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Strategies to Successfully Sustain Operations for Rural Micro and Small Enterprises

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Walden University

College of Management and Technology

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Katrina S. Chance

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Walden University
2021

Abstract

Strategies to Successfully Sustain Operations for Rural Micro and Small Enterprises

by

Katrina S. Chance

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Business Administration

Walden University

December 2021

Abstract

Only 50% of micro and small enterprises (MSEs) survive beyond the first 5 years. As a result, it is important rural MSE managers have successful strategies to sustain their business. Grounded in general systems theory, the purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore successful strategies rural MSE managers use to sustain operations successfully beyond 5 years. Participants included five rural MSE managers in the southeastern United States who integrated sustainability strategies to avoid premature business failure. Data were collected from semistructured interviews and organizational documents, such as company reports, event flyers, image files, and social media platforms. Data were analyzed using Yin's 5-step analysis process. Three themes emerged: developing marketing strategies, investing in the business and the community, and initiating the planning and implementation of the business plan. Data were analyzed by transcription, coding, categorizing, and member checking. A key recommendation is that rural MSE managers develop marketing strategies that facilitate connections between internal and external systems and maintain profitability. The implications for positive social change include the potential for lower unemployment rates, improved living standards, and local economic stability.

Strategies to Successfully Sustain Operations for Rural Micro and Small Enterprises

by

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December 2021

Dedication

I dedicate this study to my parents, Zepherine and Michael, who provided me with a head start in my education journey. To my daughter Morgan Arresha for her unconditional love and encouragement throughout this intellectual marathon. I dedicate this study to the memories of my grandmothers Estella Thompson, Alice Johnson, and my great-aunts. They were strong women in rural communities that inspired me to accomplish any goal I set my mind to with the good Lord's help. With adoration, encouragement, and guidance from individuals who care, anything is possible. Although these women are no longer here, their memories and spirit will always remain in my heart. Lastly, I dedicate this study to rural micro and small business leaders committed to following their dreams and aspirations. "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." (Philippians 4:13, NKJV).

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study

Micro and small enterprises (MSEs) are a critical segment of the United States economy. Even though they employ most of the US workforce, MSEs often fail within the first 5 years of operation. Rural MSE managers are applying successful strategies throughout the United States, and these strategies can help increase their sustainability.

Background of the Problem

Many citizens do not reside in a specified community but in unincorporated rural areas (Ryser & Halseth, 2017). Approximately 70 million people, or one in five Americans, live in what is considered rural America (Johnson & Lichter, 2020). MSEs form a vital sector of the small business population and communities throughout the United States (Small Business Administration, 2019). The U.S. economy depends on rural MSEs; therefore, rural managers must have successful strategies for sustainability. Only 50% of MSEs survive beyond the first 5 years; hence, a need exists for successful strategies to prevent business failure (Hess & Cottrell, 2016).

Some MSEs cannot maintain long-term profitability because organizational managers lack sufficient business strategies. The U.S. rural unemployment rate in 2019 was at 4.1%, whereas the national rate was 3.6% (Petrosky-Nadeau & Valletta, 2019). The purpose of this study was to explore successful strategies that rural MSEs use to sustain operations beyond 5 years. MSE managers should employ successful strategies to increase the sustainability of their specific businesses. Rural MSE managers can apply these diverse strategies based on their experience, industry, and geographic location.

Problem Statement

Approximately 79% of small business establishments opened in 2017 survived until the end of 2018 (Willmoth, 2018). Small Business Administration (SBA) statistics reveal that 50% of small enterprises fail within the first 5 years (SBA, 2019). The general business problem is that some MSEs fail before reaching 5 years of operation. The specific business problem was that some rural MSE managers lack strategies to sustain operations beyond 5 years.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the strategies rural MSE managers use to sustain operations beyond 5 years. The target population consisted of five rural MSE managers in the southeastern United States who maintained successful operations for longer than 5 years. Implications for positive social change included providing successful business strategies for rural managers, reducing joblessness, and advancing communities' economic development.

Nature of the Study

The three principal research methods are qualitative, quantitative, and mixed. I selected the qualitative method to conduct this research. Qualitative research is beneficial for exploring the meaning of a phenomenon (Fu, 2019). Quantitative analysis may include a hypothesis using associated data to prove or disapprove a theory based on statistical hypothesis testing (Zhou et al., 2017). Researchers apply the quantitative method to assess a hypothesis through statistical procedures and examine relationships or differences between variables (Fossaluzza et al., 2017). The quantitative approach was not

suitable for this study because my research does not include collecting data for analyzing variables' characteristics or relationships. Mixed-method researchers combine qualitative and quantitative methods (Makrakis & Kostoulas-Makrakis, 2016). Therefore, neither the quantitative nor mixed method was appropriate for exploring successful strategies that lead to MSEs sustainability.

Qualitative designs include (a) case study, (b) ethnography, and (c) narrative. Researchers use qualitative methods to understand the underlying phenomena and gain in-depth insight into the research question (Anderson, 2017). A researcher might use a multiple case study design to compare data across cases (Yin, 2018). I conducted a multiple case study to assess data among rural MSEs. Multiple case study researchers explore empirical materials to collect data and compare findings across different cases (Yin, 2018). Ethnography applies to exploring cultural norms of one or more groups' cultures (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Ethnography was not suitable because I did not investigate the business culture of the participants (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Narrative researchers probe the meanings of participants' personal stories to understand their stories' diversity and various levels (Baú, 2016). The narrative design was not suitable because the objective of my study was not to develop descriptions based on a history of experiences through personal stories.

Research Question

What strategies do rural MSE managers use to sustain operations successfully beyond 5 years?

Interview Questions

1. To what strategies do you attribute your business success?
2. What successful strategies did you implement to combat external pressures that affect your business?
3. What marketing strategies have you implemented to help sustain your business beyond 5 years?
4. What specific fiscal and management strategies did you apply during the first 5 years?
5. What effective strategies did you apply during economic challenges or hardships?
6. What additional information can you provide about your strategies to sustain operations during the first 5 years of starting your business?

Conceptual Framework

The framework for this research study is the general systems theory (GST). Von Bertalanffy introduced GST in 1936. Von Bertalanffy (1972) defined a *system* as the interface of related mechanisms influencing all elements' interaction. Von Bertalanffy described GST as general functions and interactions within complex systems. Fundamental constructs of GST are (a) objects, the variables within the system, (b) attributes of the system and its objects, (c) interrelationship among objects in a system, and (d) the existence of a system within an external environment. I used GST because system thinking allows the researcher to understand a phenomenon by considering the

interactions between the key elements that constitute the phenomenon (Navis & Ozbek, 2016).

MSEs play a critical part in adding value to the economy (Turner & Endres, 2017). GST provides the opportunity to explore innovative approaches to organizations (Turner & Endres, 2017). The systems theory offers a framework to examine effective management strategies for MSE managers to sustain their operations beyond 5 years (Turner & Endres, 2017). The framework could support the core for understanding complex MSE systems and implement strategies to transform innovative practices to a proactive business approach (Abdyrov et al., 2016). The GST concept supported the exploration of challenges that rural MSE managers encounter when launching, leading, and sustaining a small enterprise. Through the development of understanding the sustainability of MSEs' strategies, GST was an appropriate model for this study's conceptual framework.

Operational Definitions

Economic development: This is developing wealth using capital, humans, financial, physical, and natural resources to generate valuable goods and services (Neagu, 2016).

Micro and small enterprise (MSE): A micro enterprise is an organization with fewer than 50 employees (Shibia & Barako, 2017), and a small business has fewer than 500 employees (SBA, 2019).

Rural area: This is a populated or unincorporated area in a nonurban area or a community or city with a population of under 50,000 people (Ratcliffe et al., 2016).

Strategic management: This refers to the general course and vision of an enterprise and the connection of available resources to change capabilities in certain circumstances (Kraus et al., 2011).

Strategic planning: This is a way to attain a balance between the external environments in addition to the internal capabilities of an organization (Dyer et al., 2016).

Sustainability: Sustainability is economic development that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs (Epstein & Buhovac, 2014).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

Assumptions

Assumptions are interpretations or underlying ideas that the researcher believes to be accurate (Goodman et al., 2020). There are several assumptions in this study. One assumption was that the eligible participants are held responsible for maintaining business sustainability. Another assumption was that leaders would offer data without a private agenda or for personal gain. The final assumption was that participants would answer the interview questions honestly.

Limitations

Limitations are uncontrollable negative factors that could influence the study results (Castillo et al., 2017). The first study limitation included organizing and interviewing time constraints when collecting data from the participants. The second potential limitation of this study was a participant's willingness to participate. Nonetheless, technology permits the possibility for virtual interviews to occur, as needed.

Delimitations

Delimitations refer to boundaries or restrictions that researchers impose to emphasize the study (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). The first delimitation was the geographical location of the rural southeastern United States. Another delimitation was that I did not include medium or large enterprises in the study. The final delimitation was that the MSEs included in this study sustained their enterprise for more than 5 years.

Significance of the Study

This study's findings may be significant for identifying and understanding supply strategies that successful rural managers of MSEs use to sustain their business for more than 5 years. MSE managers could use the findings to adopt, adapt, or develop innovative business strategies for maintaining successful firms by using the outcomes of this qualitative research study to increase employment for benefiting citizens and their communities.

Small enterprise managers need to implement successful business strategies to improve the sustainability of their businesses. Encountering fiscal challenges often hinders the survival rate of a small enterprise (Mazzei et al., 2016). Managers' application of strategic thinking may lead to effectively improving business operations leading to long-term sustainability (Navis & Ozbek, 2016). The results may provide rural MSE managers with strategies to effectively enhance and sustain operations by offering strategies for improving key business processes and managerial practices and addressing financial constraints within their organization to effect performance improvements.

This study's results may provide sustainability strategies to increase the survival rates of rural MSEs for growing and sustaining employment. Implications for positive social change include offering successful business strategies for rural managers, reducing joblessness, and improving communities' economic development. The implications for positive social change may specifically interest managers and owners concerned about the communities' economic growth and development in rural areas. Sustaining small organizations produces jobs, reduces poverty, and enhances life quality (Shibia & Barako, 2017). Society benefits when individuals thrive in a healthy community, a safe environment, and have opportunities for gainful employment.

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

The literature review provides an analysis and synthesis of published research on strategies rural MSEs can use to sustain operations beyond 5 years. I begin the review of related literature with a discussion of the conceptual framework of GST and systems thinking, followed by an overview of supporting and alternative theories. I developed a comprehensive analysis and synthesis of sources from peer-reviewed articles from ProQuest Central, Walden University databases, Google Scholar, and government web pages. I expanded the research to incorporate the literature on sustainability theories, which can help researchers and MSE managers gain an in-depth understanding of the strategies they can apply to sustain their organizations successfully. Through the study, I aimed to address the gap in sustainability strategies for rural MSEs.

The keywords for the searches included a combination of *rural United States*, *micro and small enterprises*, *knowledge management*, *strategic leadership*, *rural small*

business, economic sustainability, rural small business survival, rural small business failure, rural economics, rural banking, entrepreneurial theory, institutional theory, and systems theory. The literature review included (a) 195 scholarly peer-reviewed journal articles, (b) nine seminal books, and (c) four government sources. Of the 208 sources used, 94.1% had publication dates from 2017 to 2021. Walden University recommended that 85% of cited sources be published within 5 years of CAO approval and be peer reviewed.

Literature Review Organization

This literature review section included several subsections. It begins with a comprehensive summary, including critical analysis and synthesis of the conceptual framework, the GST, to support and contrast theories from relevant literature on incorporating sustainability strategies into rural MSE business practices. The supporting and contrasting theories are Cantillon's (1755) entrepreneurship theory, Schumpeter's (1935) innovation theory, and Lorenz's (1963) chaos theory. The lack of sustainability strategies became a challenge for some MSEs. I explored various components of literature on micro and small business sustainability.

First, I focus on the literature for the conceptual framework for this study, and I discuss how I used the literature to provide additional insight into rural MSE sustainability strategies. Next, I focus on studies that reference the impact that leaders' knowledge has on sustainability and their influence as managers. Davila et al. (2019) stated that some researchers believe that an organization's competitive advantage results from the connection between innovation and internal knowledge.

The purpose of this qualitative, multiple case study was to explore the successful strategies that rural MSE managers use to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years. In addition, the purpose of this literature review was to research prior studies to understand the strategies that some small businesses employ to maintain their enterprises. Conducting this research and study offered further insight into the successful sustainability strategies that rural MSE managers may employ to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years.

I explored a variety of components of literature on the sustainability of MSEs. First, I focused on literature for the conceptual framework for this study, and I discussed how I used it to offer further understanding of MSE sustainability strategies. Next, I focused on literature addressing knowledge management (KM) and its role in business sustainability. Then I focused on literature to gain insight into increasing human and social capital in rural communities to impact financial sustainability to increase business survival rates (Conroy & Deller, 2020; Davila et al., 2019). The final subsection is a detailed discussion of these concepts: (a) marketing strategies, (b) technology strategies, (c) strategic planning, and (d) financial sustainability strategies.

GST

In the 1930s, Ludwig von Bertalanffy developed the concept of GST to describe the interactions of living organisms; later, he expanded the theory to incorporate the analysis of a business as a system (Simola, 2018; von Bertalanffy, 1972). Von Bertalanffy posited that researchers and organizational managers could implement GST to study the connections between phenomena linked to an organization's events. MSE

managers may use GST as a resolution for real-world business problems by considering the individual parts of a complete system (Simola, 2018).

