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Success Strategies of Small and Medium-Sized Retail Enterprises in North Dakota

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Walden University

College of Management and Technology

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David A. Frantsvog

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the review committee have been made.

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Walden University
2019

Abstract

Success Strategies of Small and Medium-Sized Retail Enterprises in North Dakota

by

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MS, Minot State University, 2007

BS, Minot State University, 2004

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Business Administration

Walden University

April 2019

Abstract

Entrepreneurial organizations are an integral part of the United States economy. Despite the importance of sustainable businesses operations, nearly 50% of entrepreneurial ventures fail within the first 5 years of operation. The purpose of this multiple case study was to determine the effective strategies that some owners of small and medium-sized retail firms in North Dakota used to maintain profitable business operations for more than 5 years. General systems theory was the conceptual framework for this study. The population was 5 owners of profitable small and medium-sized retail firms in North Dakota who have been in operation for a minimum of 5 years and are at least 18 years old. Data were collected from semistructured interviews and review of documentation such as training manuals, financial statements, strength-weakness-opportunities- threat analyses, industry periodicals, and ordering materials to support data triangulation. The data were analyzed according to Yin's process of evaluating, categorizing, organizing, analyzing, and rearranging research data. Five themes emerged from data analysis: leadership strategies, financial strategies, marketing strategies, inventory strategies, and customer-centricity strategies. The findings of this study may help small and medium-sized retail enterprises owners increase business sustainability rates. Increased retail business sustainability rates may contribute to positive social change by employing more people, improving the standard of living for employees, and increasing tax revenues for local, state and federal governments.

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Dedication

I dedicate this doctoral study to the individuals in my life that have continuously encouraged me to achieve goals that I thought to be unobtainable. I dedicate this doctoral study to my mother and father Robert and Sandy Frantsvog. Without your tireless commitment to my success, I would certainly not have been able to achieve this academic milestone. Thank you for believing in me. I will never be able to adequately reciprocate your constant love and commitment to my success. Words are not able to describe the profound respect and love that I have for you both.

I dedicate this doctoral study to my wife, Shanda. You have been a silent partner throughout this doctoral journey and a constant source of strength. Without your unwavering commitment to my advancement, I would have undoubtedly failed long ago. Thank you for listening. Thank you for understanding. Thank you for your steadfast support. You are the most profound partner that I could have ever hoped for and far better than I deserve.

I dedicate this doctoral study to my children Jayden, Ethan, Dawson, and Londyn. You are my inspiration and a constant motivating force to always move forward despite the adversity faced. You are the light of my life. I love you all more than words can describe. I am truly blessed to have children as wonderful as you.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study

According to the U. S. Small Business Administration (2018), owners of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) employ more than 58 million people and represent over 95% of all businesses in the United States. SMEs contribute to job creation and economic growth in many areas of the United States and play a vital role in the economic well-being of regional, state, and national economies. With new businesses being such a prominent component of the U.S. economy, it is essential that researchers conduct studies on the business sustainability strategies that successful entrepreneurs have used to maintain operations beyond the critical 5-year time frame. According to Huggins, Prokop, and Thompson (2017), several factors can contribute to improved business practices, business performance, and profits, but challenges remain with ensuring business sustainability. Despite the importance of SMEs, business failure continues to disrupt communities throughout the United States. The purpose of this doctoral study is to help minimize community disruption by researching business sustainability strategies that owners of retail SMEs in North Dakota have used to maintain operations beyond the first 5 years.

Background of the Problem

There are more than 29 million SMEs in the United States, which were responsible for the creation of 61.8% of the new job growth from 1993 to 2016 (U. S. Small Business Administration, 2017b). Although there is significant job creation occurring in the United States because of new entrepreneurial ventures, the majority of new businesses eventually fail. According to the U.S. Small Business Administration

(2017b), 20% of small businesses fail within the first year of operation, and only 50% maintain operations beyond 5 years. Because business failure is so prominent, it is essential for researchers and business owners to understand the strategies that are necessary to increase the likelihood of business survival. Navis and Ozbek (2016) stated that business owners must understand and incorporate appropriate logistical measures and implement strategies to improve business performance. SMEs are a significant and vital component of the U.S. economy, and it is imperative to understand the reasons for organizational success.

Problem Statement

Business leaders frequently fail to use defined business strategies, which can lead to poor organizational performance or even business failure (Huggins et al., 2017). According to the U.S. Department of Labor (2016), nearly 50% of entrepreneurial ventures fail within the first 5 years, and only 35% survive for 10 years or more. The general business problem is that some entrepreneurs are not actively capitalizing on entrepreneurial opportunities to improve business performance. The specific business problem is that some retail SME owners lack effective strategies to sustain profitable business operations beyond the first 5 years.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to investigate effective strategies that retail SME owners have used to sustain profitable business operations beyond the first 5 years. The population was five retail SME owners in North Dakota. The prospective social benefit of this doctoral study is an increased success rate of retail

SMEs that may result in the employment of more people, improved prosperity and standards of living for employees, and increased tax revenue for communities.

Nature of the Study

According to Yin (2017), there are three types of research methods: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method. For this doctoral study, a qualitative method was appropriate. The qualitative method is suitable for a study when a researcher seeks to identify participants' experiences and perspectives and gain a valuable description of the study phenomenon (Bristowe, Selman, & Murtagh, 2015; Cairney & Denny, 2015; Gergen, Josselson, & Freeman, 2015). A quantitative method was considered but deemed inappropriate. Researchers use the quantitative method to examine relations of magnitude between variables measuring quantities and uses the numeric analysis of data to test and verify these relations (Landrum & Garza, 2015). The quantitative method was not appropriate because the purpose of the study was not to examine relations of magnitude among variables by using numerical data. A mixed methodology was also inappropriate for this study because it uses both qualitative and quantitative methods. Because this doctoral research does not seek to identify the relationships and differences between two or more variables, a mixed methodology was not appropriate.

I used a multiple case study design in this study. According to Yin (2017), a case study design encompasses real-life settings related to events and situations and may use multiple participants for comparison and to obtain information replication and reliability. Other qualitative designs, such as phenomenology and ethnography, were considered but deemed inappropriate. Phenomenology researchers seek to understand participants lived

experiences and their perception and interpretation of events through in-depth interviews (Lawlor & Solomon, 2017). Ethnographic researchers investigate culturally focused business problems by studying the behaviors, beliefs, and experiences of a group of individuals (Eika, Dale, Espnes, & Hvalvik, 2015).

Research Question and Interview Questions

This study was guided by the following research question: What strategies do retail SME owners use to sustain profitable business operations beyond 5 years? The following nine interview questions yielded the data to answer it:

1. What skills or training did you have before starting your business that, based on your experience, contributed to your business sustainability beyond 5 years?
2. How did you acquire financing to start your business, and what, if any, contribution did financing play in your business sustainability beyond 5 years?
3. What strategies did you use, if any, to overcome the challenges of business ownership during the first 5 years of owning a retail SME?
4. What resources did you use that were beneficial during the start-up years that helped you remain in business for over 5 years?
5. What are the key success strategies have you used to sustain your business beyond 5 years?
6. What were the primary barriers that you faced with implementing your described success strategies?
7. What did you do to overcome the key barriers to implementing your key

success strategies?

8. How did you assess the effectiveness of the strategies you employed that effectively allowed you to sustain business operations beyond 5 years?
9. What else can you share with me about the strategies you developed and deployed to sustain your business beyond the first 5 years?

Conceptual Framework

I choose general systems theory (GST) as the conceptual framework for this doctoral study. The biologist, Von Bertalanffy, is considered the originator of the GST (Mockler, 1968). With GST, Von Bertalanffy focused on the complexity and interdependence of objects and their environment (1972). Retail SME's are multifaceted entities, and owners require a holistic conceptual framework to understand their businesses' complexity. Conceptualizing an organization using GST, leaders, and managers attempt to avoid individual problems by focusing on the dynamic interactions and intercommunications among components of the system (Mockler, 1968). Von Bertalanffy (1972) hypothesized that a system is an amalgamation of separate subsystems that work together and function as a whole. General systems theory subordinates the separate units or departments of a business into decision-making information and communication networks (Mockler, 1968). Using GST as a conceptual framework may enable the exploration and understanding of how the interrelated elements that comprise successful business operations synergistically contribute to business sustainability beyond the first 5 years.

Operational Definitions

The terms used in this study are defined as follows:

General systems theory (GST). General systems theory is a conceptual framework that allows researchers to recognize how unique and interacting elements within different systems have the potential to influence those systems in distinctive ways (Simola, 2018).

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). In the United States, the definition of an SME varies by industry. The U.S. Small Business Administration has set two commonly used size limitations which are 500 employees for most manufacturing and mining industries and \$7.5 million in average annual revenue for many nonmanufacturing sectors (SBA, 2017a).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

Assumptions

Assumptions refer to the beliefs that researchers have about their topics of analysis that they hold as factual or conceivable (Zientek, Nimon, & Hammack-Brown, 2016). The first assumption in this study was that the participants of this study gave accurate responses to the questions asked because they understand that their answers are confidential. The second assumption was that the study participants did not feel pressured to reply to questions in any way. The third assumption was that the interviews allowed for an opportunity to explore universal themes. Universal themes would allow for sufficient common theme development on the strategies that SME retailers have used to sustain their organizations beyond the first 5 years.

Limitations

According to Matza, Boye, Stewart, Curtis, Reaney, and Landrian (2015), limitations are potential weaknesses of the study that are not within the researcher's control. The first limitation was that this study had an initial minimal sample size of five SME retail owners which may not accurately represent all small business owners. A second limitation was that SME leaders might not have the appropriate knowledge or be able to accurately articulate their experiences to form a meaningful response regarding retail SME sustainability strategies.

Delimitations

Delimitations are the restrictions that are put in place by the researcher so that their research goals are not too broad to complete (Nelms, 2015). A delimitation of this study was that participants who are neither retail SME owners or managers nor have knowledge of retail SME management did not participate in the interviews. A second delimitation was that this study excluded SMEs business owners that have not been operating for more than 5 years. A third delimitation was the geographic location, which was constrained to North Dakota.

Significance of the Study

Business sustainability researchers and SME leaders who desire to maintain profitable business operations beyond 5 years are the intended audiences for the information contained within this doctoral study. This doctoral research may have value in retail business operations because the conclusions may benefit SME leaders who seek to formulate policies and develop strategies for avoiding business failure. Understanding

the strategies for SME success may encourage entrepreneurship in rural markets where declines in business activity and employment have occurred.

Contribution to Business Practice

The purpose of this doctoral study was to explore the effective strategies that retail SME owners have used to sustain profitable business operations beyond the first 5 years. Such an understanding may provide a more comprehensive awareness of the reasons for business failure. There is currently a limited amount of information on the strategies used by retail SME owner-managers in North Dakota, which, based on the owners' experiences, have contributed to business sustainability beyond 5 years.

The significance of this doctoral research rests on the potential use by retail SME owners to increase the profitability and hence the sustainability of their retail SMEs. Current and future retail SME owners may benefit from the identification of strategies that retail SME owners in North Dakota have used to sustain profitable business operations beyond the first 5 years.

Implications for Social Change

The results of this study may introduce new findings, conclusions, and recommendations into the existing body of knowledge to address SME sustainability beyond 5 years. The compiled information may lead to a positive social change in the form of increased sustainability among retail SMEs beyond the first 5 years. Identifying the success strategies that retail SME owners used to sustain their businesses beyond the first 5 years may positively affect communities by employing more people, improving prosperity and standards of living for employees, and increasing tax revenues for local,

state and federal governments.

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

According to Guarnieri, Sobreiro, Nagano, & Serrano (2015), a literature review synthesizes and summarizes the academic literature as it relates to a research topic and helps to answer the specific research question. The reason for this qualitative multiple case study was to discover the strategies retail SME owners have used to sustain their businesses beyond the first 5 years. The strategy utilized to synthesize and summarize the research topic focused on answering the following research question: What strategies do retail SME owners use to sustain business operations beyond 5 years?

This doctoral study contains extensive research that directly relates to the conceptual framework and topics associated with business sustainability. The search keywords and terms used in the literature review included the following: *GST, Ludvig Von Bertalanffy, small, business sustainability, entrepreneurship, SME success, SME leadership, SME sustainability, small business leadership strategies, transformational leadership, transactional leadership, servant leadership, entrepreneurial leadership, leadership development practices, and entrepreneurial motivation*. Additional keywords included: *international expansion, international commerce, technology in small business, social media use in small business, socially responsible business practices, small business failure, small business marketing practices, branding, electronic commerce, and geographic business constraints*. The development of the literature review search terms was orchestrated to help develop a diverse and unique collection of business sustainability literature.

An extensive review of academic journals, as well as books, provided insight on retail SME sustainability strategies beyond the first 5 years. In total, the literature review contains 87 references, which includes 3 book references and 84 journal references. Of the 84 journal references, 78 are peer-reviewed sources, which represents 92.8% of the total. Also, 85% of all the references had a publication date that is within 5 years of the anticipated chief academic officer approval. The literature review is formatted thematically and discusses GST, the foundations of GST, the applicable uses of GST, leadership, transformational leadership, transactional leadership, servant leadership, entrepreneurial leadership, a comparison of leadership styles, SME success and failure, SME entry into foreign markets, business sustainability strategies, and the use of technology to overcome geographic constraints.

Conceptual Framework: General Systems Theory

In this doctoral study, GST is the conceptual framework. Because business operations are complex and interconnected, it can be beneficial to understand organizational function as a series of interrelated parts. To understand how using a systems approach can benefit leaders and researchers, it is essential to understand the foundations of GST. Ludwig Von Bertalanffy, Kenneth Boulding, Norbert Wiener, and Herbert Simon are four of the better-known contributors to the development of GST (Mockler, 1968). Researchers consider Ludwig Von Bertalanffy to be the primary contributing theorist behind GST (Pouvreau, 2014). Von Bertalanffy introduced the concepts of GST in 1937, and he innovated the theory in 1949 and continued the innovation in 1972 (Pouvreau, 2014). According to Von Bertalanffy (1972), GST is the

interdisciplinary study of systems and the interrelationships between their distinct segments. General systems theory views a system as a whole and emphasizes the exchanges and interrelationships of its various subsystems (Von Bertalanffy, 1968). Researchers use GST to focus on properties, principles, and laws considering the interaction between individual components of systems (Von Bertalanffy, 1972). According to Caws (2015), a system contains single or multifaceted units encompassing a set of interrelated components. The organizational concept of interconnected systems in businesses operations has revolutionized how researchers and business leaders can envision corporate operations.

