trouble accessing money. Alagirisamy (2014) noted that access to financial capital is a priority for entrepreneurial business success. Further, Alagirisamy indicated that adequate financial capital and the ability to obtain financial support is a key factor in business profitability.

In the current study, five participants mentioned the need for financial capital to make it beyond 5 years in business. SBO 1 shared how she continues to work a day job while she operates her business. Doing this allows her to build and grow her business her way. Small business owners do not have to give up their routine to have a successful business. Implementing this method has allowed SBO 1 to save and invest back into her business without outside funding. SBO 1 increases her financial margins by securing customers who provide durable income and adjusting her pricing to current market rates and skill level.

SBO 2 shared the details of her personal investment into her business as well as her husband's financial contributions. SBO 2 shared her written financial plan. This plan was a data source to achieve triangulation and to help support my findings in the financial capital theme. SBO 2 outlined her startup costs, equipment costs, and capital needed to sustain the business until revenue exceeded operational costs. Equipment in SBO 2's line of work is very expensive, so she works to keep her business current and appealing to make a return on her investment. Being self-funded allows SBO 2 to build the business her way at her pace without added pressure or restrictions. SBO 3 operated for 5 years before she received the outside funding she needed. SBO 3 did not gain the funding through traditional methods to further her business; instead, she used networking and proper mentorship to secure funding nontraditionally. Lin and Nabergoj (2014) viewed the small business owner as a problem-solver, innovator, and person with self-direction and initiative. These characteristics are used more when small business owners need to secure capital or a new funding source to maintain their businesses.

SBO 4 discussed charging what the owner is worth. After making the initial investments in the business, business owners should have a financial plan that can carry the business off of profits. Learning to save and invest wisely can keep the owner from being indebted with a lender. SBO 4 said, “I unapologetically charge what I’m worth because I’m worth it.” Some small business owners rely on external financing for business growth and continuity (Kelly, Brien, & Stuart, 2014). In the case of SBO 5, funding was necessary. SBO 5 could not grow, scale, or provide for her customers without outside funding. The items her business provides are expensive, and without financing options, SBO 5 would not have been a good fit for her customers.

During the data collection process, I concluded that there was no one-size-fits-all solution to the financial capital question. To make it 5 years and beyond, small business owners must have financial capital options. Entrepreneurs should prepare for a time of distress by securing additional financial capital (Alagirisamy, 2014). The topic of finances was a critical part of the discussion of small business sustainability. The conceptual framework pointed at resource management as one prominent strategy. Small businesses must have a financial plan to manage the money they receive. If finances are not managed, there may be an unresolved need and the business may not make it beyond 5 years. I concluded that small business owners who are aware of the financial concept of business normally make it to and beyond 5 years.

## **Theme 2: Marketing and Competitive Advantages**

Once small business owners have identified the financial capital to launch their business, the next step is business development. Small business owners must let

customers know the solution to their problem. Lechner and Gudmundsson (2014) explained that marketing is the backbone of business development. Schumpeter (1983) described an entrepreneur as a person who allocates resources with the capability to adapt personal strengths and weaknesses and handle threats and opportunities in a changing environment. Effective marketing can be a solution to some small business problems. A solid marketing plan is where those solutions start. For small businesses, marketing planning is informal in structure, implementation, and evolution (Franco, Santos, Ramalho, & Nunes, 2014). Small business owners should have a marketing plan as an indicator of growth potential and an essential tool for their survival. Brooks, Heffner, and Henderson (2014) argued that marketing plans help business owners analyze a succinct overview of a company's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats to gain competitive advantages.

