Walden University

College of Management and Technology

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Jacqueline Robertson

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

Abstract

Leadership Strategies to Sustain Small Fitness Businesses

by

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MS, Youngstown State University, 2008

BS, Coastal Carolina University, 2002

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Business Administration

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Abstract

The development and sustainability of small businesses impact the U.S. economy. Owners of small businesses created 65.9% of new jobs between 2000 and 2017. Over 99.9% of known U.S. firms were small businesses. The purpose of this multiple case study was to explore the leadership strategies small fitness business owners implemented to sustain their businesses for longer than 5 years. The conceptual framework for this study was the servant leadership theory. The population for the study included 5 owners of small fitness businesses in the southeastern region of the U.S. who used leadership strategies to sustain their businesses for longer than 5 years. Data were collected using semistructured interviews and analysis of data from their business performance plans and financial statements. Data were analyzed using Yin's 5-step process. A transcription and coding software, methodological triangulation, and member checking were used during data analysis. Good business practices, leader characteristics, and leader relationships were the themes identified during data analysis. Company reputation, customer-service management, financial management, and marketing were minor themes of effective business practices, while adaptable, motivated, and work ethic were minor themes of leader characteristics and family-like and industry networks were minor themes of leader relationships. The implications of this study for positive social change relate to improving the economy, health, and overall well-being of community members through sustained small fitness business owners who provide jobs and access to preventive healthcare options.

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Dedication

I dedicate this study to my father, the late Edwin Clifton, grandfather, the late Edward Clifton, whom I lost during this doctoral journey, and my Aunt Michelle; they all instilled in me the importance of hard-work and determination. I especially, dedicate this study to my husband and daughters who gave me tremendous support, patience, and renewing affection from start to finish. To my sisters who never doubted my abilities and love for them, I am truly grateful. To my best friends who grew with me through tough situations and poor decisions, thank you for never judging me. To my Ohio family, thank you for understanding this time-commitment and being my cheerleaders. To my brother, thank you for the brotherly advice I didn’t know I needed when I was ready to quit.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study

Implementing sound leadership strategies can help prevent small business failure. Though small businesses make up a significant portion of the U.S. economy, more than 50% do not succeed beyond 5 years (U.S. Small Business Administration [SBA], 2018). In 2015, more than 99.9% of known U.S. firms were small businesses (SBA, 2018). Small business owners employed 47.5% of the private workforce and produced 97.6% of known exports in 2015 (SBA, 2018). Because small business performance relates to economic conditions, providing information regarding best practices in leadership is critical. Specifically, small business owners need to understand the impact their leadership behaviors have on the success of their organization.

Background of the Problem

A small business is an independently owned organization with less than 500 employees (SBA, 2018). Furthermore, small businesses include for-profit organizations that do not control significant amounts of their market (SBA, 2018). While small businesses contribute significantly to the U.S. economy, approximately half of them do not survive beyond 5 years (Holloway & Schaefer, 2014; SBA, 2018). Leadership style affects small business survival by directly influencing corporate values, organizational performance, and employee performance (Choudhary, Akhtar & Zaheer, 2013; Haynes, Hitt, & Campbell, 2015; Sellers, 2017). Creating leadership strategies to provide owners with practices to sustain their small businesses beyond 5 years is critical to small business success (Hayes, Chawla, & Kathawala, 2015; Holloway & Schaefer, 2014; Omri, Frikha, & Bouraoui, 2015; Vargas, 2014). If small business owners wish to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years, acquiring knowledge that combines leadership strategy and small business practices can prove beneficial in overcoming challenges related to small business failure rates.

Problem Statement

Leadership strategies can negatively impact the longevity of small businesses (Taneja, Pryor, & Hayek, 2016). Approximately 50% of small businesses in the United States do not survive beyond 5 years (Malott, 2016). The general business problem was that without leadership strategies many small business owners go out of business in less than 5 years. The specific business problem was that some small fitness business owners lack leadership strategies to sustain their business beyond 5 years.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of my qualitative multiple case study was to explore what leadership strategies small fitness business owners used to sustain their business beyond 5 years. The targeted population was five small fitness business owners in North Carolina who successfully used leadership strategies to sustain their business beyond 5 years. The implications for social change include promoting a better-quality marketplace for local consumers and opportunities to improve the socio-economic status of community members as well as the health of the community as an ecosystem.

Nature of the Study

I used the qualitative method for this study. Qualitative researchers explore phenomenon without presupposition and remain open to themes that may develop during the research process (Barnham, 2015; Gabriel, 2015). Qualitative researchers serve as the research instrument and investigate using open-ended questions, observation, and archival data (Barnham, 2015; Gabriel, 2015). Since I conducted interviews using open-ended questions to collect data from participants about their natural experiences, a qualitative method was most appropriate for this study. The quantitative method involves testing hypotheses and analyzing the relationships between variables or differences using statistical methods (Goertzen, 2017; Thamhain, 2014). The quantitative method was not appropriate because hypothesis testing and the analysis of the relationships between variables or differences was not necessary to address the purpose of the study. Researchers use the mixed method to integrate both qualitative and quantitative data collected in one study (Almalki, 2016). The mixed method was not appropriate because I did not test a hypothesis or require the quantitative approach to address the research question.

I employed a case study design for this study. The case study design includes real-world observations and data collection that is evidence based in application (Singh, 2014; Yin, 2017). A case study is appropriate for a qualitative study when researchers seek to answer questions over which they have no control (Singh, 2014; Yin, 2017). Researchers use the phenomenological design to explore a phenomenon in human nature through exploring meanings of the lived experiences of a small number of participants (Guetterman, 2015; Willis, Sullivan-Bolyai, Knafl, & Cohen, 2016). The phenomenological design was not appropriate for this study because understanding the meanings of lived experiences of the participants would not answer the central research question. Researchers use the ethnographic design to study people and their behavior in a cultural setting (Guetterman, 2015). The ethnographic design was not suitable because this study did not involve exploring a group in a cultural-sharing setting. Researchers use the narrative design to gain an understanding and meaning of individual or group experiences through participants' storytelling (Casey, Proudfoot, & Corbally, 2016). The narrative design was not appropriate because the study did not involve gathering information to establish the meaning of individual or group experiences.

Research Question

What leadership strategies do small fitness business owners use to sustain their business beyond 5 years?

Interview Questions

1. What leadership strategies have you used to sustain your business beyond 5 years?
2. What strategies did you find worked best to sustain your business beyond 5 years?
3. What strategies were least effective in sustaining your business beyond 5 years?
4. How did you assess the effectiveness of your strategies for sustaining your business beyond 5 years?
5. What were the key barriers to implementing your strategies for sustaining your business beyond 5 years?
6. How did you address the key barriers to sustaining your business beyond 5 years?

7. What modifications did you apply to any strategy to improve the effectiveness of sustaining your business beyond 5 years?
8. What more would you like to add regarding this study?

Conceptual Framework

I used the servant leadership theory to serve as a foundation to understand what leadership strategies small fitness business owners use to sustain their business beyond 5 years. In 1977, Greenleaf introduced the idea of servant leadership; a notion developed while reading Hermann Hesse's *Journey to the East* (Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002). While offering no succinct definition of servant leadership, Greenleaf (1977) said that the servant leader starts with an innate desire to serve first followed by deliberate actions to lead. The fundamental concepts of servant leadership theory are (a) empowerment, (b) humility, (c) standing back, (d) authenticity, (e) forgiveness, (f) courage, (g) accountability, and (h) stewardship (Mertel & Brill, 2015; Shirin, 2015; Sousa & van Dierendonck, 2017). Outcomes related to servant leadership theory include attainment of full individual potential, positive follower and organizational performance, and a positive impact on society (Kiersch & Peters, 2017; Liden, Wayne, & Henderson, 2008; Newman, Schwarz, Cooper, & Sendjaya, 2017; van Dierendonck et al., 2014). Small business owners who adopt characteristics of servant leadership are more likely to develop and implement strategies that ensure positive long-term effects (Peterlin, Pearse, & Dimovski, 2015). Small business owners can use servant leadership strategies to address social, economic, and environmental opportunities as well as internal and external organizational threats embedded in the past, present, and future (Peterlin et al., 2015; Van Winkle, Allen, DeVore, & Winston, 2014). As a result, servant leadership theory was a useful tool to help understand what leadership strategies small fitness business owners use to sustain their business beyond 5 years.

Operational Definitions

I focused on concepts related to fitness organizations, servant leadership, small businesses, and sustainability. The following definitions are operationalized to ensure readers have an optimum understanding of the applied terms.

Business sustainability: The ability to preserve core principles while meeting the long-term needs of an organization (Bateh, Horner, Broadbent, & Fish, 2014).

Fitness organization: An institution that has exercise equipment and services offered to the public in exchange for membership fees (Xiang, 2016).

Servant leadership: A leadership philosophy and application primarily influenced by the need to serve first with a focus on positively influencing others to achieve organizational goals and become servant leaders as well (Beck, 2014).

Small business: An independently owned organization with less than 500 employees (SBA, 2018).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

Assumptions

Assumptions represent unverified information that the researcher accepts as truth (Brinkmann, 2016). As the researcher, I made various assumptions in conducting this study. The first assumption was that all participants answered interview questions honestly. I also assumed that the participants selected for the study had the applicable expertise to answer the interview questions. Another assumption was that participants understood the interview questions. My final assumption was that participants had an interest in the topic of the study.

Limitations

Limitations are uncontrollable aspects that may impact the validity of a study (Buliga, 2014). One possible limitation was geographic location because the study included participants from a specific region of the southeastern United States. The experience of the small business owners selected was also a limitation as well as the sample size. Due to the role of the researcher as the data collection instrument in qualitative research, avoiding biases based on personal experiences is not always possible (O'Sullivan, 2015). Therefore, another limitation was my role as the data collection instrument and how that impacted data interpretation.

Delimitations

Delimitations are aspects that lead to restraints regarding the scope of the study (Yin, 2017). This study included several delimitations. First, I only used small business leaders who had sustained their businesses beyond 5 years in North Carolina. Second, I only used interviews and physical documents as data sources, which excluded in-depth information that I could have gained from the use of other methodological designs. Lastly, I analyzed my findings based solely through the lens of the servant leadership theory.

Significance of the Study

Contribution to Business Practice

Small business owners face various challenges related to long-term business sustainability (Malott, 2016; Taneja et al., 2016). Therefore, small business owners must understand what strategies work and what does not work to sustain their business beyond 5 years. The results of this study contribute to effective business practices by providing a practical model that small fitness business owners can use to understand servant leadership theory and business success beyond 5 years. The study is of value to the practice of business because it will help small business owners improve business sustainability through improved leadership strategy initiatives. The results from this study may also be useful to scholar-practitioners in connecting theory to application.

Implications for Social Change

The implications for positive social change include new strategies to support small business owners in efforts to lead sustainable organizations. Small business owners may use the findings of this study to enable them to increase their capabilities of and contributions to improving the economic health of their communities through decreased rates of failed businesses. Overall, decreased rates of failed businesses may benefit small business employees and their families through both job creation and continuity.

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

Researchers review literature specific to their topic because this process is helpful when identifying questions for future research (Rowley, 2014). In this section, I describe strategies and databases used in searching for relevant literature related to the research topic and conceptual framework of servant leadership. Greenleaf introduced servant leadership theory in the late 1970s as a philosophical concept of leadership (Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002). Servant leadership is an important aspect of this study because I used some of the antecedents of the theory along with phrases, such as *small business*, *leadership*, and *sustainability*, in my search for literature. Additionally, I provide an overview of the literature related to leadership and small businesses. I also reviewed articles relevant to the central research question as well as to carry out an evaluation of relevant research related to preventive healthcare.

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore leadership strategies that small fitness business owners use to sustain businesses beyond 5 years. More than 90% of all firms in the United States are small businesses; however, approximately half of small business owners do not survive beyond 5 years (SBA, 2018). As a result, the survival of small businesses significantly impacts our global and local economy. The information in this study may prove useful to small business owners seeking strategies to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years.

I organized the literature review using servant leadership theory, leadership, small business types, and small business as main topics. The literature review contains information regarding successful strategies used by small business owners and traits that predict successful leadership. To search for academic, peer-reviewed sources, I used the following databases: Academic Search Complete, Business Source Complete, Google Scholar, Directory of Open Access Journals, ProQuest Central, Sage Premier, and Thoreau Multi-Database Search. I reviewed 319 peer-reviewed articles and one non-peer-reviewed article (see Table 1). I also reviewed publications from government databases to find relevant and reliable information regarding health and human service data as well as small business statistics. Additionally, 94.03% of the sources used were published within 5 years of the expected completion of the study, based on a publication date of 2014 or later.

Table 1

Literature Review Sources

Sources	> 5 years	< 5 years	Total	% Total < 5 Years
Peer-reviewed articles	17	319	336	90.63%
Non peer-reviewed articles		1	1	0.28%
Books	5	6	10	1.70%
Dissertations		1	1	0.28%
Government websites		4	4	1.14%
Total	22	331	352	94.03%

Servant Leadership Theory

Servant leadership differs from many other leadership theories. Greenleaf introduced servant leadership in 1970 but only started discussing the concept in 1977 (Mcray, 2015; Rachmawati & Lantu, 2014). Unlike other leadership styles, servant leaders use their role as servants to influence followers (Beck, 2014; van Dierendonck & Patterson, 2015). Servant leaders place the needs of followers at the forefront (Rachmawati & Lantu, 2014; van Dierendonck & Patterson, 2015). The key aspects of servant leadership focus on interactions that are ethical, nurturing, and empathic (Beck, 2014; Coetzer, Bussin, & Geldenhuys, 2017). Servant leadership involves being self-sacrificing and future oriented (Beck, 2014; van Dierendonck & Patterson, 2015). Servant leadership seems paradoxical from the perspective of leadership but has useful characteristics.

Servant leaders have several distinguishing characteristics. Servant leadership is an intrinsic desire to serve, applied through leadership and differentiated by putting the growth and development of others ahead of self-interests (Greenleaf, 2008; van Dierendonck & Patterson, 2015). The characteristics associated with servant leadership include being forward-thinking and having a heart to serve, empathy, and a focus on follower growth (Coetzer et al., 2017; Greenleaf, 1977; van Dierendonck & Patterson, 2015). Employing communication that focuses on listening, showing care for follower well-being, being discerning, using positive-driven persuasion, and pursuing community development are also aspects of servant leadership (Beck, 2014; Greenleaf, 1977; van Dierendonck & Patterson, 2015). Servant leader characteristics do not mirror other leadership approaches but are useful depending on the type of organization.

The servant leadership approach may not work in all organizations. Often applied across religious and nonprofit organizations, the servant leadership approach tends to have a more natural fit where community and followership are key stakeholders (Beck, 2014; van Dierendonck & Patterson, 2015). While servant leadership theorists consider the leader’s behavior as the driving point, the organization, followers, public performances, and influence are the determining outcomes (Beck, 2014; Coetzer et al., 2017). Overall, organizational fit does not simply include implications related to the leader but must include follower and community engagement.

The dominating perspective of power and influence are not common concepts of servant leadership. The servant leader approaches the notion of power and influence specifically from a positive standpoint while noting that the style is not well suited for every situation (Rachmawati & Lantu, 2014; van Dierendonck & Patterson, 2015). There are unresolved postulations regarding the root of the servant leadership process that renders it too loosely defined (Rachmawati & Lantu, 2014; van Dierendonck & Patterson, 2015). Additionally, language that advocates altruism also seems to lead to implications that correlate good leadership with the notion that the needs of other must be at the forefront (Coetzer et al., 2017; van Dierendonck & Patterson, 2015). In comparison, there are other theories that focus on ethical considerations, but servant leadership goes further by emphasizing selflessness (Davis, 2017; Greenleaf, 1977). Servant leaders acknowledge power and influence but initiate leadership through selfless service.

Comparing theories. Servant leaders and transformational leaders share a similar goal of wanting to move followers to a better place; however, they differ in their approach (Chen, Zhu, & Zhou, 2015; van Dierendonck et al., 2014). Transformational leadership is the engagement process by which the follower progresses towards self-actualization through the leader-follower relationship (Pitoyo & Sawitri, 2016; van Dierendonck et al., 2014). Downtown initially used transformational leadership as a term in 1973, and Burns introduced the approach in 1978 (Abouraia & Othman, 2017; Money, 2017). Servant and transformational leadership have differing approaches and a different founding.

Transformational leadership has other unique features. Like servant leadership, transformational leadership has proven highly influential in leadership studies (Chen et al., 2015; van Dierendonck et al., 2014). However, implications related to the transactional aspects of transformational leadership may skew followers' perceptions and limit the leader's ability to fully impact their followers (Baškarada et al., 2017; van Dierendonck et al., 2014). Leadership application, intention, and the principles associated are ways to distinguish between transactional and transformational leadership (Baškarada et al., 2017; Martin, 2016). Transformational and transactional are not the same.