Scholars, researchers, and management commonly use GST. According to Colangelo (2016), researchers apply GST as an evolutionary theory to explain various complex systems in the 21st century. Caws (2015) rationalized GST as a multiple-discipline theory. A system's proficiency requires multiple practical and interrelated parts, and any impairment in the correlated parts influences the overall system (Appignanesi, 2018). Utilizing GST validates the significance of interactions in organization development, private groupings, personality, and technological methods (von Bertalanffy, 1972). Rural managers who effectively apply GST principles may ensure the long-term survival of their organization.

According to von Bertalanffy (1972), employing GST may help managers determine what system modifications are necessary for their survival. He also identified the tenets of GST as (a) a holistic approach instead of a simplistic summation of the parts, (b) the requirement for interconnections, and (c) controlling the system. The evolution of society and modern technology is so complex that earlier technology is no longer sufficient; systemic approaches and interdisciplinary methods are needed (von Bertalanffy, 1972). This holistic approach includes theories and concepts from social economics, psychology, operations research, and decision-making practices (Shaked & Schechter, 2017; Yurtseven & Buchanan, 2016a). When rural MSE managers utilize GST constructs, they may position their organization for long-term business survival.

Researchers have articulated that GST transforms to meet diverse organizational settings. According to Yurtseven and Buchanan (2016b), GST can implement objectives that involve (a) formulating GSTs, (b) establishing the method of explaining the purpose and actions of the system's objects, and (c) illustrating the simplified models. Each system has a responsibility and duty, which impacts the organization differently. In GST, systems are considered complete groupings of connected elements (Caws, 2015; Simola, 2018; Yurtseven & Buchanan). GST can be a strategic tool that supports managers when encountering various administrative situations that may hinder business growth and development.

According to Ericson et al. (2020), in systems theory, ecosystems refer to interactions between living organisms and their environment. GST can provide a framework for researchers to understand a broad range of scientific and social concerns that impact the relationships and connections between the parts of a system (Bridgen, 2017; Ericson et al., 2020). Using the GST framework, researchers can analyze an enterprise's assets and vulnerabilities while considering the influence of its purpose and objectives (Appignanesi, 2018; Bridgen, 2017).

Sayin (2016) explained that managers could adopt GST methods to develop strategies that can ensure sustainability beyond 5 years. Managers need to comprehend how business requirements and events work together to guarantee long-term business sustainability (Appignanesi, 2018). MSE managers must operate within several systems, including customer satisfaction, technology, marketing, and economic relations, for obtaining long-term business success (Turner & Endres, 2017). Von Bertalanffy (1972)

highlighted that an open and closed system is GST's core tenet. When systems are open, there is an exchange of vigor, substance, individuals, and knowledge (von Bertalanffy). By implementing GST, rural MSE managers can evaluate business procedures from a system's perspective and its components (Abdyrov et al., 2016).

Some rural MSE managers lack information technology (IT) experience (Turner & Endres, 2017). These managers may find this study and GST beneficial. Using GST permits managers to explore successful strategies by enhancing their applied business knowledge (von Bertalanffy, 1972). Muenjohn and McMurray (2016) also stated that GST is applied when exploring the successful strategies and transdisciplinary aspects of managers operating a business. Baumgartner and Rauter (2016) viewed management from a sustainability viewpoint, noting the significance of integrating sustainability strategies into business practices.

Managers could use GST to focus mainly on creating avenues for developing and analyzing the successful strategies, practices, connections, and relationships between the system (Collopy, 2019). GST is a basic methodology that impacts complexity and change (Dominici, 2017). Researchers can better understand how systems operate in successful enterprises by understanding GST's fundamental principles (Abdyrov et al., 2016).

GST's main benefit is that it advances business managers' knowledge of business practices by implementing successful real-world strategies and systems thinking (Porvazník & Ljudvigová, 2016; von Bertalanffy, 1972). Managers can also use GST to understand a system's complexities regarding internal and external influences (Caws, 2015). Researchers can apply GST to describe system boundaries, system structure, or

the push for stability (Araz, 2020; De Boer & Andersen, 2016). Such characteristics and their interrelationships relate directly to businesses and connections between companies and their external environments (De Boer & Andersen, 2016). Thus, GST is an adaptable theory that can describe any system that influences a more effective system.

Mingers and Standing (2017) suggested that managers who implement a GST construct can examine operations through a different lens. Besides building upon von Bertalanffy's theory, Caws's (2015) assessment posited that managers could discover answers to complicated problems that require numerous interconnected elements by utilizing GST tenets. Shaked and Schechter (2017) conducted a qualitative study and argued that the principals that determine GST do not break down systems into parts to understand them. GST is a framework for seeing the whole and an effective way of handling real-world problems (Appignanesi, 2018; von Bertalanffy, 1972).

Many researchers have used GST to analyze practical sustainability strategies for small businesses. Shaked and Schechter (2017) emphasized that managers who implement GST principles have a better understanding of successful business growth and sustainability strategies. Business managers who develop effective business practices based on GST concepts have a higher probability of achieving long-term sustainability and organizational success (Jansson et al., 2017; von Bertalanffy, 1972). For instance, Marsan et al. (2016) noted that an enterprise's sustainability hinges on a manager's ability to apply the theory to their organization to achieve successful outcomes. MSE managers who employ GST have a better understanding of transdisciplinary forces' influence on business operations (Shaked & Schechter, 2017).

Broks (2016) observed the principles of systems theory and suggested that the essential beliefs incorporate (a) a replication of human world phenomena in a human's world of thoughts as systems, (b) a sum of the system's interrelated parts, (c) a person's desire to learn and apply systems assets to fulfill their corresponding desires in life, (d) people's understanding of the world in fragments, and (e) the interconnections in everything. Researchers have stated that a holistic system approach to business management remains essential for business survival (Abdyrov et al., 2016; Pagani & Otto, 2013; Yurtseven & Buchanan, 2016b).

Systems Thinking

Collopy (2019) posited systems thinking as helpful in understanding and shaping complex organizational and social problems. According to Appelbaum et al. (2017), von Bertalanffy developed GST to explain a business system's interactions and applications through its relationship with systems thinking. Due to the shifting demographics, globalization, and economic changes caused by the decline in resources, rural communities experience a unique set of challenges (American Hospital Association, 2016; Meyer et al., 2018; North Carolina Rural Health Research Program, 2020). Complexity remains an essential concept in the systems movement (Yurtseven & Buchanan, 2016a). Implementing systems thinking with GST may help rural MSE managers sustain business operations (Araz, 2020; Simola, 2018) and positively effect social change.

The essential tenets of systems thinking have transformed over the years. Researchers and business managers can identify operational issues by employing GST

and systems thinking (von Bertalanffy, 1972). Some systems thinkers believe that if managers see things through the lens of GST, the world will become a better place (Araz, 2020; De Boer & Andersen, 2016). Rural managers may use systems thinking approaches to analyze business activities (Chen, 2016). Scholars, systems thinkers, and researchers use GST for applications across disciplines (Colangelo, 2016). Several researchers (e.g., Araz, 2020; Mingers & Standing, 2017) have provided systems thinking accounts that focus on this field's broad scope.

According to Chen (2016), researchers apply systems thinking to investigate connections and interactions between a system's components. Araz (2020) emphasized systems thinking as a significant pathway for discovering the less evident and complex interactions encountered by ineffective strategies. Yurtseven and Buchanan (2016a) found that system-oriented strategies can promote sustainability.

Supporting and Alternative Theories

Scholars use many theories to explore and analyze how MSEs sustain operations in the long term. Therefore, selecting the most suitable theory is vital for researching rural managers' successful strategies to maintain business operations beyond 5 years. For this study, I examined entrepreneurship theory, innovation theory, and chaos theory as supporting and alternative theories to GST.

Entrepreneurship Theory

Theorists universally recognize Cantillon (1755) as the founder of the entrepreneurship theory. Then, in 1940, John Schumpeter led the United States to a variation of this theory (Cole, 1946). Hmieleski and Sheppard (2018) described

entrepreneurs as individuals who manage an enterprise for personal gain. Researchers and scholars attribute the progression of entrepreneurship theory to several disciplines, including economics, innovation, psychology, and sociology (Mehmood et al., 2019). GST highlights entire organizational systems, including corporate cultures, partnerships, and technology, to meet goals and create economic growth (Kuratko et al., 2017; Tülüce & Yurtkur, 2015). Some MSE managers opt not to apply new resources for innovation to obtain sustainability beyond 5 years (Woschke et al., 2017). Innovative entrepreneurs are creative and make the most of an opportunity to lead them to self-employment prospects (Hmieleski & Sheppard, 2018).

Entrepreneurship theory provides a foundational basis of strategy and innovation. The academic literature reveals several perspectives that support innovation theory. GST provides researchers with a platform and the view of a dynamic system that impacts MSE business operations (Broks, 2016). Moreover, successful strategies to sustain operations within a rural community (von Bertalanffy, 1972). Rural entrepreneurship is significant in connecting innovation, developing and maintaining communities, creating jobs, and regulating the community's critical relationships and its correlation to economic development (Newbery et al., 2017).

Entrepreneurship theory is beneficial to organizations that aspire to venture into an innovative market in the start-up phase. Although this theory supports systems theory, GST provides researchers with a holistic view of various systems that impact MSEs' business operations (Broks, 2016). However supportive entrepreneurship theory is, not the best fit as a conceptual framework to explore strategies to maintain business

operations from a holistic approach within a rural community (von Bertalanffy, 1972). I chose GST because it allows business leaders to interconnect with internal and external systems to remain profitable and sustain the MSE. Some researchers seeking strategies for new businesses may apply the entrepreneurship theory.

Innovation Theory

Researchers and scholars also utilize innovation theory to explore business problems. Innovation theory can provide the researcher with an opportunity to discover strategies that may lead to solutions for a business phenomenon. Schumpeter (1935) introduced the innovation theory to demonstrate that an advanced business concept is the leading business development element and increasing revenue. Innovation concepts may include modern technology, actions that increase revenue, innovative methods of organizing, and robust systems of checking internal procedures (Appelbaum et al., 2017; Villasana et al., 2016). Similar to the GST, innovation theory supports MSE managers who may use innovation to evaluate business strategies, development, and growth (Schumpeter, 1935).

The concept of innovation involves many aspects linked to business activities. Some researchers posited that managers apply innovative strategies, such as technologies, methods, or ideas, to encourage customers' devotion, thus increasing their chance of long-term business sustainability (Jansson et al., 2017; Navis & Ozbek, 2016). Researchers assert that changes are considered necessary for the success of a business (Dykstra & Spafford, 2018). Innovation theory emphasizes using multifunctional and multidisciplinary methods, including modern technology development, with insights from

entrepreneurship, economics, and management (Audretsch & Belitski, 2016; Lee et al., 2016).

Innovation theory focuses on new trends and creativity, which are aspects of sustainability. Despite thematic similarities, a key feature makes innovation theory and GST characteristically distinct. Schmitz Weiss et al. (2018) defined *innovation theory* as a process to a final product by an organization. Innovation theory presented limits for exploring sustainability strategies. GST implements a process from a methodology that influences complexity and transformation (Dominici, 2017). GST considers internal, external, new and existing factors to sustain the business. With GST, a holistic systems approach is applied in this study to take advantage of all aspects of the business, such as marketing, technology, and human capital. I selected GST as the conceptual framework, which posed no limits to answering the overarching researching question. Which focuses on exploring successful sustainability strategies rural MSE managers apply to sustain business operations beyond 5 years. Von Bertalanffy speculated that a vast system comprises a few pieces and numerous small parts; researchers use systems theory to understand systems.

Chaos Theory

Chaos theory is an alternative theory that researchers may use to explore successful strategies. According to Lorenz (1963), chaos theory is a nonlinear chaotic system based on science and mathematics. Systems in continuous development accept unending and random patterns of instability (Turner & Endres, 2017). Chaotic systems are unpredictable because they manage not to resist outside disruptions yet react not

avoiding external influences; however, they are somewhat steered by them (Biswas et al., 2018). GST provides a framework for researchers to understand scientific and social issues within a wide range of interactions and connections between a system's parts (Bridgen, 2017). While chaos theory can inform managers and researchers of minor situations that may affect results, the main occurrences are unstable.

A tenet of chaos theory is that systems self-organize as a method to adjust to chaotic challenges (Faggini & Parziale, 2016). The application of chaos theory is a mechanical shift that has considered all elements of an economic system (Faggini & Parziale, 2016). Although an expert or scholar may describe the phenomena, social conditions, and unpredictable chaos theory behavior, the theory does not involve a complex system (Dumitrescu, 2019). Researchers may use GST to explain why complex systems with interconnected components rather than single parts can benefit managers seeking successful strategies (Broks, 2016; Porvazník & Ljudvigová, 2016). Systems thinkers use GST and systems thinking to promote business sustainability (Belinfanti & Stout, 2018).

Chaos theory does not support the overarching researching question. Chaos theory focuses more on the interruption, unpredictable, and unforeseen (Turner & Endres, 2017). To be sustainable, a rural MSE must withstand all aspects of the business regardless of the season. Whether it is in season or low tolerance season, a business must maintain and remain focused on all systems that impact the business. Lorenz's chaos theory was not suitable for the conceptual framework in my study because I did not feel that the highlight of confusion addresses rural MSE sustainability. Selecting GST allowed me to

see what is new, what is out and handle all distractions and interruptions in one theory. That is why I feel this theory allowed me to recruit managers from a business that can survive beyond 5 years.