All six of the study participants spoke on the importance of marketing and business strategy. SBO 2 highlighted the competitive advantages marketing grants her. SBO 2 takes the time to study trends and find out what consumers are wanting so that she can market to them better. SBO 2 also invests in training and conferences that teach her how to effectively market and reach the consumer. Schaupp and Belanger (2014) advocated the social media strategy in their work. SBO 4 mentioned that social media marketing was the most important element of her business growth. SBO 4 shared tenants of her marketing plan that was used when she first started her company. SBO 4 outlined a detailed plan that addressed product, price, promotion, place, and people. Based on Dzisi and Ofosu's (2014) findings, this document was an example of a marketing plan that

covered the 5 Ps of marketing and helped support my data triangulation for this theme. SBO 4 stated that the plan would be a driving factor in the long-term success of her small business. Social media marketing and word of mouth have helped SBO 4's business continuously clear six figures per year. SBO 5 had to market the effectiveness of technology to her customers so that her business could grow.

Small business owners use pricing as one of the marketing strategies by controlling the cost of goods sold to enable a lower competitive price and to gain higher market shares and profits (Felzensztein & Gimmon, 2014). SBO 1 markets based on special occasions. SBO 1 scales down and targets specific occasions to market to customers. SBO 1 sets her price for that holiday and builds her business around it. SBO 3 was able to build a better marketing plan for her business after she found a business mentor. Finding a mentor and implementing a plan helped her grow her business. SBO 6 used social media marketing to grow her business and display her talents to potential customers. The day-to-day workload is never the same for SBO 6, so she makes adjustments to her marketing tactics.

Data I reviewed on the relationship of marketing to business sustainability brought me to the conclusion that small business owners who have a basic understanding of marketing have a higher probability of remaining in business than small business owners who do not. Proper marketing gives a small business owner a competitive edge. Competitive advantages are useful in the discussion of business success to and beyond 5 years. In this study, small business owners who had been in business for more than 5 years understood how to apply that knowledge to their specific product, service, and

industry. Many small businesses are focusing on social media marketing as an important tool in growing and sustaining their businesses.

### **Theme 3: Great Customer Service**

Customer service can make or break a small business. It is important for small business owners to continue to build on their customer service skills (Anderson & Ullah, 2014). Customer service is one factor that can keep smaller firms competitive with their larger counterparts. Small businesses sustain customer loyalty and return business by providing good customer service (Zaefarian, Thiesbrummel, Henneberg, & Naude, 2017). Lechner and Gudmundsson (2014) suggested that differentiation, particularly if based on customer service, is an effective strategy for small businesses to compete. Each of the six participants in the current study mentioned customer service and how it positively impacts their success.

SBO 1 discussed how she created a VIP group on Facebook for her business so that she could stay in touch with her customers and offer discounts to those who return. As SBO 1's pricing changes, it is important that she try and accommodate her loyal customers. Offering great customer service is a low-cost opportunity that some small business owners are taking advantage of to help them get to 5 years and beyond. Customer satisfaction is a key measure of customer service (Paltayian, Gotzamani, Georgiou, & Andronikidis, 2017). SBO 3 mentioned, "It's important to remember the purpose and why of her business."

SBO 4 discussed the importance of continuing great customer service as the business grows. SBO 4 said, "I've seen so many companies that gave great customer

service when they were new, but as they grew, they forgot that piece and it showed in their business.” Customer service was one of the strategies that many business owners had difficulty applying as a practical strategy. Word of mouth was one of the main tools to SBO 4’s business success. SBO 4 said businesses should, “Keep customer service first no matter how big they get.” SBO 6 echoed the sentiments of SBO 4 by saying, “Be/hire who your business needs, not who you want.” This statement complemented Lechner and Gudmundsson’s (2014) point of view. The customer service guidelines helped achieve data triangulation for this theme. SBO 5 discussed how building and maintaining her customers’ trust is what has maintained her business. Zaefarian et al. (2017) noted that small business owners could strategically attract and maintain customers using trust for optimal business performance and profitability. SBO 5 trains her staff on the importance of customer service and trust building. For many small businesses, customer service was the only tactic they had to differentiate themselves from the field. SBO 2 falls into this category with her business. SBO 2 likes to bring trends to her clients before they flood the market. Providing good customer service by allowing customers to be first or *unique* sets SBO 2 and her business apart from the rest.