Contrasting theories. There is an association between transactional leadership and transformational leadership; however, transactional leadership contains the subcategories of charismatic leadership, contingent reward, laissez-faire leadership, and management by exception (Arnold, Connelly, Walsh, & Martin, 2015; Martin, 2016). Charismatic leadership has a foundation in the viewpoint that followers see the leader as a superhuman who is gifted with powers to influence and arouse followership (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2015; Lukowski, 2017). When employing contingent reward leadership, the leader delegates necessary work and rewards followers for acceptable completion (Arnold et al., 2015; Buengeler, Homan, & Voelpel, 2016). Referred to as the absentee leader, laissez-faire leaders take no action or initiative to support or develop followership (Arnold et al., 2015; Gholamzadeh, Khazaneh, & Nabi, 2014). Passive and active managers by exception direct attention to negative aspects of a follower's performance

(Arnold et al., 2015; Gholamzadeh et al., 2014). Transactional and transformational leadership differ, but each has aspects that offset the other.

Christianity and servant leadership. Servant leadership is not the same as Christian leadership. Scholars have noted a relationship between servant leadership and Christianity (Benawa, 2015; Irving & Berndt, 2017); however, there is insufficient evidence that servant leadership is inherently Christian (Shirin, 2015; Tropello & DeFanzio, 2014). The origin of servant leadership theory is not biblical (Gandolfi, Stone, & Deno, 2017; Shirin, 2015). The idea of servant leadership has basis in ancient practices as well as a modern reading of a non-biblical text (Greenleaf, 2008; Rachmawati & Lantu, 2014). Practitioners successfully apply servant leadership theory across various settings not specific to Christianity, including in the therapeutic, business, and nonprofit sectors (Rachmawati & Lantu, 2014; Shirin, 2015). While servant leadership has characteristics relative to Christianity, its basis is secular.

In summary, servant leadership has characteristics that differ from other leadership theories. Servant leadership applies equally in secular and religious organizations but has better outcomes where the organizations' leaders specifically focus on positive follower outcomes and community engagement (Rachmawati & Lantu, 2014; Shirin, 2015). Though differing antecedents, transformational leadership theory has a framework similar to servant leadership (Chen, Zhu, & Zhou, 2015; van Dierendonck et al., 2014). As a result, researchers can simultaneously use servant leadership and transformational leadership theories to investigate leadership strategies that help small business owners sustain their businesses beyond 5 years.

Ethical leadership. Ethical leadership is not simply following laws; ethics are an important part of both leadership and business practices (Demirtas & Akdogan, 2015; Parilti, Külter Demirgüneş, & Ozsacmaci, 2014). Ethical leadership involves understanding who leaders are as well as their actions and decisions (Demirtas & Akdogan, 2015; Wang & Hackett, 2016). Ethical leaders demonstrate a commitment to individual and group stakeholders, trust, transparency, and accountability (Demirtas & Akdogan, 2015; Moczadlo, 2015). Aspects, such as individual morals, values, and organizational culture, influence the ethics of a leader (Parilti et al., 2014; Wang & Hackett, 2016). Ethical leaders use internal and external tool as moral compasses.

Followers respond to ethical leaders, and these leaders tend to have a high impact upon organizational culture, especially when the leader is a founding member or owner of the organization (Herremans, Nazari, & Mahmoudian, 2016; Wang & Hackett, 2016). Because founders or entrepreneurs and owners invest in materials and human resources for an organization, they also invest in the culture of their organization (Liden, Wayne, Liao, & Meuser, 2014; Müller, Te, & Jain, 2017). Organizational culture is not formed through words or catchphrases and does not simply affect daily operations (Herremans et al., 2016; Müller et al., 2017). Ethical leaders embed organizational culture in morale that significantly impacts future organizational endeavors (Herremans et al., 2016; Wang & Hackett, 2016). Impact on future endeavors can determine whether organizational leaders and staff bring the vision to fruition or not (Herremans et al., 2016; Newman et al., 2017; Wang & Hackett, 2016). An ethical leader does not marry organizational culture and vision through mere words but through transparency regarding his or her actions and intentions (Herremans et al., 2016; Wang & Hackett, 2016). Generally, ethical leaders positively influence followers by providing consistent examples of ethical decision-making and practices (Demirtas & Akdogan, 2015; Müller et al., 2017. Followers can positively when they have ethical leaders.

Uncertainty within organizations can be harmful because ambiguity leads to distrust and uncertainty (Demirtas & Akdogan, 2015; Wang & Hackett, 2016). With various organizational scandals throughout the early 2000s to the present as examples, transparency has become a critical aspect of leadership (Demirtas & Akdogan, 2015; Vogelgesang & Lester, 2009; Wang & Hackett, 2016). It is essential for ethical leaders to understand the delicate balance involved with transparency: Too much information can put a leader in danger of violating privacy; yet, too little information can cause followers to have poor perceptions of leadership and organizational practices or policies (Demirtas & Akdogan, 2015; Herremans et al., 2016). Both extremes can have a negative impact on trust within the organization (Demirtas & Akdogan, 2015; Herremans et al., 2016). Leader transparency includes providing honest communication related to decision-making, sharing relevant information with followers, and being open to receiving and giving feedback (Demirtas & Akdogan, 2015; Wang & Hackett, 2016). Ethical leaders understand that an appropriate level of transparency fosters a culture of trust and security in both organizational leadership and policies (Demirtas & Akdogan, 2015; Wang & Hackett, 2016). Open communication and trust are tools small business leaders can use to model the importance of transparency in striving to sustain their businesses. Additionally, because ethical leaders and servant leaders have shared commitments to individual morals and positive follower outcomes, if small fitness business owners view ethical leadership through the lens of servant leadership, they can further develop strategies to sustain their business beyond 5 years.

Leadership

Leadership is not an idea that is separate from other areas of study; rather, it is a topic researched and documented from various perspectives, including business, education, and psychology (Elwell & Elikofer, 2015; Gabriela & Alexandra, 2014; Silva, 2014). Depending on the theory or theorists, leadership is a process, an attribute, a position or title, an outcome, or a skill (Behrendt, 2017; Vecchiotti, 2018). There are varying perspectives and ideas regarding leadership, including notions that posit leadership as innate aspects of who people are or skills developed through training and experiences (Miguel, 2017; Silva, 2014). As a result, the definition of leadership is ever evolving and varies across a wide range of disciplines (Holloway & Schaefer, 2014; Vecchiotti, 2018). For the purposes of this study, I used the following comprehensive definition offered by Winston and Patterson (2006): A leader is someone whose actions, capabilities, and combined efforts influence followers to develop and use their internal and external resources to further the mission of an organization or group.

Followership. The definition of followership comes from multiple perspectives. Rank or role and constructionist are two main perspectives related to the definition of followership (Junker & van Dick, 2014; Uhl-Bien, Riggio, Lowe, & Carsten, 2014). The rank or role perspective bases followership on hierarchy positions such as a CEO and vice president (Davis, 2017; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). Constructionist approaches involve the view of followership based on a social process where individuals engage in a trusting leader-follower relationship purposed to achieve common goals despite roles or titles (Bufalino, 2018; Salehzadeh, 2017). While followership has a direct connection to leadership, literature related to leadership dates further back than literature with a focus on followership.

Leadership requires followership. However, there exists a host of research, literature, and practitioner training about leadership while followership is a much more recent subject of examination (Bufalino, 2018; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). It is possible that the significant gap in research and development timelines for the two topics impacts the perception of leadership versus followership (Bufalino, 2018; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). The idea of being a follower has some negative connotation, including implications that a follower is less effective, of less value, or less powerful than a leader (Junker & van Dick, 2014; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). Both roles have the power to influence not only each other, but individuals and organizations outside of the leader-follower relationship (Davis, 2017; Salehzadeh, 2017; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). Both followers and leaders have beneficial characteristics. Overall, in the leader-follower relationship, leadership does not equate to elitism and followership is not demeaning; rather, they are equally important to organizational success.

Followers have notable characteristics. Courage, willingness, and trust are all important characteristics of a follower (Davis, 2017; Junker & van Dick, 2014). A follower’s value rests in their courage to be loyal to their organizations and leadership, as long as there is no misalignment between the followers’ and leaders’ or organizations’ intrinsic beliefs (Bufalino, 2018; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). Followers exercise courage by demonstrating varying types of power including the power of expectations, choice of continued support or self-extraction, and the power of honest expressions (Davis, 2017; Hurwitz & Koonce, 2016). Regarding willingness, an individual willing to follow only on their terms can likely cause stagnation, often rendering ineffective processes across an organization (De Clercq, Bouckenooghe, Raja, & Matsyborska, 2014; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). Conversely, a follower open to ideas and guidance of both leaders and colleagues can prove integral in seamless goal attainment.

Relationships encompass varying levels of trust. Trust is a critical component of a successful leader-follower relationship (De Clercq et al., 2014; Junker & van Dick, 2014). Follower trust in leadership positively impacts organizational outcomes (Hayes, Caldwell, & Licona, 2015; Junker & van Dick, 2014). Leaders who value the trust of their followers model authenticity, transparency, and demonstrate actions seeking a healthy leader-follower relationship (De Clercq et al., 2014; Junker & van Dick, 2014). An interdependence rather than dependence in the leader-follower relationship exists as both followers and leaders benefit from positive organizational and individual development outcomes (Bufalino, 2018; Hurwitz & Koonce, 2016). The leader-follower relationship is a critical component of servant leadership. Therefore, mistrust or dissention in the leader-follower relationship is neither beneficial to leaders, followers, and business sustainability beyond 5 years.

Leadership vs Management. Leadership and management are not synonymous. The two terms have distinct functions within organizations (Burcar, 2014; Oltean, 2016).

At present, publications exist that distinguish the two terms by definition, area of study, and practice; however, literature published in the 1990s contain content where scholars used the terms manage and lead interchangeably (Burcar, 2014; Cucović, 2016; Oltean, 2016). Conversely, both leadership and management practices tend to include goal attainment and working with people (Burcar, 2014; Oltean, 2016). Leadership and management are two separate ideas that share some similar practices, so a manager can be a leader and a leader can have a managing role in an organization.

Leaders and managers engage in relationships. Leaders examine the influence they have on individuals while managers tend to focus on the use of total resources including human, information, and material to streamline processes (Oltean, 2016; Silva, 2014). Also, management is generally subject to level and duties within an organization while leadership can exist in varying levels and roles (Burcar, 2014; Oltean, 2016). Oltean (2016) distinguished leadership and management by noting that the practice of leadership involves creating goals reflective of the organization's big picture while management focuses on performing actions related to the specific goals. Leaders and managers have goals, but goal attainment is another aspect that distinguishes the two ideas.

The difference between a small business leader and small business manager serves as an example of leadership versus management when examining a small organization. A business manager is within the hierarchy of an organization and is often responsible for making decisions and orchestrating processes as a part of their expected duties (Turner & Endres, 2014; Ungureanu & Vasile, 2016). A business leader may or may not have hierarchy authority within the organization (Cucović, 2016; Turner & Endres, 2014). Rather, a leader's impact on the organization may stem from the desire to influence others through their use of hard and soft skills (Choudhary et al., 2013; Cucović, 2016; Silva, 2014). Small business leaders and managers can orchestrate efficiency across their organizations when armed with skills relevant to staff needs. Additionally, as servant leaders focus on service to followers and relationships, small business owners may highlight the distinct differences between leadership and management through the lens of servant leadership in developing strategies to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years.

Leadership Approaches. Leadership has various approaches. Trait approach theorists suggest that an individual have characteristics common to leaders (Bourdage, Law, & Ogunfowora, 2016; Meuser, Gardner, & Dinh, 2016). Though still leader-focused, at the opposite end of the spectrum, skills approach theorists view leadership as an individual's knowledge regarding work or activity specific techniques, human relations, and overall concepts or ideas (Cismas, Dona, & Andreiasu, 2016; Megheirkouni, Amaugo, & Jallo, 2018). Behavioral approach theorists offer yet another perspective. Theorists of behavioral approach examine the leader's actions or mannerisms (Bajcar, Babiak, & Nosal, 2015; Bourdage et al., 2016). Implied by its name, situational approach draws attention to leadership as exercised in varying circumstances (Meier, 2016; Thompson, 2018). Leaders can select the approach that best suits his or her style and organization as no one leadership approach is superior to the other.

Each leadership approach has affiliated theories. Some of those theories include Path-goal, leader-member exchange (LMX), transformational, authentic, servant, adaptive, psychodynamic, and team (Gabriela & Alexandra, 2014; Silva, 2014). Path-goal theory focuses on methods leaders use to motivate members or followers toward goal achievement (Farhan, 2017; Malik, Shamsa, & Hassan, 2014). LMX theorists address leadership as a relationship that has positive and negative implications of leader-member relationships through dyadic illustrations (Harris, Li, & Kirkman, 2014; Henson & Beehr, 2018). Like LMX, transformational leadership involves attention to both the leader and follower (Diggin, Svendsen, & Joensson, 2016; Pitoyo & Sawitri, 2016). However, transformational leaders focus on the process by which the leader and follower are motivated to evolve into better people as they work toward a common goal (Megheirkouni, Amaugo, & Jallo, 2018; Pitoyo & Sawitri, 2016). Transformational leadership expands upon transactional leadership (Baškarada, Watson, & Cromarty, 2017; Megheirkouni et al., 2018). Specifically, transactional leaders focus on exchanges, rewards or punishments from the leader to the follower while transformational leaders aspire to make their followers better people and leaders (Baškarada et al., 2017; van Dierendonck et al., 2014). While transactional and transformational leadership differ, combined, both approaches can prove beneficial in the leader-follower relationship.

The idea of authentic leadership is not new. However, the term authentic is one of the more contemporary areas of study regarding leadership that tends to be leader focused (Duncan, Green, Gergen, & Ecung, 2017; Kiersch & Peters, 2017). Self-awareness, stability and endurance, self-regulation, and standard of character are four rules based on authentic leadership (Kiersch & Peters, 2017; Malik, 2018). Servant leadership, by title, seems a contradiction in that the idea of a leader serving does not align with our conventional views (Beck, 2014; Verdorfer & Peus, 2014). Servant leadership starts with wanting to serve others, which begets a will to lead through service that helps individuals grow and have a better quality of life (Beck, 2014; Greenleaf, 2008). Prioritizing service before leadership is an aspect that distinguishes servant leadership from other theories.

The adaptive approach is another form of leadership. Adaptive leadership is an approach that focuses on the leader's actions (Jefferies, 2017; Woolard, 2018). Specifically, adaptive leaders help members or followers navigate change in a way that is beneficial physically and mentally (Nelson & Squires, 2017; Wooldard, 2018). Psychotherapeutic is a perspective the adaptive leadership process applied theoretically (Adenoro, Sowcik, & Balser, 2017; Nelson & Squires, 2017). The general notion of psychodynamic dates to Sigmund Freud; however, the married study of psychoanalysis and leadership has a more recent history (Cilliers, 2018; Plakiotis, 2017). Psychodynamic leadership is unique in that it offers an approach to leadership that tends to encourage introspection of leaders' past and present life experiences (Cilliers, 2018; Plakiotis, 2017). After gaining a better understanding of how a leader's background, experiences, and perceptions influence personal behaviors, psychodynamic leadership also directs leaders to consider the same implications as related to followers (Barabasz, 2016; Plakiotis, 2017). The psychoanalysis through adaptive leadership is an approach that allows engagement of both the leader and follower.

Team leadership is another useful approach to organizational leadership. Team leadership involves ensuring successful outcomes related to team goals and or tasks (Alavi & McCormick, 2016; Konradt, 2014). Team leadership theorists posit that anyone can make sound decisions benefiting team outcomes and team development, not just leaders (Alavi & McCormick, 2016; Graca & Passos, 2015). Various societal shifts including globalization and technological innovations have changed the notion of team and teamwork (Alavi & McCormick, 2016; Graca & Passos, 2015; Konradt, 2014). Teams are no longer limited to in-person interactions as the work done within them can be virtual, national, and global (Alavi & McCormick, 2016; Graca & Passos, 2015). Due to the diverse nature of teams, team leadership proves to be complex, yet offers practical approaches to team effectiveness within organizations (Graca & Passos, 2015; Konradt, 2014). Team leadership has some complexities but is a practical approach that offers flexibility in application.

Small Business Types

Family-owned businesses. Family-owned businesses are complex and vary in size. From an anthropological perspective, family enterprise concepts are as old as humanity (San Román, Fernández Pérez, & Gil López, 2014; Wiley, 2013). While there is no one agreed upon definition of a family-owned business, the basis of varying definitions includes a business, firm, or venture, controlled or managed by more than one family member (Fitzgerald & Muske, 2016; San Román et al., 2014). Family-owned firms range from small businesses to large corporations and contribute significantly to economies around the world (Apong et al., 2015; Goel & Jones, 2016; Pukall & Calabrò, 2014). Gilding, Gregory, and Cosso (2015) reported that family-owned businesses made up 90% of all businesses in the United States. As a result, establishing sound strategies that will allow family-owned businesses to thrive is critical to the U.S. economy (Gilding et al., 2015; Goel & Jones, 2016; Pukall & Calabrò, 2014). Based on a review of the literature, the following are challenges family-owned businesses face.