MSEs

MSEs may be small in terms of team member capacity, but they influence the economy. The career ecosystem in a rural location is primarily vocational or entrepreneurial, with people working for themselves or working in or owning MSEs (Sector & Joseph, 2020). Micro and small firms offer products or services to customers in various industries like childcare, manufacturers, technology, retail, or family-owned markets. The survival capabilities of MSEs differ based on the firm size as a function of income resiliency, labor flexibility, and committed costs (Bartlett & Morse, 2020). Microbusinesses (1–5 team members) depend on 14% greater revenue resiliency (Bartlett & Morse, 2020). Enterprises (6–50 team members) have twice as much labor flexibility but an 11%–22% higher residual termination probability from the committed costs (Bartlett & Morse, 2020). A rural economy may heavily depend on the long-term financial success of MSEs (Haas et al., 2016).

Many rural MSEs provide services. Globally, U.S. MSEs are vital parts of the small business population (SBA, 2019). MSEs affect the gross domestic product (GDP). Rural geographic locations draw agricultural, manufacturing, and related service corporations (Sector & Joseph, 2020). As they contribute to significant growth in the U.S. economy, MSEs are most at risk of failure before reaching their 5-year mark (Hess & Cottrell, 2016). The U.S. financial system depends on small enterprises' power and scope

as they represent over 90% of total U.S. businesses (Small Business Administration, 2019).

MSEs encounter exceptional challenges. Managers of MSEs confront challenges and changes such as fraud risks, fluctuations in buyer behavior, the weight of taxes, lack of knowledge, and competition from larger rivals (Hess & Cottrell, 2016; Rimita et al., 2020). Additional factors that contribute to the existence of high failure rates include (a) limited access to funding, (b) lack of technical skills and access to materials, (c) inadequate infrastructure, (d) insufficient business knowledge, and (e) environmental influences such as competition and financial difficulties (Omiunu, 2019). These challenges present difficult obstacles for some managers of rural MSEs to conquer. Researchers have suggested that managerial skills promote enterprises' development and prevent business failure (Rimita et al., 2020).

Sustainability Strategy Drivers

Small business leaders should continually consider sustainability as a critical priority for organizational survival. In 2017, 79% of small enterprises established and launched in the United States survived until the end of 2018 (Willmoth, 2018). Managers view sustainability as a criterion for surviving in a competitive market (Alonso-Almeida et al., 2018). However, there are many reasons small businesses do not continue beyond 5 years. Some rural MSE owners and managers owners are not always sure how to adjust their business practices and strategies to succeed beyond 5 years. In this section, I presented a collection of literature and provided strategies that business leaders may employ to maintain their business longevity.

First, I defined and discussed KM and offered business innovative knowledge-based strategies (Zaika & Gridin, 2020). Next, I aimed at providing literature to gain insight into growing human and social capital in rural societies to influence financial sustainability to improve business survival rates (Conroy & Deller, 2020). The remaining elements were a detailed discussion of the following sustainability concepts (a) marketing strategies, (b) technology strategies, (c) strategic planning, and (d) financial sustainability. Rural MSE leaders must understand and use sustainability strategies to take hold of the business and the essential measures to steer them towards long-term sustainability.

KM

KM is essential to economic stability. Ode and Ayavoo (2020) assert the role of knowledge in improving efficiency and generating sustainable competitive advantage. KM is critical to enhancing the value that produces sustainable competitive advantage since knowledge provides the basis for sustainable variation challenging to emulate (Ode & Ayavoo, 2020). KM is a strategy that firms utilize to increase their competitiveness, given that knowledge is a strategic resource that allows organizational leaders to achieve an elevated level of competitiveness (Byukusenge & Munene, 2017). KM as a sustainability strategy is vital for MSE to thrive in a highly competitive world.

KM plays a critical role in ecosystems. In developed and developing countries, small businesses are the pillar of economic development (Byukusenge & Munene, 2017). MSE provides employment, enhances citizens' income, and links the community to the worldwide economy (Byukusenge & Munene, 2017). Notwithstanding MSE significance,

demonstrate inadequate performance indicated by continuous shortfalls, a decline in sales and short-range operational existence (Byukusenge & Munene, 2017). MSE provides employment, enhances citizens' income, and links the community to the worldwide economy (Byukusenge & Munene, 2017). KM is a source of economic sustainability.

Researchers have explained KM in various ways. Lee et al. (2016) said KM was a significant and progressive connection with technological innovation, and the competitive advantage increases an organization's chance of survival. Farrell (2017) posited that effective communication conducted a qualitative study to reflect leaders' KM. Another viewpoint is the intentional act of discovering, capturing, sharing, and applying knowledge to improve, in a cost-effective approach, and the effect of experience on the organization's success (Alawneh & Aouf, 2017; Rafique et al., 2018a). Rural MSE managers should consider KM practices to help them achieve the business goals and improve their performance.

Researchers explain innovative KM as a firm's commitment to creating innovative procedures and its competence in implementing the approach (Nowacki & Bachnik, 2016). Knowledge management's significance is to immerse decision-making and knowledge within an organization to foster communication between team members for well-informed business practices (Farrell, 2017). Faustino and Ribeiro (2016) made a convincing argument that knowledgeable managers understand that innovation, combined with creativity, plays a significant role in the growth and development of a business. Byukusenge and Munene (2017) suggested that innovation facilitates the relationship between KM and the organizational performance of MSEs. As a concept, KM is

significant in increasing awareness of the importance of knowledge for organizations' success and long-term survival (Byukusenge & Munene, 2017).

Business leaders become more innovative to remain competitive in the market. Claver-Cortés et al. (2016) suggested that they must increase development, generate productivity, and produce revenue in today's competitive markets for firms to survive. For instance, in the media industries, Faustino and Ribeiro (2016) noted that the different business management strategies applied in media management are used at different levels and encompass various skills, tasks, and responsibilities. They further explained that media might differ from other products and services due to differences in the supply and demand mechanics (Faustino & Ribeiro). Rural MSEs also have distinct supply and demand characteristics that require leaders to employ creativity and innovation. For instance, Sousa et al. (2020) explained that merchants recognize the significance of rural markets and are increasing their online outlets to rural regions. The literature in this study focused on incorporating KM as a business strategy of rural MSEs.

Human Capital and Social Capital

Researchers assert that the success, or failure, of an organization, centers on three types of capital: (a) human capital, (b) structural or organizational capital, and (c) social capital. There is a positive correlation between human capital and MSE sustainability (Greer et al., 2017). Human capital speaks to the abilities and experiences of the leader and team members. Structural or organizational capital conveys how the business is designed, for instance, an MSEs size, funding structure, and the industry in which the MSE conducts business.

Human Capital

Rural MSE managers might improve their business practices for better survivability by gaining further knowledge and insight into effective sustainability strategies to remain in business beyond 5 years. Human capital is the economic value team members produce for organizations utilizing a set of immeasurable, intellectual, and practical attributes (Buckman et al., 2018). Economists have closely studied human capital since the mid-twentieth century to identify individual effort variables measuring one's capacity to perform at a high-level in their profession (Buckman et al., 2018). Building and sustaining human capital is an essential strategy for rural MSE managers to sustain operations successfully.

Human capital in the agricultural sector of the rural economy travels through four stages: (a) formation, including family-generational and cultural-ethical education, the creation of social norms and rules, education at various stages, and the connections amid the scholarly and vocational-labor spheres, (b) distribution by sub-sectors of agriculture and agribusiness sectors, considering territorial details, (c) localization of human capital, involving the choice of a specific enterprise – the subject of agricultural activity, and targeted training and internships for the specific requirements of an enterprise, and (d) delivery of direct professional activity in agriculture, the execution of labor, business, creative, academic and socio-cultural possibility of a person (Belkina et al., 2020).

Human capital is significant in economic growth and sustainability. An essential and distinct aspect of intellectual capital is human capital, which comprises the creativity, knowledge, and idea development skills within and utilized by an organization's

members (Prajogo & Oke, 2016). Zaika and Gridin (2020) recognized human capital as formed or developed due to investments and accumulated by a person—a specific accumulation of health, knowledge, skills, abilities, motivations, and other beneficial qualities. They further asserted that human capital refers to individuals with the skills, knowledge, and abilities that positively support a firm’s economic value (Zaika & Gridin, 2020). Buckman et al. (2018) proposed that human capital is the quality and quantity of an individual’s human capital investments, for example, experience, education and training. Lin et al. (2019) characterized human capital as the stock of knowledge, habits, and social and personality attributes, including creativity, of the team members that produce economic value.

Rural MSE managers can advance the economy by intentionally dedicating resources to increasing human capital (Kusmagambetova et al., 2020). Zaika and Gridin (2020) explained that in the 21st century, human capital is strategically vital in the formation of the economy of innovative development. They further stated that the foundation must be knowledgeable, professional, creative, and innovative (Zaika & Gridin, 2020).

Connecting human capital involves transforming organizational knowledge through questioning methods and absorbing new information to create innovations for achieving a sustainable competitive advantage (Prajogo & Oke, 2016). Human capital is an essential strategic resource that MSE leaders can use to enhance operational sustainability in a rural economy (Belkina et al., 2020). The managers’ investment in human capital empowers team members to accomplish organizational goals (Lin et al.,

2019; Prajogo & Oke, 2016). Growth in the economy and achieving financial sustainability connect to human capital.

Sycheva et al. (2019) posited that goods and services hinge on advanced technology and humans' knowledge and skills. The concept of human capital suggests an understanding of individuals' vital role in society's ecosystem and acknowledging the need to invest in people since it enhances investment and creates a sustained economic impact (Zaika & Gridin, 2020). Therefore, individuals with their knowledge, skills, and abilities help economic growth (Sycheva et al., 2019).

Researchers have also recognized that organizational team members' competence, knowledge, and experience shape human capital, increasing sustainability, and operational success (Lin et al., 2019; Rimita et al., 2020). Entrepreneurs creatively use human capital to generate profits; it also produces a socio-economic construct of the existing quality of human potential (Savitska, 2016). Firms that invest in those who perform the work develop knowledge, skills, and abilities and help economic growth (Savitska, 2016; Zaika & Gridin, 2020). Researchers have asserted that human capital is an essential strategy for managers in the service industry for facilitating the sustainability of small businesses (Prajogo & Oke, 2016). Over the last two decades, researchers claimed human capital has increased within entrepreneurship literature (Marvel et al., 2016). Improving human capital strategies may increase the economic performance for rural MSE business longevity.

Social Capital

Understanding social capital is essential to MSE sustainability. Social capital is a concept gaining traction among researchers and scholars in social sciences (Gardner, 2019; Hasan et al., 2017). Social capital encourages cooperation, decision-making, and economic growth through sharing information (Cheng et al., 2019). As indicated by Pratono (2018), social capital is the social connection through which organizational leaders can discover resources critical for business performance. According to the Small Business Administration (2019), the percentage of small firms may continue to decrease. Social capital has a positive economic influence on communities, organizations, and individuals (Hasan et al., 2017).

Through the research, Kuo and Fu (2021) articulated social capital as significant network assets that help people improve their instrumental gains and psychological well-being personally (Kuo & Fu, 2021). The two most frequently applied social capital methods are trust in other individuals and association membership (Eriksson & Rataj, 2019). Social capital further signifies the mutual resources that, mostly, members in a person's family unit, education institution, and community collectively value (Kuo & Fu, 2021). Therefore, comprehending and employing social capital strategies to reap long-term business survival benefits rural MSE.

Social norms and mutually connected systems exist in rural communities. Social capital combines the forces developing from social norms and mutual trust to support shared standards, connected networks and resources (Hasan et al., 2017; Kuo & Fu, 2021). Researchers noted that from a policy standpoint, considering social capital as a

standardized asset versus an individual approach is not beneficial to all communities (Conroy & Deller, 2020). Researchers affirm that community structure influences an organization's 5-year survival level (Conroy & Deller, 2020). The location of an MSE can affect the life span of business sustainability.

Some rural MSE managers encounter banking challenges. Numerous researchers have stressed that social capital increases the economic advantages for MSE through its influence on funding expenses (Cheng et al., 2019; Hasan et al., 2017). However, some MSE managers lack financial skills and pose a credit risk to banks, affecting their ability to receive bank loans (Gebremariam, 2017). Bank managers place high importance on MSEs in communities with significant social capital (Hasan et al., 2017). MSE managers should apply social capital since businesses with elevated social capital experience lower costs (De Massis et al., 2018; Hasan et al., 2017). Researchers agreed that a surge in a firm's financial, environmental, and social capital is an indicator of a sustainable business (Conroy & Deller, 2020). Further noting, generating sustainability through a small business enterprise is equivalent to building financial capital and supporting sustainability performance efforts (Conroy & Deller, 2020; Hussain et al., 2018).

Successful Sustainability Strategies

An argument can be made that understanding and implementing successful sustainability concepts could increase the longevity of an MSE. Sustainability is a complex concept and refers to something long-term (Aragon-Correa et al., 2017). Omiunu (2019) specified several elements that affected the survival rates of MSE. The key elements are (a) limited access to funding, (b) lack of technical skills and access to

materials, (c) inadequate infrastructure, (d) insufficient business knowledge, and (e) environmental influences such as competition and financial difficulties. The lack of successful sustainability strategies may be why many rural MSE encounters do not survive beyond 5 years. The following subsections include discussions of marketing, technology, strategic planning, and MSEs' financing strategies.