Foundations of General Systems Theory

General systems theory is dynamic, but the central focus is on the interconnected balance which researchers observe in natural ecosystems. The basis of GST derives its foundations from nature, detailing how interconnected components comprise an aggregate ecosystem. According to Rousseau (2015), human groups and cultures are like the open systems within biological structures as described by Von Bertalanffy. General systems theory views business as though they were ecosystems because ecosystems encompass interconnected individual components that when working together form a harmonious, interrelated and sustainable ecosystem.

With GST, Von Bertalanffy focused upon comprehensive organizational systems with technology, society, and human beings working together to pursue mutual corporate goals (Gilsen, 2015). It is crucial that business leaders and employees openly communicate about company goals and work together to reach their organizational

objectives. Terra, Passador, Ventura, and Medeiros (2015) stated that businesses are often complex organizations with several relationships and interactions between people and subsystems that frequently require adjustments for changing conditions and inputs from their environment.

As consumer consumption trends vary over time, organizational objectives can change, and business leaders must work to maintain profitable operations in a constantly evolving business landscape. According to Sayin (2016), the use of GST can help direct business leaders to determine the strategies that are necessary to improve a process which has changed due to the evolving business environment. Organizational change is a constant in today's economic landscape, and successful organizations must evolve to adapt to the changing business environment. According to DeBoer and Andersen (2016), the essential components of system theory are system boundaries, system structure, and system stability and adaptive behaviors. Economic, social, and political variables are continually changing, and GST allows researchers and business leaders to conceptualize organizational activities in a way that is holistic and inclusive to allow for better understanding. According to Hughes, Newstead, Anund, Shu, and Falkmer (2015), system theory encourages analysis and actions through the process of gathering information and forming conclusions from all parts of a system. Adopting a systems approach to understanding managerial functions may allow for a more precise conceptualization of business sustainability strategies because the conceptual framework offers a unique lens to view corporate operations. Corporate operations often involve complex interactions between leaders and employees whose actions play a role in

collaboration with other active members (Araujo, Bucher-Maluschke, & Pedroso, 2016). Researchers can use GST as an advanced way to conceptualize interrelated and often complicated business functions and personal interactions more holistically.

Applicable Uses of General Systems Theory

By using GST, business leaders can explore business systems in a holistic manner (Von Bertalanffy, 1972). According to Hitt, Xu, and Carnes (2016), the use of theories supports researchers that seek to understand phenomena linked to operations management. General systems theory has many advantages for researchers seeking to understand business sustainability as it allows for the connection of seemingly separate business functions to better appreciate the holistic nature of organizational activities and processes. According to Salmons, Kaczynski, and Smith (2015), qualitative researchers use GST to study relationships between subsystems and discover distinctive attributes that contribute to system behavior. A systems approach is beneficial as a conceptual framework because it consists of several interrelated parts that focus on businesses as a cohesive unit. Gilson (2015) reiterated this concept by stating that a systems approach to conceptualizing organizational culture focuses on understanding the dynamic behavior of the organization rather than the actions of individual components.

A systems concept of organization attempts to avoid individual problems by focusing on the dynamic interaction and intercommunication among components of the system (Mockler, 1968). According to Caws (2015), systems are a collection of independent elements and have a purposeful relationship with each other. By focusing on the collection of independent elements, business leaders and researchers may be able to

appreciate the importance of conceptualizing collaborative environments to achieve predetermined goals. Systems thinking as a field is applicable across several disciplines with many practical applications which researchers have described as transdisciplinary because of systems concepts (Midgley & Wilby, 2015).

Despite the importance of collaboration and cooperation, some organizational leaders have difficulty working together to reach business objectives. According to Zenko, Rosi, Mulej, Mlakar, & Mulej (2013), few humans are capable of interdisciplinary expertise, but specializations and their need for each other along with restriction of individual incapacity to solve problems in isolation forces holistic work to solve organizational problems. Business leaders who holistically view their companies and promote systemic cooperation can potentially increase business sustainability by facilitating the connection between different operations and individuals. Without interdisciplinary collaboration, organizational fragmentation may occur which may have detrimental effects on business sustainability. By utilizing general systems theory, researchers can disassemble the system to observe the association between components, which helps them to discover the unique features of the system (Salmona et al., 2015). Business units and processes can be complicated, so it is vital that leaders understand the aggregate function of individual business components to increase the likelihood of organizational sustainability.

Business leaders benefit from the increased awareness of the diverse organizational divisions and by understanding how these divisions interact with and affect other business units (Valentinov & Chatalova, 2016). Without the ability to

critically think about business system interactions, business leaders may succumb to the amalgamation of complex interactions resulting in business failure. According to Williams (2017), complexity increases the risk of failure in new project implementations. New project implementation may be necessary for business survival, making it essential for business leaders to fully understand the complex nature of their organizations to increase the likelihood of implementation success.

Business leaders and researchers must consider several factors when utilizing GST, including external business forces which frequently have dramatic effects on company operations. Business leaders must prudently consider external forces from a systems approach and carefully consider business sustainability factors that may be outside standard business control. Business leaders can apply GST to their leadership philosophy, which can have value when seeking to understand leadership strategies and behavior (Adams, Hester, Bradley, Meyers, & Keating, 2014). The proper administration of new projects within complex systems requires an interconnectedness within the operations of an organization (Leonardi, Bailey, Diniz, Sholler, & Nardi, 2016).

Effective business management is a complicated process and understanding business operations can allow managers to be more effective in their application of organizational objectives. Holistic understanding of business operations may lead to improved management skills which may ultimately foster increased organizational outcomes and increase business sustainability. With advanced management skills, entrepreneurs may be able to able to mitigate an increasingly complex and competitive business environment. The strategies utilized in GST can help business leaders

understand the *whys* and *hows* of complex components of their business (Adams et al., 2014). Understanding businesses as a group of individual systems may allow for business leaders to understand organizational fragmentation and how to resolve issues that result from compartmentalized business units.

Fragmentation is an inevitable result of the spread of new systems ideas (Midgley & Wilby, 2015). While some might think fragmentation to be a negative consequence of success, it also brings with it an opportunity for mutual learning from cooperative individuals that may enhance systems practices in diverse domains (Midgley & Wilby, 2015). Business level strategic change is complicated and dynamic, and a systems approach can be useful in understanding interrelated systematic changes. According to Adams et al. (2014), by using GST, business leaders gain a better understanding of business operating systems. By understanding operating systems business leaders may have an increased ability to remain competitive despite the scale and financial constraints associated with SMEs. Sayin (2016) stated that the use of GST might help to expose the standards or procedures that are necessary and will foster the development of the processes required to reach the stated business objectives.

Business leaders can use the paradigms associated with GST to understand human behavior to increase the trust of customers within their communities. A method of improving mutual trust with customers is to increase the level and frequency of communication efforts involved in various business facets. By using a systems approach, managers are forced to look at business organizations as communication and information networks with the flow of information provided to decision-makers at varying

management levels (Mockler, 1968). By applying the concepts of GST, business leaders ensure a better way of promoting communication which helps owners sustain their businesses over prolonged periods (Adams et al., 2014). Through the application of GST strategies, business leaders can understand real-world systems as a cohesive unit (Adams et al., 2014). With enhanced communication strategies fragmented organizational groups can work together as a cohesive unit to achieve predetermined business goals.

Business leaders that utilize GST view their organizations as a focused system of interrelated subsystems working in unison with each other to achieve shared goals in a changing business environment (Wang, Shi, Nevo, Li, & Chen, 2015). Realizing that companies are elaborate sets of systems may allow researchers and business leaders to form new concepts that may inspire increased business intelligence. Collective intelligence and actions enable a holistic approach to solving business problems and may increase the probability of achieving predetermined organizational goals.

According to Caws (2015), leaders benefit when they take a holistic approach to governing their operationally closed social systems. When businesses are operationally closed, they have a decreased ability to understand how compartmentalized actions affect other organizational aspects. The development of GST began with the observation that ecosystems are complicated, but they seem to maintain balance despite variations in the systems. Valentinov and Chatalova (2016) stated that a sustainable operation of the system in a steady state is only possible if the predator continually regulates its behavior to that of the prey. The predatory adjustment must match the prey's regeneration rate (Valentinov & Chatalova, 2016). DeBoer and Andersen (2016) reiterated this statement

by saying organizational systems must continuously adapt because environmental factors must be maintained to ensure sustainable continuity. Valentinov's, Chatalova's, DeBoer's and Andersen's comments resonate with business organizations because it is necessary for organizational leaders to continuously adjust their operations to remain solvent, just as a predator must adapt their practices to help ensure that they will continue to thrive. All operational functions are interlinked, and it is appropriate to approach them holistically as connected, self-sustaining networks. Sustainable business strategies involve customers, owners, and employees who are interconnected and must be viewed holistically to understand further how interconnected individuals and components affect the system.

Systems thinking has evolved into an amalgamation of ideas that can help to solve complex real-world problems (Mingers, 2015; Rajagopalan & Midgley, 2015). The use of GST as a conceptual framework in complex industries can allow elaborate individual business units the opportunity to work together holistically to achieve goals that appear too complicated when viewed a non-holistic manner. Focusing on entire organizational systems working together to attain corporate goals may improve the ability to meet objectives as the process connects variables in a way that aligns complex operations. Business leaders of large companies are not the only beneficiaries of GST because the underlying concepts can be readily applied to smaller organizations as a conceptual framework to achieve business goals. General systems theory was used in this study because it offers a theoretical lens to holistically understand how SME leaders can sustain business operations beyond the first 5 years.

Leadership

Small business leaders are vital contributors to the economic well-being of society. According to Koens and Thomas (2015); Nwobu, Faboyede, and Onwuelingo (2015), the prosperity of society depends upon the behaviors of small business leaders who can expand economic outcomes. Burns (1978) defined leadership as a mutual process of mobilizing people with motives and values to achieve goals independently or mutually held by both leaders and followers. Afsar, Badir, Saeed, and Hafeez (2017) stated that leaders play a vital role in encouraging and supporting the resourcefulness of employees to explore new opportunities, develop new products, and improve work procedures for the benefit of the organization. Although leadership is a well-known component of innovation and organizational success, individual leadership ability can vary significantly, and a business leader must often work diligently to develop their leadership style. Lin, MacLennan, Hunt, and Cox, (2015) described a leadership style as the way a leader delivers directions, executes plans, and influences people. Leadership style development emphasizes the process of developing leaders and enhancing leadership capacity in organizations. According to Garavan, Watson, Carbery, and O'Brien (2016), leadership development is critical for SMEs and challenging to implement. According to Freeman and Siegfried (2015), it can be difficult to guide employees to adopt leadership positions within organizations. Individual leadership development practices can vary with personal attributes contributing to leadership development preferences. Business owner-managers (OMs) incorporate their values, beliefs, and attitudes into decision making; therefore, adopting leadership development

practices is based on personal leadership preferences (Garavan et al., 2016). Leadership ability can have a significant impact on business success, and continual development may be necessary to help promote organizational sustainability. When SME OMs have positive attitudes towards leadership development and perceive them to be strategically vital, there will be greater adoption of leadership development practices (Garavan et al., 2016). Leadership development can be pivotal to organizational success, and entrepreneurs need to focus on their attitudes to ensure they develop a leadership style that coincides with their attributes and fosters organizational success. Franco and Matos (2015) reiterated the importance of leadership development by stating that leadership plays a central role in SME management with leader's behavior, actions, and attitudes being a determinant in defining the leadership style.

The concept of SME leadership practices may have poignant ramifications on organizational success, but some researchers have stated that there is more information needed to understand SME leadership. Franco and Matos (2015) reported that there is a significant amount of studies in the field of leadership, but researchers have conducted very little work on SMEs. As SMEs are such a prominent component of the global economic landscape, it may be beneficial to understand SME leadership tendencies. Individual leadership tendencies can vary widely based on factors such as industry type, personal attributes, organizational objectives, and employee responses. With several different known leadership styles, there is no single leadership style followed faithfully by SME leaders (Franco & Matos, 2015). Although there is no unique leadership style used by all entrepreneurs, there can be shared tendencies. The following sections explore

several prominent leadership styles and how the individual leadership styles may contribute to SME sustainability.

Transformational Leadership

One common form of organizational leadership is transformational leadership. Transformational leadership is described by Bass (1985) as actively seeking to change the personal values of followers so that they can go beyond their self-interest for the good of larger entities such as a group or an organization. At a group level, transformational leadership helps develop a team's identity, shared vision, and collective commitment by rewarding team achievement and drawing attention to characteristics and accomplishments that differentiate the team from other groups (Li, Mitchell, & Boyle, 2016). When business leaders display commitment, employees feel obligated to care about organizational prosperity and to help their company reach its objectives (Dajani, 2015). Transformational leadership can help facilitate open and receptive business environments that promote commitment and achievement because transformational leadership emphasizes building trusting relationships and empowering employees. Kim, Liden, Kim, and Lee (2015) stated that transformational leaders could improve employment outcomes, which include job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Tung (2016) expanded on this statement by saying that a transformational leadership style also has a significant effect on employee creativity. With the proper type of encouragement, followers can generate new ideas and think creatively (Henker, Sonnentag, & Unger, 2015). According to de Oliveira Rodrigues and Ferreira (2015), transformational leaders are exceptionally capable of leading their subordinates to take

actions that go beyond their prescribed roles. Transformational leaders can motivate associates to achieve the desired outcomes and inspire increased performance in followers. On an individual level, transformational leaders build followers' motivation and skills by setting challenging work targets, providing advanced training, and offering developmental feedback (Li, Mitchell, & Boyle, 2016). Transformational leaders are role models for their followers and work diligently to motivate and inspire.

In addition to motivating employees and inspiring creativity, transformational leaders seek to increase employee engagement. According to Saboe, Taing, Way, and Johnson, (2015), employee engagement is essential to organizational leaders because they have devoted substantial resources toward the recruitment, orientation, and education of employees. When business leaders understand how to increase employee engagement, they may be able to reduce the costs associated with employee turnover. Feather, Ebright, & Bakas (2015) stated that supportive manager behaviors such as communication, respect, and caring significantly impacted job satisfaction and increased employee retention. Employee retention is a significant factor in sustainable business operations. When employees leave organizations, they create operational inefficiencies by which may lead to increased costs, therefore lowering the likelihood of organizational sustainability.