Family-owned organizations have challenges that hinder success. Global and national economic hardships along with a lack of strategic and succession plans tend to prove detrimental to many small businesses, particularly family organizations (Fletcher, De Massis, & Nordqvist, 2016; Gilding et al., 2015; Leppäaho, Plakoyiannaki, & Dimitratos, 2015). Additionally, a lack of separating business and family decisions exists as a challenge across family-owned businesses (Binz, Ferguson, Pieper, & Astrachan, 2017; Kowsalyadevi & Kumar, 2013). Not separating business and family decisions can negatively impact family relations as well as impose legal implications on the business (Binz et al., 2017; Kowsalyadevi & Kumar, 2013). Another challenge within family enterprises seems to be a fear or lack of interest in globalization (Chung, 2014; Leppäaho et al., 2015). Though globalization increases the chances of success in family businesses, a significant number of organizations avoid expansion beyond local or national operations (Arregle, Duran, Hitt, & Essen, 2017; Chung, 2014). Overall, it is important that small business leaders of family-owned businesses become aware of challenges and develop strategies to address each one in a manner that is appropriate for their organization and will aid them in sustaining their businesses beyond 5 years. Practiced from the perspective of servant leadership, small family-owned business owners may be able to better balance family-work challenges using characteristics such as openness and desire for common good.

Fitness and wellness businesses. Physical fitness and wellness products can include goods and services. Services within fitness and wellness businesses include intangible experiences that ensure individual health and wellness (García, Bernal, Fernandez, & Colon, 2014; García-Fernández et al., 2017). Goods within fitness and wellness businesses represent tangible items professionals offer to enhance services (García et al., 2014; Thomson, Kilgore, & Lionnàin, 2015). For the purpose of this study, I focused on physical fitness and wellness services.

Fitness and wellness are important aspects of individual health. Fitness and wellness directly relate to personal health as some individuals regard the advice from fitness professionals as highly as information from healthcare professionals (Andreasson & Johansson, 2014; Kim & Ling, 2017). Physical fitness is the overall ability for a person's body to respond to physical exercise in a manner that is physiologically beneficial (Cheng & Chen, 2018; Marques, Santos, Ekelund, & Sardinha, 2015). Further, wellness is an individual's effort to maintain overall health across all aspects of their life for the purpose of optimal physiological functions daily (Cheng & Chen, 2018; Marques et al., 2015). Although there are costs associated such as gym memberships and personal training sessions, results from engaged physical fitness and wellness are incalculable (Andreasson & Johansson, 2014; Thomson et al., 2015). Overall, physical fitness and wellness are not tangible, and while there are associated costs, the benefits remain innumerable.

Not all fitness and wellness professionals carry the same credentials. Training and credential requirements for fitness and wellness professionals are not consistent throughout the industry (De Lyon, Neville, & Armour, 2017; García et al., 2014). The inconsistent requirements reflect erratic remunerations for fitness and wellness professionals found across organizations (De Lyon et al., 2017; García et al., 2014). For example, to pay individuals less, fitness centers often overlook professionals who hold academic credentials in physical education and exercise science for those with minimal certifications (Bates, 2008; De Lyon et al., 2017). Overlooking those who hold degrees has resulted in subpar services from trainers and instructors, sometimes leading to cases of product-harm (Bates, 2008; De Lyon et al., 2017; Lloyd & Payne, 2017). Avoiding product harm can help owners of small fitness businesses sustain their firm beyond 5 years organizations (Xiang, 2016; Yun, 2015). As a result, researchers and small fitness business owners should investigate and establish guidelines for remunerations that align with fitness and wellness professional’s skills and experience.

Product-harm. Instances of product-harm occur across various industries. Product-harm is an instance where an affiliated brand’s product proves faulty or causes harm (Akpinar, Verlegh, & Smidts, 2018; Ma et al., 2014). As fitness and wellness can represent one or a combination of services, product-harm can result from not only poor customer service, but also experiences that do not yield improved physical health or appearance including personal injury (Kim & Ling, 2017; Polyakova & Mirza, 2016). Situations of product harm significantly impact the reputation and long-term success of fitness and wellness organizations (Xiang, 2016; Yun, 2015). To address issues related to product-harm fitness and wellness organizations should address public awareness of product-harm situations, maintain planned methods to avoid or address product-harm situations, and have an appointed person to communicate organizational goals related to any incidents or claims of product-harm (Ma et al., 2014; Yun, 2015). Also, it is vital that organizational leaders ensure that services offered within their fitness and wellness organizations are of sound research-based practices while thoroughly and regularly evaluating individual skills and credentialing organizations associated with staff members (Xiang, 2016; Xuejuan & Xiaohong, 2014). Regarding customers, tracking data related to individual customer health and wellness can prove critical in proactively addressing potentially harmful situations as well as helpful if confronted with actions that lead to organizational or staff mitigation (Teik, 2015; Yun, 2015). As a result, designated personnel should perform an assessment of the individual health needs and risks of customers prior to the established membership agreement as well as during membership (Teik, 2015; Xiang, 2016; Yun, 2015). Product-harm in the fitness and wellness industry has unique challenges, therefore, small fitness business owners must consider unique leadership strategies to address product harm resolution that enables them to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years.

Healthcare delivery systems and fitness. There are several types of services involved in healthcare delivery systems. Preventive care, primary care, secondary care, and tertiary care are categories of services within healthcare delivery systems (Duggan, Leon, McDonald, & Chow, 2017; Wilk et al., 2016). For the purpose of this study, I will focus on preventive care services as related to aspects of fitness such as exercise and nutrition. Preventive care involves integrating healthy behaviors into an individual's lifestyle that will help them prevent or delay diseases while leading productive lives with minimal medical costs (Crisford et al., 2018; Leenaars, Smit, Wagemakers, Molleman, & Koelen, 2015). Individuals can begin healthy habits through preventive care practices.

Preventive care involves more than just annual doctors' office visits. Regular exercise and a balanced diet are preventive measures individuals take to improve and sustain their physiological health (Leenaars et al., 2015; U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2017). Regular exercise consists of 30–60 minutes of moderate to intense aerobic exercises or physical activity daily (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2017; Yan, Finn, & Corcoran, 2015). A balanced diet includes consuming adequate portions of water and nutrients such as carbohydrates with fiber, non-saturated fats, minerals, proteins, and vitamins based on individual needs to maintain good health (Brown, Bray, Beaty, & Kwan, 2014; Wilson, 2016). Individuals who exercise and maintain a balanced diet can decrease their chances regarding the onset of various types of chronic diseases including arthritis, diabetes, hyperlipidemia, and hypertension (Alphafri et al., 2017; Leenaars et al., 2015). Exercise can also help impede some negative effects of the aging processes such as loss of bone and muscle mass (Crisford et al., 2018; Leenaars et al., 2015; U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2017). Overall, exercise and a balanced diet is an important part of preventive care as they are beneficial to a person's health.

Healthcare systems have intricate structures. Not all individuals understand the importance of and have access to preventive care services (Feyerherm, Tibbits, Hongmei, Schram, & Balluff, 2014; Gavin, Seeholzer, Leon, Chappelle, & Sehgal, 2015; Young et al., 2015). Gaps in access to and an understanding of healthcare including preventive services exist throughout the United States (Silver, 2017; Young et al., 2015). Adults tend to have unhealthy habits that develop throughout childhood due to a lack of access to proper fitness, healthcare, and nutrition education (Brooks & Moore, 2016; García-Fernández et al., 2017). As a result, adults and children across the U.S. population experience higher rates of chronic diseases and conditions linked to obesity (Brooks & Moore, 2016; Steinhardt et al., 2015). The increased rates of chronic diseases and conditions have also led to higher healthcare costs (Crisford et al., 2018; Leenaars et al., 2015; Young et al., 2015). In response to limited access and rising costs, healthcare professionals have shifted their focus from illness and disease treatment to prevention (Alphafri et al., 2017; Marques et al., 2015; Yan et al., 2015). A shift to focusing on prevention is one way to address challenges related to healthcare inaccessibility and misunderstandings.

Various organizations have partnerships purposed to narrow the access gap and provide a better understanding of illness and disease prevention. Insurance providers, fitness centers, and employers collaborate to create fitness initiative programs and offer employer or health plan-sponsored benefits to those seeking to improve their health through exercise and nutrition (Alphafri et al., 2017; Leenaars et al., 2015). Programs and benefits include chronic disease prevention workshops, free or discounted fitness center memberships, and lower out-of-pocket insurance costs (Gavin et al., 2015; Leenaars et al., 2015; Young et al., 2015). Due to prevention education and health plan-sponsored programs, an increasing number of individuals engage in healthy behaviors that include using fitness center services as a foundation to establish regular exercise routines (Abdin, Welch, Byron-Daniel, & Meyrick, 2018; Gavin et al., 2015; Rothstein, 2014). This increased engagement affects individuals and parties involved. Employers benefit because when employees are healthy, absenteeism decreases and morale, productivity, as well as satisfaction increases (Abdin et al., 2018; Rothstein, 2014). Insurance providers benefit from having healthy customers through lower claim rates (Crossman, 2018; Navratil-Strawn, Hartley, & Ozminkowski, 2016). Fitness centers benefit through an increase of a long-term committed membership base as well as by gaining exposure to populations who might not have pursued fitness services otherwise (Abdin et al., 2018; Crossman, 2018; Navratil-Strawn et al., 2016). In pursuit of sustaining their businesses beyond 5 years, small fitness business owners should develop strategies that align with the focus on preventive care in the healthcare systems. Viewed from the perspective of servant leadership, small fitness business owners seeking to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years can benefit from community engagement. Specifically, small fitness business owners can develop strategies to provide access to fitness and wellness services across their community by establishing partnerships with local employers and insurance companies as well as providing government-funded programs and services that promote wellness.

Small Business

There are various definitions of small business. For the purpose of this study, a small business is an independently owned organization with less than 500 employees

(SBA, 2018). Small businesses include for-profit organizations that do not control significant amounts of their market (SBA, 2018). While small businesses contribute significantly to the U.S. economy, about half of them do not survive beyond 5 years (Holloway & Schaefer, 2014; SBA, 2018). Among other factors, leadership is a key aspect of corporate success (Akinbola, Abiola, & Ajonbadi, 2014; Amankwah-Amoah, 2016; Khelil, 2016). Particularly, because small businesses employ 500 or fewer people, leadership style has greater potential for impacting organizational success at every level of the firm (Anastasia, 2015; Holloway & Schaefer, 2014; Hyder & Lussier, 2016). As a result, understanding leadership in the context of small business is critical to the success of organizations in the small business sector (Holloway & Schaefer, 2014; Hyder & Lussier, 2016). It is also important to understand other factors related to small business success.

Entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurship and ownership are not the same. Many small business owners are also entrepreneurs (Awasthi & Mathur, 2017; Mathews, 2017). However, there are differences between entrepreneurs and small business owners. Behaviors related to achievement motivation, innovation, and risk tolerance are ways to distinguish between an entrepreneur and a small business owner (Cajaíba de Oliveira, Tavares Araújo, & Castro Silva, 2014; Fitzgerald & Muske, 2016). Small business owners and entrepreneurs are distinct in various ways starting with risk tolerance associated with starting a business.

Entrepreneurs take risks. Entrepreneurial endeavors involve significant amounts of associated risk (Awasthi & Mathur, 2017; Zhang, 2014). Entrepreneurs perceive and manage risk differently based on their strengths and characteristics (Fitzgerald & Muske, 2016; Mathews, 2017). Some aspiring entrepreneurs experience varying levels of fear associated with risk that ultimately cause them to abandon their efforts (Cajaíba de Oliveira et al., 2014; Khelil, 2016). Fear, associated with various factors such as failure, risk, and perception are prominent reasons that entrepreneurial ideas and innovation remain unrealized beyond individual ideas or thoughts (Hyder & Lussier, 2016; Khelil, 2016). Successful entrepreneurship involves navigating risk by entering a market with valuable resources that are both rare and immitigable while ensuring the firm can provide support for rapid company growth met with quick profit returns (Baron, Mueller, & Wolfe, 2016; Mathews, 2017). Some find fear as an obstacle to entrepreneurial endeavors whereas others use it as a motivator to drive personal and professional development (Bandura & Lyons, 2015; Baron et al., 2016). Risk-taking is a common aspect of entrepreneurship that has helped and hindered entrepreneurs.

Entrepreneurs should continuously develop their skills and resources. An entrepreneur’s personal and professional development impacts company success (Money & Odibo, 2015; Shindina, Lysenko, & Orlova, 2015). Gathering reputable resources and knowledge is critical to the successful initiation and growth of an organization (Bandura & Lyons, 2015; Mgeni, 2015; Turner & Endres, 2014). As companies grow, processes become more complex and likely require higher levels of thinking and knowledge (Shindina et al., 2015; Turner & Endres, 2014). Added interpretations of best practices and ethical standards accompany organizational growth as policies change and human resources may increase to better suit the organization’s growth (Apong et al., 2015; Ion &

Vlăsceanu, 2014). Personal and professional development are tools entrepreneurs use to improve critical-thinking skills while gaining the knowledge and abilities necessary to offer innovative products and services that prove reputable, unique, and transformative (Baron et al., 2016; Cajaíba de Oliveira et al., 2014). Entrepreneurs who engage in personal and professional development ensure that their practices remain relevant and up to date.

Innovation and entrepreneurship are not instant processes. Entrepreneurship usually starts with innovation (Ribeiro-Soriano, 2017; Shindina et al., 2015). Entrepreneurship involves identifying a prospect, articulating an idea for a business, recognizing and procuring resources, implementing the endeavor, and making changes where necessary (Cajaíba de Oliveira et al., 2014; Morris, Webb, Fu, & Singbal, 2013; Prajogo, 2016). Innovation is the impact made upon societies through the actualization of products or services that offer new processes or progress (Cajaíba de Oliveira et al., 2014; Carayannis, Samara, & Bakouros, 2014). Combined, innovators and entrepreneurs are successful because of intentionality embedded in their actions (Shindina et al., 2015). Innovation and entrepreneurship lead to focused, courageous, and self-confident acts that fuel leadership endeavors (Franco & Matos, 2015; Yoshida, Sendjaya, Hirst, & Cooper, 2014). From an organizational standpoint, entrepreneurship and innovation are tools used by leaders to inspire and motivate members to invest their followership efforts into the leaders' endeavors (Franco & Matos, 2015; Yoshida et al., 2014). Entrepreneurial endeavors of leaders also positively influence the career aspirations and achievement of their followers (Bandura & Lyons, 2015; Cajaíba de Oiveira et al., 2014). When entrepreneurs model behaviors such as ethical leadership and integrity, employees are more productive and innovative (Cajaíba de Oliveira et al., 2014; Money & Odibo, 2015; Ribeiro-Soriano, 2017). Overall, researchers and small business leaders should note the difference between an entrepreneur and a small business owner to avoid investigating and using strategies specific to entrepreneurial endeavors to help small business owners sustain their businesses beyond 5 years.

Success factors. There are various factors that contribute to the success of small businesses. Some of those factors include leadership, capital, financial management, information technology (IT), innovation, marketing, and strategic planning (Franco & Matos, 2015; Jebna & Baharudin, 2013; Omri et al., 2015). A leadership strategy based on relationships correlates to a successful small business owner (Hyder & Lussier, 2016; Omri et al., 2015). Leadership components, such as inclusiveness, empowerment, purposefulness, ethics, and process-orientation have proved helpful in successfully leading a small business (Franco & Matos, 2015; Van Winkle et al., 2014). Leadership style and entrepreneurship also impact corporate performance (Holloway & Schaefer, 2014; Van Winkle, Allen, DeVore, & Winston, 2014). Leadership styles such as transformational are beneficial in corporate performance as opposed to transactional and laissez-faire leadership (Arnold et al., 2015; Gholamzadeh et al., 2014; Holloway & Schaefer, 2014). Malott (2016) acknowledged the survival rate of small businesses in the United States and explained how leadership strategy affects the success of an organization, specifically, noting that a firm’s success depended on the leader’s methods and ability to orchestrate and influence staff behaviors through industry and organizational demands.

Capital and financial management. Capital and financial management are core elements of small business success. The goal of a for-profit organization is to gain worth (Al-Maskati, Bate, & Bhabra, 2015; Kaczynak, Salmona, & Smith, 2014). To attain that goal, small business leaders must make decisions to determine the organization’s financial path (Al-Maskati et al., 2015; Malshe, 2015). Some decisions and processes are likely to differ due to regional location; associated risks; and factors such as company values and structure that determine company responsibility to stakeholders (Hazudin, Kader, Tarmuji, Ishak, & Ali, 2015; Malshe, 2015). Building a sustainable financial future helps to ensure the long-term success of small businesses.

Managing debt and equity is a part of small business ownership. In the pursuit of maximizing a company’s value, an organization must decide the appropriate amount of equity as well as debt in which it should house (Dahem & Rodríguez, 2014; Hernández-Cánovas, Minguez-Vera, & Sánchez-Vidal, 2016). When deciding on debt and equity financing or capital structure, small business leaders should consider industry type as well as company size and culture (Dahem & Rodríguez, 2014; Hernández-Cánovas et al., 2016; Malshe, 2015). While debt is usually cheaper than equity, owners do not have to pay equity back to a lender (Dahem & Rodríguez, 2014; Daskalakis, Balios, & Dalla, 2017). The decision to obtain capital through debt, equity, or a combination of each can prove challenging without an appropriate analysis (Dahem & Rodríguez, 2014; Malshe, 2015). Small business owners must carefully assess the internal and external characteristics of their business before finalizing debt and equity commitments.