Good customer service was an effective way for small business owners to differentiate themselves from their competition. Developing and maintaining good customer service and building customer relationships is imperative for small business owners’ success and profitability. Great customer service was the only theme that emerged that had almost zero cost associated with it. Great customer service does, however, require time and focus to create the right business culture to be effectively

implemented. Making the customer a priority can be taught, learned, and shared.

Focusing on great customer service helps small business owners make it beyond 5 years.

### **Applications to Professional Practice**

I sought to understand why some small businesses remained in business beyond 5 years and why some did not. The goal of this study was to identify strategies for competitive advantage that some small business owners use to keep their businesses operating beyond 5 years. New small business owners may be able to use the information presented in this study to formulate short and long-term plans to help their companies to remain in business beyond 5 years. Small business owners may not be successful without being intentional about how they focus on the themes explored within this conceptual framework: (a) financial capital, (b) marketing and competitive advantages, and (c) great customer service.

The three themes supported professional practice in different ways. The financial capital theme reminds small business owners not only of the importance of small business funding, but also outlines both internal and external funding options that have been used successfully by other small business owners. The marketing and competitive advantages theme centers on the small business owner focusing on the best way to present their product or service to their customers in the most cost-effective way. The small business owners should not be afraid to follow trends and adapt to their market. The final theme, great customer service, makes it possible for small businesses to compete with their larger counterparts in a very efficient way that does not require a lot of capital. As the small business grows, the service should grow with it. Current small

business owners may find some of these competitive advantage strategies useful in making course corrections to sustain their business to the 5 year mark and beyond.

### **Implications for Social Change**

The implications for positive social change include the potential for this study to provide strategies to some small business owners to ensure business growth, increase revenues, stimulate job creation, and help provide local and national economic stability. Successful small businesses create a higher employment rate and create and help the local economy. Researchers have suggested small businesses usually generate income from the local community (Ruskin et al., 2016). The results of this study could also help small business owners expand operations and become more profitable. When small businesses thrive, the overall well-being of the community is enhanced and contributes to positive social change.

Each of the three identified themes has an impact on social change. Financial capital, when obtained through a lender, has a positive effect on both public and private institutions of lending. With profits earned, lenders are able to continue to invest in and serve small business owners. Marketing and competitive advantages provide businesses with a social approach to reach customers and affect their buying habits; the same process used to sell a product could be used to change behavior. Small business owners should focus on serving their customers and addressing their needs. Great customer service invites the conversation about social responsibility. Satisfied customers are messengers of the business name as well as a driver of repeat business transactions (Alagirisamy, 2014).

A recent shift to sustainable and environmentally friendly business practices is an example of this idea.

As trends in entrepreneurship theory grow, new measures of competitive advantage could be explored to facilitate sustainable business practices. New measures of competitive advantage could enable the small business to thrive during their first 5 years and remain valuable members within the community. Private and public stakeholders could utilize the findings of this study to create new policies, initiatives, and approaches to improve the longevity of small businesses. Small business owners gain a better understanding of what competitive advantage strategies help some small business make it past the 5 year milestone. Measuring success in areas of social change requires the small business owner to be an active participant in their community. Employing and developing local community members within small retail businesses would lend credence to social change (Nelissen et al., 2017). Properly managed small businesses can become leaders within society.

### **Recommendations for Action**

Business sustainability makes firms resilient, so they will be able to confront a changing environment (Michell et al., 2015). The findings of this study align with the tenets of entrepreneurship theory that some small business owners use. The tenants of entrepreneurial orientation are guides that small business owners can use to achieve economic growth through profit-driven measures within their business (Kegel, 2016). Elements of the theory could be used to make judgments regarding an opportunity for creating wealth (Flores, Westhead, Wright, & Ucbasaran 2014). The knowledge from this

study indicates that for small business owners to sustain their business, they need to have strategies for financial capital, marketing and competitive advantages, and great customer service. As a small business owner and entrepreneur, I see the broad impact a successful small business can have.