Another vital factor to consider when discussing transformational leaders is the appreciation and acceptance of organizational change. Organizational change includes the adjustment in business structure, internal process, and company personnel that are necessary to transform operations and compete in an evolving marketplace (Aaron,

Dunne, Geho, McDowell, & Urban, 2016). The economic landscape is continuously changing, and it is imperative that organizational leaders adjust their business practices to help maintain solvency in a business environment that continually evolves. Because the business landscape is always changing, it is crucial for entrepreneurs to develop a leadership style that motivates employees to pursue organizational objectives that may otherwise be deemed difficult, mundane, or undesirable.

When business leaders incorporate a transformational leadership perspective, they seek to increase the motivational level of employees by transforming the employee's previous ideas about the organization and the benefits of reaching the stated objectives. Transformational leaders focus on build trusting relationships with employees to facilitate their ability in interact, which can lead to an increased ability to change employee attitudes about organizational activities. SME leaders can utilize a transformational leadership style to motivate employees to work together to achieve the stated corporate objectives.

Transactional Leadership

Transactional leadership is another commonly referenced leadership style. Transactional leadership encompasses an exchange process that may result in follower compliance with leader requests. Transactional leadership is most appropriate for employees who are motivated by reward (Aarons, Ehrhart, Moullin, Torres, & Green, 2017; Kanste, Kaariainen, & Kyngas, 2009). Transactional leaders have specific goals and organizational processes to determine how employees are performing. Transactional leaders focus on predetermined criteria that are used to monitor and assess employee

activities. When employees execute well, their leaders reward them in a predetermined structured manner. When employees do not perform well, leaders discipline them for not achieving organizational expectations. Leaders enforce expectations and standards for employees through performance management initiatives (Baškarada, Watson, & Cromarty, 2016). In transactional leadership, the fundamental characteristic is the mechanism of exchange established between leaders and subordinates (de Oliveira Rodrigues & Ferreira, 2015). When business leaders utilize a transactional leadership style, they are stating the objectives that are necessary to obtain set organizational goals, and they are making employees aware of the consequences of their actions if they are not able to fulfill the predetermined and known business goals.

Although there are advantages to the use of a transactional leadership style, it may be less desirable in some organizational settings. Transactional leaders may utilize an exchange process that results in follower compliance with the leader's requests, but the follower may lack enthusiasm and commitment to task objectives or strategies. When subordinates only focus on obtaining specific organizational criteria, there is the possibility that employees are merely concerned about reaching predetermined goals while ignoring other critical business-related activities. Businesses operations encompass many interconnected and often complicated systems. When employees focus on obtaining only predetermined goals and avoid punishment for lack of performance, there is a possibility that the employee may neglect critical organizational targets for which managers did not explicitly state all the pertinent objectives. Even though business performance is such a prominent part of sustainable companies, there can be disconnects

between the stated goals, leader-follower relationships, and completion of the work necessary to obtain long-term business viability. Transactional leaders are not inherently concerned about forming a cohesive bond with employees, or employee development; they are more focused on reaching the stated business goals. Current research related to transactional leadership suggests that organizational performance and the leader/follower relationship are two distinct outcomes of the leadership style (Quintana, Park, & Cabrera, 2015).

Transactional leadership is defined as a leadership style based on contingent reinforcement, asserting that leaders lack the motivation to improve the development of subordinates, and their leadership style is rooted in predetermined motives (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999). Transactional leadership involves the use of motivational strategies that use praise and rewards for satisfactory work, and contrary corrective activities such as disciplinary actions when the leader is dissatisfied with the performance of their subordinates (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999). When business leaders focus on the utilization of a transactional leadership style, they are incorporating strategies that promote explicit organizational objectives. Transactional leadership styles do have some potentially adverse characteristics, but at its core, it is not entirely negative. According to Bass (1985), the primary objective of transactional leadership focuses on providing clear task objectives and job outlines and provides positive feedback when it is appropriate while disciplining subordinates who do not comply. Some researchers argue that transformational and transactional leadership styles are both excellent methods for motivating employees and developing creative conceptualizations that allow businesses

to excel. According to Deichmann and Stam (2015), transformational and transactional leadership are equally suitable for encouraging employees to create new ideas that move the organization forward. The transactional leadership philosophy has significant value to small business leaders that seek to construct a clear path for employees to follow which may lead to increased business sustainability.

Servant Leadership

According to Du Plessis, Wakelin, and Nel (2015), four principles are foundational in servant leadership: sacrifice, duty to a worthy cause, the belief that the ends and means are inherently linked, and resilient relationships. Servant leaders believe that these principles are pivotal to the success of an organization and that leadership actions are a vital factor in the success of the business. Servant leaders are willing to take the leadership steps necessary to achieve valued business objectives. Another component of servant leadership is the belief that it is essential for leaders to act in a manner that is ethical and in the best interest of their followers. Ethical leadership is the extent to which leaders are honest, trustworthy, and act with integrity (Liden et al., 2015). Followers may view moral values to be an essential characteristic of business leaders because it may be intrinsically beneficial for employees to act morally as well. When employees observe their leaders morally working, they may appreciate that attribute and mirror the leader's attitudes and actions as they are determined to be valuable to their business community.

Servant leaders value their community because service to others provides an opportunity for individuals to experience interdependence, respect, trust, and personal growth (Greenleaf, 1970). Servant leaders understand the importance of personal growth

as it not only benefits the individuals involved but also can have positive ramifications for the organization. Senior-level servant leaders play a vital role in helping employees realize the importance of service to their companies, which in turn helps businesses achieve organizational goals (Ling, Lin, & Wu, 2016). Many employees operate best in a positive and proactive environment, and they do not perform at optimum levels in a work environment that is hypercritical and continuously focuses on strict guidelines and rigid business environments.

Servant leaders place the needs of others before themselves, which may lead to a more engaged workforce that seeks to benefit others. Employee engagement is an essential component of successful leadership because of the relationships that it helps to build. Leaders need the ability to create professional connections: knowing how to work together, how to listen and be compassionate, and how to have the capacity to persuade (Niță, 2015). When leaders adopt a servant leadership style, they can help foster an environment that seeks to actively engage with their subordinates in a way that can create deep and meaningful relationships which in turn may be beneficial to the long-term sustainability of the organization.

Entrepreneurial Leadership

Entrepreneurial leaders appear to be more motivational than conventional entrepreneurs, more robust than mainstream leaders, and more sociable, flexible and intuitive than both individual groups (Ling, Standen, & Coetzer, 2017). Entrepreneurial leaders are visionary entrepreneurs who also have the motivation and ethics of a leader (Ling et al., 2017). Entrepreneurial leaders that seek to maintain focus on the future must

foster an environment that focuses on continual changes and business evolution. Entrepreneurial leadership behaviors are essential for innovation, growth, and organizational success (Afsar et al., 2017). According to Alberti and Varon Garrido (2017), incorporating innovative ways of doing business that support profit and sustainability is a crucial challenge for managers and business strategists in the twenty-first century. Innovation encompasses applying new ideas to generate value (Holt & Daspit, 2015; Ribeiro-Soriano, 2017). Baškarada et al. (2016) stated that leaders utilizing a culture of exploration make it clear that they have a desire for innovative outcomes and lead with a constructive approach. Open innovation strategies in SMEs is a sophisticated and highly professional activity that incorporates vision and strategy into SMEs (Krstevski & Mancheski, 2016). Because the business landscape is continuously evolving, an entrepreneurial leadership style may be necessary to adjust to the changing economic landscape. Despite the importance of a visionary mindset in an evolving business landscape, entrepreneurial leadership is not as prominent as other leadership styles. According to Ling et al. (2017), the notion of entrepreneurial leadership has attracted interest from leading scholars, but it is still a neglected area in entrepreneurship and SME research.

Some researchers have suggested that entrepreneurial leadership has a leadership construct which can be part of a broader domain of governance (Renko, El Tarabishy, Carsrud, & Brännback, 2015). By including entrepreneurial leadership as part of a broader leadership domain, entrepreneurs could embrace several of the beneficial components such as visionary characteristics while maintaining various aspects of better

researched and utilized leadership styles. Entrepreneurial leadership is not as common as other leadership styles because it is deemed to be less focused than other leadership categories. According to Harrison, Leitch, and McAdam (2015), researchers have suggested that entrepreneurial leadership research lacks clarity and assessment tools. Without proper clarity and a means of adequately assessing entrepreneurial leadership, it may be difficult for researchers to sufficiently explore the organizational concept and difficult for entrepreneurs to incorporate into their businesses.

Comparison of Leadership Styles

A comparison of entrepreneurial leadership, transformational leadership, transactional leadership, and servant leadership styles reveals unique differences among the different leadership approaches. Additional research is needed to understand how context influences leadership style, as well as how the differences between transformational leadership, transactional leadership, servant leadership, and the entrepreneurial leadership affect business performance. One aspect that appears to be necessary when examining a leadership style is to determine a leader's personal preferences coupled with an understanding of the specific business environment. According to Coates and Howe (2015), leaders influence and inspire followers through numerous methods of leadership styles. Investigating leaders' personal leadership preferences combined with organizational context could provide insight into the transferability of leadership styles to different settings and help to determine how different leadership styles can affect SME strategies, which will ultimately contribute to organizational success or failure.

SME Success and Failure

Change is a constant component of business operations, and leaders that seek long-term business sustainability must understand that addressing change is necessary for business survival. According to Paucar-Caceres, Hart, Roma I Vergés, and Sierra-Lozano (2016), there are two ways of thinking when undertaking organizational change. The first method refers to the optimization paradigm which focuses on the development of solving methods in management science. In the second model Paucar-Caceres, et al. (2016) argue that reality is complex; it is socially constructed and a product of peoples' interactions, which are influenced by others. Business does not take place in a vacuum, and leaders need to understand the importance of outside influences and how their operations can impact the environment around them. Business leaders must work to develop strategies that promote business growth while remaining thoughtful of the fact that business is inherently risky and organizational changes require consideration in a way that will maximize results while minimizing risk.

Business leaders should utilize strategic,-operational management techniques to achieve their business objectives. Without adequately defined business techniques and targets, it can be difficult for organizational leaders to determine if the company has reached the level of success necessary to promote business sustainability. With the changing economic landscape, it has become essential for SMEs to stand out from competitors and be sustainable in business. According to Mitchell, Hutchinson, Quinn, and Gilmore (2015), it has become increasingly vital for SMEs to stand out. The world is increasingly dynamic and complex, and many businesses are struggling to redefine

themselves and understand their products, processes, and markets in new ways (Lemark, Henderson, & Wenger, 2004). According to Krstevski and Mancheski (2016), SMEs must undergo fundamental changes and continuously seek new ways to create future value. One strategy to develop future value is to penetrate international markets.

SME Entry into Foreign Markets

SME entry strategies into foreign markets translate into financial results for firms (Lo, Chiao, & Yu, 2016). When SMEs can penetrate international markets, they can expand their customer base beyond the local area which can lead to increased profitability. Another reason that SMEs may wish to enter a foreign market is due to increased competition in their primary locations. Holtgrave and Onay (2017) stated that globalization and global competition drives many SMEs to enter international markets. When competitive forces become too high in a specific area, it is deemed necessary to expand to other markets. By moving into new markets business owners expose their organizations to a new customer base and may be able to exploit a market that is less saturated than in their primary location. According to Franco and Matos (2015), the current business environment encompasses globalized markets, competition, technology, and innovation; and SMEs OMs must find and adopt strategies that allow them to overcome business challenges. Although it may be deemed necessary to enter foreign markets to remain financially viable, there are additional variables that can contribute to the entrepreneur's decision to join an international marketplace. According to Lo et al. (2016), more internal network linkages and the perception of significant variances in a host country's macroeconomic environment are all associated with admission into

international markets by SMEs. The decision to enter a global marketplace may be evident at times, but it is also critical for business leaders to ensure the timing of external business entry is well thought out. It is appropriate for SME business owners to accurately time their expansion into international markets to help ensure organizational success. According to Meschi, Ricard, and Tapia Moore (2017), time is a primary component in the internationalization process that guides structural changes that occur with SMEs while initiating and channeling future changes. The failure rate for firms embracing the late, slow, and careful sequential international expansion is considerably lower than in small businesses taking other paths to internationalization (Meschi et al., 2017). Koryak et al., (2015) concluded that evidence suggests that firm performance and growth excels when organizations successfully perform the critical processes of continuous improvement, correct market orientation, internationalization, and market development, well thought out joint venture formation, and adequate general functional and strategic management. Accurate and timely planning and implementation of international expansion are necessary to help ensure the success of organizational development and business sustainability beyond the first 5 years.

Business Sustainability Strategies

Montalbano, Nenci, and Pietrobelli, (2018) stated that it is vital that business owners understand the strategies that are necessary to operate effectively because an advanced understanding of effective business strategies can promote more business revenue and increase the likelihood of staying in business. Strategic objectives in a viable operating company include specific financial objectives, an ecological “footprint” to

improve the balance of the consumption of natural resources with the existing capacity, specific community targets that contribute to quality of life, cultural development, and conservation objectives (Ahlrichs, 2012). A new type of organizational thinking is expanding business sustainability concepts including social entrepreneurship, corporate social responsibility, partnerships, conscious capitalism, and sustainable development (Nagler, 2012). The foundation of corporate social responsibility is rooted in the ethical concerns and duties of the organization regarding stakeholders, employees, and communities that have direct and indirect contact with the company (Huang & Watson, 2015). When business leaders practice corporate social responsibility, they encourage support between business interests, social value, and environmental stewardship, which can have a profound impact on society (Shaukat, Qiu, & Trojanowski, 2016). Many leaders are changing the scope of their organizational objectives to be more attuned to the needs of all stakeholders that have an affiliation with the company, which can lead to substantial profits. Corporate social responsibility can be directly associated with increased profits levels and may increase compliance and decrease corruption through internal controls (Carroll, 2015).

Because markets are competitive, organizations are expanding their traditional organizational thinking in ways that may draw them to develop new strategies viewed as unconventional in standard marketplaces. Budget constraints have also lead enterprises to focus on new methods and low-cost strategies such as face-to-face agent sales to distribute products because traditional methods may not translate into sufficient sales (Couto & Ferreira, 2017). One way to help ensure adequate revenue streams is to utilize

effective marketing. Another way to approach profit and sustainability goals is to develop a hybrid business design, which is when a business leader designs their business model on the mitigation of social or environmental issues (Alberti & Varon Garrido, 2017). Business leaders may wish to focus their operations on social or environmental problems to convey the business's commitment to being socially responsible or due to an intrinsic desire to promote the greater societal good.