Securing funding for small businesses is complex. Analyzing an organization based on their financial statements can prove helpful in gaining insight into the firm's structure, accounting practices, and financial sources and tools (Florina & Iulia, 2015; Pticar, 2017). Lenders can assess an organization's financial ratios when considering lending decisions (Faello, 2015; Hogan, Hutson, & Drnevich, 2017). Ratios such as gross profit percentage, current ratio, debt ratio, days in accounts receivable, days in accounts payable, net profit ratio and return on investment combined are most helpful in determining whether a small business can meet their financial obligations without hardship (Dahmen & Rodriguez, 2014; Hogan et al., 2017). However, small businesses often lack adequate liquid assets and demonstrated viability through financial statements (Chen, Huang, Tsai, & Tzeng, 2015; Hogan et al., 2017), so in addition to ratios, soft information regarding the firm seeking financial support also has significance in lending decisions (Chen et al., 2015; Faello, 2015). Employee satisfaction, management skills, competitiveness, product or service quality, reputation among the public and sales of long-term customers are examples of soft information usually collected during interviews conducted by lending officers (Chen et al., 2015; Faello, 2015). When securing funding, small business owners can provide potential lenders with a combination of hard and soft information for a comprehensive view of the organization.

Information technology (IT). Companies use technology in different ways. IT and management information systems (MIS) are critical aspects of an organization's success (Marchland & Raymond, 2018; Turner & Endres, 2017). IT systems require building, maintaining, assessing, and refurbishing based on the needs of an organization and industry (Ertuğrul, 2017; Soto-Acosta, Popa, & Martinez-Conesa, 2018). Considering each element of an organization's information system can prove beneficial to the organization's competitive advantages and help avoid a significant loss in resources (Ertuğrul, 2017; Marchland & Raymond, 2018). The purpose of MIS is to help individuals use technology to streamline information sharing processes and procedures associated with their role in the organization (Ada & Ghaffarzadeh, 2015; Soto-Acosta et al., 2018). A lack of or improper use of MIS could have a negative impact on an organization.

Organizations can have challenges maintaining information without systems to manage and support their data. Business intelligence, intellectual assets, and best practices are all critical parts of an organization (Ada & Ghaffarzadeh, 2015; Ertuğrul, 2017; Istrat, Stanisavljev, & Markoski, 2015). Small businesses can use each part to define, contribute to, and account for the success of an organization (Ghobakhloo & Tang, 2015; Soto-Acosta et al., 2018). When appropriately managed, supported, and employed information has direct implications on organizations profits and losses (Istrat et al., 2015). Small business owners must handle firm information in a manner that reflects its importance.

Organizations contain knowledge. As technology continues to advance, knowledge management (KM) systems have become necessary for many organizations, no matter the industry type (Soto-Acosta et al., 2018; Valdez-Juarez, de Lema, &

Maldonado-Guzman, 2016). Organizational knowledge and KM are terms that prove helpful in determining who will oversee information and how (Dra, Samsir, & Andreas, 2017; Soto-Acosta et al., 2018). Organizational knowledge is the compounded information of all the organizations' members who have a vested interest in the organization (Dra et al., 2017; Soto-Acosta et al., 2018). KM is the management of the compounded information to secure and maintain competitive advantage (Soto-Acosta et al., 2018; Valdez-Juarez et al., 2016). Managing and creating a platform in which the information proves useful can be challenging due to the influx of data created through technological advances and globalization (Ertuğrul, 2017; Soto-Acosta et al., 2018). However, when small business leaders carefully consider the benefits and risks, processes, systems, and cultures specific to their organizations, implementing well-designed KM systems is not as challenging (Ghobakhloo & Tang, 2015; Soto-Acosta et al., 2018). Organizational leaders should dedicate necessary resources to KM in the pursuit of company growth.

The use of IT has associated risks and benefits. Computers are as much a part of organizations as are humans (Ertuğrul, 2017; Wang, Wang, Bi, Li, & Xu, 2016). Combined, human resources and IT resources are useful tools to manage knowledge across the organization (Soto-Acosta et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2016), however, their interrelationship creates risks regarding business practices as well as aspects of IT security (Ertuğrul, 2017; Wojtasiak-Terech, 2015). When making decisions regarding implementing and using IT, small business leaders must understand the associated impact on their brand image, financial transactions, public trust, and regulation compliance

(Ghobakhloo & Tang, 2015; Kim, Kim, & Chung, 2015). IT can serve as a helpful or harmful tool in advancing organizational success.

Successful implementation of a KM system requires sound organizational knowledge. In order to build organizational knowledge, the organization must be a learning organization (Dra et al., 2017; Vargas, 2014). A learning organization is an organization where every member seeks to expand their competencies and understandings through introspection, a shared vision, and collective learning (Abu-Shanab, Knight, & Haddad, 2014; Farhan, 2017). Members of a small organization who are not open to learning and evolving causes stagnation and blocks innovation across the organization (Farhan, 2017; Vargas, 2014). Stagnant organizations rarely succeed in competitive markets and often find their products or services outdated and irrelevant (Farhan, 2017; Vargas, 2014). Learning as an organization is fundamental to the development and success of a company.

Innovation. Innovation exists in various forms. Within the context of small business, innovation involves marketing, technology, available financial resources, and networking across small business advisory programs (Dunne, Aaron, McDowell, Urban, & Geho, 2016; Vargas, 2014). Innovation plays a critical role in the survival of small businesses because it influences competitive advantage and growth compared to large organizations that tend to have larger pools of resources and networks (Lichtenthaler, 2016; Taneja, Pryor, & Hayek, 2016). Due to their size, small businesses can develop and implement concepts quicker than large businesses (Dunne et al., 2016; Niedderer et al., 2016). Additionally, because small business leaders can develop cultures that foster teamwork across the entire organization, they can also identify new ideas based on varying experiences of each staff member (Dunne et al., 2016; Taneja et al., 2016). The speed, agility, and team culture of small businesses allow for innovative approaches that are both market-driven and technology-driven (Lee & Kim, 2016; Niedderer et al., 2016). When used properly, innovation is a beneficial tool to small business owners.

Customer satisfaction. Customer satisfaction is a helpful component to having a successful organization. Measuring customer satisfaction is a tactic used across multiple organizations (Krajnakova, Navikaite, & Navickas, 2015; Kułyk, Michałowska, & Kotylak, 2017). Although there are various definitions of customer satisfaction, for the purpose of this study, customer satisfaction is the result of a consumer's experience with a product or service based on the consumer's perception (Hamza, 2017; Hussain, Nasser, & Hussain, 2015). Customer satisfaction impacts financial and overall organizational performance (Lun, Shang, Lai, & Cheng, 2016; Malshe, 2015; Roberts, 2013). Satisfied customers often become repeat patrons and inform others of their positive experience while dissatisfied customers communicate their poor experience to a larger audience and shop elsewhere, including competing organizations (Ojeme, 2017; Panigrahi, Azizan, & Waris, 2018). Company leaders can measure customer satisfaction using a single metric or a combination of financial and organizational performance measures as well as repeat patron activities depending on the strategy that proves most beneficial to the organization (Malshe, 2015; Panigrahi et al., 2018; Roberts, 2013). Although small business leaders have the ability to assess customer satisfaction and use it as a tool in pursuit of organizational success, it is important to understand that an aspect such as repeat patronage is not synonymous to customer loyalty.

Customer satisfaction and loyalty are both important to the success of an organization. However, customer satisfaction does not always lead to customer loyalty (Apong, Osei, & Akomea, 2015; Ojeme, 2017). Customer satisfaction includes consumer sense of pleasure or displeasure, whereas loyalty comprises the consumer's deep commitment to repurchase an organization's products or services consistently (Gizaw & Pagidimarri, 2014; Krajnakova et al., 2015). The customer's deep commitment does not always link to individual purchase experiences (Gizaw & Pagidimarri, 2014; Krajnakova et al., 2015). Satisfaction and loyalty are distinct in terms of customer behavior (Panigrahi et al., 2018; Razak, Nirwanto, & Triatmanto, 2016). Loyal customers are likely satisfied, but satisfaction does not serve as a predictor of customer loyalty (Panigrahi et al., 2018; Razak et al., 2016). Overall, small business leaders find customer satisfaction and customer loyalty as helpful indicators regarding company success. An examination of the literature yielded factors such as product or service quality and price as influences on customer satisfaction while highlighting the indirect relationship between customer satisfaction and customer loyalty.

Customer satisfaction is not a standalone concept within businesses. Factors such as product or service quality and price influence customer satisfaction (Hamza, 2017; Kułyk et al., 2017). Customer expectations define product or service quality and lead to customers'satisfactory or dissatisfactory experiences (Razak et al., 2016; Suchánek, Richter, & Králová, 2015). As a result, it is important that leaders of organizations employ strategies to understand their customers' expectations and assess the relationship between those expectations and product quality (Razak et al., 2016; Suchánek et al., 2015). Consumers consider price as the expense of obtaining a desired product or service (Ehsani & Ehsani, 2014; Razak et al., 2016). Organizations can use product or service prices to drive profit as well as customer satisfaction (Ehsani & Ehsani, 2014; Lun et al., 2016; Razak et al., 2016). Quality and price of a product or service aligned with customers' expectations often yield customer satisfaction (Ehsani & Ehsani, 2014; Razak et al., 2016; Suchánek et al., 2015). Leaders should know that product or service quality impacts customer satisfaction while also understanding how their leadership directly influences customer satisfaction as well.

Entrepreneurs and small business owners should think about customer satisfaction. A link exists between customer satisfaction and leadership style of entrepreneurs and business owners (Mgeni, 2015; Pantouvakis & Patsiouras, 2016). Leadership style influences customer satisfaction as well as organizational performance when examined along with factors such as service quality, employee satisfaction, and financial performance (Gabriela & Alexandra, 2014; Pantouvakis & Patsiouras, 2016). Entrepreneurs and small business owners are not always the same, but the leadership of both entrepreneurs and small business owners impact customer satisfaction through direct influence on follower- or staff-related outcomes such as job satisfaction, organizational innovation culture, retention, and engagement. As a result, small business owners might develop strategies based on areas of customer satisfaction to help sustain their businesses beyond 5 years.

Marketing. There are a number of ways to market small business products and services. Aligning small business marketing strategies and research with trends and changes in technology is imperative to organizational success (Akbar, Omar, Wadwood, & Tasmin, 2017; Aksoy, 2017; Malshe, 2015). The concept of marketing involves the 5Ps, which are product/service, price, promotion, place, and people (Hanaysha, 2017; Sari, 2017). While the 5Ps of marketing remain the same, marketing has evolved over the years with the advent of the Internet (Malshe, 2015; Sari, 2017). Globalization, spurred by the Internet and advanced technologies, has also impacted the way marketers theorize and apply marketing methods (Agnihotri, 2015; Chung, 2014). Consumers can simultaneously shop physically and virtually, buying power among cultures has shifted, and consumer knowledge has expanded with greater access to information (Agnihotri, 2015; Aksoy, 2017; Sari, 2017), and as such, marketers must adapt their methods, messages, and products to appropriately communicate and serve an ever-evolving population (Agnihotri, 2015; Aksoy, 2017). Online settings provide a wide range of promotion mediums such as social media, online newspapers, and search engine advertising (Faisal, 2016; Mahajan, 2015). While online mediums provide an assortment of promoting channels, communication is often instant and widely accessible globally (Agnihotri, 2015; Tălpău, 2014). To position themselves successfully, small businesses need to ensure their communication is attractive to their target market as well as represents their stakeholders (Lochrie, 2016; Sanfelice, 2014; Tălpău, 2014). Small business owners can use a balanced marketing mix to sell their products or services effectively.

Small businesses offer products, services, or a combination of both. Small business marketers should use quality media and provide in-depth information about their product or service (Hanaysha, 2017; Sari, 2017; Tălpău, 2014). Companies should consider the most appropriate pricing models for both their organization and industry (Razak et al., 2016; Stoppel & Roth, 2017). Pricing online has various levels and methods. Consumers have access to more information and can compare the prices of multiple vendors in a short period of time, with little effort (Faisal, 2016; Sari, 2017; Tălpău, 2014). In order for a small business owner to gain and keep a competitive advantage, they must stay abreast of their competitors' prices and consumer sources of information (Malshe, 2015; Razak et al., 2017). Additionally, it is important for marketers to understand that due to varying backgrounds, cultures, preferences, and perspectives, all consumers do not share the same ideals, likes or dislikes, habits, and even family make-up (Beise-Zee, Ngamvichaikit, & Japan, 2014; Panigrahi et al., 2018; Suchánek et al., 2015). Not all people are the same and, therefore, do not have the same wants or needs.

Online shopping impacts placement costs. Placement costs are not often significant as an online presence yields very little distribution fees (Akbar et al., 2017; Tălpău, 2014). Small businesses utilize the Internet as a distribution channel that directly connects with consumers (Aksoy, 2017: Guiterrez-Leefmans, Nava-Rogel, & Trujillo-Leon, 2016). However, before an organization completely dismisses any preexisting intermediate channels, they should first ensure that they have the capacity and resources (Razak et al., 2016; Stoppel & Roth, 2017). Using the Internet allows small business owners to directly connect with consumers while decreasing costs associated with product or service placement.

Organizations rely on people. Of the five elements within a marketing mix, people are the most critical aspect as they represent both an organization's human resources and consumers (Maheshwari, Gunesh, Lodorfos, & Konstantopoulou, 2017; Salman, Tawfik, Samy, & Artal-Tur, 2017). Internally, companies can gain advantages by soliciting ideas and input from staff members on various organizational levels regarding product development and advertising methods (Maheshwari et al., 2017; Salman et al., 2017). From a consumer standpoint, it is important that an organization not simply determine consumer shopping habits but that they truly understand the experiences and values of their consumers (Beise-Zee et al., 2014; Panigrahi et al., 2018; Suchánek et al., 2015). In the marketing mix, people do not simply represent outside consumers, but organizational staff members as well.

Strategic planning. Small business leaders should develop a plan for their business. Successful small businesses use various types of strategic planning (Muhammad, 2015; Suarez, Calvo-Mora, & Roldán, 2016). The role of strategic planning includes identifying company actions based on plans developed during the planning cycle to achieve competitive advantage (Bereznoi, 2014; Suarez et al., 2016). Strategic planning also provides consistent roadmaps that can ensure organizational continuity through countless changes such as industry, market, leadership and other vital staff-related events (Bajcar et al., 2015; Smith, 2013). Without a well-constructed plan, long-term business success can prove challenging as companies may find themselves in a cycle of ineffective initiatives in pursuit of competitive advantage (Sirén & Kohtamäki, 2016; Suarez et al., 2016). Strategic planning requires time and resources; however, a lack of or poor planning can result in costly mistakes.

Strategic planning is an involved process. As a result, some small organizational leaders find that they must invest significant amounts of human and financial resources into the process (Muhammad, 2015; Suarez et al., 2016). Additionally, successful strategic planning must include a leader who is a strategic thinker (Bajcar et al., 2015; Jahanshahi, Nawaser, & Etemadi, 2015). The process of constructing and implementing a strategic plan includes establishing the organization's purpose, analyzing both internal and external aspects of the company, constructing a strategy, and implementing it (Bajcar et al., 2015; Bouhali, Mekdadb, Lebsirc, & Ferkhad, 2015; Peterlin et al., 2015). Overall, the strategic planning process assists in establishing the foundation on which an organization measures, evaluates and reevaluates its success from the start of the company through its existence.

In conclusion, I reviewed articles of various topics. Specifically, I reviewed articles about servant leadership and leadership, respectively, to assess the different types of leadership and related strategies as well as support my conceptual framework. I reviewed articles related to ethical leadership to underscore how leaders use leadership strategies to sustain successful businesses through positive influence on their followers and stakeholders by modeling moral and ethical decision-making and actions as related to my conceptual framework. In a review of articles about small business types, I emphasized that family-owned small businesses have characteristics and challenges specific to their organizational structure; meaning the owner of a small business that is family-owned may use leadership strategies to sustain their businesses that are not applicable to small businesses that are not family-owned. Further, I noted challenges and trends specific to the health and fitness industries that owners of small fitness businesses must navigate if they expect to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years. Finally, I identified the characteristics of small businesses and entrepreneurs as well as factors related to small business success in the review of small business literature. In a review of articles related to entrepreneurship, I emphasized the importance of distinguishing two types of small business leaders; noting that due to differing goals and characteristics, small business owners should not use to the same strategies as entrepreneurs to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years. I reviewed articles about capital and financial management, IT, innovation. customer satisfaction, marketing, and strategic planning to highlight its relationship to small business success, as well as the direct influence leadership has on related outcomes. Through an examination of and leadership strategies, fitness businesses and trends, as well as small business types and success factors, each topic reviewed relates to and supports my central research question. Additionally, I viewed each topic through the lens of servant leadership; considering servant leadership antecedents and characteristics with aspects of small fitness business owners' leadership strategies to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years.

Transition

In Section 1, I highlighted the context and background of my business problem. Further, I noted the purpose, selected population, and geographic location of my qualitative case study while identifying the contribution to social change. I also listed my central research question along with aligned interview questions in Section 1. Moreover, I added reasoning for and applicability of my conceptual framework with background information such as date, theorist, and key concepts. Next, I listed definitions of technical terms and jargon specific to my study. Additionally, I presented the definitions of the terms while also noting my assumptions, potential limitations within the study, and bounds of the study. In Section 1, I also explained the significance of my study, noting why businesses may find the findings valuable, and how I may contribute to improving business practices as well as social change through my study. Lastly, I briefly discussed the literature reviewed for my study.