The participants of this study were able to get past the 5 year mark, ensuring their product or service solved a problem. Three recommended strategy categories emerged from the results of this study for action for small business owners to sustain their businesses past the first 5 years of operation, to include (a) financial capital strategies, (b) marketing and competitive advantage strategies, and (c) great customer service strategies. To prevent failures, small business owners who lack these qualifications need to have some further education, training, or attending seminars related to certain fields. Some other alternatives for solving the inability to avoid or mitigate failures might be to obtain external assistance such as professional advisors. Small business owners could find the information from this study useful in developing strategies to sustain their businesses for more than 5 years after business establishment.

It is my recommendation that anyone considering starting a small business has a plan for financial capital. Small business owners must understand what the monetary needs of the company will be and have multiple sources to address this need if necessary. A small business needs money to start, money to continue, and money to grow. Successful small business owners made a point to ensure they had access to enough financial capital to keep the company going. I would suggest new small business owners have multiple funding streams including a personal start-up fund.

It is critical to have a formal marketing plan in place that addresses the five Ps of marketing: place, price, product, promotion, and people strategy. The participants in my study had sustainable marketing and competitive advantage strategies in place. They grew to understand their market and the best way to remain appealing to the consumers. I suggest new business owners that do not have some knowledge and experience in small business marketing should reach out to someone with more knowledge for help. Schumpeter's interpretation of entrepreneurship theory stressed the importance of foresight; this can be a vision for the future of their company, or even the foresight to solve a customer's problem (Ahlstrom & Ding 2014). Furthermore, it is important to solve the customers' problem as quickly and efficiently as possible.

Small business owners must have a customer service plan in place and train all team members on how and why it is used (Dzisi & Oforu, 2014). Customer service and customer satisfaction are important indicators of business profitability for more than 5 years after establishment for all the participants. I would encourage new and existing small businesses to make sure the product or service they intend to provide, or are currently providing, solves a problem that their customers have. Great customer service not only keeps current customers coming back, but it also helps to gain word of mouth referrals.

Organizations that support small businesses can use this study as a guide to help new and existing business owners understand what competitive advantage strategies some small business owners in the Houston, TEXAS area use to make it beyond 5 years. As the researcher, I will disseminate the findings of this study to the participants,

government sectors such as the U.S. Small Business Association, scholarly journals, business literature reviews, and entrepreneurship conferences. My goal is to make the findings of this study available to as many parties that have an interest in small business development and growth as possible. Some of these parties include the local area Chamber of Commerce and the Small Business Administration. Community leaders, current and prospective small business owners need to pay attention to this study and use the themes as a guide for engaging small business owners searching for strategies to sustain their small business.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

The results of this study include strategies small business owners use to maintain competitive advantage that sustains their business beyond 5 years. The data includes strategies and skills that are critical to small business owners in the Houston, TEXAS area staying in business longer than 5 years. Due to the challenges small business owners face in securing and maintaining financial capital, there may be further inquiry regarding a need for grassroots-based funding options. Social media marketing over traditional marketing tactics may be effective for some small business owners. Additional insight on the effectiveness of social media marketing for the small business owner can add to the competitive advantage and sustainability conversation. Small business owner's customer service ethos could be a topic worthy of contributing to the existing small business body of knowledge as it can be used as an equalizer.

Recommendations for further research include focusing on different geographical locations of small businesses. I recommend other researches investigate effective and

efficient options for new small business owners to discover. Because the six small business entrepreneurs who participated in the study derived from Houston, TEXAS, future researchers may consider studying profitable small business owners from various location demographics in the state of Texas for comparisons, to include (a) Dallas/Ft. Worth, (b) Austin, (c) San Antonio, and (d) North Houston. Further examination of strategies some small business owners use to remain in business in different locations would allow researchers to compare strategies based on location.

A limitation of the current study was that the results of the study may not reflect the experiences of all small business owners. A recommendation for further research is to conduct a more extensive study with specific questions posed to potential, current, and successful small business owners in different sectors detailing their experiences with financial capital, marketing and competitive advantages, and great customer service. These options could address problems or needs potential customers have that are not being met or solved. I selected the qualitative research method along with a case study design. Additional qualitative research may give some insight into other strategies and skills that were useful in helping small business owners grow beyond 5 years. Other researchers should use other designs and methodologies, at their discretion, to expand the body of research on this topic. Overall, the study findings and themes align with the conceptual framework of the theory of entrepreneurship, moreover the tenants of entrepreneurial orientation.