One way to help promote the greater societal good is for organizations to focus on social entrepreneurship. Social entrepreneurs can make a positive social impact and build the value of a community fostering trust by adopting a grassroots approach of listening to, learning from, and participating in the activities of community organizations (Heinze, Babiak, & Banaszak-Holl, 2016). The use of social entrepreneurship and market-based approaches can help to create sustainable businesses that allow organizations to profit and communities to benefit (Zaefarian, Tasavori, & Ghauri, 2015). By focusing on social entrepreneurship, business owners may be able to maintain sustainable business practices while positively impacting the communities.

There are other methods that business leaders can use to help promote sustainability that may not be well known to the more substantial body of organizational leaders. Agile leadership, hybrid skill development, architectural views, digital entrepreneurship, value creation, and value prospector were leadership qualities noted for strategic alignment (Li, Liu, Belitski, Ghobadian, & O'Regan, 2016). When there are systems changes, business leaders must focus on both economics and ecology to overcome the disconnect between people and nature (Case et al., 2015). Socially

responsible entrepreneurship philosophies may be helpful to business leaders that seek sustainable businesses, but they must carefully consider the proper marketing approaches to help ensure corporate prosperity. Kumar and Reinartz (2016) stated the most critical duties of marketing are to create and communicate value to customers which can drive satisfaction and loyalty, therefore leading to increased profitability. According to Edeling and Fischer (2016), marketing-mix decisions such as advertising spending do translate into financial results for firms. Effective marketers need to measure and manage the value of the customers to the business and must incorporate this aspect into real-time marketing decisions (Kumar & Reinartz, 2016). Decision makers who allocate resources to marketing, business operations, and customers are challenged to align resources spent on customers and products to generate value both to and from customers (Kumar & Reinartz, 2016). Another relevant subset of effective business and marketing strategies requiring consideration is corporate branding.

SME OMs play a vital role in the branding process (Mitchell et al., 2015). It is essential for SME retailers to focus on a conservative brand strategy by choosing to manage their brand in small market segments instead of exposing their company beyond their capabilities (Mitchell et al., 2015). Business leaders need to focus their marketing efforts on specific areas because there may be limited financial resources available to promote organizational activities. According to Mitchell et al. (2015), successful retailers take a cautious approach to branding, with owners seeking to build loyalty, relationships, and networks. By focusing on commitment and relationships, SME owners may be able to compete with other retailers that are more focused on product pricing and are less

focused on customer service. Successful retail OMs develop their own exclusive, value-added product identity based on a customer-first approach to retail branding (Mitchell et al., 2015).

The value of companies ultimately lies in the worth of the brands and the owners' awareness of the target market, with the real importance of the brand being in the distinction it has against competing products (Couto & Ferreira, 2017). Organizational differentiation is vital for SMEs as they need to establish themselves in ways that are unique from larger more established businesses. Proper branding is a useful tool that SME OMs can use to set themselves apart from other retailers and may become even more critical when SMEs move into international markets. Brand management becomes more complicated in global markets as several external factors may vary, such as the structure of markets, environmental factors, religion, language, education, economics, and technology (Couto & Ferreira, 2017). One tool that may help to promote successful branding strategies is the implementation of technological resources to aid in promotional activities.

Technology to Overcome Geographic Constraints

Business leaders who are more technologically skilled can experience significant growth in their businesses (Taneja, Pryor, & Hayek, 2016). Alford and Page (2015) stated that there is more to be learned about OM practices regarding incorporating technology despite it being essential for the survival of small businesses. Kurnia, Choudrie, Mahbubur, and Alzougool (2015) stated that electronic commerce (EC) has substantial potential to increase growth in SMEs in both developed and developing countries.

Technology can enable business owners to sell products to customers in other countries to help the company remain solvent. Small businesses can remain vibrant by exporting to other nations (Dal Bianco, Amini, & Signorelli, 2017).

One subset of innovation strategy in SMEs is the advanced use of technology to enhance efficiencies and market share. Technological advancements and entrepreneurial alignments are significant success factors for SMEs regarding financial and non-financial performance (May Chiun, Yin Chai, Wah, & Ramayah, 2016). Tung (2016) stated that due to rapid advances in science and technology and fierce competition, organizational adaptability became an essential factor in an organization's ability to survive. Recent mobile technological developments, such as smartphones and tablets, are amplifying the impact of the Internet on society (Berman, 2016).

According to Li et al. (2016), a serious challenge faced by SME leaders, that use digital technology, is how to properly align business strategy with EC to leverage the potential presented by these techniques in pursuit of longevity and growth. Kurnia et al. (2015) suggested that organizational readiness, national readiness, and environmental pressure do influence EC adoption.

Small business owners and managers realize that there is a significant need to adopt technology for marketing, stating that there is an explicit recognition of its opportunities mainly related to how technology can create a stronger market alignment and more agile marketing practices (Alford & Page, 2015). With customer engagement being such a critical component of the small business strategy, it becomes increasingly important for small businesses to have a means of interacting with the public (Gholston,

Kuofie, & Hakim, 2016). One method of SME OMs using technology to interact with the public is the use of social networking sites as a means of fast and reliable mass communication. Posting frequently, connecting with their audience, receiving feedback, and listening to customer conversations can be a useful marketing tool that can be used by small businesses that use social media to gain customer attention (Gholston et al., 2016). With the recent technological advancements that have been happening, it can be difficult for SME OMs to maintain technological literacy with such a rapid pace of progress. Alford and Page (2015) stated that the speed of technological development could create a knowledge gap for some OMs, but most are aware of the importance of adopting technology for marketing and recognize the opportunities of utilizing new technologies.

Businesses are continuously changing, and it is crucial for SMEs to remain dynamic to serve their customers and employees. Information and communication technologies are a central component of innovation strategy in SMEs (Iivari, 2015). Organizations can better compete by accepting rapid innovation and strengthening the creative capacity of their staff (Tung, 2016).

The effectiveness of the current knowledge management processes results from sufficient resourcing and sustained operational momentum (Baškarada et al., 2016). In a continually changing environment, it becomes increasingly critical for entrepreneurs to maintain an appetite for learning about new technologies to help ensure they maintain flexibility in a rapidly changing business environment.

It has become increasingly challenging to create innovations behind closed doors

in a modern, globalized business environment (Iivari, 2015). May Chiun et al. (2016) stated that invention and creativity in adopting technology might provide helpful guidelines to the firms seeking strategic implementation strategies. Freel and Robson (2017) indicated that value creation and value capture are essential components of successful innovation. When SME owners utilize new technologies, they may be able to better differentiate themselves from other businesses that have similar organizational objectives.

Summary and Transition

The purpose of this doctoral study was to explore the factors that contributed to SME sustainability beyond the first 5 years. Section 1 of this study contained information on the business problem and the purpose of this study. Also, in Section 1 was an assembly and synthesis of the academic literature. The literature review contained information on GST, leadership theories, SME success and failure, business sustainability strategies, and technology to overcome geographic constraints. The research I have conducted on the use of GST can contribute to an enhanced understanding of the complex and connected relationship between various business components that may lead to organizational sustainability beyond the first 5 years of a company's existence. In Section 2 of this doctoral study, I explain the data collection process and provide additional information on the chosen research method. Section 3 of this research includes a comprehensive examination of the outcomes, implications, and recommendations for action and future research studies.

Section 2: The Project

In Section 2 I explore the retail SME sustainability strategies that businesses owners have used to maintain their operations for more than 5 years. Section 2 encompasses several unique and essential components that require significant attention. In Section 2 I review the role of the researcher, discuss participant selection and contact mechanisms, validate the research method and design, discuss research population and sampling, address ethical research concerns, and describe the data collection and analysis. In the final portion of Section 2, I examine the validity and reliability of qualitative studies.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to investigate effective strategies that retail SME owners have used to sustain profitable business operations beyond the first 5 years. The population was five retail SME owners in North Dakota. The prospective social benefit of this doctoral study is an increased success rate of retail SMEs that may result in the employment of more people, improved prosperity and standards of living for employees, and increased tax revenue for communities.

Role of the Researcher

My interest in the subject of SME sustainability stems from being a business instructor at a state university in North Dakota. Throughout my time teaching, I have had significant contact with colleagues and acquaintances who have started businesses and are seeking ways to sustain their organizations. Most businesses fail, and this doctoral study may be able to help mitigate the risk of business failure. Developing strategies for

SME sustainability may help enable business owners to handle adverse economic difficulties or overcome changes in aggregate business practices, promoting sustainability beyond the first 5 years.

For this qualitative multiple case study, I was the principal instrument for the data collection process and conducted face-to-face, semistructured interviews with each of the study participants. By meeting with participants in person, I could control the interview process to help ensure an environment that is conducive to an accurate and thorough investigation. According to Fleet, Burton, Reeves, and DasGupta (2016), as the researcher in this qualitative study, I was the primary instrument for the data collection process. According to McKee, Guimaraes, and Pinto-Correia (2015), the researcher has a critical role in qualitative studies because they are the primary instrument for collecting data relating to the research phenomenon.

As the primary data collection instrument, it was critical to be mindful of potential personal bias. To reduce it, I used the established interview protocol, which standardized the interview process. According to Castillo-Montoya, (2016), the use of an established interview protocol can act as a method of reducing bias which may help to control personal reactions to interview questions. To further avoid bias I carefully listened to the participant responses and utilized member checking to improve the reliability and validity of the research. The data gathered for this doctoral study came from interviews, company records, and other sources to examine participant insights and gain a systematic understanding of the specific business problem. As suggested by Kruth (2015), I incorporated documentation such as financial statements, internal reports, strategy

documents, and SME business plans to substantiate participants' claims and varied perspectives, hence, validating the study and the findings. In addition to the mitigation of any potential bias, it was essential to ensure ethical research processes.

Throughout the data collection process, the researcher has a responsibility to act ethically and protect the rights participants as discussed in the Belmont Report (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 1979). The Belmont Report describes the principles of ethical research that involves human participants. The ethical principles include respect for persons, beneficence, and justice (Nicolaidis, 2016). Researchers should use the principles that were described in the Belmont Report to resolve ethical issues that can occur throughout the research process (Nicolaidis, 2016).

Participants

This doctoral study included a purposive sample of five participants who have been owners of SMEs in North Dakota for a minimum of 5 years. According to Rubin (2015), purposeful sampling methods help to target a specific population and emphasizes choosing participants with valuable information and is very meticulous. According to Yin (2017), researchers should choose participants by using a screening method that allows for the selection of the most qualified participants. The initial list of potential participants came from North Dakota Chamber of Commerce agencies and similar government agencies in North Dakota that collect retail business information. To ensure that the chosen participants brought value to the study it was essential that they meet specific criteria. The criteria for the participants in this study include (a) the participant is a retail SME owner, (b) the business has been in operation for a minimum of 5 years, (c) the

business location is in North Dakota, (d) the business is profitable, (e) the business owners are over 18 years old. Company documents such as articles of incorporations, participant identification, and financial statements were requested to verify participants meet the eligibility requirements.

The selected participants may possess the knowledge and experiences necessary to identify and represent the different circumstances faced by retail SMEs. The knowledge and expertise of study participants may be useful to other individuals or groups concerned with ensuring sustainable planning and operational business practices. To gain access to potential participants, it is essential that researchers build trusting relationships. According to Yin (2017), it is necessary to establish a healthy working relationship with study participants from the beginning of the communication process. A proper participant relationship consists of transparency, respect, and trustworthiness as described by (Wolgemuth et al., 2015). One mechanism that researchers can use to establish transparency, respect, and trustworthiness is to utilize the participant consent form and continually reassure the participant that their identity and responses will remain confidential. According to Nair and Ibrahim (2015), the use of the informed consent form and continual reassurance of participant confidentiality can help to strengthen the working relationship between the researcher and the participants. Some additional strategies that aided in establishing a relationship with the participants include researching the retail SME industry and acquiring relevant local knowledge about typical retail business practices.

The solicitation of potential participants utilized multiple contact mechanisms.

The potential participants of this doctoral study received either an e-mailed invitation or a telephone call describing the research and inquiring if they would like to participate in the study of retail SME sustainability strategies. The researcher gave participants the researcher's contact information to ensure they can ask any questions they may have about the study. The participants who agree to participate in the study received an informed consent form in an e-mail and were asked to reply, signifying their agreement to participate. After participants consent to the interview, the interview occurred at their business location or a mutually agreed upon location for a face-to-face meeting. When selecting a mutually agreed upon interview location, participants were encouraged to utilize a private setting to help ensure participant confidentiality. Wolgemuth et al., (2015) stated that a private setting supports the interviewer's interest in authentic communication and facilitates thorough, detailed participant responses. Morse and Coulehan (2015) stated that a researcher's primary objective is to inform and protect study participants. Utilizing the appropriate selection criteria, establishing trusting relationships with participants, and ensuring private conversational interview atmospheres helped to provide meaningful information collection.

Research Method and Design

Research Method

There are three methodologies used in conduction research: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods (Flick, 2015). A qualitative research methodology was most appropriate for this study because qualitative research involves a subjective analysis of participants' lived experiences rather than the objective measurement of phenomena.

When researchers perform qualitative research, they provide a comprehensive sense of a phenomenon by asking how, why, and what questions (Seitz, 2016). By using a qualitative methodology, researchers can concentrate on an in-depth understanding of practices, and motivations by using words instead of numerical data (Barnham, 2015). Subjective analysis is a critical component of qualitative research because it provides insight into a participants' lived experiences and words rather than an objective measurement of phenomena used in quantitative research (Suddaby, Bruton, & Si, 2015). A qualitative research methodology is different from a quantitative research methodology. Researchers use a quantitative methodology to help them test a theory or examine relationships by using statistical examination to validate whether a relationship exists between a set of known variables, and by asking closed-ended questions (Petty, Thomson, & Stew, 2012). A qualitative methodology is fundamentally different from quantitative research because a quantitative methodology is used to answer questions that examine the relationships and differences among variables (Devotta et al., 2016). When researchers incorporate a mixed methodology for conducting research, they are utilizing both qualitative and quantitative research strategies (Yin, 2017). The quantitative and mixed methods research methodologies were deemed inappropriate for this doctoral study because this study does not seek to analyze relationships between quantitative variables or to determine if a relationship existed between known variables by examination of numerical data.