In Section 2, I will include a restatement of the purpose statement as well as a description of my role as the researcher in the data collection process and ethical implications related to the Belmont Report protocol, my relationship to the topic, and my rational the interview protocol. Additionally, I will includ a description of participant eligibility criteria and strategies I used to gain access to and establish working relationships with participants. Further, I will identify and justify the use of a qualitative research method over quantitative and mixed method. I then will identify and justify the use of a case study approach over other research designs and noted how I ensured data saturation. In Section 2, I further describe and justify my use of purposeful sampling in selecting five participants while noting the selection criteria. Next, I will discuss elements of ethical research including, informed consent, participant withdrawal procedures, and efforts to protect study participants. Subsequently, I will identify myself as the data collection instrument using semistructured interviews and an interview protocol along with identifying how I enhanced reliability and validity of my data. Lastly, I will explain how I organized and analyzed my data while addressing dependability, credibility, transferability, and confirmability.

I will start Section 3 with an introduction to the purpose of the study and provide a summary of the study's findings. I will also provide an in-depth discussion about how the finding applies to professional business practices. In Section 3, I will specify discussions regarding implications for social change, recommendation for action, and recommendations for further study. I will conclude Section 3 with a reflection of my experience throughout the research process and relative conclusions.

Section 2: The Project

In Section 2, I note the methods I used to explore leadership strategies that small fitness business owners use to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years. Section 2 includes a restatement of the purpose statement and an explanation of my role as a qualitative researcher followed by a description of the study participants. Furthermore, I provide information regarding the research method and design as well as validation methods. In Section 2, I also explain the ethical research and guidelines I adhered to while conducting the study as well as justifications for the data collection, organization, and analysis methods I employed. Lastly, I describe approaches I used to ensure the validity, dependability, credibility, and transferability of the study.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of the qualitative multiple case study was to explore what leadership strategies small fitness business owners use to sustain their business beyond 5 years. The target population consisted of five small fitness business owners in North Carolina who had successfully used leadership strategies to sustain their business beyond 5 years. The implications for social change include promoting a better-quality marketplace for local consumers and opportunities to improve the socio-economic status of community members as well as the health of the community as an ecosystem.

Role of the Researcher

The researcher is critical to the data collection process in a qualitative study. The role of a qualitative researcher involves serving as the primary research instrument (Barnham, 2015; Gabriel, 2015; Leko, 2014). The responsibilities of a qualitative researcher include building and maintaining the trust of and productive relationships with participants while adhering to ethical guidelines (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Specifically, my data collection process included selecting participants and gathering information from them as the primary research instrument using semistructured interviews.

Small business is a topic that I have explored for personal interest as well as for research from various angles including small business development or start-up, small business performance measures from the customer and employee perspectives, and small business systems analysis. I would like to own a small, family-owned business with the purpose of fostering better health habits across my community. From a professional standpoint, I serve as the operations manager of a small business where I work closely with the owner to ensure that each area of the organization functions at optimal levels while aligning with the overall mission and values of the organization. In selecting participants for my study, I chose individuals with whom I had no personal or professional relationship. My experience with the research topic stems from both personal and professional goals and involvements.

Koro-Ljungberg, Gemignani, Brodeur and Kmiec (2007) noted that qualitative researchers must uphold the guiding principles outlined by an Institutional Review Board (IRB), the Belmont Report, and the National Institutes of Health (NIH). As a qualitative researcher, I upheld the principles provided by Walden University's IRB as well as guidelines outlined in the Belmont Report and NIH reports by treating each participant with respect and ensuring participant confidentiality and privacy.

A researcher's philosophical worldview directly impacts their personal assumptions and biases (Aluwihare-Samaranayake, 2012; Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2013). Methodological triangulation and peer-review are helpful strategies researchers can use to stay focused on the data and avoid assumptions or speculations that may cause them to veer away from the core of the study (McDermid, Peters, Jackson, & Daly, 2014; Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013). I minimized my biases by using methodological triangulation and invited feedback from academic and professional mentors throughout the process of developing my study.

I used a multiple case study design to conduct semistructured interviews. The researcher can gain an in-depth comprehension of the subject studied by using interviews (Brinkmann, 2016; Duan, Bhaumik, Lawrence, & Hoagwood, 2015). An interview protocol is a helpful tool that qualitative researchers use to foster interactions in which participants can communicate openly about the topic of study (Cronin, 2014; Drabble, Trocki, Salcedo, Walker, & Korcha, 2015). An interview protocol is also a useful instrument that researchers employ to ensure consistency when conducting semistructured interviews (Anderson & Holloway-Libell, 2014). Aspects of an interview protocol can include open-ended interview questions with the use of an audio device to record interview sessions and member checking to ensure that the researcher accurately interprets the interviewees' responses (Brinkmann, 2016). My interview protocol (see Appendix) included an audio recording device; a list of IRB-approved, open-ended questions; and member checking for in-person interviews on an agreed upon date.

Participants

For this study, I interviewed a purposeful sample of five participants who owned small fitness businesses in North Carolina. To be eligible for participation in the study, individuals had to have owned and sustained at least one privately owned, independent, small fitness business in North Carolina beyond 5 years. In purposeful sampling, the researcher identifies and selects participants based on the amount and ease of access to information related to the stipulations of the study (Duan et al., 2015; Gentles & Vilches, 2017; Palinkas et al., 2016). To gain access to participants, I contacted the local Chamber of Commerce and a conducted a Google search using the phrase “fitness businesses in North Carolina” to identify small fitness businesses, followed by a combination of in-person visits, phone calls, and e-mails to each of the identified businesses.

Establishing a good relationship with participants is an important aspect of a qualitative study (Beskow, Check, & Ammarell, 2014; Irvine, Drew, & Sainsbury, 2013). To form a working research-participant relationship, researchers should start by making a connection with participants based on open communication, transparency, and trust (Stahl, 2016). I established a working relationship with participants by informing them about my study, of their rights, and the interview protocol after receiving approval from the IRB. Furthermore, I scheduled each participant for a face-to-face interview in a mutually agreed upon location and stored participant information in a secure location to ensure safety and confidentiality. After 5 years, I will destroy all documentation and data by shredding hard copies as well as erasing all data from external hard drives.

Research Method and Design

Research methodology and design consist of guidelines researchers must use through the development and finalization of their study (Yin, 2017). Quantitative researchers examine relationships, while qualitative researchers explore phenomenon in natural environments and highlight themes that develop during the research process (Barnham, 2015; Goertzen, 2017; Groeneveld, Tummers, Bronkhorst, Ashikali, & van Thiel, 2015). In the following subsections, I provide an explanation of the selected research method and design.

Research Method

Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed method are three main research approaches (Almalki, 2016; Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2013; Groeneveld et al., 2015). I used a qualitative method to explore the strategies five small fitness business owners used to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years. Qualitative researchers serve as the research instrument and explore human experiences using close contact approaches, such as open-ended questions and direct observation (Barnham, 2015; Gabriel, 2015). Qualitative researchers seek to understand the reality of individuals by exploring experiences through research questions (Brinkmann, 2016; Cairney & Denny, 2015).

Quantitative investigation involves research questions designed to examine relationships (Groeneveld et al., 2015; Smith, 2014). Additionally, quantitative researchers analyze numerical data to offer general application based on sampling using predetermined notions, such as hypotheses and instrument-based questions (Smith, 2014).

I did not examine relationships or numerical data for the purpose of general application; therefore, I did not use quantitative methodology.

Mixed-method researchers examine relationships and explore phenomenon to gain a well-rounded perspective in their study (Almalki, 2016; Edmonds & Kennedy, 2013). Researchers use the mixed method to integrate both qualitative and quantitative data collected in one study (Almalki, 2016; Palinkas et al., 2016). Engaging in mixed-method research requires a wealth of resources and time not often possessed by novice research doctoral students (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2013; Rockinson-Szapkiw & Spaulding, 2014). I did not engage in quantitative examinations and, as a doctoral research student, was subject to limited time and resources; therefore, I did not use a mixed method.

Research Design

I employed a case study design in this study. Case study, phenomenology, ethnography, and narrative are designs used in qualitative research (Gentles, Charles, Ploeg, & McKibbon, 2015). Researchers who use the case study design engage in exploration of situations or occurrences (Dresch, Lacerda, & Cauchick Miguel, 2015). A case study design is also an appropriate way to gather in-depth information to answer a central qualitative research question using semistructured interview questions (Cronin, 2014; VanScoy & Evenstad, 2015). Single and multiple are options for case study designs (Baškarada, 2014). Researchers using a single case study design investigate one person or a group of people from one unit (Yin, 2017). A single case study design is sufficient when one person or one unit meets all the criteria necessary to explore the researchers' theory (Haddad, 2015; Yin, 2017). Researchers using a multiple case study design investigate multiple people or units (VanScoy & Evenstad, 2015; Yin, 2017). A multiple case study design is sufficient when researchers need to investigate more than one person or unit in comparing data from each analysis across the different units to gain an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon (Baškarada, 2014; Mohajan, 2018; Yin, 2017). I explored a practical business problem using a multiple case study design because it allowed me to address the central research questions concerning not just a single unit but multiple owners of small fitness businesses in North Carolina. Researchers use the phenomenological design to explore a phenomenon in human nature through gathering meanings of the lived experiences of a small number of participants (Guetterman, 2015; Willis et al., 2016). The phenomenological design was not appropriate for this study because I did not explore existential experiences of participants. In ethnographic designs, researchers study people and their behavior in a cultural setting (Guetterman, 2015). The ethnographic design was not appropriate for this study because I did not engage in cultural exploration with participants. Narrative design researchers try to gain an understanding and meaning of individual or group experiences through participants' storytelling (Casey et al., 2016). The narrative design was not appropriate for this study because I did not gather information for meaning-making.

Data saturation occurs when the information the researcher gathers becomes repetitive (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Nelson, 2016). Qualitative researchers understand that data saturation occurs when responses from interview participants do not produce new information (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Nelson, 2016). To ensure data saturation, I conducted interviews and performed member checking until participants provided no new information.

Population and Sampling

Purposeful sampling is a method used by qualitative researchers to identify and select members of their study (Palinkas et al., 2016). Qualitative researchers identify and select participants through purposeful sampling based on participant knowledge and experience as related to the study (Duan, Bhaumik, Lawrence, & Hoagwood, 2015; Palinkas et al., 2016). I used purposeful sampling to select five small business owners from different fitness businesses in North Carolina. I used the local Chamber of Commerce and a Google search using the phrase “fitness businesses in North Carolina” to locate owners of small fitness businesses.

Establishing criteria in a qualitative study helps the researcher ensure that participants have characteristics, experiences, or knowledge that qualify them to provide information necessary to address the research question (Robinson, 2014). Researchers who select appropriate participants can gather in-depth information (Robinson, 2014). I found owners of the small fitness businesses who met the following criteria for the study: (a) participants who were over the age of 18; (b) participants who were active small business owners in the health and fitness industry; (c) participants who operate their privately owned, independent fitness businesses in North Carolina; and (d) participants who used leadership strategies to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years.

Sample size is an important aspect of qualitative research (Malterud, Siersma, & Guassora, 2016). A sample size represents how many observations a researcher conducts to gather information about the population under examination (Hennink, Kaiser, & Marconi, 2017; Malterud et al., 2016). A qualitative researcher will not need a large amount of participants if their study includes established theory, strong interview dialogue, and has a narrow aim (Malterud et al., 2016). Furthermore, Yin (2017) noted that four to five samples in a case study are sufficient. I used a sample size of five small fitness business owners to explore the central question in this study.

Researchers can validate their findings through data saturation and member checking (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Yu, Abdullah, & Saat, 2014). Fusch and Ness (2015) and Nelson (2016) explained that data saturation occurs when study participants' information becomes repetitive. Qualitative researchers understand that data saturation occurs when responses from interview participants no longer contain new information (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Nelson, 2016). Data saturation is possible and noted by the researcher when participant interviews cease to produce new information and no new themes emerge (Nelson, 2016; Tran, Porcher, Falissard, & Ravaud, 2016; Yu et al., 2014). Member checking is a technique that qualitative researchers use to ensure that they gain a clear understanding of the information participants provide during the study (Munn, Porritt, Lockwood, Aromataris, & Pearson, 2014). Member checking involves participants reviewing the researcher's interpretation of their interviews to validate content (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Harvey, 2015). I ensured data saturation by interviewing participants and performing member checking until no new themes emerged. I gave participants a copy of my interpretation of their responses to interview questions and participants verified that my interpretation of their answers was accurate.

Qualitative researchers should conduct interviews in an environment that is comfortable, free from distractions, and non-threatening (Mumford, Todd, Higgs, & McIntosh, 2017; Paine, 2015). Brinkmann (2016) noted that participants provide information that is open and honest when interviewed in an environment that feels comfortable and safe. I allowed participants to select an interview location that they deemed comfortable, convenient, quiet, and private.

Ethical Research

Ensuring sound ethical research means addressing informed consent, participants' voluntary participation, incentives, protecting participants and their rights, participant confidentiality and anonymity, as well as data protection (Paul & Brookes, 2015; Walton, 2016). The NIH offered training to individuals engaged in research involving human participants to help researchers ensure their practices remain protective of human rights (Gordon, Culp, & Wolinetz, 2017). I completed the NIH's Protecting Human Subject Research Participants training regarding Human Participants to minimize potential risks to participants. Before I contacted any potential participants, I obtained approval (04-25-19-0515337) from Walden University's IRB. Informed consent involves the researcher providing initial and ongoing information to participants so that they are fully aware of what their participation in the study means and requires (Walton, 2016). I provided an informed consent form to participants prior to their involvement in this study that included the purpose of the study, interview questions, and assurance of participant confidentiality. As ethical research guidelines contain information about the importance of voluntary participation from participants, the informed consent form also contained participants' involvement requirements, information regarding participants' ability to withdraw from the study at any time with no penalty, a no compensation or incentive for study participation clause, and procedures ensuring participants' privacy.

Offering incentives or disallowing participants to withdraw from a study can imply coercion (Halse & Honey, 2014). Researchers must not coerce participants into initial or continued participation in their study (Aluwihare-Samaranayake, 2012; Walton, 2016). Coercion in a study can violate participant human rights and negatively impact research findings (Aluwihare-Samaranayake, 2012; Morse & Coulehan, 2015). To mitigate coercion, I did not offer incentives to participate in this study and informed participants that they could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or risk of defamation.

Protecting participants from harm and their confidentiality is imperative to the research process and study (Paul & Brookes, 2015). To protect participants and their rights, researchers should model respect, kindness, and justice throughout participant selection, data collection and analysis, and presentation of findings processes (Paul & Brookes, 2015; Walton, 2016). The Belmont Report contains guidelines to which researchers should follow to ensure participant protection of safety and privacy along with three critical guidelines: respect for individuals, beneficence, and justice (Koro-Ljungberg, Gemignani, Brodeur, & Kmiec, 2007; Miracle, 2016). To ensure participant ethical protection, I followed the Belmont Report and NIH guidelines by treating each participant with respect, beneficence, and in a just manner.

The rights of participants include protecting personal data (Walton, 2016). Beskow, Check and Ammarell (2014) explained that researchers could use codes to identify participants while also ensuring anonymity. I ensured the protection of participants' identity by using identifiers such as P1, P2, P3, P4, and P5 when referring to participants in this study. Researchers must also protect participant identity by securing data collected and analyzed (Wallace & Sheldon, 2015). I secured all electronic data on a password protected external hard drive and locked all hard copy documents in a safe. After 5 years, I will destroy all documentation and data by shredding hard copies as well as formatting and destroying external hard drives.

Data Collection Instruments

In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary data collection instrument (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018; Yin, 2017). I was the primary source for data collection in this qualitative multiple case study. Qualitative researchers can also use various data collection processes such as direct observations, documents or reports, interviews, and physical artifacts (Grossoehme, 2014; Sutton & Austin, 2015). Three data collection techniques researchers use with case study include archival records, interviews, and observations (Cronin, 2014; Turner & Dank, 2014). Procedural processes are important for consistency regarding data collection instruments (Anney, 2014; Yin, 2017).

Anderson and Holloway-Libell (2014) and Anyan (2013) noted that researchers gain structure that ensures consistency when collecting data by using an interview protocol. I started the data collection process with face-to-face, semistructured interviews based on the interview protocol (Appendix), followed by observations, and reviewing archival data. Interviews included the open-ended questions listed in the interview protocol (Appendix) for the purpose of collecting data. For archival data, I reviewed business performance plans as well as consolidated financial statements.

To ensure validation and reliability of research findings, researchers should employ member checking as a tool (Harvey, 2015; Ramthun & Matkin, 2014). Harvey (2015) and Yin (2017) noted that member checking ensures the validity and reliability of qualitative research findings. Member checking involves allowing participants the opportunity to review the researcher's interpretation of the interview to ensure the researcher accurately interprets the information communicated (Birt, Scott, Cavers, & Walter, 2016; Houghton, Casey, Shaw, & Murphy, 2013). To enhance the reliability and validity of this study, I gave participants my interpretation of their responses to interview questions and they verified the accuracy of my interpretation.