## Reflections

Engaging in this study was the most demanding yet rewarding learning experience I have had thus far. My doctoral study experience at Walden University provided me an opportunity to strive for knowledge that will benefit my business and community. I gained incredible knowledge from literature reviews, especially about small businesses. Despite challenges I faced with time management and concept adaptation, I persevered. I took it upon myself to read more and ask deeper questions to equip myself with the tools I needed to write, understand the text, and articulate findings. My knowledge of small business was expanded. As a small business owner, my excitement and appreciation for the work needed to grow and sustain a small business has heightened.

At the start of this study, I was sure about what I wanted to write about and the resources available to me. There was so much information readily available, that I went back and forth on my topic and the best way to present it. During the prospectus and proposal periods, I made several changes until I believed I was presenting my best work. I learned how to set my personal bias aside and I embraced my research and interactions with participants with a fresh slate. Collecting the data for this study showed me that there are many ways to fund your business in the beginning and along the way. The study enhanced my understanding of the challenges small business owners face and the lengths they will go to for continuity. Progressing in my career, I will take the lessons learned at Walden University with me on my career and entrepreneurship journey.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the competitive advantage strategies used by small business owners in the service industry to maintain profitability for more than 5 years after business establishment. I conducted semistructured interviews with six small business owners that were in business longer than 5 years to obtain my data. The participants for the semistructured interviews reside and operate their businesses in Houston, TEXAS. I used member checking to ensure data saturation and validity (Harvey, 2015; Houghton et al., 2013). Data saturation was reached at the point in an interview where I gathered enough data to find the answer to the central research question (Marais & Wyk, 2014). The analysis of each emergent theme was linked back to the literature, existing bodies of knowledge, and the conceptual framework for this study.

In conclusion, the competitive advantage strategies that small business owners need to sustain their business beyond the first 5 years are plans for financial capital, marketing and competitive advantage strategies, and great customer service. Small business owners must have money to start their businesses and sustain their growth. Traditional funding sources may not always be easily attainable. Small business owners need to think outside of the box and make use of nontraditional sources to finance their businesses. Marketing is part of the small business longevity equation that will likely never go away. Social media and technology are making it much easier for small business owners to market more effectively. Small business entrepreneurs should include the knowledge of social media, social networks, and social responsibility into their strategy

planning for their business sustainability. It is important for small business owners to meet customer needs and expectations by providing good customer service and quality products. Participants revealed that valuing employees' skills and developing relationships that will foster personal and professional growth contributed to small business profitability. My contribution for this study is to provide small business owners with more information to sustain their success in their business. The findings of this study could create positive social outcomes and help improve the longevity of some small businesses.

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## Appendix A: Interview Protocol

- I. Introduce self to participant (s).
- II. Present consent form, go over contents, answering questions and concerns of participant(s).
- III. Participant signs consent form.
- IV. Give participant copy of consent form.
- V. Turn on the recording device.
- VI. Follow procedure to introduce participant(s) with pseudonym/coded identification, note the date and time.
- VII. Begin interview with Question 1, follow through to final question.
- VIII. Follow up with additional questions.
- IX. End interview sequence; discuss member checking with participant(s).
  - a. Thank you the participant(s) for their parts in the study.
  - b. Reiterate contact number for follow up questions and concerns from participants.
- X. End protocol.

## Appendix B: Interview Questions

The interview questions are as follows:

1. How many years have you been in business?
2. How do you implement your strategies to sustain your business?
3. What were the key barriers to implementing your strategies for sustaining business beyond 5 years?
4. How did you address the key barriers to implementing your strategies for sustaining business beyond 5 years?
5. What are the challenges you countered in developing your strategies?
6. What else, if anything, would you like to add to our conversation about the success factors and strategies related to your business' survival during the first 5 years?