Research Design

According to Flick (2015), the decision of research design is reliant on the nature

of the research and the objective of the study. This doctoral research utilized a multiple case study design. According to Yin (2017), if the goal of the study is to gain a fundamental understanding of a phenomenon by answering the research question, a qualitative case study design is appropriate. Yin (2017) stated that a multiple case study design is a qualitative research design that researchers use to capture the viewpoint of legitimate activities and situations within the natural context. Because the goal of this doctoral study was to gain a fundamental understanding of the business problem and to capture participant's valid viewpoints, a qualitative multiple case study design was appropriate to attempt to answer the central research question.

Ethnographic and phenomenological research designs were deemed inappropriate for this study. According to Petty et al. (2012), the ethnographic research process examines cultures, daily lives, actions, and activities in a culture or community. An ethnographic design was inappropriate because the purpose of this doctoral study was not to understand how cultural influences affect SME sustainability. When researchers use phenomenological design, they concentrate on the unique lived experiences of individuals encircled by a phenomenon (Petty et al., 2012). DeFelice and Janesick (2015) confirmed the purpose of phenomenological research designs by stating phenomenological research as a study that emphasizes the lived experiences of the participants as they relate to the studied phenomenon. Because the aim of this doctoral research was not to concentrate on unique lived experiences to answer the central research question, a phenomenological design was not appropriate.

Population and Sampling

The population for this study was five retail SME business owners in North Dakota who have sustained business operations for a minimum of 5 years. Because it is not feasible to interact with all individuals within the research population, a population sample is appropriate.

For this doctoral research, a purposeful sampling technique was appropriate to select participants. When using the purposive sampling method researchers intentionally select participants that are suitable to meet the objective of the study (Benoot, Hannes, & Bilsen, 2016; Emerson, 2015). Emerson (2015) also stated that purposive sampling is the careful selection of participants to take part in a study. Purposeful sampling allows researchers flexibility when choosing participants based on their knowledge and experience with the study phenomenon (Mead, Cohen, Kennedy, Gallo, & Latkin, 2015). Using a purposeful sampling technique allowed for the appropriate identification and selection of participants who were able to provide detailed information on their use of business strategies to successfully operate their retail SME for more than 5 years. Purposeful sampling is a valid mechanism that can help with selecting information-rich cases for research (Palinkas et al., 2015).

According to Kasim and Al-Gahuri (2015), the appropriate sample size in a qualitative study is dependent upon the context of the inquiry. Fusch and Ness (2015) stated that a researcher should choose a sample size that offers the best prospect of achieving data saturation. For this doctoral study, data collection began with a minimum of five participants and continued until there is a full understanding of the business

strategies that retail SME business owners used to sustain their business beyond the first 5 years. Data saturation occurs when no supplemental data, themes, or codes arise from the data (Shahgholian & Yousefi, 2015). According to Fusch and Ness (2015), researchers obtain data saturation when new data is no longer obtainable, and there is sufficient data collected to allow for a duplication of the study.

The chosen participants for this doctoral study must meet the criteria of owning a retail SME in North Dakota for a minimum of 5 years. I assembled the prospective participant list from database information from local North Dakota Chamber of Commerce agencies. The participants I selected for this study received an invitation to participate utilizing an e-mail message or a telephone call. The participants who agreed to contribute to this doctoral study received an informed consent form in a subsequent e-mail and were asked to respond via e-mail which indicated their willingness to participate.

Ethical Research

According to Johnson (2015) and Yin (2017), ethical research starts with ensuring the participants are protected from harm, are provided confidentiality, and have confirmed their consent. To help ensure an ethical research process, I adhered to the three basic ethical principles described in the Belmont Report. An ethical research process provides respect for individuals, beneficence, and justice (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 1979). According to Hammersley (2015), the prominent common ethical considerations that researchers must focus on are minimizing harm, respecting participant autonomy, preserving privacy, and acting justly. Because ethical research is

such an essential aspect of the research process, there was a continual focus on ethical conduct throughout the entire research process.

To ensure ethical research, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Walden University helped to safeguard that the research I conducted fulfills the university's ethical standards and meets U.S. federal regulations. After receiving IRB approval No. 11-06-18-0666695, initial contact with potential participants occurred by e-mail or by telephone. The purpose of the e-mail or telephone call was to explain the reason for the study and ask for participation and included a formal invitation to participate (Appendix A). After the initial e-mail, a follow up with a phone call helped answer any questions potential participants may have. After the participants agreed to take part in the study, they signed a consent form before any data collection began. In the letter and throughout all conversations, participants were made aware that they may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Participant withdrawal can be verbal or received in a written or electronic format.

To further ensure ethical research I validated IRB approval in the final doctoral text by including the Walden IRB approval number. Participants received no incentives for their cooperation. Throughout the study process, safeguarding of participant identities occurred by using alphanumeric codes as identifiers for participants such as P1 and P2. After the information collection process, data is being secured in a safe place for 5 years to protect the rights of participants. After completion of the final doctoral study, a summary of the findings will be available to all study participants.

Data Collection Instruments

I was the primary data collection instrument for this doctoral study. According to Sutton and Austin (2015), the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection in a qualitative study. This qualitative multiple case study incorporated semistructured in-person interviews with retail SME business owners located in North Dakota. The selected open-ended interview questions were designed specifically to help answer the research question (see Appendix B). According to Seierstad and Kirton (2015), researchers use semistructured interviews because of the flexibility, accessibility, and proficiency that it allows when gathering data. By using semistructured interviews, I was able to have a clear conceptualization of retail SME owner's strategies for business sustainability in an evolving and competitive marketplace.

Because I was the primary data collection instrument, it was critical that I understand how personal beliefs, attitudes, and actions may adversely affect the outcomes of this research. There is a constant need for researchers to recognize their own biases. Grosseohme (2014) stated that it is essential to document and understand personal prejudices and understand how they may potentially influence the data collection and analysis process. To help mitigate the potential for researcher bias, researchers should outline and monitor their desired goals and regulate their actions to ensure the attainment of the research plan (Buhrau & Sujana, 2015). To mitigate the risk of bias, I followed strict interview protocol for all participants and validate all responses using follow up questions which helped to increase researcher understanding. Strict data collection protocol and the ability to understand the true meaning of participant responses is essential in qualitative

research. Participants clarified their responses through the use of follow up questions which increased researcher understanding and ensured a thorough understanding of their responses.

Participants validated my understanding by reviewing a detailed synopsis of their answers with a process known as member checking. Harvey (2015) stated this it is crucial for researchers to utilize member checking to validate their replies and confirm the accuracy of the information that is collected by the researcher. Member checking is used to gain participant feedback and validate responses (Varpio, Ajjawi, Monrouxe, O'Brien, & Rees, 2017). When conducting a qualitative study, it is imperative that researchers utilize member checking because it ensures the validity and reliability of the research findings (Harvey, 2015; Yin, 2017). By reviewing a synopsis, participants identified any misinterpretation of the data which allowed an opportunity for correction.

In addition to the interview data, data collection occurred from retail SME owners through company documentation. According to Yin (2017) case study researchers should supplement interview data with information from secondary data sources. The additional information I collected came from financial statements, internal reports, strategy documents, training guides, and archival documents. By using supplementary data sources, the information within this doctoral study was validated and aided the understanding of retail SME sustainability strategies.

Data Collection Technique

I began data collection for this research after receiving approval from the Walden University IRB. For this doctoral research, there were several sources of evidence. The

sources I utilized in this research process came interview responses from open-ended questions, internal company documents such as financial statements, memos, business strategy guides, pertinent archival records, and the company's original business plans. When completing qualitative case studies, multiple sources of data can help researchers validate data received from other sources (Yin, 2017). By Collecting data from various sources, I ensured the accuracy of the information collected and presented.

To initially obtain information on relevant organizations that meet the participant profile, I contacted North Dakota governmental agencies that gather business information to form a list of potential participants. After the potential participant list was received, I e-mailed or called selected retail SME owners explaining the purpose of the study and send them a formal invitation to participate in the research (Appendix A). After delivery of the initial request for consideration, a follow up with a phone call occurred to potential participants to clarify any questions they may have. If participants agreed to aid in the research process, they received a consent form which allowed them to understand the research process further.

After consent was received, interviews were scheduled utilizing a mutually agreed-upon location that adequately met the research requirements of privacy and confidentiality. The preferred location was the business owner's location as this location is familiar to the participant and may offer a comfortable and private environment for the interview. Before the discussion begins, a formal interview structure was explained to avoid potential interviewer bias. A structured interview protocol can help guide the accurate collection of data (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Koskei and Simiyu (2015) stated that it

is vital for the interviewer to set aside all prejudice and inform the participants about the research expectations and provide an idea of the purpose of the interview. Understanding the potential for researcher bias allows for additional measures to be put in place to avoid any misinterpretation of the data.

All participants were asked the same semistructured questions (Appendix B) to ensure consistency in the data collection process. According to Cridland, Jones, Caputi, and Magee (2015), semistructured interviews allow for flexibility, improved data accuracy, and the interviews provide descriptive data. By using semistructured interviews, participants can provide answers with rich detail (Morse, 2015). When the conversation began, all discussion was recorded to capture all participant feedback. Throughout the interview process, clarifying questions were asked to ensure a clear understanding of participant responses and accurately capture their intended meaning. Member checking increases ethical principles of a study and helps to confirm the results (Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, & Walter, 2016). Member checking allows the researcher to validate and verify their analysis of the interview data (Yin, 2017). Throughout the interview process, it was essential to adhere to a structured interview protocol, refrain from guiding the interviewee and utilize member checking to help ensure information accuracy.

When the interview was complete and after the data interpretation, all participants were allowed to review the information that was gathered and assembled to ensure information accuracy. Participants were provided a synopsis of the analyzed data to ensure accuracy.

According to Cait et al. (2016), transcript review is an essential process that helps to increase the reliability and validity of a study. Additionally, a review of company documents such as business plans, financial statements, archival records, and procedure manuals were analyzed. Internal documents from the companies can validate other data sources. Analyzing archival records can help support additional evidence and assist in developing consistent research results (Yin, 2017).

Data Organization Technique

Data organization is a fundamental aspect of qualitative research. Due to the potentially sensitive nature of the data that is collected by researchers, it is essential that researchers protect the privacy of research participants. To help mitigate the risk of participant identification in the published study individual participant information was replaced with an alphanumeric code that allowed for internal identification of participants without revealing their identity to others. Lahman et al. (2015) stated that researchers could use codes in place of participant names as an additional safeguard to protect participant identity and to ensure confidentiality.

In addition to coding any potentially sensitive participant information, it is also crucial that researchers protect and securely store all participant information. To further ensure that participant information is secure all digital data is being saved in a password-protected file. Hard copies of research data will remain in a locked enclosure, and destruction of all potentially revealing information will occur 5 years after the data collection. Researchers are obligated to safeguard research data (Jao et al., 2015). Adequate reduction in the risk of participant identification was achieved by coding all

potentially exposing participant information and safely storing all electronic and physical data, and by destroying all participants' materials after 5 years.

Data Analysis

According to Yin (2017), data analysis involves evaluating, categorizing, organizing, analyzing, and rearranging research data. The data analysis procedure that I used in this qualitative research concentrated on identifying themes that arise from the transcribed participant interviews and through the review of archival documents in an attempt to answer the central research question (Davidson, Paulus, & Jackson, 2016). To develop themes, I identified patterns and recurring words to form categories of information that directly relate to the research question. To help to discover meaning from interview data and archival company documentation, I coded information into clusters of uniform concepts, to develop theme clusters as described by Lewis (2015). Coding encompasses the inclusion of related concepts or ideas into categories (Riera et al., 2015). The data analysis process required codification and categorization of participant data to identify themes, patterns, and to categorize data with similar meaning. Additionally, the utilization of data triangulation increased the reliability of the analyzed data.

Triangulation is a process that aids in recognizing themes, making interpretations, steering assessments, and developing conclusions (Devotta et al., 2016). This doctoral study incorporated a specific triangulation method known as methodological triangulation. When researchers use methodological triangulation, they utilize more than one type of data to study a phenomenon (Yin, 2017). According to Fusch and Ness (2015),

methodological triangulation can enhance a study by correlating data using multiple data collection methods. The data analysis in this doctoral study included incorporating information from retail SME archival information, organizational documents, company strategy guides, business plans, and semistructured interview responses. The objective of this doctoral study was to determine common themes by collecting and methodically assembling participants' experiential data. Methodological triangulation helped to validate the study findings, increase the study validity, and can create an enhanced understanding of retail SME sustainability strategies.

Software Analysis

Yin (2017) stated that software programs enable researchers to group and code significant quantities of interview data and other written documents. After all participant information was gathered and assembled, NVivo software was utilized to help analyze the interview transcripts. Zamawe (2015) stated that NVivo software is an adequate tool when conducting qualitative research which may dramatically improve the quality of research. Because NVivo is a useful tool that aids researchers in the production of themes while increasing research quality and validity, it was used to analyze the qualitative participant data.

Reliability and Validity

Noble and Smith (2015) stated that reliability is a measure of consistency in research findings. According to Chen (2015), validity means the results of a study are accurate, and they exemplify the study phenomenon. Yin (2017) stated that reliability and validity examine the design of qualitative research to establish credibility,

trustworthiness, conformability, and data dependability. When researchers focus on quality, they are building consistency in their study technique which over time allows for the accurate representation of the study phenomenon (Prion & Adamson, 2014).

Reliability

According to Lofstrom, Nevgi, Wegner, and Karm (2015), research dependability refers to the ability of others to follow the original researcher's data collection and analysis processes and reach similar conclusions. Lishner (2015) suggested that researchers must confirm consistency in their research results as a way of ensuring the dependability of the findings. To increase study dependability, I utilized a standardized interview protocol and recorded all participant information. Member checking was incorporated throughout the data collection process to help increase the dependability of the study. According to Bennett and McWhorter (2016), member checking enhances the integrity of the study and deepens the understanding of the research phenomenon. Clarifying questions may be asked to ensure an accurate understanding of the participants' responses. After the completion of each interview, I transcribed the audio recordings to ensure reliable information. According to Cridland et al., (2015), it is important to transcribe recorded interviews to acquire relevant data and to express the participants' responses. After the transcription of the interviews, I compiled a synopsis of the data collected. After all interview information was collected- and transcribed, participants had an opportunity to review a synopsis of the transcribed data increasing study reliability. Any discrepancies that the participants found with the data were noted,

and the data was modified to ensure accurate information, further adding to the dependability of the study.