Data Collection Technique

Qualitative researchers use data collection techniques for in-depth exploration of their research question (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Percy, Kostere, & Kostere, 2015; Sutton & Austin, 2015). Interviews, observations, and document reviews are three techniques researchers can use to gather in-depth information for their study (Anderson & Holloway-Libell, 2014; Jamshed, 2014; Percy et al., 2015). I conducted interviews using an interview protocol (Appendix) which included introducing myself, discussing the informed consent form as well as providing clarifying answers to questions, turning on the recording device, and introducing participants using coded identifications (P1, P2, P3, P4, and P5). I continued following the interview protocol (Appendix) by noting the date and time of each interview, asking the interview questions, ending the interview sequence, discussing the member checking process with participants, and thanking the participants. Additionally, I noted direct observations and reviewed archival documents such as business performance plans and consolidated financial statements as data collection techniques for this study.

Regarding the interview process, I compiled a list of small fitness business owners from using the local Chamber of Commerce and a Google search using the phrase “fitness businesses in North Carolina.” For initial contact, I made in-person visits, phone calls, and e-mails to each identified business to explain the purpose of my study and inquire about the owners’ interest in participating. Once owners expressed interest and proved eligible to participate, I presented them with the informed consent form for completion. Qualitative researchers must give participants information about the study including details regarding the interview and measures to ensure confidentiality (Anyan, 2013; Haahr, Norlyk, & Hall, 2014; Jamshed, 2014). After each participant consented to participate in this study, I contacted them via phone to schedule an interview and confirm location, date, and time. Lastly, I e-mailed a copy of the interview questions to each participant for review prior to their interview.

Accurate interview data collection involves the researcher following interview protocol and asking probing questions (Anderson & Holloway-Libell, 2014; Brinkmann, 2016; Irvine et al., 2013). During interviews, I asked the questions listed in the interview protocol (Appendix) as well as necessary probing questions to clarify participant responses. When using interviews to collect data, researchers should use audio collection devices as well as take brief notes to ensure data accuracy (Anderson & Holloway-Libell, 2014; Bowden & Galindo-Gonzalez, 2015; Sutton & Austin, 2015). I used an audio device to record each interview while also taking brief notes. After finishing each interview, I stopped the audio recording device, reminded each participant that I will contact them at a later date to give them my interpretation of their responses to interview questions and have them verify my interpretation of their answers for accuracy. At later respective dates, I provided each participant with a copy of my interpretation of their responses to the interview questions to which each participant verified for accuracy.

Every data collection technique has advantages and disadvantages. Advantages associated with using face-to-face interviews for data collection are the rich information obtained through interviews, the researcher's ability also to observe visible and verbal cues, and opportunity to ask clarifying questions (Irvine et al., 2013). A disadvantage of using face-to-face interviews is participant hesitation to fully disclose information about their organization that may prove relevant the study (Irvine et al., 2013; Yin, 2017). Other disadvantages to using face-to-face interviews include difficulty transcribing the large amounts of information derived from interviews, and participant desire to impress the interviewer resulting in participants providing false or misleading information (Anderson & Holloway-Libell, 2014; Irvine et al., 2013; Yin, 2017). Advantages of reviewing company documents include data validation and access to in-depth data not provided during interviews (Anyan, 2013; Mojtahed, Nunes, Martins, & Peng, 2014). Disadvantages of document review include the significant amount of time necessary as well as the subjectivity of the information contained in the documents (Irwin, 2013).

Researchers use member checking to make sure data provided by interview participants align with the researcher's interpretation (Birt et al., 2016; Morse & Coulehan, 2015; Onwuegbuzie & Byers, 2014). Member checking is the process where participants review the researcher's interpretation of the interview and provide feedback regarding accuracy and objectivity of the researcher's interpretations (Baškarada, 2014; Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2013; Houghton et al., 2013). Member checking minimizes errors researchers make when transcribing audio recordings of interviews (Birt et al., 2016; Fusch & Ness, 2015; Harvey, 2015). I used a transcription software, Dragon Naturally Speaking, to transcribe each interview. I then copied the interview transcription from the Dragon Naturally Speaking text format into a Microsoft Word document. Next, I employed member checking by providing each interview participant with my interpretation of the interview via e-mail to check for accuracy regarding their responses.

Data Organization Technique

Yin (2017) noted the importance of data organization and documentation as well as enhanced reliability through a chain of evidence. Techniques used to organize data can impact the accuracy and security of a study (Pierre & Jackson, 2014; Yin, 2017). Qualitative researchers can use techniques that include use of reflective journals, research logs, and computer software to organize data collected during their study (Mayer, 2015; Talanquer, 2014). Researchers use reflective journals and research logs to record data collected during interviews and observations to decrease the risk of missed or forgotten information (Kaczynak et al., 2014; Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018). I took notes in a research log during interviews and recorded direct observations in a reflective journal.

Researchers can use computer software programs such as Microsoft Excel and Word as well as NVivo to categorize, code data, identify themes, and transcribe interviews (Mayer, 2015; Talanquer, 2014; Yin, 2017). I used Microsoft Word as a transcript format for raw interview data. I also used Microsoft Excel and NVivo to categorize, code data and identify themes. Ensuring the anonymity of each study participant is a critical component of producing ethical research (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Noble & Smith, 2015). I created a filing system using coded names (P1, P2,P3, P4, P5) to maintain the confidentiality of each participant. I also stored electronic data used in this study on a password-protected external hard drive and secured hard copy documents in a locked safe. After 5 years, I will discard data by formatting and destroying the password-protected hard drive as well as shredding all hard copy documents.

Data Analysis

Data analysis involves examining the information gathered by the researcher to determine the overall meaning of the data (Derobertmasure & Robertson, 2014; Pierre & Jackson, 2014). In qualitative studies, the researcher uses data analysis to answer the research question through the discovery of themes and patterns (Barnham, 2015; Derobertmasure & Robertson, 2014). Qualitative researchers ensure credibility by using methodological triangulation to crosscheck data (Yin, 2017). Researchers using methodological triangulation can gain a detailed understanding of the phenomenon studied due to gathering data from multiple sources (Anney, 2014; Irwin, 2013). Vohra (2014) demonstrated the effectiveness of methodological triangulation by using interviews document review and observation to explore leaders' behavior regarding their small and medium enterprises. I used methodological triangulation to gather data via semistructured interviews, reviewed organizational documents such as financial statements, and observational notes.

Researchers must follow a systematic approach to properly examine and interpret data (Grossoehme, 2014; Munn et al., 2014). In qualitative studies, Yin (2016) instructed qualitative researchers to use a five-step process to analyze data. Researchers can offset literary criticisms by using the five-step process (Durodola, Tippins, & Fusch, 2017). In this study, I used the five-step data analysis: compile database, disassemble data, reassemble data, interpret data, and conclude. Researchers can use various types of computer software such as Microsoft Excel and Word as well as NVivo to compile, code data, and identify themes (Derobertmasure & Robertson, 2014; Durodola et al., 2017; Sutton & Austin, 2015;). I used Microsoft Excel, Word, and NVivo throughout the five steps.

Compiling

Once the researcher completes data collection, they should compile the data by organizing it in a meaningful way (Durodola et al., 2017). Researchers compile data to connect information collected from various sources (Vohra, 2014). Data compilation also involves continuously reviewing transcribed notes to ensure the researcher retains an accurate memory of the interviews and observations (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Yin, 2017). I used Microsoft Excel to compile my database.

Disassembling

Researchers disassemble data by dividing textual data into small fragments (Durodola et al., 2017). Disassembling data also involves labeling the small fragments of data and assigning them codes (Durodola et al., 2017; Yin, 2017). Researchers can use Microsoft Word to code data at various levels (Derobertmasure & Robertson, 2014; Hennink et al., 2017). I used Microsoft Word to code data in an organizational chart.

steps.

Reassembling

Sound data analysis involves coding data into themes (Hennink, Kaiser, & Marconi, 2017; Vaismoradi et al., 2013). Reassembling data includes combining the small fragments of data based on assigned themes (Braun & Clarke, 2015; Durodola et al., 2017). During reassembly, researchers identify patterns and arrange data into different theme groups (Durodola et al., 2017). Braun and Clarke (2015) and Jonsson and Tolstoy (2014) noted that researchers could use thematic analysis as a helpful technique to identify patterns and keywords from interview data. Further, researchers use thematic analysis to provide in-depth reports of specific themes and groups of themes inside the data (Braun, Clarke, & Terry, 2014; Jonsson & Tolstoy, 2014). I used thematic analysis to research and organize my literature as correlated to the key themes. Additionally, I used thematic analysis to focus on the key themes and used the identified themes to answer the research question while relating to the conceptual framework. I also utilized NVivo computer software to identify themes.

Interpreting

Data interpretation impacts how readers perceive the quality of a study (Barnham, 2015; Yin, 2016). Qualitative researchers can provide data interpretation using descriptions, descriptions with a call to action, or explanations (Cuervo-Cazurra, Andersson, Brannen, Nielsen, & Rebecca Reuber, 2016; Yin, 2016). Sound data interpretations are complete, fair, accurate, valuable, and credible (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018; Onwuegbuzie & Byers, 2014; Yin, 2017). During the interpreting phase, researchers use their skills to describe or explain the meaning of the data collected, which sometimes require the researcher to return to previous phases such as reassembling (Cuervo-Cazurra et al., 2016; Onwuegbuzie & Byers, 2014; Yin, 2016). I provided a descriptive interpretation of themes drawn from interview data as well as company documents. Further, I identified and interpreted connections between interview data, company document data, and literature specific to the body of knowledge regarding this study through the lens of servant leadership theory.

Concluding

Despite methodology, it is important that all completed studies contain conclusions (Nelson, 2016; Yin, 2016). In qualitative studies, researchers describe or explain study outcomes while also reporting findings (Palinkas et al., 2016; Yin, 2016). Conclusion in data analysis is not only the overall summation of the researchers' findings but also encapsulates the significance of the study as well as research and practical implications (Palinkas et al., 2016; Stewart & Gapp, 2017; Yin, 2016). Yin (2016) noted that researchers conclude by calling for new research, questioning notions of social stereotypes or generalizations, making propositions, or generalizing their findings to conditions not specific to their study. Researchers also conclude by highlighting newly developed concepts or theories that could prove useful or necessary in future studies or practices (Stewart & Gapp, 2017; Yin, 2016). Data analysis conclusion includes connecting data interpretations to various aspects of the study (Nielsen & Hjørland, 2014; Yin, 2016). Specifically, researchers should connect data interpretations to key themes and patterns found in the data, the research question, the literature within the study, and the conceptual framework (Nielsen & Hjørland, 2014; Yin, 2016). I concluded my data analysis by describing the link between interview data, data from company documents, reflective and observation notes, my research question, scholarly literature, and servant leadership theory.

Reliability and Validity

Ensuring the quality of a study is critical to establishing a reliable and valid study (Street & Ward, 2012). As a result, there are specific approaches researchers should use based on the selected research method (Yin, 2017). Regarding qualitative research, there are various approaches to validate quality research and methods to establish reliability specific to case study design. Managing biases and ensuring replication of the study are ways to ensure the quality of a study (Baškarada, 2014; Yin, 2017). Managing biases and study reproduction includes building in peer review, member checking, and using tools such as audio or video recordings as well as research journals (Grossoehme, 2014; Yin, 2017). To ensure thoroughness of a study's results, researchers use methods regarding dependability, credibility, transferability, confirmability, and data saturation (Anney, 2014; Hill & Bundy, 2014). I addressed reliability and validitiy using multiple methods.

Reliability

A study's reliability greatly depends upon consistent replication using the same instruments and data collection procedures to yield the same research findings (Gheondea-Eladi, 2014; Polit, 2014). Reliability is a critical aspect of ensuring the dependability of qualitative research results (McNeil et al., 2015; Noble & Smith, 2015). Researchers can enhance the trustworthiness and integrity of their findings by establishing consistency, accuracy, and neutrality (Battisti, Dodaro, & Franco, 2014; Van den Berg & Ma, 2014). I addressed dependability using member checking by audiotaping and transcribing each interview, allowing every participant the opportunity to read and confirm my interpretations via a written summary.

Member checking is a valid method to ensure the trustworthiness and dependability of a study's results (McNeil et al., 2015; Noble & Smith, 2015). Researchers can use member checking to aid their understanding of the participants' feedback regarding the research topic (Birt et al., 2016; Harvey, 2015). To accurately recall participant feedback, researchers should record and transcribe participant interviews (Cridland, Jones, Caputi, & Magee, 2015; Harvey, 2015). To ensure dependability, I recorded and transcribed each participant interview. Further, I performed member checking by providing each participant the opportunity to review my interpretation of the interview.

Validity

Qualitative researchers use validity as a tool to measure the accuracy of data collection based on participant and reader perspectives (Eiras, Escoval, Grillo, & Silver-Fortes, 2014; Noble & Smith, 2015). In validating a qualitative study, researchers must include research design, data collection, data analysis, and data interpretation that proves replicable (Morse, 2015; Noble & Smith, 2015). Validity includes the level of credibility, transferability, conformability, and data saturation regarding the research findings (Leung, 2015; Noble & Smith, 2015).

Credibility. When a study is credible, researchers consider all perspectives offered by participants (Beise-Zee et al., 2014; Leung, 2015; Stewart & Gapp, 2017). Qualitative researchers establish credibility through participant evaluation of the research findings (Baškarada, 2014; Beise-Zee et al., 2014). When demonstrating credibility, researchers believe that participants provide accurate, assured, and valuable feedback (Anderson & Holloway-Libell, 2014; Beise-Zee et al., 2014). I ensured credibility through member checking and following the interview protocol (Appendix).

Transferability. A study is transferable when researchers can transfer the findings to another study similar in context without diminishing the meanings within the original study (Adamson & Prion, 2014; Cope, 2014). Qualitative researchers should provide thorough descriptions of the context of their study including methodology, assumptions and limitations, as well as findings (Anney, 2014; Houghton et al., 2013). By providing detailed information regarding their study, qualitative researchers aid readers and future researchers in determining the study's transferability (Adamson &

Prion, 2014; Houghton et al., 2013). However, transferability remains at the discretion of the reader and future researcher (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; McNeil et al., 2015). I ensured transferability of the study by documenting and reporting detailed information regarding methodology, reflections and observations, assumptions and limitations, and research findings.

Confirmability. Confirmability signifies the extent to which other researchers can corroborate the results of a study (Anney, 2014; Houghton et al., 2013). Ensuring confirmability allows researchers to report reputable, unbiased data, interpretations, and findings regarding their study (Anney, 2014; Hill & Bundy, 2014; (Houghton et al., 2013). Qualitative researchers can use reflective journaling and methodological triangulation to ensure confirmability (Anney, 2014; Houghton et al., 2013; Yin, 2017). I established confirmability by using reflective journaling to reduce researcher bias and methodological triangulation to collect data from multiple sources.

Data saturation. Data saturation is a critical aspect of qualitative research (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Nelson, 2016). Qualitative researchers reach data saturation when the information gathered becomes repetitive, and they can no longer identify new themes (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Nelson, 2016). Researchers exhibit the comprehensiveness of a qualitative study's data collection and analysis through data saturation (Franco & Matos, 2015; Guetterman, 2015; Yin, 2017). I employed member checking and methodological triangulation to ensure data saturation.

Transition and Summary

In Section 2, I restated the purpose statement, noted my role as the researcher, as well as information about the participants I will select. Additionally, I included my selected research method, research design, and sampling. I also included information regarding ethical research practices and processes, data collection instruments and techniques, data organization techniques, and data analysis. Lastly, I identified how I will address dependability, credibility, transferability, confirmability, and data saturation in reliability and validity subsection while ending with a transition and summary.

I will start Section 3 with an introduction to the purpose of the study and provide a summary of the study's findings. I will also provide an in-depth discussion about how the findings apply to professional business practices. Section 3 also contains specific discussions regarding implications for social change, recommendation for action, and recommendations for further study. I will conclude Section 3 with a reflection of my experience throughout the research process and relative conclusions.

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

Introduction

The purpose of my qualitative multiple case study was to explore what leadership strategies small fitness business owners use to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years. I interviewed five owners in the fitness and wellness industry and reviewed scholarly literature regarding small businesses, the fitness and wellness industry, and healthcare trends to derive information-rich data. I used methodological triangulation, which included (a) data from semistructured interviews, (b) participants' company financial statements and performance plans, (c) government websites, and (d) scholarly literature. Furthermore, using methodological triangulation, I identified three major themes and nine minor themes related to leadership strategies owners use to sustain their fitness businesses beyond 5 years. Through data analysis, I identified that the strategies owners used, characteristics owners demonstrated, and relationships owners fostered were critical to long-term business sustainment.

Presentation of the Findings

The central research question that guided the study was: What leadership strategies do small fitness business owners use to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years? I conducted semistructured interviews with five owners of small, privately owned, independent fitness businesses in North Carolina who sustained their business beyond 5 years. Table 2 contains an overview of each organization. Collectively, all interviews averaged approximately 35 minutes in length.

Table 2

Overview of Organizations

	Site 1	Site 2	Site 3	Site 4	Site 5
Description	Group fitness	Pilates	Full service gym	Pilates & yoga	Martial arts
Number of employees	<20	<6	<10	<20	<10
Number of years of operation	>6 years	>19 years	>5 years	>9 years	>11 years
Family owned	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No

I also gathered information from observations, company financial documents, and performance plans (see Table 3). In addition to audio recording each interview, I also used a research journal to log my reviews of company financial and performance plans as well as my observations of owner-to-employee and owner-to-customer interactions.