Marketing Strategies

Successful marketing is vital in any enterprise. Marketing is the activity, set of institutions, or methods for communicating, creating, delivering, and exchanging offerings with importance for clients, customers, partners, and society at large (American Marketing Association, 2017). Marketing seeks to build customer fulfillment by creating valued relationships with customers (Dieguez, 2020). Strategic marketing focuses on the organization's current and potential strengths to present differentiated goods and services, delivering improved service and value to its customers (Dieguez, 2020). Business leaders should be strategic in their marketing methods.

Due to globalization, managers no longer depend on old-style media such as newspapers to advertise to potential buyers in the market and communicate with target audiences (Carmen & Marius, 2016). Lukiyanto and Wijayaningtyas (2020) argued that customer changes follow global changes; thus, marketing methods need to appeal to the evolving target market. Through innovative communication, marketing implementation will improve company performance (Lukiyanto & Wijayaningtyas, 2020). The communication vehicles valuable to MSEs include database marketing, direct mail, mobile commerce, and digital marketing (Carmen & Marius, 2016; Zafar, 2017). Some

managers have seized these opportunities, taking advantage of technology to increase business sustainability through social media communication (Ferreira et al., 2017).

Effective marketing activities are essential for maintaining a competitive advantage. Some MSE managers do not apply effective marketing strategies to steer them towards business sustainability. An organization's marketing strategy refers to its marketing activities and the decisions connected to producing and sustaining a competitive advantage, concentrating on approaches in which the business may distinguish itself successfully from the competition by taking advantage of assets to deliver better value to customers (Al-Surmia et al., 2019). Empirical evidence suggests that effective managers base their marketing strategies on strategies that generate profit and increase their business performance (Hanssens & Pauwels, 2016; Tabassum, 2017).

Business leaders can produce value for the customer through tailored marketing strategies. Kumar and Pansari (2016) explained that satisfying customers by merely selling products and services are not sufficient because many products and services are standardized, and competition is extreme. An organization must involve customers through numerous strategies, such as encouraging customer referrals, soliciting customer feedback on goods and services, and engaging in social media interactions (Kumar & Pansari, 2016). Marketers must obtain concise information about their customers' preferences as input for strategic marketing decisions.

MSE managers must incorporate strategic marketing principles to maintain business operations despite technological and economic limitations (Rabie et al., 2016). Marketing has a beneficial influence on small-scale businesses and marketing

management (Hanssens & Pauwels, 2016; Tabassum, 2017). MSE managers who change their business marketing strategies to include the Internet are more likely to increase profitability (Bilgihan & Wang, 2016; Mukherjee, 2018). For rural MSEs, applying marketing strategies is crucial in business sustainability (McKelvey, 2016).

Technology Sustainability Strategies

Technology plays a significant role in business management. Jafari-Sadeghi et al. (2021) described technology readiness as the individuals' inclination to accept and use new technologies for achieving goals, both at home and in the work environment. Digital transformation is subject to two fundamental factors: availability of the technology and individuals' competence to utilize it for increased performance Jafari-Sadeghi et al. (2021). The MSE's intellectual resources and sufficient operational resources are essential to maintain a competitive advantage.

Technology as an operational resource influences MSE management's ability to succeed and not fail requires innovative technology (Chinedu-Eze et al., 2018). Innovative technology tools such as iPads, iPhones and the like are assisting MSE to remain competitive. Shifts in customer preferences, increasing markets for products that offer social, economic, environmental, or health benefits, and advanced technological improvements provide a groundwork for strengthening MSE survival in rural America (Jackson-Smith & Hoy, 2020). Ukaj and Bibuljica (2019) noticed there comes a time for expansion and innovation in successful enterprises' life cycle. Modern technologies and innovations in organizational activities influence operational sustainment and enhance the MSE managers' ability, with viable economic benefits (Ukaj & Bibuljica, 2019).

According to (Bilgihan & Wang, 2016), applying theoretical literature on IT and competitive advantage introduces informational strategies that can lead to a sustainable competitive advantage.

Researchers explain that technology is useful for conducting business (Mukherjee, 2018). Globalization and the Internet have changed how MSEs conduct business regarding marketing, customer relationships, market access, shared innovation, and business success (Mukherjee, 2018). IT is a necessary tool used by MSE managers as a strategic means to increase sustainability (Mukherjee; Ukaj & Bibuljica, 2019). Managers can use technology as a communication vehicle to strengthen the relationship between all stakeholders. Enterprises using technology as a sustainability strategy enhance knowledge by coordinating, cooperating, and sharing successful strategies (Bilgihan & Wang, 2016).

Technology is a significant element in an enterprise's strategy (Cant & Wiid, 2016; Qureshi et al., 2017). A technology-induced approach is a method by which enterprises separate themselves from rivals while equipping managers with a strategic advantage through speed and responsiveness (Bilgihan & Wang, 2016). Electronic commerce (e-commerce) offers numerous innovative ways for the business sector and its users to connect, collaborate, buy, and sell products or services (Šaković Jovanović et al., 2020) through various Internet sales channels such as online marketplaces, search engines, and websites.

The manager is accountable for technology development or network administration and may lack knowledge of security-related issues or the possible

consequences of not viewing data security as a concern (Dykstra & Spafford, 2018).

MSEs in the United States conducted much of their business using the Internet without IT protection and were targets for cybercrimes (Dykstra & Spafford, 2018). Globally, micro to large firms faces at least 122 cyberattacks weekly (Aiken et al., 2016). Some MSEs use IT accounting sources without proper cybersecurity protections, which places their data and assets at risk (Aiken et al., 2016). To sustain IT security systems and safeguard their businesses, some enterprises incorporate security procedures to protect finances adequately, administrative information, social media, technical, and business operations (Dykstra & Spafford, 2018). An enterprise can use a variety of security resources to combat security breaches.

Organizational managers must remain vigilant about protecting their business due to the sophistication of cyberattacks. Most enterprises know how these attacks have evolved; therefore, they invest in advanced security systems, such as intrusion detection systems, security information event management (SIEM) systems, security operations centers), or managed security service providers (López et al., 2020). Researchers have found that MSEs expand their use of SIEM systems (López et al., 2020). Small companies have been increasing their usage and reliance on technology (López et al., 2020).

Strategic Planning

MSE managers can explore approaches to focus on business challenges essential to survival. According to Dearman et al. (2018), recent studies to explain capital budgeting processes in MSE stated that many MSE leaders lack fiscal knowledge due to

their educational background. The MSE manager's abilities, including knowledge of financial issues, could affect formal planning and that planning effort's success (Dearman et al., 2018). Dearman et al. (2018) mentioned that MSE skills that lead to success are (a) goal setting, (b) systematic planning, (c) monitoring, (d) efficiency, (e) quality, and (f) persistence. Levytskyi (2020) explained that strategic planning for the enterprise is an organized, strategic decision-making process. MSE managers could take advantage of developing a strategic plan.

A strategic plan is an essential aspect of the long-term existence of an enterprise. Strategic planning is applied to help organizations remain above-average and withstand the competitive market (Aleong, 2018). Epstein and Buhovac (2014) claimed that organizational sustainability basics are neither simple nor crafted for one essential source because sustainability can involve an enterprise's internal and external systems. According to Aleong (2018), annual reviews of the internal strengths, weaknesses and external opportunities and threats (SWOT) enable organizations to gain a competitive advantage over their market rivals. Guth and Asner-Self (2017) acknowledge the factors of SWOT include strengths (vital internal aspects of the business), weaknesses (aspects the enterprise requires), opportunities (aspects presented by the environment), and threats (elements potentially risky to the business). Managers may revamp their thought processes and use SWOT analysis during the strategic planning process for economic growth.

Preparation is essential to business success. Managers apply planning as a strategic tool to withstand economic challenges (Lesáková et al., 2017). A manager's

capability to adapt operational strategies is essential for MSE to remain viable, meet the needs of changing global markets, and acknowledge innovative developments (Miller & Le Breton-Miller, 2017). Strategic planning can be effectively merged into a business management framework, delivering potentially beneficial insights about the systems' management activities and relationships for success (Papke-Shields & Boyer-Wright, 2017). The potential for long-term survival can increase by implementing a strategic plan.

Business leaders may link the strategic plans to the MSE vision and mission to ensure the firm provides quality service and goods. Shamsuzzoha et al. (2017) stated that a business strategy is how the leaders align the business with its environment to systematically produce and keep a competitive advantage by expanding its resources, investments, and capabilities. A strategic plan generates from an organizations' mission, vision, and value statements that describe their core values, character, reasons for existence, and their lasting purpose (Baral & Pokharel, 2017). By studying successes in other businesses, MSE managers might gain valuable insight into forming strategies to sustain beyond 5 years in a global community.

MSE managers should create community connections. Beer and Micheli (2017) insisted that a company should be well established in its local community and engaged with stakeholders to achieve organizational sustainability. In response to global business challenges, Shamsuzzoha et al. (2017) argued that enterprises implement diverse strategies like networking, merging and acquisition, and co-creating organizational survival partnerships. Additional research that may further investigate the connection between preparing business plans and MSE performance should consider the

characteristics of the context and the individual MSE manager that may affect organizational performance whether or not a business plan is prepared (Dearman et al., 2018). Strategic plans must steadily evolve in reaction to the economic ecosystem.

Business managers may become more knowledgeable of business practices that could enhance firm performance to increase their organizations' long-term survival. The organizational manager's primary purpose is to increase long-standing profitability and sustainable growth over market rivals, keeping a competitive advantage (Al Ridho et al., 2020). Evidence suggests that the necessity for external funding and a managers' intellectual ability, such as financial knowledge, impact the decision to create a formal strategic business plan to position the organization to raise financial capital (Dearman et al., 2018). Abosede et al. (2016) established that MSEs implementing strategic planning outperform organizations without a plan. Rural MSE managers may become more knowledgeable of business practices that could enhance firm performance to increase their organizations' long-term survival.

Managers may utilize a strategic plan as a tool to withstand economic challenges. Saleem (2017) asserted that MSE sustainability depended on managers' operational principles, particularly when managing risks. According to Blanchard (2020), strategic planning is a proactive preparation measure. Managers with advanced stages of creativity and vision identify and take advantage of opportunities, supporting the endurance and sustainability of the MSE and ecosystems within local communities during the planning process (Blanchard, 2020). Almeida and Pessali (2017) noted that encouraging solutions to assist MSE managers in achieving strategic goals can produce sustainable results.

Evidence further indicates MSE managers obtain a competitive advantage by applying effective strategies to increase economic development (Saleem, 2017). Identifying the sustainable management strategies that ensure the longevity of MSE past 5 years might enlighten rural managers, increase firm performance, and lower the odds of business failure.

Financial Sustainability Strategy

The MSE industry could shape the landscape of the global economy. Creating financial capital increases economic, environmental, human, and social capital (Enderle, 2018). In the United States of America, 20% of small businesses fail in the first year and 50% in the fifth year (Febriani & Dewobroto, 2018). MSEs are critical providers of employment and essential to the gross domestic product; therefore, small businesses' failure could be a global economic dilemma. Underscoring the influences of building community capital includes organizations other than the market (Enderle, 2018). The key to thriving in the demanding market is for MSE to consider every aspect that could influence the business's survivability.

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has caused economic hardship for some rural MSE managers. Bartik et al. (2020) conducted a study to explore the impact of COVID-19 on MSEs and found that many small businesses are financially unstable. The study revealed that the average MSE with more than \$10,000 in monthly expenditures had only roughly two weeks of cash at their disposal (Bartik et al., 2020). Small enterprises contribute significantly to the growth of the U.S. economy, and MSEs are

most at risk of failure before reaching their 5-year mark (Hess & Cottrell, 2016). If small businesses collapse, then individuals lose their jobs, and the economy suffers.

The congressional influence in which development funding could assist rural MSEs in areas of greatest need (Matti, 2019). On several occasions, the U.S. government has assisted small enterprises. In the 1940s, the U.S. Congress established the Smaller War Plants Corporation (SWPC) to assist MSE leaders (Small Business Administration, 2019). The SWPC gave out small business loans and some financial aid instead of supporting essential business management procedures such as sustainability planning (Small Business Administration, 2019). In response to COVID-19, Bartik et al. (2020) recognized the government's effort to provide business support through the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act.

Business leaders in the 21st century face different challenges. For instance, in 2016, the Small Business Administration reported that approximately 30.7 million MSEs in the United States competed for the shoppers' dollars globally; however, in the 1940s, the marketplace was not as competitive (Lahm, 2020; Small Business Administration, 2016). The managers are now competing amidst a global pandemic while trying to maintain financial stability.

Organizations could benefit from using various proactive techniques to combat financial challenges. Hess and Cottrell (2016) offered seven useful recommendations to help small business leaders prevent and detect fraud, (a) demonstrate that ethics matters, (b) make reporting ethical concerns simple, (c) trust but verify, (d) no exceptions policy, (e) look for suspicious patterns, (f) good outcomes are no excuse for bad decision

making, and (h) gives team members what they need to reach their goals. MSE leaders that promote a work environment of accountability may lessen the risk of fraud and enhance organizations' sustainability (Hess & Cottrell, 2016).