Validity

Research validity signifies a measure of trust, which is essential when investigating the study phenomenon (Aravamudhan & Krishnaveni, 2015). Noble and Smith (2015) described validity as the meticulousness with which the findings precisely reflect the data. The incorporation of multiple data sources and maintaining the established data collection techniques increased the validity of this doctoral study. By utilizing multiple data sources, researchers can reach data saturation on the studied phenomenon. According to Guetterman (2015), data saturation indicates research quality and thoroughness in data collection and analysis processes and occurs when no new evidence of new themes emerges from the interviews.

Noble and Smith (2015) stated that when a researcher utilizes strategies such as member checking, transcript review, triangulation, and multiple sources of data, they are contributing to the credibility of the study. The credibility of this doctoral study occurred by implementing member checking and transcript review; by systematically reviewing company documents such as financial statements, company memos, business plans, and corporate strategy guides; and by incorporating methodological triangulation. To further ensure study credibility, diligent safeguarding of all participant information continued during and after the research process. According to Noble and Smith (2015), ensuring participant privacy is essential to achieving credibility. Participants were made fully aware of the entirety of the research process, which includes participant anonymity, and

secure storage of all potentially sensitive information. Interviews were conducted in a private area to ensure they feel free to answer all questions openly and honestly.

Confirmability is an essential component of quality research. According to Kallio, Pietila, Johnson, and Kangasniemi (2016), research confirmability refers to making the researcher's objectivity evident. By describing the data collection process and increasing the transparency of the research process researchers increase confirmability. Maintaining accurate records of the data collection and analysis processes increases confirmability (Wamba, Akter, Edwards, Chopin, & Gnanzou, 2015). In this doctoral study, I increased the confirmability of the research using methodological triangulation, by conducting semistructured interviews, a thorough review of company documents, the use of NVivo software and using member checking.

According to Soares, Bastos, Rodrigues, Pereira, and Baptista (2015), transferability requires the researcher to provide vibrant explanations of their research process to allow the investigator's results to be reproducible in other settings. According to Fusch and Ness (2015), data triangulation offers a technique to attain data saturation. Fusch and Ness (2015) continued by stating that it is vital that researchers explore a phenomenon until reaching saturation and that failing to reach data saturation impacts the quality of the research and hampers content validity. The data collection process from relevant research information sources continued until no new themes or data emerged, and data saturation occurred.

Data saturation is another vital component of quality research. Data saturation occurs when gathering and checking data reveals no new information (Fusch & Ness,

2015). Morse (2015) reiterated this point by stating that data saturation is evident when additional data collected will no longer yield new or relevant information. Throughout the research process, I used a highly structured interview protocol and processes such as member checking and data triangulation to increase the confirmability of this doctoral research.

Summary and Transition

In Section 2 I provided an explanation and justification of the research process used in this doctoral study. Section 2 contained information on (a) participant selection; (b) research method and design; (c) participant population and sampling; (d) ethical research; (e) data collection instruments and techniques; (f) data organization and analysis techniques; (g) software analysis; and (h) study reliability, validity, credibility, and transferability. In Section 3 of this doctoral study, I will reveal the research findings and make recommendations for further study.

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to investigate effective strategies that retail SME owners use to sustain profitable business operations beyond the first 5 years. The data utilized in this study came from interviews with five business owners and archival information collected at their SME retail enterprises in North Dakota. The findings of this study revealed SME sustainability strategies that five successful SME business owners in North Dakota have used to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years.

Presentation of the Findings

The central research question for this study was: What strategies do retail SME owners use to sustain profitable business operations beyond 5 years? To answer the research question, I interviewed five retail SME business owners to determine the strategies that they used to sustain their business beyond 5 years. The conceptual framework utilized in this doctoral study was general systems theory. The major and minor themes that emerged for the data analysis provided an understanding of how the use of general systems theory (GST) as a conceptual framework can help retail SMEs owners sustain their organizations beyond 5 years. Chan (2015) stated that individuals who view individual components of a system using a single holistic lens could examine business problems with significant depth. von Bertalanffy (1972) indicated that business leaders could use GST as a holistic systems-based approach to enable business success. By understanding GST as a lens to view business problems, a more profound

understanding appears of how the retail SME participants have sustained their businesses beyond the first 5 years.

To be eligible for participation in this doctoral study all participants had to meet specific inclusion criteria: (a) the participant was a retail SME owner, (b) the business had been in operation for a minimum of 5 years, (c) the business location was in North Dakota, (d) the business was profitable, (e) the business owners were over 18 years old. A total of five participants contributed to this doctoral study. Table 1 describes the individual characteristics of the five participants. The participants had different levels of educational achievement, years of ownership experience, and various numbers of employees at their organizations.

Table 1

Overview of Retail SME Study Participants

	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5
Years of SME ownership	13	26	7	34	5
Number of employees	10	10	7	15	4
Highest level of education	Master's degree	Bachelor's degree	Some college	Some college	Master's degree

The primary data sources that I used came from interviews with study participants. I obtained the interview data by conducting face-to-face interviews with each of the study participants. I completed the participant interviews at each participant's business to ensure confidentiality and a comfortable data collection environment. I

utilized open-ended questions (see Appendix B), to allow the participants the ability to respond to the interview questions in their own words with rich detail. According to Yin (2017), the use of open-ended questions lets researchers collect information based on the expertise of study participants. Throughout the interview process, additional clarification questions were asked to ensure that I captured the participant's true meaning without misinterpretation.

In addition to collecting interview data, other relevant documentation such as training manuals, financial statements, SWOT analyses, industry periodicals, and ordering materials were reviewed to triangulate the data. After completing the participant interview and reviewing internal company documentation, transcription of interview data began. After data transcription completion, I compiled a synopsis of each participant's responses and sent it to the participant to ensure an accurate understanding of their responses. Fusch and Ness (2015) stated that the use of member checking can help to clarify the meanings of specific participant responses which can reduce the likelihood of personal bias. By using member checking, the reliability and validity of the interview data increased, and the potential risk of personal bias was mitigated. After the participants validated their responses, the data were entered into the NVivo software, which helped to develop and categorize major themes. The analysis of data using NVivo software supported the data processing procedure that was used to determine the strategies that the retail SME owners used to maintain profitability for more than 5 years. The themes emerged from frequency calculations which I compiled based on the number of individual comments that the participants made on their retail SME sustainability

strategies. The results of the data analysis process produced five emergent themes.

The five dominant retail SME sustainability strategies emerged were: (a) leadership strategies, (b) financial strategies, (c) marketing strategies, (d) inventory strategies, and (e) customer centricity strategies. Table 2 lists the emergent themes and the number of comments associated with each theme. The number of comments detailed in Table 2 describes the prevalence associated with each sustainability strategy. The emergent themes, as well the minor themes, are described in subsequent pages.

Table 2

Emergent Themes

Themes	Number of Comments
Leadership strategies	67
Financial strategies	59
Marketing strategies	46
Inventory strategies	41
Customer centricity strategies	35
Total	248

Emergent Theme 1: Leadership Strategies

All of the study participants discussed the leadership strategies that they used to sustain their retail businesses beyond 5 years. According to Muenjohn and McMurray (2016), effective leadership is a fundamental element for small business owners seeking to achieve sustainable growth and profitability. When correctly applied, effective

leadership strategies may increase an entrepreneur's ability to sustain profitable business operations beyond the first 5 years. The leadership strategies were subcategorized into minor leadership strategy themes to allow for an enhanced conceptualization of the leadership strategies described by study participants.

Figure 1 shows a visual representation of the relative frequency of participant comments that relate to the minor leadership strategies themes. Figure 1 details that 36% of the leadership strategy comments involved entrepreneur education and experience, 27% of the comments described leadership style, 25% of the comments involved employee training and development, and 12% of the leadership strategy comments discussed entrepreneurial drive.

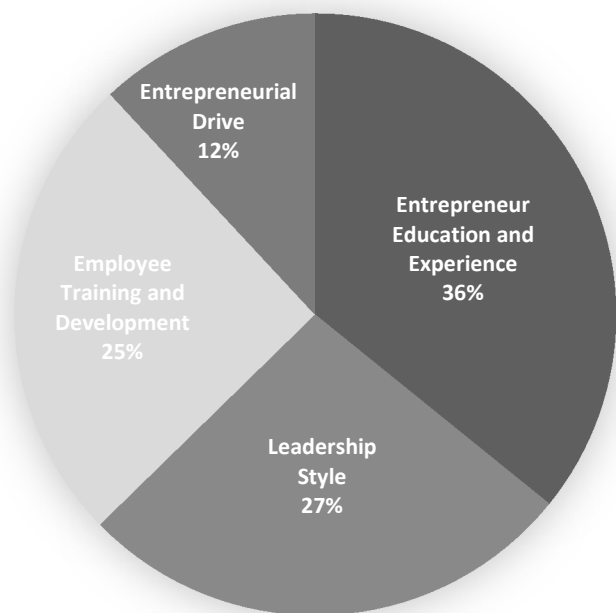


Figure 1. Relative frequency of minor themes associated with leadership strategies.

To accurately articulate the leadership strategies that were described by the study

participants, I categorized their leadership strategies into minor themes in Table 3. Table 3 details a numerical representation of the number of comments relating to the relevant leadership strategies that the study participants felt contributed to their organization's success beyond the first 5 years.

Table 3

Emergent Theme 1: Leadership Strategies

Minor Themes	Number of Comments
Entrepreneur education and experience	24
Leadership style	18
Employee training and development	17
Entrepreneurial drive	8
Total	67

Entrepreneur Education and Experience

All study participants described the skills or training that they believed contributed to their business's sustainability beyond 5 years. All participants in this study did have some level of higher education that they felt added to their ability to sustain their organizations. P1 stated, "The primary thing as far as from a business aspect is I did have a master's degree in business." P2 mentioned that they had a business-related degree; and the degree contributed to their knowledge base, which was useful in sustaining their organization. According to Qureshi, Saeed, and Wasti, (2016), entrepreneurs can further their education and advance their entrepreneurial competencies, therefore, improving the

likelihood of sustaining their organization.

Not all participants had a post-secondary education in a business-related field. P3 stated that their instruction was in elementary education and added that relevant work experience was a more significant contributing factor for the sustainability of their organization. P3 noted: “I have over twenty years of experience working at a similar retail business” and that “experience was more useful” to the sustainability of their organization than the education the participant had received. Hietanen and Jarvi (2015) expressed the importance of entrepreneurial experience by stating that entrepreneurial skills and experiences impact the likelihood of individuals becoming entrepreneurs and the probability of business success. Having an adequate amount of training and relevant experience may allow retail SME owners the ability to increase the likelihood of business sustainability beyond 5 years.

Leadership Style

Leaders influence others to achieve significant goals that would have not otherwise be achieved (Bendell, Sutherland, & Little, 2017). All the participants had unique leadership philosophies, but transformational and ethical leadership appeared to be prevalent among study participants. Transformational leadership focuses on the transformation of a business and its followers from current conditions to an inclusive organization that aligns the organization and business vision (Top, Akdere, & Tarcan, 2015). Kihyun (2016) described ethical leadership as a leadership style exemplified by a follower’s trust and identification with a leader. P3 stated, “I am very open with my employees, and if there's any issues I always encourage them to come to me right away.”

Well and Walker (2016) described the qualities of an ethical leader as honest, fair, trustworthy, and caring. P2 exhibited transformational and ethical leadership styles by stating that the employees and the business owner were all in it together and that "It's not my business; it's our business." P5 stated, "It's important to model behaviors" for their employees. The interviewed business owners seemed to have a genuine concern for their employees on both a personal and professional level. By utilizing a transformational or ethical leadership style, business owners can motivate their employees by showing genuine concern for their well being which may contribute to the sustainability of their retail SME.

Employee Training and Development

Employee training and development is a critical component of business sustainability that was described by study participants. Bercu (2017) stated that education and training have a considerable effect on the growth and productivity of small businesses. Van Rijn, Yang, and Sanders (2013) noted that the value of an employee could increase with additional education and training. The importance of proper employee training and development was exemplified by P1 when they indicated that their employees were required to be certified to assure adequate knowledge. P1 later said that "the biggest reason we've been successful is a really great staff. " P2 reiterated the importance of employees by stating "You can't do it without employees." P4 stated, "It is important for employees to be trained, so they can sell more products." P4 also commented on how challenging the training process can be, as individuals can have different ability levels and motivational tendencies. The study participants placed a

significant focus on employee training as a means of increasing the employee's ability to complete their assigned tasks. When leaders focus on adequately training their employees, they expand the employee's knowledge of business operations and products, which can lead to more product sales and an increased probability of business sustainability.

Entrepreneurial Drive

The ability of entrepreneurs to be highly motivated can influence the sustainability of the organization. Some entrepreneurs exhibit self-motivation personality traits that help to make them resilient during difficult business circumstances (Pawęta, 2015). Entrepreneurial motivation was described by P1 who stated, "You really have to work extra hard." P2 stated, "You know when you own a business, you can be your best ally and you can be your worst enemy. If you don't get it done, nobody is going to push you to do it." P3 stated, "When I go home, I'm mentally exhausted, and physically exhausted too." P4 said, "You have to put in many hours." The participants placed significant emphasis on the amount of energy that was necessary to sustain their organizations. The interviewed entrepreneurs described the high level of motivation that was necessary to maintain business solvency. By staying motivated, entrepreneurs can increase personal productivity, which can lead to increased business sustainability.

Emergent Theme 2: Financial Strategies

The study participants emphasized the importance of appropriate financial strategies as a method of sustaining their retail SME. Amel and Mach (2017) stated that financial stability is vital for prosperous business operations. von Bertalanffy's (1972)

system theory supports the financial strategies that participants discussed. Retail SME owners must take a holistic approach to ensure adequate financial resources exist for business to thrive. By utilizing appropriate financial strategies, entrepreneurs may be able to increase the likelihood of profitable business operations beyond the first 5 years. The financial strategies have been categorized into minor financial strategy themes to increase the level of understanding of the financial strategies described by study participants,

Figure 2 shows the relative frequency of participant comments that relate to the minor financial strategy themes: 39% of the financial strategy comments described external financial resources, 34% described capital conservation strategies, and 27% of the comments related to financial benchmarking and evaluation.



Figure 2. Relative frequency of minor themes associated with financial strategies.

I subcategorized the financial strategies that were presented by the study participants into minor themes. To precisely communicate the financial strategies

described by the study participants, their utilized financial strategies are categorized into minor themes in Table 4. Table 4 gives a numerical representation of the number of comments relating to financial strategies that the study participants felt contributed to their organization's success beyond the first 5 years.