Table 3

Data Sources

Data Source	Site 1	Site 2	Site 3	Site 4	Site 5
Face-to-face, semistructured interviews	X	X	X	X	X
Observation of owner-employee interactions	X				X
Observation of owner-customer interactions			X		
Performance plan documents	X	X		X	X
Financial documents			X		

I used Dragon Naturally Speaking software to transcribe each of the audio-recorded interviews. Afterward, I used Microsoft Word to create a transcription of each interview as well as document my observations. Next, I used Microsoft Excel to organize participant responses according to each interview question. Chandra and Shang (2017) noted that researchers have used NVivo as a tool to identify reoccurring themes throughout their data. Using NVivo, I coded data and identified themes. Furthermore, I used data triangulation and member checking to derive the major themes of (a) good business practices, (b) leader characteristics, and (c) leader relationships (see Table 4).

The conceptual framework for this qualitative multiple case study was servant leadership introduced by Greenleaf in 1977. Through the lens of servant leadership, I recognized the following minor themes of leader characteristics: adaptability, motivation, and work ethic. During analysis of data collected from interviews, review of company documents, and observations coupled with a review of the professional and academic literature, I identified customer service management, financial management, marketing, and company reputation as minor themes of good business practices. Furthermore, I identified family-like environment and industry networks as minor themes of leader relationships (see Table 4).

Table 4

Major Themes and number of Participants and Responses

Major themes	# of participants	# of times in responses
Theme 1: Good business practices	5	71
Theme 2: Leader characteristics	5	33
Theme 3: Leader relationships	5	24

Themes

The first theme was good business practices. Participants included good business practices in their responses 71 times total. Most of the participants addressed the minor theme of company reputation, but all the participants included customer service, marketing, and financial management in their responses. The second theme was leader characteristics. Participants included leader characteristics in their responses 33 times total. All the participants' responses included the minor themes of adaptable and work ethic, while most participants commented about loving what they do. The third theme was leader relationships. Participants included this theme in their responses 24 times.

Most of the participants included family-like environment and industry networks in their responses.

Theme 1: Good Business Practices

Each participant identified good business practices as an important aspect of sustaining their small fitness business beyond 5 years. Managers and owners of companies must have good business practices if they want long-term success (Church, 2017). Lack of good business practices was among the issues related to small business failure (Church, 2017; Pitrus, 2015). All participants explained that having good business practices helped them assess how they were doing as an organization and allowed them to really understand the best way to utilize their resources. Each participant made general statements about their good business practices; however, company reputation, customer service management, financial management, and marketing strategies (see Table 5) were minor themes that I identified during data analysis.

Table 5

Minor Themes, Participant Percentage, and Response Frequency

Theme 1: Good Business Practices	% of participants	# of times in responses
Company reputation	60	3
Customer service management	100	46
Financial management	100	17
Marketing	100	12

Company reputation. More than half of the participants noted that new and continued customers come to their facility because they have a positive company reputation. The following are direct quotes from participant interviews related to company reputation. P1 stated, “people, no matter what level of athleticism, know they can come here to get a good workout in a clean place.” P2 stated, “people are curious about what we do but are willing to try my services because they have heard good things about us.” P3 stated, “people come here because they know we are not jerks and do not allow jerks here.”

Existing literature aligns with the findings of my study. Dutot (2016) noted that the reputation of a small business owner influences development and the survival of an organization. Owners and managers of small businesses can use company reputation strategies to increase profits, attract customers, and improve performance (Dutot, 2016; Gatzert, 2015; Koporcic & Halinen, 2018). Leaders of small businesses can also achieve competitive advantage with a positive company reputation (Gatzert, 2015; Koporcic & Halinen, 2018). Literature related to small business sustainability and company reputation supports the findings of my study.

Customer service management. P1, P2, P3, and P4 included customer service in their responses 46 times total. The following are direct quotes from participants regarding customer service. P1 stated, “[C]ustomer service is really important. We want to make sure that their experience here is always the best experience possible.” In response to the first interview question, P2 stated, “Probably the biggest one is client service. Timely response to queries, getting back to people, following up outreach.” P3 stated, “It’s not all business; you have to have that customer service side of it, especially in this business.” P4 explained, “being able to support each of our clients in the right way and whatever ways they need it is important to us as owners." I also observed customer service as a measure in performance plans for each participant, excluding P3, who did not have performance plans available to view. In P1's performance plan, I observed that they measure customer service using results from surveys distributed to customers every quarter. Devicais (2014) explained that organizations can measure customer service and satisfaction using sales records as well as surveys. I observed that P2's performance plan included customer service as a metric based on owner response time to customer inquiries via e-mail, phone, and in person. P2 included an assessment of documented instances of positive and negative direct customer feedback in their performance plan. In the performance plans of both P4 and P5, I observed that participants included ratings based on Google and Yelp reviews as a metric for customer service. Regarding P3, I observed owner-customer interactions that supported the information the owner provided during the interview. Specifically, while waiting near the front counter, prior to interviewing the owner, I observed the owner greeting each person as they came in and engaging in brief conversations with more than half the customers about their jobs, family, and overall personal well-being. A customer who initially believed that I was at the facility to exercise also explained how they appreciated the owner for helping them develop a workout regimen when they first joined the gym and continues to hold them accountable each time they come in. Lastly, P3 explained that they monitor their organization's Google and Yelp reviews regularly.

Literature reviewed align with the findings of this study. Devicais (2014) noted that meeting customer expectations is critical to the success of a small business.

Customer service is a key factor for organizational leaders that are a part of any service industry (Chen et al., 2015). Specifically, small business managers and owners can use customer service strategies to ensure higher levels of customer satisfaction, increase competitive advantage, and improve customer loyalty (Chen et al., 2015; Devicais, 2014; Lachiewicz, Marek, Pawel, & Maciej, 2018). Existing literature supports the minor theme of customer service as a factor related to small business success.

Financial management. All participants expressed that financial management was a critical aspect of maintaining their businesses beyond 5 years. Every participant explained that without properly managing their finances, they would not have successfully sustained their business longer than 5 years. All participants explained the importance of financial management throughout the life of their business; however, P2 and P4 noted that being conservative at the start of their business helped them to grow their organization. Additionally, I observed that all participants, excluding P3, used profit margin increase as a metric in their performance plans. The following are some direct quotes from participants related to financial management. P1 stated, "I do not enjoy sitting behind a desk crunching numbers, but it is important that I know how our financial resources are being used so that I can make decisions about when and where to spend money." P2 explained,

> When starting my business, just knowing that I could afford my expenses based on the income I was producing it was important to me so I selected an affordable location and managed my finances so that I could afford to run my business without having to rely on anyone else's productivity; so being financially

> conservative in order to be completely self-sufficient was my biggest strategy for moving beyond 5 years.

P3 said, “Relationships are the most important, but I was in finance for 30 years, so you have to look at your gym’s finances and make sure you are making good decisions like buying the equipment your members will actually use.” P4 noted,

> I am definitely fiscally conservative. We started off with a few pieces of equipment then as it got a little busier, we assessed our finances to see if we can muster up a couple of dollars for more equipment. This helped us grow the business because it would be great to start the business with everything set the way you want, but I think that being conservative in the first year or two is very critical to success.

P5 said,

> I run a tight budget, balancing between 10 to 12 thousand dollars. So, the biggest thing is just managing your budget because your feelings and your emotions will lie to you and have you thinking that your business is doing ok. Take an honest look at your finances. If you don’t know and manage your budget, you don’t really know anything.

I used existing literature to confirm the findings of my study. Didenko and Morozko (2018) and Karadag (2015) explained that because most small business leaders do not focus on strategies related to financial management, many of them do not survive. There is a direct relationship between poor financial management and small business failure (Karadag, 2015). Capital mismanagement and excessive fixed-asset investment were among the main causes of business failure related to financial management (Dahem & Rodríguez, 2014; Karadag, 2015). The minor theme of financial management aligns with existing literature related to small business success.

Marketing. All participants mentioned marketing in their answers to interview questions. Participants included marketing types and strategies in their responses a total of 12 times. All participants noted that they found marketing via social media and word-of-mouth more beneficial than other forms of marketing such as print, television, and radio advertising. The following are direct quotes from participants about marketing. P1 stated, “I implemented new social media tactics to increase our online presence. I hired someone specifically to work on our social media platforms because that and word-of-mouth are our best marketing efforts.” In response to Interview Question 3, P2 explained, “Conventional advertising; magazine and print. I've never done TV advertising because it is too expensive. But, yeah, any kind of print, I didn't find that it paid for itself.” P2 stated later in the interview, “I use social media and word-of-mouth to let people know who and where I am in the community.” In response to Interview Question 2, P3 stated, “definitely social media” as strategies that work best in sustaining their business beyond 5 years. Additionally, in response to Interview Question 3, P3 stated, “print ads” as a strategy was least effective in sustaining their business beyond 5 years. P4 said, “in the early days we did not have to do any marketing, but now in the last year or so we definitely have amped up our social media and word-of-mouth marketing, which is certainly helpful and fun.” P5 explained, “we have definitely modified our marketing strategies and put more effort in to social media and word-of-mouth because social media is most popular, and word-of-mouth is the cheapest way to market that has high results." I observed that each organization had a company website and at least one social media account which they posted advertisements regarding their services.

I was able to support the findings of my study with the literature I reviewed. Bocconcelli et al. (2018) explained that when leaders of small businesses employ marketing strategies, they are likely to achieve long-term competitive advantage as well as performance growth. Using successful marketing strategies include the use of modern approaches such as online marketing (Cant & Wild, 2016). Due to continuous advances in technology, online and word-of-mouth are more effective and efficient forms of marketing than print advertising, broadcast media, and direct mail (Bocconcelli et al., 2018; Cant & Wild, 2016). The literature reviewed aligns with the findings of my study.

Theme 2: Leader Characteristics

Each participant described various leader characteristics that they believed were instrumental in sustaining their small fitness business beyond 5 years. A leader's characteristics has significant impact on the success of their organization (Putra & Cho, 2019). Leader characteristics can influence employee satisfaction and retention, organizational performance, and company innovation (Liden et al., 2014; Putra & Cho, 2019). All participants noted that they were able to positively influence their organization's culture, fulfill company goals, and rejuvenate themselves to continue as small fitness business owners due to some of their characteristics as leaders. Adaptable, motivation, and work ethic (see Table 6) were minor themes that I identified during data analysis.

Table 6

Minor Themes, Participant Percentage, and Response Frequency

Theme 2: Leader characteristics	% of participants	# of times in responses
Adaptable	100	15
Motivation	80	5
Work ethic	100	26

Adaptable. All participants expressed that being an adaptable leader helped them sustain their businesses beyond 5 years. Every participant noted that because the fitness industry is in constant flux, an owner must be willing to make changes to continuously meet customer demands while meeting industry standards regarding health and safety practices. Participants included adaptability in their responses a total of 15 times. The following are some direct quotes from participants related to being an adaptable leader. P1 stated, "I think that in order for any business to really strive you really need to adapt to certain situations or certain different changes in the climate of culture or even just business attitude." In response to Interview Question 7, P1 also stated, "Again you have to be adaptable. Really understanding that sometimes you need to admit that you are doing things wrong and change your game plan." P2 explained,

> "I needed to make changes as my business grew, I moved to a new location that gave me more space and privacy to serve my clients. I also engage in continuing education and opportunities for improved subject knowledge to keep up on what it is that I do, and how to keep doing it well because this industry is not just a static thing."

P3 said,

> “The thing here is, we are constantly looking if we should tweak this or tweak that. You can't go through something like this with blinders on. For instance, I put in a functional training area. People like the functional training and you are seeing more gyms put something like that in because it is a popular way of training, it’s not going away.”

P4 explained,

> “As we grew over the years, we had to change how we connect with our staff. It was easy to stay connected with a small group of people, but when your staff doubles and some people only come in one day a week, you have to make the necessary adjustments to maintain a positive environment for employees.”

P4 further noted,

> “tourism is a big thing for us and as the weather gets warmer earlier in the year, our summer clients are starting to come back earlier and earlier each year, so we have to adjust to make sure our clients and employees are happy here.”

Lastly, P5 stated,

> “constantly adapting is the biggest thing. Being able to be flexible is the biggest thing I think as far as how to keep your business successful. You just gotta go with the flow because everything changes and adapts constantly in this industry.”

Literature reviewed aligns with the findings of this study. Small business owners and managers must be able to adapt across their organization as goals change, staff and staff needs change, and the nature of their business and industry change (Lachiewicz et al., 2018; Matejun, 2018; Vidal, Campdesuñer, Rodriguez, & Vivar, 2017). Gorshkova, Trifonov, and Poplavskaya (2014) expressed that in order to have an adaptable organization, the leader must be adaptable. Being able to adapt easily is a competitive advantage small businesses have over large corporations; however, when leaders and owners of small businesses are not adaptable their organizations become stagnant and cease to thrive (Matejun, 2018; Petkovska, 2015). Stagnation and an inability to thrive can cause small businesses to fail (Petkovska, 2015; Vidal et al., 2017). Existing literature related to small business success supports the minor theme, adaptable.

Motivation. Approximately 80% of the participants noted that passion and their love for the work they do or the services they provide are critical factors that motivate them to sustain their business. Participants mentioned how they love or feel passionate about what they do in their responses a total of five times. The following are some direct quotes from participants related to loving what they do as a motivating factor. P1 said, "I love what I do here. We get to help people change their lives every day by helping them become better athletes and people. It's definitely hard work so I wouldn't do it if I didn't love it." P2 explained. "I am not just into mindless fitness. I am passionate about helping my clients feel better in their bodies through intentional movements." P4 noted, "I may not love doing the studio's laundry, but I do love what I do as far as the services we provide and connections that we make." P5 stated, "I really love what I do. It's cool that I get to share my passion with kids and adults; it's why I keep doing it."

Existing literature aligns with the findings of my study. Holloway and Schaefer (2014) opined that having passion and love is a critical aspect of a small business owner' motivation. Small business owners who desire to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years must have a passion and love for their work and industry (Kosa & Mohammed, 2018; Warren & Szostek, 2017). An owner's passion motivates them to reach organizational goals by working hard, being committed to their stakeholders, and developing necessary skills (Coda, Krakauer, & Berne, 2018; Tasnim, Yahya, & Zainuddin, 2014; Warren & Szostek, 2017). The minor theme, motivation, aligns with existing literature related to small business success.

Work ethic. All participants noted the importance of work ethic in sustaining their business beyond 5 years. Each participant expressed that owners of small fitness businesses must work hard to sustain their organizations beyond 5 years. Participants included work ethic in their responses a total of 26 times. The following are direct quotes from participants about work ethic as a leader. P1 stated,

> "as an owner of a fitness center, you have to do a lot of things at once like manage staff, monitor finances, coach clients, and a lot of other things I can't think of right now, so you definitely have to be a hard worker if you want to own a successful fitness business."

P2 said,

> "I'm an owner, so I must make sure the facility is clean, create and maintain a healthy environment, manage my time and finances properly, and maintain relationships in the community. So, I work hard because-in the end-it's all on me."

P3 explained, “In this industry, our customers have to work hard to get good results for their bodies. It is the same for me as an owner; I have to work hard to see good results for my business.” P4 noted, “we have a tremendous staff and great clients, and if we want to keep them, we must work hard as owners so that they know we care about them and our business.” P5 expressed, “this is hard-work, and if people want to own a successful fitness business around here, they have to work hard, period.”

The literature I reviewed supports the findings of this study. A small business owner’s work ethic influences employee commitment as well as productivity (Muenjohn & McMurray, 2016; Putra & Cho, 2019; Vedula & Kim, 2018). When leaders of small businesses worked hard across their organizations, they had better relationships with employees (Holloway & Schaefer, 2014; Muenjohn & McMurray, 2016; Putra & Cho, 2019). Additionally, hard-working leaders had employees that were more innovative (Freeman, 2015; Muenjohn & McMurray, 2016). Existing literature related to small business success supports the minor theme, work ethic.

Theme 3: Leader Relationships

Each participant responses included information about types of relationships they have that allow them to sustain their small fitness business beyond 5 years. From the small business perspective, leader-follower relationships can include owners, employees, customers, and community members (De Clercq et al., 2014; Elsetouhi, Hammad, Nagm, & Elbaz, 2018). It is important that small business leaders develop and nurture positive relationships within and outside of their organization (De Clercq et al., 2014; Elsetouhi et al., 2018). When small business leaders lack positive relationships with followers as well as industry colleagues, their organization may not thrive; resulting in failure (De Clercq et al., 2014; Elsetouhi et al., 2018; Rauch, Rosenbusch, Unger, & Frese, 2016). All participants explained that relationships within their community, with customers and employees, and relationships with other professionals across the fitness industry helped them determine community needs and wants, evaluate the effectiveness of their strategies as leaders while raising morale, and assess their personal and professional goals as owners. During data analysis, I identified family-like and industry networks as minor themes (see Table 7).

Table 7

Minor Themes, Participant Percentage, and Response Frequency

Theme 3: Leader relationships	% of participants	# of times in responses
Family-Like	80	7
Industry Networks	60	4

Family-like. More than half of the participants noted that fostering a family-like relationship with their staff and customers was a helpful strategy in sustaining their business. Participants mentioned their family-like relationships with staff and customers in their responses a total of seven times. The following are some direct quotes from participants related to family-like relationships across their organizations. P1 stated,

> “I was always raised that family takes care of family and that's how I've always run my business, especially when it comes to members being able to afford coming here. If they can’t afford to come, we make it affordable because that’s what families do.”