Hess and Cottrell (2016) observed the economic challenges faced by MSEs, which include securing loans and obtaining affordable finance sustainability. Haas et al. (2016) argued that innovation and rural development support stakeholders and professionals in their agriculture businesses' sustainability. They also noted that government public services in isolated rural areas are missing in farmers' growing public services. Glaister et al. (2018) researched the impact of managerial capabilities on firm performance and discovered that knowledgeable leaders are more skilled at recognizing financial risks and challenges.

The U.S. economy could consistently flourish if all rural MSE managers had sufficient access to information regarding the business capital, business management, and fiscal management. Organizations that recognize and integrate systems and current information can improve business operations (Rafique et al., 2018b; von Bertalanffy, 1972). Organizational leaders encounter unprecedented changes with the pace and frequency rapidly increasing, causing operating environments with unpredictability, insecurity, and complexity (Rimita et al., 2020). Therefore, business environments require more opportunities to use successful strategies to thrive.

Transition

The research explored rural MSE managers' experiences regarding successful strategies for sustaining business operations beyond 5 years. The qualitative research

methodology aims to align the research question with the phenomenon. Semistructured interviews are suitable for collecting data virtually via videoconferencing platforms such as Google Meet, Zoom, or Skype (Baines et al., 2018). The research problem was analyzed to view the phenomenon from the perspective of GST. I applied GST to explain the sustainability strategies used by MSEs. Section 1 consisted of the assumptions, limitations, delimitations, and significance of the study. It also reviewed the professional and academic literature to position this research within the existing literature.

Section 2 includes the study's purpose, the researcher's role, intended selection criteria, and justification of the research method and design. Then, I provide information regarding the population and sampling of the study and ethical research. Additionally, the section contains the data collection instrument and techniques, data organization and analysis process, and the findings' reliability and validity. Section 3 includes the results, applications for professional practice, implications for social change, recommendations for further actions, and research reflections. The section will end with a summary and a conclusion.

Section 2: The Project

Section 2 includes the purpose statement and explanations regarding the research process, including the research method and design, the researcher's role, ethical research, and the population and sampling method. This section also contains information on the data collection instruments, data collection techniques, data organization techniques, data analysis, the research, and the validity of the study; it ends with the transition and summary.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study is to explore the strategies rural MSE managers use to sustain operations beyond 5 years. The target population was five rural MSE managers in the southeastern United States who maintained successful operations for longer than 5 years. Implications for positive social change included providing successful business strategies for rural managers, reducing joblessness, and advancing communities' economic development.

Role of the Researcher

As a researcher, I served as the primary data collection instrument in this study. A researcher conducting qualitative research collects, analyzes, and interprets the data (Saunders et al., 2015). This role entailed choosing an appropriate methodology, selecting participants, collecting, organizing, analyzing, interpreting data, and transcribing the results. Throughout the data analysis process in a qualitative study, the researcher identifies the codes and themes emerging from the participants (Yin, 2018). I employed open-ended questions during one-on-one interviews. Semistructured interviews provide

in-depth information based on the participants' experiences and perspectives and allow the conversation to flow naturally, leaving room for the researcher to ask follow-up questions and garner clear answers (Yin, 2018). Relationships between a researcher and the participants can be a potential risk factor when conducting research; nevertheless, the risks are preventable when following ethical guidelines such as those provided in *The Belmont Report* (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). I did not have personal relationships with the intended participants. However, from my experience living in rural communities, I was interested in the sustainability of MSE.

An ethical researcher must guarantee respect and confidentiality and safeguard the privacy of the participants of the study (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). Therefore, I engaged respectfully with the participants and protected their identities by utilizing unique identifiers. In a qualitative study, the researcher is usually the data gatherer and analyst, which can lead to researcher bias (Birt et al., 2016). In this study, member checking will mitigate bias and help avoid viewing the data from the researcher's perspective. Member checking or participant validation is a method for discovering the reliability of data outcomes and results (Birt et al., 2016).

I used the interview protocol to collect data (see Appendix A). Qualitative researchers use semistructured interviews to ask in-depth, open-ended questions (Yin, 2018). The selected participants reviewed a sample of the interview questions before scheduling the interview. The participants accepted or rejected any question. Each

potential contributor received an invitation letter with a summary explaining the expectations of the participant. Upon agreeing to participate in the study, the participants received the informed consent form provided for the approval to participate in the doctoral study. During the direct data collection process, I digitally recorded the responses and wrote down notes (Chongo et al., 2018). The semistructured interview protocol permits the interviewer to ask encoded questions in numerous ways based on the participants' responses (Yin, 2018). Adhering to the interview protocol guaranteed uniformity in the interview process.

Participants

Rural MSE owners and managers in the southeastern United States were the target population of this study. Researchers must use an eligibility criterion to select the right participants to contribute to a study (Yin, 2018). In this study, the names of potential MSE were gathered from the Internet, using Rotary and Chamber of Commerce websites in the target area. To establish a working relationship with the participants, I learned something about each targeted organization (Yin, 2018). As a Chamber of Commerce board member and the local Rotary Club secretary, I was in a unique position to build a working relationship with potential study participants. After receiving the Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval 05-12-21-0972431, I emailed the potential participants the informed consent letter.

The purposeful sampling technique enables researchers to acquire valuable data relating to the research phenomenon from informed participants' (Palinkas et al., 2015). For this study, participants were selected based on several criteria: they (a) must be at

least 18 years old, (b) must be an owner or manager of a rural MSE, (c) must operate within the southeastern United States, and (d) must be profitable at the end of 5 years of operation. MSE leaders who did not meet the selection criteria were not eligible to participate in this study.

After establishing eligibility and confirming participants' commitment to participate, I emailed an informed consent form with the list of interview questions to the participants. Next, after receiving an email confirmation of willingness to contribute to the study, I scheduled the interviews at the date and time most convenient for the participant. I contacted each participant by phone to further enhance a working relationship and confirmed the meeting date and time.

Research Method and Design

Research Method

The three significant research methods are qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods. In this study, I utilized the qualitative method to understand the successful strategies that MSE managers used to sustain operations beyond 5 years. Researchers using a qualitative approach aim to comprehend the meanings, phenomena, and processes understood by the individuals affected by them (Corti & Fielding, 2016). Qualitative researchers use methods that require developing procedures and gathering information at the participant's location (Patton, 2014). Qualitative researchers emphasize details, whereas quantitative researchers emphasize data (Yin, 2018). Quantitative researchers focus on range and scope by gathering data to hypothesize and use models or samples to simplify results. Quantitative research may include a hypothesis and use theory based on

evidence to prove or disprove the hypothesis (Saunders et al., 2015). The quantitative method did not apply to this study because I explored successful rural managers' strategies to sustain operations beyond 5 years.

Mixed-method researchers utilize quantitative and qualitative methods sequentially (Makrakis & Kostoulas-Makrakis, 2016). They collect data to understand the meaning of phenomena or life experiences and corroborate numerical data in a single study (McKim, 2017). Since this study does not require quantitative analysis, the mixed-methods approach was not appropriate.

Research Design

Study designs include case study, ethnography, narrative, and phenomenology. I used a multiple case study design. A single case study was not suitable because the design requires careful investigation of the topic to reduce the results' misrepresentation. Yin (2018) stated that when a researcher uses a multiple case study, they can analyze the data in numerous situations and across various situations, unlike in a single case study. According to Gustafsson (2017), another difference between a single case study and a multiple case study is that the researcher analyzes multiple cases to comprehend their similarities and differences. A case study design requires creating an analysis of a case or multiple cases to explain the phenomena (Yin, 2018). The case study design was suitable for creating "how" and "why" questions to understand managers' strategies to sustain operations. Researchers using a case study design may collect distinct data types from multiple sources to gain a broader understanding of the phenomenon (Yin, 2018).

The other three approaches considered for this qualitative research design were ethnography, narrative, and phenomenology (Willgens et al., 2016). An ethnographic design describes a group or culture and how they survive in the world through long-term research (Mannay & Morgan, 2015). Researchers employ ethnography to understand cultural behaviors by interacting with the group and interviewing and observing group members over an extended period (Yin, 2018). Since this study did not aim to explore the participants' cultural existence, ethnography was not applicable. Narrative inquiry facilitates an interpretation study in a real-world setting, providing the reader with vivid imagery and a sense of being there (Yin, 2018). This design did not suit the exploration of the sustainability strategies of MSE. The phenomenological design concentrates on the lived experiences of the study participants (van Manen, 2017). Researchers use this design to explore individuals' lived experiences and their meanings, whereas they use the case study approach to examine real-life situations for developing strategies. Thus, a multiple case study design was better suited for this study.

I conducted virtual semistructured interviews until I achieved data saturation. As the researcher, I obtained data by conducting semistructured interviews with five participants and continuing until no new data was obtained (Fusch & Ness, 2015). According to Saunders et al. (2018), to reach data saturation, emphasis must be placed on the number of interviews conducted and no redundancy in the data collected. Using semistructured interviews to collect data for multiple case study designs helps researchers reach data saturation and gather robust data (Fusch & Ness, 2015).

Population and Sampling

Researchers select potential participants whose characteristics align with the overarching research question (Yin, 2018). Therefore, the purposeful sampling method was suitable to select a sample of participants for this study. I aimed to use purposeful sampling to select five owners or managers from various rural MSEs in the southeastern United States who have used successful strategies to sustain their businesses for 5 years or more. Purposive sampling, a nonrandom selection of participants for the research (Emerson, 2015), is applied when the researcher seeks to include participants who represent a range of perspectives or when the researcher wants to include participants who meet a specific criterion (Patton, 2014). Qualitative researchers utilize purposeful sampling to pursue various comprehensive data sources and focus on the rigor and quality of data instead of participants' numbers (Maher et al., 2018; Yin, 2018).

Ensuring that data saturation is a priority for collecting robust data is essential in a case study to increase its rigor. Researchers have contended that data saturation is not definite in any specific sample size (Boddy, 2016). Yin (2018) proposed that two participants may be enough to satisfy the data collection to complete a study. I interviewed five rural MSE managers and asked open-ended questions to obtain rich data. Qualitative researchers make sampling choices that enable them to expand their understanding of the studied phenomenon (Yin, 2018). Interviews and data collection are practical and efficient methods for collecting rich and robust data. According to Yin, data saturation occurs when the data becomes repetitive, and no new information is acquired. I

achieved data saturation when there was no new information and themes no longer emerged from data analysis.

Researchers establish criteria to select participants for a study (Benoot et al., 2016). Since a population of rural MSE managers has successfully applied sustainable strategies to achieve profitability and sustainability beyond 5 years of operation. I interviewed five MSE managers by telephone, Zoom, and Google meets utilizing open-ended semistructured questions. Conducting virtual meetings is a cost-effective, universal method for data collection, allowing more contact with geographically separated participants (Lindenbald et al., 2016). Purposeful sampling was suitable for this study because it allowed me to obtain various viewpoints and collect data from knowledgeable participants that have executed effective sustainability strategies in the southeastern United States. Unlike probability sampling techniques, purposeful sampling allows researchers independent control while gathering information from diverse perspectives (Weller et al., 2018). Purposeful sampling was appropriate because it provided the appropriate sample size to address the overarching research question. Without being so comprehensive, the volume of data does not allow an in-depth analysis of the successful strategies used by rural MSE managers to sustain business operations beyond 5 years.

Ethical Research

Implementing this research study begin upon receiving approval from the Walden University IRB. Under *The Belmont Report* (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979), researchers must exercise the three core ethical principles of research, which embraces respect for persons,

beneficence, and justice to protect human subjects. I adhered to and followed the interview protocol (see Appendix A), emailed a letter of invitation to potential participants, upheld the guidelines in the informed consent form, and demonstrated respect for each participant by affirmation.

The consent form included the conditions I needed to obey to safeguard the participants' contribution to the study (Morse & Coulehan, 2015). To withdraw from the study, participants could provide a verbal or written statement by e-mail indicating that they want to withdraw from the study. The potential participants received an informed consent form that contains contact information, their contribution requirements, background information, confidentiality disclosure, procedures, and a no compensation clause informing the participants that there would be no financial compensation for participating in the study.

The informed consent process requires researchers to provide (a) a full explanation of the study's purpose, (b) the option to withdraw from the study at any time, (c) a complete assessment of the potential risk to participants, and (d) a detailed explanation about how the researcher will keep the participants' identities confidential (Wilson, 2017). Each participant was assigned a unique identifier to ensure that they are ethically protected. If a participant withdrew from the study, I would shred all participant data and documents immediately. All interview recordings, transcripts, and unique identifiers will be stored in a password-protected computer for 5 years to ensure confidentiality. All study-related materials will be maintained to protect participant

confidentiality and kept in a locked cabinet that only I can access. These materials will be destroyed after 5 years.

Data Collection Instruments

In qualitative multiple case studies, the researcher is the chief data collection instrument (Damsa & Ugelvik, 2017). Data for qualitative research may originate from various sources or methods, including documentation, interviews, direct observations, archival records, physical artifacts, and participant observations (Yin, 2018). Some researchers recognize four principles of data collection: (a) multiple sources of evidence, (b) creating a case study database, (c) maintaining a chain of evidence, and (d) exercising care when using data from social media sources (Yin, 2018). In qualitative research studies, conducting semistructured interviews provides the researcher with an opportunity to collect valid, appropriate, and reliable data to answer “how” or “why” questions (Kallio et al., 2016). I gathered data using interviews with semistructured questions and archival documents.