Table 4

Emergent Theme 2: Financial Strategies

Minor Themes	Number of Comments
External financial resources	23
Capital conservation strategies	20
Financial benchmarking and evaluation	16
Total	59

External Financial Resources

Many entrepreneurs do not have the financial ability to self-fund their business venture. All the study participants did have some level of dependency on outside financial resources to help ensure the sustainability of their businesses. External capital from a formal lending institution can help entrepreneurs sustain their organizations (Bates & Robb, 2015). P1 emphasized the need of outside capital by stating, "It took a substantial amount of money to purchase the inventory," and that "We immediately we assumed two large loans." P3 reiterated the importance of access to outside financial resources by stating, "I did not have thousands of dollars to just throw to the business."

P5 stated, “For the last three years, I've needed an operating credit line.” As discussed by the study participants, it may be necessary to have access to capital to help ensure business solvency. Initial and subsequent funding resources can be a contributing factor to help retail SMEs sustain beyond 5 years.

Capital Conservation Strategies

According to Albuquerque, Filho, Nagano, and Philippsen (2016), effective financial planning is a critical component to business owners that seek to meet their monetary goals. To achieve the set fiscal goals, several study participants implemented capital conservation strategies. P1 stated, “The first year was tough, we didn't even take a salary,” and “I try to be judicious as I said in managing the money of the store.” P1 also stated, “I followed a budget.” P2 stated, “I think it helped us by starting small and then growing instead of starting big and trying to maintain a large store,” and “I believe in being conservative.” P5 discussed the importance of “minimizing interest payments.” The participants had access to outside capital sources but chose to take a conservative approach toward the use of financial resources. Although the study participants had access to external funding sources, they discussed the importance of conserving capital and being cautious about spending activities as a contributing factor to business sustainability.

Financial Benchmarking and Evaluation

According to Ludmila, Lubor, and Dimitris (2017), it is vital that business leaders implement a strategic plan to promote the well-being of their business. According to Verstina, Akimova, Kisel, Chibisova, and Lukinov (2015), successful entrepreneurs

frequently examine financial results against their planned budget to increase the opportunity to get back on track. Tracking financial progress allows an entrepreneur the opportunity to evaluate operations and make adjustments. P1 discussed evaluation and monitoring of financial data by stating “The first-years sales were slowing down. Did we do something wrong?” P2 stated that they compare financials “year to year,” and it was necessary to determine: What are the reasons that we didn't make as much money? P5 emphasized the need for financial benchmarks and evaluations by stating they “monitor and review so that I can make good decisions, so it's not just a wing and a prayer.” P5 also mentioned “We still have to hit targets” and “I continually monitor those benchmarks.” The study participants continually observed their operations to ensure they were meeting their organizational objectives. When company performance was not meeting the set standards, the entrepreneurs researched the problem which allowed them the ability to make the necessary changes to their organizational model. By monitoring and evaluating business performance, the study participants were able to adjust current business operations to affect future sales.

Emergent Theme 3: Marketing Strategies

The third theme that emerged was marketing strategies. All five of the study participants discussed how various marketing strategies were necessary as a means of sustaining their retail SME. By marketing new products, business leaders support customer's awareness of different offerings, which can promote long-term organizational growth (Agnihotri, Gabler, Itani, Jaramillo, & Krush, 2017). When entrepreneurs use effective marketing strategies, they may be able to increase customer awareness, which

may also increase the likelihood of profitable company operations. The marketing strategies described by study participants are categorized into the minor themes of traditional and digital marketing and business networking.

The relative frequency of participant comments that relate to the minor marketing strategies themes appear in Figure 3. Figure 3 shows that 83% of the marketing strategy comments involved traditional and digital marketing and 17% of the comments communicated business networking as contributing factors to business sustainability.

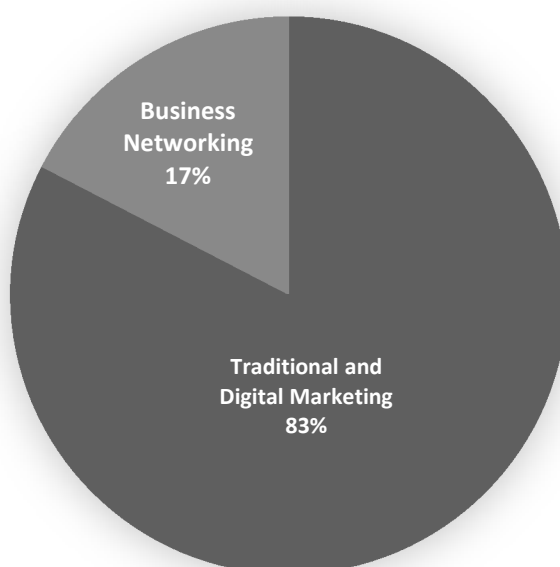


Figure 3. Relative frequency of minor themes associated with marketing strategies.

The study participants described the marketing strategies that they felt contributed to organizational success beyond 5 years. The marketing strategies outlined by the study participants appear as minor themes in Table 5. Table 5 also shows a numerical representation of the number of comments relating to marketing strategies that the study participants felt added to their ability to sustain profitable business operations.

Table 5

Emergent Theme 3: Marketing Strategies

Minor Themes	Number of comments
Traditional and digital marketing	38
Business networking	8
Total	46

Traditional and Digital Marketing

Traditional and digital marketing was a minor theme of this doctoral study. According to Shaw (2012), organizational leaders develop a marketing strategy to engage customers, prospects, and other business to achieve higher levels of success. Study participants discussed several marketing mediums that they felt were useful to sustain their organizations. P5 emphasized the importance of marketing by stating “Marketing plays, in my mind, probably the biggest role in the success of a small retail business,” and “Marketing has to be highly targeted.” P1 stated that they “market in television and radio primarily” P4 discussed various types of advertising mediums and stated, “Nobody reads newspapers.” P1 reiterated a potential disadvantage of newspaper advertisements by stating: “newspapers advertising is an expensive proposition.” The participants in this doctoral study emphasized the importance of marketing and the use of different marketing resources as a means of increasing customer awareness. Different advertising mediums may be able to reach specific audiences, and business leaders need to be conscious of the number of people influenced and the costs associated with marketing

activities. Business leaders need to independently evaluate their marketing tactics to ensure they can engage customers and prospects effectively.

Another prominent form of marketing that participants discussed was word of mouth advertising. According to Dadzie, Amponsah, Dadzie, and Winston, (2017), word of mouth advertising can be a potent marketing tool. P4 stated, “word of mouth is probably the number one source of advertising.” P1 stated, “We so appreciate word of mouth.” An offset of word of mouth advertising is digital advertising, which was mentioned by several participants. P1 stated, “We advertise on our Facebook.” P2 said, “I have Facebook, and we post several times a week.” P3 said, “Social media is a huge strategy that I use.” P5 added, “Social media is super easy to track through a boosted post.” Online marketing is an advantageous medium for marketing. Business leaders that fail to understand the potential benefits of online marketing can reduce customer interaction, productivity, and revenue (Cheng & Liu, 2017). As individuals become increasingly connected in an online environment, it becomes essential for business leaders to realize the potential advantages associated with social marketing techniques.

Business Networking

Business networking is another prominent marketing strategy that was discussed by study participants. Business owners seeking increased competitiveness and business sustainability need to manage business relationships (Zaefarian, Thiesbrummel, Henneberg, & Naudé, 2017). P1 discussed the importance of business networking as a marketing strategy by saying “More than anything as I said going to industry shows, sitting down side-by-side, and sharing.” P2 reiterated that business networking was an

important marketing strategy by stating "Networking is just so huge," and that it was useful to "pool our resources." P3 stated, "I'm a member of a networking group." P5 stated, "Collaboration matters." Business networking is a useful tactic that successful entrepreneurs can use to pool resources and increase their ability to understand markets and make changes to their organizations as necessary.

Emergent Theme 4: Inventory Strategies

The fourth theme in this study is inventory strategies. All five of the study participants discussed various inventory strategies that were useful in sustaining their organization. According to Huang, Hsu, and Ho (2014), one way that companies remain competitive and increase the sustainability of their organizations is through proper inventory management. When entrepreneurs effectively manage their inventory, they may enhance their ability to stay competitive in a saturated business segment. The inventory strategies that the participants described are subcategorized into the minor inventory strategies themes of inventory selection and management, vendor relationships, and product knowledge.

Pictured in Figure 4 are the relative frequencies of participants' comments that relate to the minor inventory strategies themes. Figure 4 shows that 51% of the inventory strategy comments involved inventory selection and management, 32% described vendor relationships, and 17% of the comments contained information regarding product knowledge.

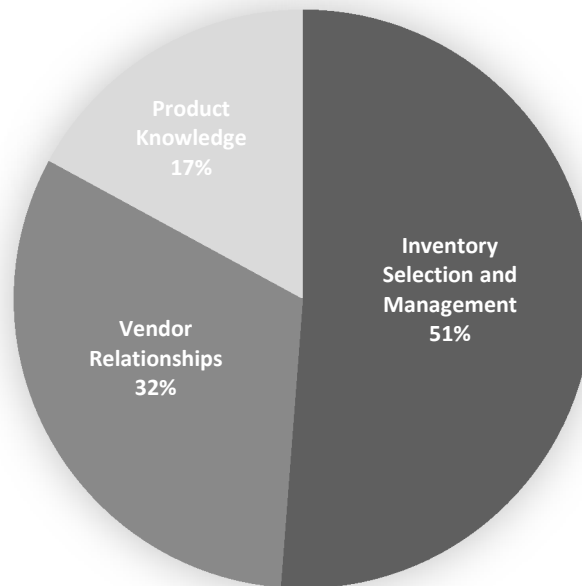


Figure 4. Relative frequency of minor themes associated with inventory strategies.

To exemplify the number of comments associated with inventory strategies that were discussed by the study participants, the data related to inventory strategies are categorized into minor themes in Table 6. Table 6 details the minor inventory strategy themes of inventory selection and management, vendor relationships, and product knowledge and shows the number of comments related to each minor theme.

Table 6

Emergent Theme 4: Inventory Strategies

Minor Themes	Number of Comments
Inventory selection and management	21
Vendor relationships	13
Product knowledge	7
Total	41

Inventory Selection and Management

Inventory selection and management was a minor theme discussed by study participants. According to Karadağ (2018), proper inventory management in small businesses positively associates with financial performance. According to P1, “The hardest thing is to pick what people want,” and “Having dated inventory is a problem.” P2 stated, “It's hard to know if you've got the right inventory until after the fact.” P2 also noted, “Of course you want to order everything, but you know there were years where we could just order what we needed.” P3 emphasized the importance of inventory quality by saying “If people aren't happy with your product they definitely talk.” and “Giving a good quality product is the number one goal.” P3 also said, “I have my standards, and if the standards aren't there then it's not going out the door.” P5 stated, “I don't want to be a bargain house. I want quality, good prices, and unique items.” P5 also stated, “I curate my entire collection.” The study participants focused on the inventory sold at their establishments. The participants noted that the level of inventory as well as the individual

product choices was critical. Proper inventory selection and management are essential components of retail SME sustainability. With appropriate inventory selection and management techniques, entrepreneurs may be able to increase the likelihood of organizational sustainability beyond the first 5 years.

Vendor Relationships

Strong vendor relationships was another minor theme that participants discussed as a sustainability strategy. According to Vivaldini, De Matos, and Pires, (2017), organizational leaders can benefit from vendor support to increase the competitiveness of their business. P1 stated, “We've established really good relations with most of our vendors on a personal level. That makes a difference,” and “We know they provide quality products.” P2 commented on the importance of vendor relationships when first starting their business by stating, “A lot of it was just, you know, working with our vendors and learning the business.” P3 said, “Wholesalers had a significant role in determining strategy.” P4 stated, “Wholesalers are very helpful for product selection.” The participants commented on the importance of vendor relationships, noting that a high level of trust established with individual vendors had a positive influence on their organization. By building meaningful relationships with vendors, retail SME owners may be able to increase the likelihood of business sustainability.

Product Knowledge

Knowledge is an asset that can create a competitive advantage for businesses because it is specific, rare, and valuable (De Luca, Maia, Cardoso, de Vasconcelos, & da Cunha, 2014). P1 commented on the importance of product knowledge by saying “You

cannot sell a product, like what we have, without knowing what the heck you're talking about." P1 also commented on the importance of industry periodicals as a source of product information by stating, "Journals provide information on current products." By knowing about products, retail businesses have additional knowledge and confidence in the retail items that they sell. P2 stated, "If we don't believe in the product, we can't sell it." P2 also said, "A lot of times my employees already know more than the reps, they're amazing because they'll take it upon themselves to learn." P4 stated, "Customers rely on the salesperson to tell them about it." The study participants discussed the necessity to have a superior level of product knowledge was a way to increase their ability to sell retail merchandise. Increasing product knowledge is another retail SME strategy that can help enhance the likelihood of business sustainability.

Emergent Theme 5: Customer Centricity Strategies

The fifth major retail SME sustainability strategy is customer centricity strategies. According to Ahmad, Rezaei, Tavasszy, de Brito, (2016), successful businesses promote high business integrity, sincerity, and excellent customer service. When entrepreneurs place a significant focus on their customers, they may be able to increase the number of repetitious customers and referral business, which can increase the likelihood of profitable business operations.

The participants described customer centricity strategies as a contributing factor in their organization's sustainability. Customer centricity strategies are subcategorized into the minor themes of genuine interactions and customer service.

Pictured in Figure 5 is the relative frequency of participant comments that relate

to the minor customer centricity strategies themes. Figure 5 shows that 51% of the customer centricity strategy comments discussed genuine interactions and 49% of the comments communicated customer service as contributing factors to an increased ability to sustain profitable business operations.

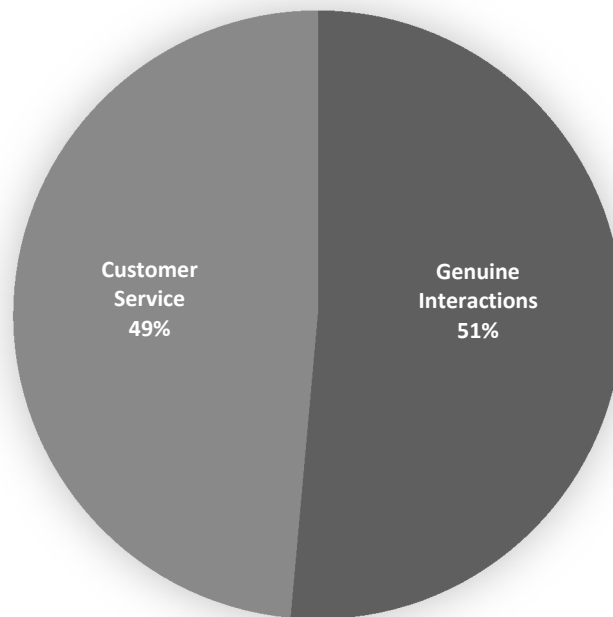


Figure 5. Relative frequency of minor themes associated with customer centricity strategies.