P1 also stated,

> “I really try to establish a family connection with my employees. Every Thursday I invite them to my house, and we do family dinner and we don't talk about anything in the gym. It has really raised morale here to new levels. So, I feel that once you understand that this is your life and not just your job, it really changes your perception of what you are capable of doing as an owner.”

P3 explained,

> “It’s like a family in here and I take that serious. We don’t want animosity between any of the members or any of the staff because that sets a precedence that is not good for anyone and could hurt the overall business. What you’ll see here is people walking through, shaking hands, getting to know each other, staff and members do it.”

P4 said,

> “We are like a weird little family, connecting staff and clients with each other and just developing some sort of community. If there's deaths in the family we don’t just send flowers, we go to funerals…we are more like a family that shares a workout space together.”

Existing literature aligns with the findings of my study. Owners and co-workers of small businesses enjoy good relationships when work relationships are comparable to that of family units (Unsal-Akbiyik & Zeytinoglu, 2018). When small business owners and managers foster family-like relationships in their organizations, employee performance, job satisfaction, and knowledge-sharing increases (Jeong, McLean, & Park, 2018; Unsal-Akbiyik & Zeytinoglu, 2018). Further, absenteeism and employee turnover rates decrease when there are family-like relationships in the workplace (Dalela, Givan, Vivek, & Banerji, 2018; Jeong et al., 2018). Small business owners and managers who encourage family-like relationships with customers can expect higher rates of customer and employee satisfaction (Dalela et al., 2018). Owners who model and encourage family-like relationships with customers have higher rates of customer loyalty as well (Dalela et al., 2018; Unsal-Akbiyik & Zeytinoglu, 2018). The minor theme, family-like, aligns with existing literature related to small business success.

Industry networks. P2, P3, and P5 included industry networks in their responses four times, total. The following are some direct quotes from participants regarding industry networks. In response to Interview Question 1, P2's response included, "maintaining a network with other professionals aligned to my profession, so that I am not confined to just my experiences in movement, exercise, and safety." P3 explained, "Another thing I do is network. As an owner, I need to know what is going on in this industry so that I know what's popular, what's new with safety rules, and better ways to use my space." When answering Interview Question 1, P5's response included,

> "A lot of it is finding people who are better at it than I am and following what they do. Like, I'm in a networking group where we meet up and talk about our experiences. We learn what works what doesn't work in our industry."

The findings of this study were consistent with the literature I reviewed. Engaging in networking is a fundamental strategy for small business leaders (Bocconcelli et al., 2018; Turner & Endres, 2017). When seeking to grow a small business and improve business performance, networking relationships are important to small business owners (Kuhn, Galloway, & Collins-Williams, 2017). Small business owners who engage in industry networking have a wider knowledge base, utilize more available industry resources, and are more innovative than owners who do not engage in industry networking relationships (Bocconcelli et al., 2018; Turner & Endres, 2017). As a result, small business owners are more likely to sustain their businesses longer (Bocconcelli et al., 2018; Kuhn et al., 2017; Turner & Endres, 2017). Existing literature related to small business success supports the minor theme, industry networks.

Correlating Findings to Conceptual Framework

I explored the phenomenon to complete my study through the lens of servant leadership theory. As each of the participants described leadership strategies they used to sustain their small fitness businesses beyond 5 years, many of them identified the importance of empowering their staff and customers, being humble leaders so that they can empathize with and help heal clients or customers, standing back to conceptualize and listening to their staff and customers, being authentic with and accountable to staff and customers, forgiving of staff members when they make mistakes, having courage to become a small business owner, and being a good steward throughout their organization and community-antecedents of servant leadership theory. Follower performance and growth, organizational performance, and societal impact are outcomes related to servant leadership (Beck, 2014; Liden, Wayne, Liao, & Meuser, 2014). Putting followers first is another component of servant leadership (Beck, 2014; Liden et al., 2014). Servant leaders achieve positive outcomes related to organizational performance through good business practices based on their selfless nature and ability to conceptualize as well as serve as reliable financial stewards (Beck, 2014; Dahem & Rodríguez, 2014; Karadag, 2015). Empathy, empowerment, and selflessness are leader characteristics that scholars use to distinguish servant leadership from other leadership theories (Beck, 2014; Mcray, 2015; Rachmawati, & Lantu, 2014). During data collection involving owner-employee and owner-customer interactions, I observed owners display of empathic, empowering, and selfless characteristics. Leader relationships based on meaningful connections is a fundamental concept of servant leadership (Davis, 2017; Newman, Schwarz, Cooper, & Sendjaya, 2017). All participants expressed that the relationships they established and fostered as leaders were also tools they used to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years.

During my observations at Sites 1, 3, and 5 I observed owners stopped eating to assist a customer or staff person. During interviews, all participants referenced occasions where they made changes in their personal schedule to meet the needs of a staff person or customer. Lastly, I observed that the performance plans of P1 and P4 included making staff and customer needs the top priority. Participant responses and data from my observations support the notion that small fitness business owners can use servant leadership theory to explore the impact specific business problems may have on sustaining their business beyond 5 years.

Applications to Professional Practice

Owners of small fitness businesses could find the results of my study useful in creating sustainable business practices, modeling positive leader characteristics, and fostering helpful relationships. Small fitness business owners can use the findings from the study when developing and assessing their strategies, behaviors, and business practices as leaders. Small business owners who develop and adhere to business practices relevant to their organization will perform at higher levels and are profitable (Cant & Wild, 2016; Dutot, 2016). Owners who apply some of the business practices highlighted in my study might achieve improved organizational performance and profits. When small business owners are adaptable, motivated, and work hard, their organizations are not stagnant, their products and services remain relevant, and they have high employee morale (Muenjohn & McMurray, 2016; Petkovska, 2015; Warren & Szostek, 2017). Owners who exhibit some of the leader characteristics outlined in my study may also achieve higher levels of performance and growth from followers, including employees and customers. Positive relationships are keystones to small business success (De Clercq et al., 2014; Elsetouhi et al., 2018; Rauch et al., 2016). Owners who form and nurture relationships like those emphasized in this study may achieve a better understanding of the fitness industry as well as improved employee and customer morale. Based on the results of this study, the following are suggestions for owners of small, privately-owned, independent fitness businesses seeking to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years: (a) use sound business practices to assess company performance and use of resources; (b) demonstrate positive leader characteristics to remain self-aware while influencing organizational culture and goal-attainment; and (c) cultivate open relationships with employees, customers, and other industry-related professionals to understand and respond to follower needs as well as gain a broader perspective of the fitness industry.

Implications for Social Change

Implications for change regarding this study include the potential to help decrease the rate of small business failure beyond 5 years. Decreased rates of failed businesses may positively impact local communities by improving the socio-economic status of community members through job creation. Owners of small businesses who sustain their business can offer continuity for employees and local consumers. Additionally, decreased rates of small business failure could increase local consumer market options.

Access to and costs associated with healthcare is problematic. An increasing amount of healthcare professionals focus on disease and illness prevention due to limited access and rising costs in healthcare (Alphafri et al., 2017; Marques et al., 2015; Yan et al., 2015). Healthcare professionals recommend regular exercise and a balanced diet as measures to prevent some diseases and illnesses (Alphafri et al., 2017; Leenaars et al., 2015; Yan et al., 2015). Increased rates of successful small fitness businesses can help owners provide access to more fitness and wellness services across their community. As a result, the findings of this study may also contribute to positive social change by improving the overall health and well-being of community members.

Recommendations for Action

Based on the findings of this study, I recommend actions that current and future owners of small fitness businesses take to sustain their business beyond 5 years. The first recommendation is to create and maintain business practices aligned with measuring company reputation and customer service. A small business owner’s reputation and level of customer service has a direct relationship to an organization’s long-term success

(Devicais, 2014; Dutot, 2016). Small business owners can improve customer loyalty and increase profits with strategies that focus on company reputation and customer service (Dutot, 2016; Gatzert, 2015). The second recommendation is to establish business practices that small business owners use for financial management and marketing. Specifically, small business owners should closely monitor their budget, spend conservatively when possible, and strategically designate financial resources to marketing plans that include various forms of advertisements. Many small business owners failed due to a lack of focus on financial management strategies (Morozko, 2018; Karadag, 2015). Further, it is important that small business owners use the most effective and up-to-date marketing strategies as to avoid misallocation of funds and loss of resources (Bocconcelli et al., 2018; Cant & Wild, 2016). Business practices are important to sustaining a small business beyond 5 years.

The third recommendation is that small business owners become and remain adaptable to changes within their organizations and industry. When small business owners are adaptable, they can acquire new skills and knowledge as well as overcome challenges easier (Vidal et al., 2017). Adaptable small business owners can successfully lead their organizations through unexpected shifts inside and outside of their organizations; resulting in long-term sustainability (Gorshkova et al. 2014; Petkovska, 2015). The fourth recommendation is that current small business owners explore areas of their organizations where they feel most motivated. For aspiring small business owners, establish organizations based on personal passion. When small business owners feel motivated by their passion and love, they are more engaged in the long-term success of their organization (Holloway &Schaefer, 2014). Small business owners offer products and services that are relevant and desirable to their customers when owners have passion and love the work they do (Tasnim et al., 2014; Warren & Szostek, 2017). An owner's leader characteristics are important to the long-term sustainability of a small business.

The fifth recommendation is that small business owners work hard to sustain their businesses. Being a small business owner requires hard work and commitment (Freeman, 2015). Small business owners who work hard have lower levels of employee turnover and higher levels of customer satisfaction (Holloway & Schaefer, 2014; Muenjohn & McMurray, 2016). The final recommendation is that small business owners foster family-like relationships with employees and staff while networking across their industry. Employee morale and customer loyalty rates are high when small business owners encourage family-like relationships across their organization (Jeong et al., 2018; Unsal-Akbiyik & Zeytinoglu, 2018). Additionally, small business owners sustain their businesses longer by gaining knowledge and resources through industry networking (Bocconcelli et al., 2018; Kuhn et al., 2017; Turner & Endres, 2017). When small business owners want to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years, it is important that they work hard and foster positive relationships among staff and customers as well as across their industry.

The recommendations from my study help (a) current owners and leaders of small fitness businesses, (b) aspiring owners and leaders of small businesses, and (c) students and researchers completing studies related to sustaining small business businesses beyond 5 years. Providing the literature reviewed in this study will allow small fitness business owners access to information related to their profession and industry. My goal is to incorporate the research into presentation materials for workshops I will provide to local small business professionals through public libraries and other nonprofit organizations such as the YWCA. I will also pursue publication of my study's results in a peer-reviewed journal for researcher and practitioner reference.

Recommendations for Further Research

I recommend conducting further research regarding strategies small business owners use to sustain their business beyond 5 years. The findings of this study include small fitness businesses located in North Carolina. Aspects such as geographic location can impact the validity and scope of a study (Buliga, 2014; Yin, 2017). Researchers should conduct further research beyond the geographic region and industry of this study to compare findings and relevant strategies. I used a qualitative research method with a multiple case study design to conduct this study. Qualitative researchers explore phenomenon then identify and discuss themes based on their findings; however, quantitative researchers examine relationships (Barnham, 2015; Goertzen, 2017; Groeneveld et al., 2015). For further research, scholars should use other methodologies and designs to explore and investigate small business success beyond 5 years.

I recommend further research related to the themes and literature outlined in this study. Dutot (2016) and Gatzert (2015) researched company reputation based on external stakeholders such as customers as well as company performance. However, there is a gap in research regarding company reputation from internal stakeholders such as employees (Gatzert, 2015). Future researchers can identify additional information regarding how the reputation of a small business impacts success based on employees' perspectives. Three out of five of the participant's organizations in this study are family owned. Owners of family-owned small businesses do not always face the same challenges as owners of small businesses that are not family owned (Binz et al., 2017; Fletcher et al., 2016). Future researchers should explore and investigate strategies of small businesses specific to family-owned enterprises.

Reflections

When I started the journey toward doctoral study competition, I was eager to begin uncovering discrepancies in the relationship between small business failures and small business contributions to the economy. I believed that through streamlined observation and research, I would be able to find some solutions to this misnomer. I also believed that, because the issue of small business failure was not uncommon, finding participants willing to participate would not be challenging. However, when reaching out to prospective participants to schedule interviews, I found that many participants did not respond to phone calls and e-mail requests. Initially, I felt discouraged by the low response rate and became anxious. Later, a couple of small fitness business owners, whom I did not contact initially, e-mailed me. I found out that the potential participants who responded to my phone calls or e-mails but did not meet all qualifications to participate in the study, reached out to other small fitness business owners they knew and gave them my contact information. As a result, I was able to interview qualified participants.

The data collection process helped me to grow as a researcher. I gained a wealth of knowledge from both interviews and observations. I also found that most of the participants wanted to know the results of my study and inquired about potential presentations to them and other organizations in their industry. After initially collecting data, I found member checking to be challenging with regards to obtaining feedback from participants. I began to worry about data saturation as it took a couple of participants more than two weeks to confirm the accuracy of my interpretations of their interviews. However, while waiting for participant feedback, I learned the importance of finding peace in the pursuit of accuracy. After receiving confirmation from the last participant, I felt excited to report my findings.

As a college instructor, I will incorporate and share the knowledge gained throughout this study with my students and colleagues. I also hope to use the findings from this study to build and sustain my own small business. Lastly, I will use the information in this study to help local small business owners develop strategies to ensure long-term success.

Conclusion

In my qualitative multiple case study, I explored the leadership strategies owners of small fitness businesses use to sustain their business beyond 5 years. The study consisted of data collected through semistructured interviews with owners of small fitness businesses who sustained their businesses beyond 5 years. I identified three themes: (a) good business practices, (b) leader characteristics, and (c) leader relationships. Within each theme, I identified nine minor themes. Minor themes for good business practices were company reputation, customer service, financial management, and marketing. Minor themes for leader characteristics were adaptable, motivation, and work hard. Minor themes for leader relationships were family-like and industry networks. Each participant highlighted the importance of using good business practices to assess company performance. All participants recognized the importance of modeling leader characteristics that ensured employee and customer satisfaction as well as long-term sustainability for them as owners. Also, fostering relationships such as making stakeholders feel like family members and industry networking were critical measures participants identified to achieve high rates of employee morale, customer loyalty, and access to a wider breadth of industry knowledge and resources. Using the results from this study, I understood that small business owners need to develop and use leadership strategies relative to their business practices, characteristics as leaders, and relationships to sustain their organizations beyond 5 years.

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Appendix: Interview Protocol

<table>
<tr><th colspan="2">Interview Protocol</th></tr>
<tr><th>What I will do</th><th>Script</th></tr>
<tr><td>▪ Introduce self and thank participants for their willingness to participate.
▪ Confirm expected length of time for the interview as well as audio recording.
▪ Present the informed consent form that includes interview questions, emphasize the confidentiality of the participants, discuss content, and address questions as well as concerns of participants.</td><td>My name is Jacqueline Robertson, and I am a student at Walden University. Thank you for your willingness to participate in this study. Each interview will take approximately 45 minutes to one hour. Just a reminder that each interview session will be audio recorded for research purpose only. There will be no references to participant’s name or business.</td></tr>
<tr><td>▪ Turn on the audio recording device.
▪ Introduce participants with coded identification and note the date and time.</td><td>Today is (Month, Day, Year), I will be interviewing participant (#) in seeking to answer the central research question: What leadership strategies do small fitness business owners use to sustain their business beyond 5 years?</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="6">▪ Begin the interview with question #1 then follow through to the final question.
▪ Watch for non-verbal queues
▪ Paraphrase as needed
▪ Ask follow-up probing questions to get more indepth if needed.</td><td>1. What leadership strategies have you used to sustain your business beyond 5 years?</td></tr>
<tr><td>2. What strategies did you find worked best to sustain your business beyond 5 years?</td></tr>
<tr><td>3. What strategies were least effective in sustaining your business beyond 5 years?</td></tr>
<tr><td>4. How did you assess the effectiveness of your strategies for sustaining your business beyond 5 years?</td></tr>
<tr><td>5. What were the key barriers to implementing your strategies for sustaining your business beyond 5 years?</td></tr>
<tr><td>6. How did you address the key barriers to sustaining your business beyond 5 years?</td></tr>
</table>

	7. What modifications did you apply to any strategy to improve the effectiveness of sustaining your business beyond 5 years?
	8. What more would you like to add regarding this study?
▪ End interview sequence. ▪ Thank participants for their part in the study.	This is the end of the interview and I would like to thank you for your time.
▪ Discuss member checking with the participants.	I will send you a summary of my interpretation of your interview via email to ensure that I accurately interpreted your responses. Please review the summary and contact me to let me know if there are any misinterpretations in need of changing or additional information you would like to add.
▪ Reiterate contact information for questions and concerns from participants. ▪ End protocol.	If you have questions later, you may contact me via XXXXXXXX. If you want to talk privately about your rights as a participant, you can call the Research Participant Advocate at my university at 1-800-925-3368 ext. 312-1210 (within the USA), 001-612-312-1210 (from outside the USA) or via email, irb@waldenu.edu.