The interview protocol (see Appendix A) aligns with the research topic, areas relevant to the research study, the research questions, and the semistructured interview. I collected data by acquiring company archival documents and conducting interviews by telephone, Zoom, and Google meets. I reviewed company documents such as annual reports, event flyers, image files, and social media platforms. Yin (2018) stated that documentation is a significant resource for case study data because researchers do not produce them as part of a study. The documents do not change over time and are specific and comprehensive (Yin, 2018). Engaging with participants is essential for creating trust

and building a professional relationship before collecting rich data (Farooq & de Villiers, 2017). After collecting and interpreting the data, researchers may request feedback from the interview interpretations using member checking (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Member checking is appropriate for the credibility, reliability, validity, and transferability of the gathered data and research outcomes (Anderson, 2017). I conducted member checking by asking the research participants to confirm the researcher's interpretation of the interviews (Johnson et al., 2020). Thus, to enhance the data collection instruments' validity and reliability, I applied methodological triangulation, member checking, and a multiple case study design for this study.

Researchers use interviews and organizational documents related to their research questions to gather information for analysis (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Data saturation increases the value of a study. Data collection and analysis are critical for credible, reliable, and dependable research (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). I gathered data using open-ended semistructured interview questions until no new patterns or themes develop.

Data Collection Technique

This study's data collection techniques will include semistructured virtual interviews that follow the interview protocol (see Appendix A) and reviewing documents. I interviewed participating MSE managers or owners by telephone, Zoom, and Google meets using open-ended semistructured questions. Conducting virtual meetings is a cost-effective, universal method for data collection, allowing more contact with geographically separated participants (Lindenbald et al., 2016). Online approaches have enabled researchers to access participants from all over the world. Semistructured

interviews are suitable for qualitative studies since researchers utilize them to provide reliable information (Baines et al., 2018).

There are potential disadvantages to conducting semistructured interviews, including researcher bias, inaccuracies in the collected data, or the participant providing the researcher with the information they want to hear instead of accurate information (Yin, 2018). However, it has advantages as well: (a) the researchers may pick up on social cues during the interview (Ginting, 2016), (b) they have the flexibility and the freedom to probe during the questioning process, and (c) they have flexibility in asking follow-up questions to obtain rich data (Mori et al., 2018). Semistructured interviews increase qualitative studies' reliability because it facilitates organic and informal discussions with the participants (McTat & Leffler, 2017).

Another method of data collection is using documents. Archival documents will also provide company data (Yin, 2018). Overall, the participants provided data through semistructured interviews and archival documents. For example, marketing brochures and strategic business plans are documents participants used as sustainability strategies. The advantages of using documentation include detail and stability as the data is accurate and will not change between analyses (Yin, 2018). The disadvantages of using documentation include access to documents and biased viewpoints from the person selecting the data (Yin, 2018). Therefore, to reduce the risk of facing these disadvantages, I retrieved documents from other sources such as websites and databases.

Researchers use member checking and methodological triangulation to increase the validity and reliability of collected data (Yin, 2018). I allowed interviewees to verify

my interpretations of their responses to the interview questions and provided additional information to minimize researcher bias (Johnson et al., 2020). An interviewer uses member checking to ask an interviewee to verify the interviewer's understanding of the interviewee's responses to the interview questions (Johnson et al., 2020). I scheduled follow-up member checking sessions utilizing Zoom and telephone calls. During these sessions, participants had the chance to confirm my interpretations of their interview responses and add additional information if they chose to do so at that time. Researchers use member checking to increase the chances of obtaining reliable and valid data (Fusch & Ness, 2015).

Data Organization Technique

Data organization is essential to the retrieval of information throughout the research process. The qualitative researcher gains access to the participants and is the main research instrument used to collect and analyze data. (Clark & Vealé, 2018). During the interview process, I audio recorded and kept journal notes of each interview. Organizing the data involves creating a filing system on my computer for the study with a folder for each participant's documentation. The semistructured interview recordings and organizational information received from each participant are kept in a separate, password-protected device. I will wipe the electronic data and shred documented journal notes 5 years after the study's completion.

Data Analysis

Qualitative researchers are often the data collection instrument, gathering data using diverse sources, such as interviews, documents, and observations (Flick, 2017). As

a researcher, I used triangulation as the primary data process. There are four core data analysis processes for triangulation: data, investigator, methodological, and theory triangulation, each encompassing a different approach to checking the validity and observing differences of opinion regarding the research problem (Turner et al., 2017). Researchers' application of data sources triangulation of data sources reinforces the study since it indicates that the research is credible (Taylor et al., 2016). Qualitative studies' data analysis methodology often includes case study research designs and data analysis, specific and systemic (Yin, 2018). Data triangulation requires researchers to apply more than one method to understand the problem.

Researchers utilize data analysis to interpret the data collected from consenting participants, turning it into meaningful data. Data analysis includes categorizing, coding, and analyzing the collected data and documenting significant patterns and themes (Yin, 2018). I used a thematic analysis process to analyze and code the transcripts to identify themes (Clark & Vealé, 2018). I used NVivo 12 to gather, organize, group, and identify themes. In this study, new concepts will be explored and identified by journaling and reviewing them (Hoover et al., 2018). After the interviews were complete, I entered the information into the NVivo 12 data analysis software, which helped me code the data collected. The data coding process included identifying patterns, themes, and categories of all the data I compiled during the data collection process. Coding is an analytical method that researchers can identify documented data, concepts, and sorting (Maher et al., 2018). During the coding and thematic analysis processes, I coded recurring words and phrases in specific colors. Cross-referencing the data with the interviews'

information validates the data and themes interpreted from the data collection (Davidson et al., 2017; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Yin proposed a thematic analysis of qualitative data to identify emerging themes in the data.

Some qualitative researchers analyze data in phases. The information was analyzed by applying Yin's five-phase cycle of compiling, disassembling, reassembling, interpreting, and concluding data (Yin, 2018). Yin's Five-Phased Cycle includes: (a) compiling data into a formal database, (b) disassembling data, (c) reassembling data, (d) interpreting data, and (e) creating conclusions (Yin, 2018). After receiving approval from Walden's IRB, I collected data using semistructured interviews and document analysis. I compiled and transcribed the audio interview data and notes into Microsoft Word until I uploaded the information into NVivo 12. I transferred the data into NVivo 12 data analysis software to disassemble and assign codes to categorize the data. NVivo 12 was used to code and identify themes based on the literature and GST, the study's conceptual framework.

Researchers can use methodological triangulation to compare the interview data with company archival documentation obtained during the data analysis process. Yin (2018) stressed that triangulating data sources increases the validity and credibility of the study and improves the depth of the data collected. According to Kim and Kim (2018), when researchers use methodological triangulation, the validity of the findings increases using multiple data sources. I continued combining the data with company archival documents and reflective notes from five MSE managers to maximize validity throughout the data analysis process.

Member checking maintained the studies' accuracy and integrity (Birt et al., 2016). I conducted member checking with research participants using thematic analysis to validate the interpreted data (Laur et al., 2017). I conducted member checking with participants to validate the accuracy of the interpreted data. I provided participants with my understandings of their answers to the interview questions and asked them to validate my interpretations of their responses to the interview questions.

While conducting qualitative research, the researcher must disregard previous notions and findings. The data analysis process includes discovering all possible meanings by reducing detailed statements into themes and analyzing them (Yin, 2018). Using the methodological triangulation method can limit bias in the study, increasing reliability (Yin, 2018). Researchers use methodological triangulation to improve the validity of the findings by using multiple sources of data.

During the analysis, it is essential to continue to identify key themes. Researchers map relationships between themes from different data sets and focus on key themes that emerge in the research data to answer the primary research question (Yin, 2018) link key themes with current literature and the chosen conceptual framework (Rosenberger et al., 2017). I used NVivo to compare data gathered, my literature review and any research published since writing this proposal and selecting GST as the conceptual framework for this study. Qualitative researchers utilize the conceptual framework as a groundwork to explore the existing literature, select the methodology, and establish the findings of a study (Breidbach et al., 2018). This comparison allowed me to correlate any key themes and began developing the findings for this study.

Reliability and Validity

Achieving reliability and validity is critical for the research process (Yin, 2018). Data quality issues may negatively influence a study by impeding its ability to develop validity and reliability (Saunders et al., 2015). Qualitative researchers pursue dependability, credibility, and confirmability of their findings to enable others to trust the findings of the study and transferability to further cases and settings (Johnson & Rasulova, 2017). Researchers ensure reliability through methodological data techniques such as member checking, transcript review, and triangulation (Renz et al., 2018).

Reliability

The dependability of the study refers to the reliability of the data attained by providing integrity and transparency (Yin, 2018). Researchers define reliability as the consistency of findings and results that the data collection method and procedures generate in repeating the study (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Throughout the research, to ensure study dependability, the researcher should explain the process, which will permit other researchers to imitate the study and transfer the findings to another case or setting (Anderson, 2017). Qualitative researchers utilize methodological triangulation to verify the data's completeness by verifying findings from multiple data sources (Renz et al., 2018). Hence, to improve dependability, I used numerous data sources: (a) conducted semistructured interviews, applying an interview protocol (see Appendix A), (b) applied member checking, (c) used journal notes to supplement the data gathered, and (d) reviewed archival documents. Researchers should acknowledge that no one source of data is better than the next since all data sources are complementary, and a case study

should contain as many sources of data as possible (Yin, 2018). Triangulation is a qualitative research strategy to test validity by applying information from various sources (Renz et al., 2018). Semistructured interviews and archival documents helped to triangulate the data for this study.

Dependability in qualitative research refers to the research findings' stability (Moser & Korstjens, 2017). Member checking is a method to add study credibility and reliability that entails asking a research participant to verify the researcher's interpretation of the participants meaning (Johnson et al., 2020). When researchers use member checking to increase the dependability of the collected data, they also enhance the reliability of the findings (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). To demonstrate credibility and dependability, I used a record-keeping system to demonstrate accountability during the study. I employed an audit trail, field notes, and reflective journals to document the difference in responses to obtain differences and comparisons throughout the participant replies to ensure there is a representation of diverse viewpoints. I ensued member checking to ensure interpretations of data were consistent and transparent. I aimed for dependability by collecting rich data from participants through interviews and member checking, using an interview protocol (see Appendix A), complying with ethical research standards, and to ensure data saturation. By documenting procedures, researchers increase their ability to reproduce a study's findings, guaranteeing dependability (Yin, 2018).

Validity

The qualitative researcher seeks dependability, credibility, and confirmability of the findings to allow future researchers to have confidence in the findings regarding transferability to other cases or settings (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). Transferability refers to how the findings can transfer or compare to future research and settings (Maher et al., 2018). Obtaining transferability entails the researcher describing the study to participants and others to explain how the findings of the research study might relate to other situations, contexts, and populations (Abdalla et al., 2018). I described the research question, design, context, and findings to help other researchers obtain transferability. Transferability succeeds when researchers present research findings that may apply to other research and settings (Munthe-Kaas et al., 2020). I used an interview protocol (see Appendix A) to ensure the dependability of the data and the credibility of the findings.

Future researchers might have the opportunity to transfer the findings of this study to other settings or cases. Using an interview protocol allows the researcher to (a) adhere to the proposed data collection, (b) analyze procedures, (c) triangulate the data, and (d) receive credible results to improve the expectations of transferability of the findings (Yin, 2018). I maintained an audit trail detailing the specific target audience and geographic limitations for readers and researchers to imitate.

Qualitative researchers aim to increase confirmability by allowing the participants to provide further explanations during the interviews and member checking to validate the researcher's interpretations (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). Confirmability of the findings increases when researchers utilize multiple data sources and methodological

triangulation to compare the data range (Renz et al., 2018). The researcher establishes confirmability in the research study when the findings reflect the participants' opinions and not the researcher's beliefs (Maher et al., 2018). To ensure confirmability is applied, I adhered to the interview protocol (see Appendix A) for each participant. I confirmed the findings of this study by asking probing open-ended questions throughout the semistructured interviews, applying member checking, gathering company documents, and employing methodological triangulation.

Data saturation in qualitative research occurs when researchers cannot acquire new relevant data (Yin, 2018). Not reaching data saturation affects the research's total quality and validity (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Researchers view data saturation as the point where data collection may conclude (Faulkner & Trotter, 2017). Therefore, to reach data saturation, I interviewed study participants, asked follow-up questions, probed the participants during the interviews and reviewed company archival documents until no new or relevant information or themes emerge and data became repetitive.

Transition and Summary

Section 2 included the study's purpose, the researcher's role, the intended selection criteria, and the justification of the research method and design, as well as information about the population and sampling of the study and ethical research. Section 2 also detailed the data collection instrument and techniques, data organization and analysis processes, and the findings' reliability and validity. Section 3 contains the study results, applications for professional practice, implications for social change,

recommendations for further actions, and research reflections. It ends with a summary and a conclusion.

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the strategies rural MSE managers use to sustain operations beyond 5 years. The study involved five rural MSE managers in the southeastern United States who maintained successful operations for longer than 5 years. This study was guided by the research question: What strategies do rural MSE managers use to sustain operations successfully beyond 5 years? Yin's (2018) Five-Phased Thematic Analysis Cycle applied to the interview and documents revealed the following overarching themes: (a) initiating the planning and implementation of the business plan to have tangible goals, (b) developing marketing strategies to attract customers, and (c) investing in the business and customer relationships to retain customers.