The study participants stated that they believed that genuine interactions and customer service strategies contributed to organizational success beyond 5 years. Table 7 gives a numerical representation of the customer centricity strategies minor themes which they believed added to their ability to sustain profitable business operations for more than 5 years.

Table 7

Emergent Theme 5: Customer Centricity Strategies

Minor Themes	Number of Comments
Genuine interactions	18
Customer service	17
Total	35

Genuine Interactions

Genuine customer interactions was a theme that was referenced several times throughout the interview process. Honest communications can increase customer loyalty and business profitability (Blanchard Hada, & Carlson, 2018). P1 stated, “I believe being kind to your customers and truthfully doing the best that you can for them and not taking them for granted.” P2 stated, “Each employee has a different way of talking with the customers but it's what they feel is genuine and what they feel is the right answer.” P3 said, “When our customers come in, we meet with them, we get to know them and about they're wants.” P4 stated, “I think what's kept our businesses going is the personal contact.” P4 also said, “I try to more befriend people through conversation to figure out what they are looking for.” P5 stated, “Try to start a conversation and be authentic.” P5 also stated, “It's very genuine when you are giving your honest opinion” and “We want to let them know we love them and there's no drama and we're authentic.” The participants discussed the importance of being genuine with their customers and having honest and

sincere interactions as a means of increasing organizational sustainability. By focusing on genuine customer interactions, retail SME owners may be able to meet the customer's needs, which can improve the opportunity for business sustainability.

Customer Service

According to Kessler, Pachucki, Stummer, Mair, and Binder, (2015), customer service is a primary component of customer satisfaction, which can increase the likelihood of business survivability. P1 explained the importance of customer service by saying, "Customer service has got to be, you know, number one" and "We do not pressure people when they come in." P2 stated, "You have to treat them well. They might be paying more here, but you have to, you know, give them a reason to come down here." P3 stated, "I want my customers to be happy and be satisfied with their products" and "If we do get a complaint or a problem or whatever else, we always fix it." Some small business owners even change their hours of operation to accommodate the customer's needs. P1 stated, "We've even met here at our store in the evening with some customers." The interviewed entrepreneurs placed significant emphasis on enhanced customer service tactics. When entrepreneurs put additional focus on customer service, they may be able to enhance their ability of business sustainability beyond 5 years.

Alignment of the Emergent Themes with GST

The diverse themes that emerged for this study directly align with GST. According to von Bertalanffy, (1972), the principal components of GST are a holistic approach instead of a basic summation of the parts, the necessity of interconnections, and regulation of the system. The retail SME owners utilized a holistic approach to sustain

their organization. The five emergent themes of leadership strategies, financial strategies, marketing strategies, inventory strategies, and customer centricity strategies are the individual strategies that the business leaders utilized holistically to sustain their organizations. The retail SME owners provided the regulation of the different system components, which allowed for a sustainable business system. All the distinct themes holistically connected and mutually contributed to organizational sustainability beyond 5 years.

Application to Professional Practice

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the effective strategies that retail SME owners use to sustain profitable businesses beyond 5 years. Retail SME owners may find the information within this study valuable to promote long-term business sustainability. Retail SME owners can use the information in this study to improve their companies' performance by aligning their retail organization in a manner that is consistent with the emergent themes. This doctoral study resulted in five emergent themes: leadership strategies, financial strategies, marketing strategies, inventory strategies, and customer centricity strategies.

Business owners that focus on the emergent themes presented in this doctoral study may increase business efficiency and enhance the probability of sustainability. It may also be beneficial for retail SME owners to conceptualize their business operations holistically as suggested by von Bertalanffy (1972), instead of independently evaluating each function. According to Haye, Matus, Cottet, and Niño (2018), it is vital that retail business owners understand the organizational requirements and the interrelation of their

business components to help promote business sustainability. By viewing their organizations holistically and utilizing the sustainability strategies discussed in this study, retail SME owners may be able to increase the likelihood of sustaining profitable business operations.

Implications for Social Change

The findings of this study may affect positive social change by showing retail SME leaders the sustainability strategies, which can improve retail SME sustainability rates. According to Meyskens and Bird (2015), business owners who successfully sustain their organizations create employment, increase economic development, and promote social values. An increase in retail SME sustainability could have a positive impact on local, state, and federal agencies through increased tax revenues. When local, state and federal agencies have additional funds from tax collections, they may be able to better meet the needs of their constituents by expanding government benefits that would otherwise be unfundable.

An increase in retail SME sustainability may also benefit the individuals that are seeking employment or are currently employed by a retail SME. Higher retail SME sustainability rates could result in higher wages and better benefits for current and prospective employees. With higher salaries and better employment benefits, retail SME employees may enjoy a better quality of life for themselves and their families. Citizens in communities may also benefit by reducing unemployment rates, aggregate improvements in the standard of living for all citizens, and enhanced economic stability.

Recommendations for Action

The purpose of this doctoral study was to explore the strategies that retail SME owners use to sustain their companies beyond 5 years. The findings of this study indicated that five sustainability strategies may benefit owners of retail SMEs. Leadership strategies are the first emergent retail SME sustainability strategy documented in this study. The participants of this study discussed four leadership strategies that they deemed beneficial for sustaining their organizations. The first leadership strategy is entrepreneur education and experience. Retail SME leaders may find it beneficial to have an educational and work background to help them better understand how to lead a retail SME. The second leadership strategy is leadership style. Retail SME leaders should also focus on a leadership style that is transformational and ethical. Buy utilizing transformational and ethical leadership styles; business leaders can motivate and inspire employees to achieve organizational goals. Business leaders should also focus on employee development and training. The third leadership strategy is employee training and development. Ensuring proper employee development is a leadership attribute that helps promote business sustainability. The fourth leadership strategy is entrepreneurial Drive. Becoming a successful entrepreneur is not for the faint of heart. It is essential that retail SME owners that seek long-term sustainability be willing to make personal sacrifices and work vigorously to achieve their organizational goals.

The second emergent retail SME sustainability strategy was financial strategies. The participants of this study documented three financial strategies that they believed were beneficial for sustaining their organizations. The first financial strategy is external

financial resources. Current or prospective retail SME leaders may need sufficient access to external financial resources to help ensure long-term business sustainability. Business leaders that do not have access to external capital may be more prone to business closure resulting from inadequate financial resources. The second financial strategy is capital conservation strategies. Entrepreneurs that are seeking sustainability must be conservative with their financial assets in an attempt to not overextend themselves. Setting and following a budget were also essential aspects discussed by study participants, which contributed to their organization's sustainability. The third financial strategy is financial benchmarking and evaluation. Business owners need to determine the level of sales that are necessary to meet their business objectives. After business leaders establish sales or revenue goals, it is essential to track organizational progress, making adjustments as deemed necessary.

The third retail SME sustainability strategy that emerged in this study was marketing strategies. The participants of this study discussed two marketing strategies that they thought were beneficial for sustaining their organizations. The first marketing strategy is the use of traditional and digital marketing. Business leaders need to develop and implement effective traditional and digital marketing strategies to increase organizational awareness. Business leaders need to focus their marketing dollars in the medium that will work best for them. Online advertising such as Facebook can be a valuable and cost-effective medium for marketing to current and prospective clients. Word of mouth advertising is another marketing medium that successful entrepreneurs utilize. Entrepreneurs should not underestimate the power that word-of-mouth advertising

can have on the success of their organization. The second marketing strategy that retail SME owners should employ is business networking. By discussing business operations with other non-competitor organizations, business owners can access additional knowledge from other entrepreneurs that have similar goals but different methods of goal attainment. Business networking is useful for entrepreneurs that are looking for ideas or partnerships for promoting organizational sustainability.

The fourth sustainability strategy that successful retail SME owners discussed was inventory strategies. The participants discussed three inventory strategies that aided them in their ability to sustain their organizations. The first inventory strategy is inventory selection and management. Inventory selection and management is an essential component of retail SME sustainability. Successful retail SME owners need to pay careful attention to the inventory on hand and be mindful of current inventory levels. It is essential to know the products that are or are not selling. Consumer preferences can change frequently, and successful retail SME owners may need to adjust product offerings to meet changes in product demand. The second inventory strategy is vendor relationships. Retail SME owners need to establish a mutually beneficial relationship with vendors. Retail SME owners must be able to trust their vendors because they can be a valuable resource in determining changes in customer preferences and useful resources for new industry information. The third inventory strategy is product knowledge. Successful retail SME owners place significant value on knowing about the products that they are selling. With access to online resources, some customers place additional emphasis on the ability of retail SME employees to describe and demonstrate the

products they sell. Industry journals may be a valuable resource as a means of increasing knowledge about a specific product or product lines.

The fifth retail SME sustainability strategy discussed in the study is customer centricity strategies. Retail SME owners must put a strong emphasis on customer experience. The retail market is highly competitive, and customer focus is essential. Genuine interaction is the first customer centricity strategy that is essential. Entrepreneurs need to be honest with their customers about the products they are offering. Participants of this study do not typically employ the use of high-pressure sales tactics. The successful retail SME owners in this study focused on befriending their customers through sincere interactions that focused on the customer's best interests. Customer service was the second customer centricity strategy that is needed to promote retail SME sustainability. The participants commented on how it was necessary to take their customer service skills above and beyond that of their competitors. By increasing the customer service skills utilized, retail SME owners may be able to increase business revenue and the likelihood of long-term business sustainability.

Because the information in this study can have a positive impact on business owners, employees, and communities, it is essential to disseminate the retail SME sustainability strategies that emerged. To help promote the retail SME sustainability strategies discussed in this study, I will forward a summary of the findings of this study to all study participants. I will further disseminate the findings to new local retail SME owners in North Dakota. I will also seek opportunities to share the results of this study

with others by participating in public conferences and by discussing this doctoral study with the students and faculty at local universities in North Dakota.

Recommendations for Further Research

The findings of this study present the strategies that retail SME business owners in North Dakota used to sustain their organizations beyond the first 5 years. The conclusions of this study can equip researchers with a basis for conducting future research by exploring other strategies that did not emerge from this study. Future researchers could conduct additional qualitative studies to uncover additional sustainability strategies that retail SME owners have used to sustain their businesses beyond the first 5 years.

This research was limited to a sample size of 5 participants that have owned a retail SME for more than 5 years. Further studies could utilize a larger sample size to determine additional retail SME sustainability strategies. A delimitation of this study was that the participants must have a business located in North Dakota. I recommend that future researchers conduct studies to determine the success strategies that retail SME owners use in other geographic locations. Additionally, this research was completed using a qualitative method and a multiple case study design. Further investigation could utilize different methodologies and designs to help determine the strategies that retail SME business owners use to sustain their organizations beyond the first 5 years. There are also additional opportunities for future researchers to consider, which may focus their research on SMEs in other industries other than the retail sector.

Reflections

The curriculum presented at Walden University is both challenging and rewarding. I believe that the structure of coursework required at Walden University allows students to slowly progress toward the ultimate goal of completing their doctoral research. As I progressed through the coursework, I noticed an improvement in my research, communication, and information processing skills. The timing and application of the coursework advanced my research skills, which constructed the informational foundation that was necessary for the completion of this doctoral study.

Completing this doctoral study has deepened my knowledge of retail business operations and the difficulties that some business leaders have when implementing their described sustainability strategies. The completion of this doctoral research has resulted in personal and academic growth and a better understanding of small business operations. Initially, the idea of the data collection process seemed intimidating. Once the data collection process began, I realized that speaking with the retail SME owners was the most enjoyable part of the doctoral study process. By sharing their experiences, I have expanded my understanding of small business ownership. I now have a new-found appreciation for all the hard work and dedication that is required to sustain a small business.

Completing this doctoral study allowed me to understand the knowledge, skills, and personal attributes necessary to sustain a retail SME in North Dakota beyond 5 years. Business owners often make significant personal sacrifices to ensure the sustainability of their organizations. The dedication exhibited by business leaders is not necessarily self-

serving. Many business owners continually think about how their actions will affect the well-being of other stakeholders associated with their organizations.

Conclusion

Successful small business ownership promotes the vitality of the US economy (Park & Campbell, 2017). Despite the importance of small businesses to the U.S. economy, some retail SME owners lack effective strategies to sustain profitable business operations beyond the first 5 years. Successfully sustaining a retail SME is complex and requires the entrepreneur to take a holistic approach to their business operations as was suggested by von Bertalanffy (1972). Retail SME owners that utilize effective leadership, financial, marketing, inventory, and customer centricity strategies may improve the likelihood of sustaining their organization. New and existing retail SME owners may be able to implement the recommendations from this study to help them maintain their business operations beyond the critical 5-year period. By improving individual business performance, business leaders can positively impact stakeholders that directly and indirectly affect their business operations.

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Appendix: Invitation to Participate in the Study

<Date>

<Address Block>

Dear Business Owner,

My name is David A. Frantsvog, and I am currently a doctoral student at Walden University. I am researching small and medium-sized retail enterprises to complete my doctoral degree. I am writing to ask for your assistance in identifying the strategies used to succeed in business in North Dakota. To complete my doctoral research, I am requesting an interview with retail business owners who have operated their businesses continuously for at least 5 years. The interview will likely take less than one hour, and we can have the discussion at your business or a mutually agreed upon location. With your permission and consent, I will ask you questions and record your answers. All of your personal information will remain confidential and will not be published or shared with any individuals or organizations. Please read the attached consent form as it provides additional details about the requests from potential participants for this doctoral study.

After I complete the study, I will offer to share the results of this study with you. Because I want to ensure accurate results, I will not provide compensation for your participation in this study. Although I am not offering payment, your involvement can help to improve business sustainability for small and medium-sized businesses owners in North Dakota. If

you would like to participate in this study, please contact me by e-mail at david.frantsvog@waldenu.edu. Thank you in advance for your consideration.

Sincerely,

David A. Frantsvog