Presentation of the Findings

This section contains the presentation of the study findings. The findings revealed overarching themes and subthemes that provided insight into five rural MSE managers' strategies to sustain operations in the southeastern United States beyond 5 years. The five MSE managers participated in individual semistructured interviews and provided at least one archival document relevant to sustaining their MSE operations beyond 5 years. The interviews were conducted over 3 weeks, during which the COVID-19 pandemic had been ongoing for over a year. Each interview session had a duration of at least 30 minutes. A brief overview of the participants' demographics relevant to their businesses is provided in Table 1.

Table 1*Participant Demographics*

Participant	Gender	Type of business	Years in business
MSEM1	Female	Screen printing	15
MSEM2	Female	Real estate	12
MSEM3	Male	Handyman services	31
MSEM4	Female	T-shirt retail, lash service	6
MSEM5	Male	Consulting	35

A total of 10 pages of interview transcription and seven archival documents consisting of promotional flyers and strategic plan reports were the data sources for this study. Each data source was imported to NVivo 12, a qualitative data analysis software, for compilation. The researcher proceeded to disassemble the compiled data in search of small units of meanings or codes. Each data source was read and analyzed line-by-line. Using NVivo, key statements relevant to the research question of this study were highlighted and assigned into codes. The codes were labeled with descriptive phrases that pertained to the coded statements. After coding, the researcher reviewed the codes and the coded texts to identify patterns in the data. Codes with similar patterns were grouped together under the hierarchy feature in NVivo; thus, the data were reassembled based on common patterns. A complete list of codes, subthemes, and themes is provided in Appendix C. The researcher then interpreted the patterns of meanings to develop themes and draw a conclusion. The data analysis steps were derived from Yin's (2018) Five-Phased Thematic Analysis Cycle. An overview of the themes with the number of supported data sources and references is shown in Table 2.

Table 2*Overview of the Themes*

Theme	No. of supporting data sources	No. of references in the data
Initiating the planning and implementation of the business plan to have tangible goals	5	12
Developing marketing strategies to attract customers	11	37
Investing in the business and customer relationship to retain customers	5	23

Theme 1: Initiating the Planning and Implementation of the Business Plan to Have Tangible Goals

The first strategy developed and used by the five MSE managers was to make a business plan and implement it. According to Blanchard (2020), strategic planning is a proactive preparation measure. The first phase, planning, generally involved conceptualization of the business strategies. Managers with advanced stages of creativity and vision identify and take advantage of opportunities, supporting the endurance and sustainability of the MSE and ecosystems within local communities during the planning process (Blanchard, 2020). MSEM4 stated that they began the business venture with an “entrepreneur mindset,” which the participant defined as making a firm decision to own and operate their own business. MSEM4 reiterated, “I have always wanted to own my own business. I do not want to work for somebody else all my life.” According to MSEM5, planning began with, “Having a clear vision of where we wanted to go ... And then, we made sure everything we did was evidence-based. We did our research, and we are data-driven customer-focused.” MSEM2 also did some research for the business

planning phase and cited the use of American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) business resources, followed up with “marketing, negotiating, and joining organizations.”

In the implementation phase, MSEM5 emphasized the influences of following the strategies in the business plan. The participant believed that implementation was as important as planning for the business to sustain. Abosedo et al. (2016) established that MSEs implementing strategic planning outperform organizations without a plan. MSEM5 perceived that companies that fail tend to spend money and time planning but do not follow the plans. Thus, the participant reiterated, “So we made a certain effort to work the plan, and then after that, obviously hire competent staff to implement the plan was key.”

MSEM2, MSEM3, and MSEM4 contended that implementing the business strategies according to the plan was good but being able to adapt to the changes in the reality of the business was better. MSEM4 particularly emphasized trying to sell different products until they found what was profitable. Moreover, MSEM4 encountered a supplier that failed to provide the materials for the t-shirt business. As a result, the participant shifted business and begin making t-shirts in addition to selling eye lashes.

The theme of planning and implementing a business plan relates to GST. Baumgartner and Rauter (2016) viewed management from a sustainability viewpoint, noting the significance of integrating sustainability strategies into business practices using a holistic approach. By implementing GST, rural MSE managers can evaluate business procedures from a system’s perspective and its components and better understand the transdisciplinary forces that influence business operations (Abdyrov et al., 2016; Shaked & Schechter, 2017).

Theme 2: Developing Marketing Strategies to Attract Customers

An organization's marketing strategy refers to its marketing activities and the decisions connected to producing and sustaining a competitive advantage, concentrating on approaches in which the business may distinguish itself successfully from the competition by taking advantage of assets to deliver better value to customers (Al-Surmia et al., 2019). Developing marketing strategies involve building interconnections in the community and the business world. The findings of this study were developed from the participants' marketing strategies that entailed creating ways to connect with holistic systems that aided and maintained profitability regardless of economic hardships, such as the participant's experience operating their MSE during the COVID-19 pandemic. An example is MSEM1's experiences of collaborating with other MSE managers to create promotions and events to attract customers during the pandemic. MSEM1 shared,

My business is screen printing, a family-oriented business around for over 15 years. Given what was going on, we had to be creative and offer something new because sales had greatly reduced. We had to employ different strategies like offering VIP cards for our customers. A car wash was an incentive.

This section contains an elaboration of Theme 2, developing marketing strategies to attract customers, which was relevant to the holistic interconnections shared by the participants. This theme emerged from codes centered on creating awareness about the business, offering incentives and promotions, building a customer base through networks, and getting creative with products and services the business offered. Three subthemes,

shown in Table 3, emerged under this theme: (a) advertising, (b) networking, and (c) differentiation from competitors.

Table 3

Subthemes for Developing Marketing Strategies to Attract Customers

Subtheme	No. of data sources	No. of references
Advertising	8	20
Networking	7	11
Differentiation from competitors	3	6

The finding that developing marketing strategies enhances MSEs sustainability aligns with findings in the literature. Several researchers noted that a holistic system has a beneficial influence on small-scale businesses and marketing management (Hanssens & Pauwels, 2016; Tabassum, 2017). Business leaders can produce value for the customer through tailored marketing strategies. Kumar and Pansari (2016) explained that satisfying customers by merely selling products and services is insufficient because many products and services are standardized, and competition is extreme. An organization must involve customers through numerous strategies, such as encouraging customer referrals, soliciting customer feedback on goods and services, and engaging in social media interactions (Kumar & Pansari, 2016). For instance, MSEM3 believed that it is essential to routinely review their organization's social media platforms to monitor customer engagement and feedback. MSEM5 reiterated this belief by stating, "we cannot always rely on fires and those things we did back in the day. We have to make sure we have an up-to-date, relevant web page". For rural MSEs, recent qualitative research involving interviews with rural micro-enterprise leaders revealed an emphasis on marketing to achieve

sustainability (Ab Rahman et al., 2021). Other findings, from McKelvey (2016), have indicated that applying marketing strategies is crucial in business sustainability.

The results of the qualitative analysis revealed that developing marketing strategies involved building interconnections in the community and the business world. This finding correlates with the conceptual framework of GST because a system's proficiency requires multiple practical and interrelated parts, and any impairment in the correlated parts influences the overall system (Appignanesi, 2018). MSE managers must operate within several systems to achieve long-term success (Turner & Endres, 2017).

Advertising

The most referenced marketing strategy developed and used by the participants was advertising. This subtheme emerged from eight data sources and 20 references from the data. The highlight of this subtheme, revealed in seven references, was to get the community to recognize the MSE's brand. MSEM4 and MSEM5 specified that advertising involved getting their "name out there," which meant their strategy involved building their brand awareness within the community. MSE managers use database marketing, mobile commerce, and digital marketing as communication drivers to advertise their services and products (Carmen & Marius, 2016; Zafar, 2017).

In order to achieve brand recognition, four participants cited using different advertising vehicles such as flyers, billboards, promotions, and social media. MSEM4 shared a flyer of one of their advertisements, which showed the brand name and logo and the business's web address. MSEM2 and MSEM3 utilized billboards. MSEM3 operated a handyman service and used a van to reach their customers' locations. The participant

shared that they used the van as a “mobile billboard.” This finding was verified through a photo of the van that the participant shared. On the other hand, MSEM2 paid for using a “roadside billboard” to advertise themselves as a realtor. MSEM2 described the advertising strategy as effective, as people in the community see them and recognize them as the realtor seen on the billboard.

MSEM2’s advertising strategy also involved the use of promotions such that the potential customers in the community did not “forget” about their MSE. The promotions developed by the participant depended on their relevance during certain seasons. MSEM2 justified staying in touch with clients during Christmas and their birthdays, further stating, “And rightfully so if I do not let you know that I am a realtor, you will not know that I am in business; it is really important to touch your clients.”

Apart from MSEM3, the other four participants all emphasized using social media and their websites to advertise their businesses. According to research, MSE managers who change their business marketing strategies to include social media are more likely to increase profitability (Bilgihan & Wang, 2016; Mukherjee, 2018). MSEM1 and MSEM5 both targeted millennials as their audience. Both participants noted that the use of social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat helped their MSEs reach their target customers. MSEM1 stated, “Social media became a moving force with marketing and was the new creative strategy. Because the younger generation, particularly Millennials, are social media-driven. Facebook live/postings, Snapchat, and Instagram, we implemented them all.” MSEM5 revealed that they used social media in addition to traditional paper advertisements. The participant contended that they made

sure their advertising methods were “relevant” to their target audience, such as using social media to attract the “younger population.”

Some participants believed that advertising strategies could involve free or paid tools. MSEM1 expressed that the best advertisement for a business is word-of-mouth. Word-of-mouth advertising is based on consumers’ utilizing informal networks of communication to verbally express opinions about a personal experience (Timothy et al., 2018). MSEM2 experienced that several online tools were free. Conversely, MSEM4 chose to spend money on advertising online, such as Facebook ads, due to being cost-efficient. MSEM4 shared, “The ads or not too high, and you could set your budget. I want to run an ad simply for \$40 and reach a specific number of people.” Rural MSE managers rely on and use various advertising strategies to maintain their business.

Networking

I identified 11 references from the data that pertained to networking as a marketing strategy participants developed to sustain their MSEs. Networking involved several business systems that the participants identified. The first identified network was peers and clients referring the business to other potential clients. MSEM2 emphasized that word-of-mouth had a significant impact on their MSE; the participant stated, “[I am] trying to do an amazing job with each client so that they can give me a referral.” MSEM2 believed that referred clients were somewhat already familiar with the business and that doing business with them was “so much easier” than clients who knew nothing about the enterprise. MSEM2 described having a client who referred their sibling to the business.

The sibling will close the deal in a few months. MSEM2 hoped that the siblings would share the business with other family members.

The second network identified by the participants was the professional connection with other MSE managers/owners. MSEM3 shared that one way to connect with other business owners was by joining the business networking international (BNI). The participant cited that BNI was helpful, especially when relocating the business to a new community, as the organization offered connections with local businesses. Similarly, MSEM2 highlighted the importance of establishing networks and partnerships to support sustainability. MSEM2 explained:

I joined several different organizations that I was passionate about. Because I do not mind giving up my time for something I believe in. I was in Family Promise, and I was on the board of directors. I was on the board of directors for the Literacy Council and Rotary, a service organization. I think that networking in a rural community is a must for any small business.

The third network identified by the participants as part of their marketing strategy was partnerships with other businesses and organizations. MSEM1 provided a flyer of their business partnership with other organizations to host an event to gain exposure to the community. Partnerships also involved creating joint promotions with another business. MSEM1 described such a partnership:

For example, the car wash was another small business that was suffering. So what we did was for those customers who spent a certain amount in our business they got a free car wash. My business and the car wash came up with an amount

feasible for both of us to pay. We paid that money off the sale of the merchandise to give him the amount and how many cars he would actually wash on a particular day.

Differentiation from Competitors

The third marketing strategy developed by three participants was to make sure that their business offered something “different” (MSEM1 and MSEM4). This finding aligns with Kumar and Pansari’s (2016) research explaining that satisfying customers by merely selling products and services is insufficient because many products and services are standardized, and competition is extreme. MSEM5 emphasized that part of their marketing strategy was to “Work the plan, periodically update the plan and think outside of the box.” MSEM1 had similar perceptions as MSEM5 in that they “employed different strategies” to cope with the changes in the business plan to adapt to the Covid-19 pandemic. MSEM1 reported that because of the pandemic, the sales of their 15-year family business of screen printing “had greatly reduced.” As a solution, the participant shared, “We had to be creative and offer something new. ... We had to employ different strategies like offering VIP cards for our customers. A car wash was an incentive.” Similarly, MSEM2 perceived that “different” entailed a unique product and a creative approach to selling, such as attracting a new demographic. MSEM4 described a recent event in which:

Everybody was doing the same shirt, trying to sell the same shirt. So, my strategy was to target a different audience. Instead of targeting my age group, I need to go

a little higher to the older population. By doing that, you cannot have the same trend as you do for a younger crowd to the older crowd.

Some participants shared that their strategies involved providing products or services that their competitors did not offer. MSEM1 also believed that strategies to develop something different from what competitors offered were generally not a challenge as long as an MSE manager focused on “customer service.” The participant explained that apart from providing the customers with the products they want, their business treated the customers as part of their branding. MSEM1 shared, “Customer service ... is how you treat the customer as soon as they walk through the door ... So, the price being feasible, the friendliness of your staff, and responding to calls and emails were essential to sustaining.” MSEM4, who sold t-shirts and lash services, also expressed that offering customers a product at a more affordable price than the competitors was a marketing strategy. MSEM4 shared,

Marketing is the biggest thing that will help me be successful with my lashes. I have to be different from other people. I cannot have the same lashes; I cannot have something similar in my prices. They have to be a little bit lower than my competitors because that is what people look for.

Theme 3: Investing in the Business and Customer Relationship to Retain Customers

The participants generally perceived that investment was a strategy that helped sustain their MSEs. The participants believed that investing in the business involved financial capital and investing in the community. This finding aligns with previously published research. For example, MSEM5 stated, “Obviously, capital we invested, you

know financial capital we put money in the community and invested social capital and human capital.” Researchers affirm that community structure influences an organization’s 5-year survival level (Conroy & Deller, 2020). Similarly, Beer and Micheli (2017) insisted that a company should be well established in its local community and engaged with stakeholders to achieve organizational sustainability.

One participant reported investing in human resources. Among the five managers, MSEM1 was the only participant who emphasized the strategy of training their staff “beginning with the basics.” MSEM1 reiterated the importance of their staff being trained in the business process, work ethics, customer service, and etiquette to become efficient at work. From a business standpoint, firms that invest in those who perform the work develop knowledge, skills, and abilities and help economic growth (Du et al., 2021; Savitska, 2016; Zaika & Gridin, 2020). Particular investment in helping staff utilize data to support marketing may yield benefits for sustainability (Du et al., 2021). Additionally, researchers have asserted that human capital is an essential strategy for managers in the service industry for facilitating the sustainability of small businesses (Prajogo & Oke, 2016). Investment in human resources may go beyond training, as one recent study indicates that concern with employees’ needs and general welfare is a key sustainability strategy for rural MSEs (Ab Rahman et al., 2021).

Additionally, MSEM1, MSEM4, and MSEM5 believed that investing and reinvesting their financial capital was an effective business strategy, particularly during the first few years of operation. MSEM5 emphasized that reinvesting money into the business helped it sustain and grow. The participant reported the strategy of using the

profit during the first few months of operation to reinvest into the business. MSEM5 described reinvesting to include making sure that their business “stayed state of the art” and that they “spent enough money on marketing.”

At the beginning of the business, MSEM1 and MSEM4 revealed that they had financial backers for their capital. Researchers noted that generating sustainability through a small business enterprise requires building financial capital and supporting sustainability performance efforts (Conroy & Deller, 2020; Hussain et al., 2018).

MSEM4 had financial support in that her parents helped her purchase the machines needed to start her t-shirt business. MSEM1 relied on loans and a business partner.

MSEM1 shared, “One effective strategy is applying for business loans; another strategy is that the partner had to bring in a certain percentage of income into the business to help sustain.”

MSEM1 added that they could obtain other assets at a low price from a similar business that shut down their operations. Similarly, according to MSEM5, knowing where to apply budget cuts and re-allocate the funds or save for “rainy days” were also effective business strategies. The participant discussed their financial management strategies during the Covid-19 pandemic and described how their travel budget was re-allocated into their cash reserves. MSEM5 shared, “The idea is to put that money aside. That is one of the things we have done despite the economic downturn. To try and save not spend unwisely again working the plan.”

On another note, four participants believed that investment included putting in money, time, and effort into customer relationships. MSEM2 reiterated, “You gotta sit

down and really concentrate and focus [on the needs of the customers]...let people know you care about them.” MSEM2 believed that engaging the customers entailed their loyalty to the business.

MSEM1 and MSEM5 cited that they typically developed and implemented business strategies that provided for the needs of their customers. MSEM1 stated that identifying the “target audience” was necessary to understand potential customers’ interests and offer them as they needed. However, MSEM1 and MSEM5 also added that providing for the customers’ needs was not only through the products and services they sold. Both participants reported that their offers were “timely” (MSEM5).

According to Kumar and Pansari (2016), an organization must involve customers through numerous strategies, such as encouraging customer referrals, soliciting customer feedback on goods and services, and engaging in social media interactions. MSEM1 shared that their business held a “customer appreciation day” during the pandemic, during which free food and five-dollar sales were offered. MSEM1 explained that “nobody was profiting during the pandemic,” but holding the event not only brought their business earnings but also helped the customers with their expenses. MSEM5 similarly perceived that “being there for people” and “understanding what the community needs” was the “greatest return on investment.” The participant shared that business was about “serving the customer.”

MSEM5 added that as a business owner, one of their roles was to understand the needs of their customers. Reiterating, “Our motto is “your business is our business,” and we stuck to that. So, whatever the community needed, they are the reason we are in

business.” However, the participant also believed that recognizing the competitors in the local area was also part of the investment strategy. Understanding the strengths and weaknesses of competitors allowed MSEM5 to realize what products and services were accessible to customers. As a result, MSEM5’s business was able to cater to what the customers needed in their community.

Application to Professional Practice

The data collected and analyzed for this study provided insight into successful strategies rural MSE managers use to sustain operations beyond 5 years. The findings of this study might help rural MSE managers recognize strategies to apply for long-term business sustainability. Three central strategies emerged from the qualitative analysis: (a) initiating the planning and implementation of the business plan to have tangible goals (b) developing marketing strategies to attract customers; and (c) investing in the business and customer relationship to retain customers. Rural MSE managers may apply these diverse strategies to improve key business processes, managerial practices, organizational performance, and address financial constraints within their enterprise. The findings may assist rural MSE managers in acquiring a greater awareness to integrate sustainability concepts into business practices that support economic growth and attain a competitive advantage.

This study could assist rural MSE managers with applying successful sustainability strategies. Von Bertalanffy (1972) created GST to demonstrate the need for various elements to work together as a unit to foster business success. MSE managers who apply GST might incorporate the three key themes that emerged in the data

collection process. Managers could use GST to create opportunities to develop and analyze successful strategies, practices, connections, and relationships amongst systems (Collopy, 2019). I recommend that potential rural MSE managers develop an effective marketing strategy incorporating these themes within their approach to remaining in business longer than 5 years.

All five participants emphasized the importance of preparation and the significance of developing ongoing robust marketing strategies. The findings of this study could provide rural MSE managers with successful strategies to create a well-thought-out strategic plan that includes marketing strategies. Levytskyi (2020) explained that strategic planning for the enterprise is an organized, strategic decision-making process. Participants stated that they executed diverse plans to best meet the needs of consumers, thus strengthening the MSEs long-term sustainability. One study participant discussed executing a community survey. Another participant explained how she routinely updates the advertisements on all of her social media platforms. These findings resemble those of Abdyrov et al. (2016), who contend the GST could support the core for understanding complex MSE systems and implement tangible strategies to transform practices to a proactive business approach.

Managers of rural MSE might apply the findings to develop successful strategies to invest in the community. Customer satisfaction and a positive experience or relationship build customers' loyalty (Dam & Dam, 2021). The participants in this study shared that investing in the community was a strategy they used to promote sustainability. Investing in the community may help rural MSE managers build connections with

community members that encourage customer loyalty. One study participant explained that she volunteered at local non-profits and civic organizations in her county. Customers may have a more satisfactory purchasing experience knowing that their choice to shop at or hire services from the local rural MSE supports the community as a whole. The findings of this study indicated that some rural MSE managers understood the business value of employing a stakeholder relationship strategy.

Small businesses account for the largest share of employment in market-based economies (Caiazza et al., 2021). Rural MSE managers who incorporate GST into initiating strategic business planning, developing appealing marketing strategies, and investing in business and customer relationships could enhance their survival rate. Sharing the findings from this study may help managers prepare a business plan, maintain customers, and prepare sustainable strategic goals. MSE manager's skills, including knowledge of financial issues, can influence formal planning and success (Dearman et al., 2018). The findings of this study may prove valuable to current and potential rural MSE owners and managers who have been ineffective in establishing successful strategies to remain in business longer than 5 years.

Implications for Social Change

Rural MSE managers interested in organizational growth and sustainability may use the information provided in this study for future guidance. The results of this study have implications for positive social change by providing successful business strategies for rural managers, which will reduce joblessness and advance communities' economic development. In addition, this study's results provide sustainability strategies to increase

the survival rates of rural MSEs for growing and sustaining employment. The U.S. rural unemployment rate in 2019 was at 4.1%, while the national rate was 3.6% (Petrosky-Nadeau & Valletta, 2019). The implications for positive social change may specifically interest managers and owners concerned about the communities' economic growth and development in rural areas. Sustaining small organizations produces jobs, reduces poverty, and enhances life quality (Shibia & Barako, 2017).

Society benefits when individuals thrive in a healthy community, a safe environment, and have opportunities for gainful employment. Moreover, the results of this study revealed that customer relationships were a strategy MSEs could use to foster sustainability. The results from this study can impact social change if rural MSE managers apply strategies for providing relationship building with potential clients, vendors, and stakeholders. Promoting and increasing successful strategies to rural MSE could sustain their capacity to survive and create a mechanism for strengthening local economies. Rural communities could benefit economically because of lower unemployment rates, improved living standards, and local economic stability.

Recommendations for Action

The objective of this study was to explore what strategies do rural MSE managers use to sustain operations successfully beyond 5 years. The findings from this study support strategies rural MSE managers utilize to sustain their enterprise. Based on the three central strategies that emerged, (a) initiating the planning and implementation of the business plan to have tangible goals, (b) developing marketing strategies to attract customers, and (c) investing in the business and customer relationship to retain

customers. I recommend that rural MSE managers apply these diverse strategies to develop fundamental business processes, managerial practices, and address economic limitations within their enterprise.

Based on the results of this study, I recommend that rural MSEs develop marketing strategies that facilitate connections between internal and external systems and maintain profitability. These strategies may include advertising, networking, or offering a unique product or service. For example, MSEs could build a presence on social media as both an advertising strategy and a way to network with the community. Another recommendation for action is for rural MSEs to invest in the business. Investing in the business may involve investing in financial capital, human resources, and the community.

The findings of this study indicated that MSE managers applied several successful marketing methods to increase customer base, enhance brand or reputation, and strengthen economic sustainability. For instance, one participant had a vehicle professionally wrapped with his business logo and contact information, including a shortlist of services. Finally, I recommend that rural MSEs managers create and execute a business plan. Creating and implementing a business plan may involve conceptualizing business strategies, developing a clear vision, and being flexible to adapt to internal and external changes.

Findings from this study support these recommendations; therefore, rural MSE might consider the findings to benefit their enterprise. The results of this study will be published in the literature so rural MSE managers or potential managers can benefit from the findings. In addition, the findings of this study might be distributed or shared as a

resource at professional conferences and community events where the sustainability of rural MSEs is a topic of discussion. Ultimately, the study will be published in the ProQuest dissertation database.

Recommendations for Further Research

In section 1 of this study, I identified some potential limitations of this study. Limitations are uncontrollable negative factors that could impact the study findings (Castillo et al., 2017). This study included three main limitations: a qualitative multiple case study, sample size, and the geographical area. The limitations of this study were restricted to a qualitative multiple case study design with rural MSE managers in the southeastern United States, which had been successful for a minimum of 5 years. A different research method and design could present an opportunity for future research and could reveal different results, viewpoints, and awareness.

Future researchers may include a broader geographical area, adding more participants and including rural MSE managers of medium and large enterprises. I would also suggest mixed-method research of MSE ownership among Generation Xers and Millennials. This could provide more qualitative awareness of the manager's lived experiences as my study has provided; it would enable the researcher to understand frequencies related to MSE ownership. For instance, future research could establish how many MSE owners have experienced specific problems or utilized certain strategies in their MSE by collecting quantitative data from a larger sample utilizing an online quantitative survey. Another recommendation would be to interview rural MSEs' managers who failed to discover the factors contributing to their failure. Finally, I

recommend that future researchers conduct a longitudinal study to determine how the sustainability strategies of rural MSEs change over time.

Reflections

The DBA doctoral study process expanded my knowledge about rural MSEs and business strategies that organizations employ to enhance sustainability. Completing the DBA doctoral study, I recognized my own biases, reactions to participants and added information that surfaced during the research process. When I began my DBA journey, I worked for a corporate organization supporting Head Start programs in Louisiana and Georgia for several years. I desired to share with society the successful strategies rural managers apply for business sustainability. I thought that my professional career was secure, and it was an optimal time to embark on the DBA journey. Nevertheless, I accepted an ideal new role as an executive director (ED) of a non-profit federally funded county program and relocated to rural North Carolina. This position brought about various challenges that caused me to enhance my critical thinking and problem-solving skills throughout the DBA program.

Before accepting the ED role, I had more time to complete my assignments, conduct my research, and utilize Walden resources. My thinking changed from ensuring that I prioritize my most important tasks and dedicate adequate time to meeting the DBA requirements. I allocated personal time to working on my dissertation and conducting research, which has enabled me to thrive in a demanding position. While working as an ED my experience, has allowed me to value the importance of reducing bias in my study. A bias I had about the participants was how managers might have minimal technology

usage for marketing, mainly social media. After completing the research, I further realized how many MSE managers heavily depend on social media platforms to understand consumer demands regarding products and services. I recorded all interviews, provided a document trail, and conducted member checking to mitigate any bias.

While conducting this study, I discovered how to become a better independent scholar and enhanced my critical thinking skills by using the plethora of resources offered by Walden. These resources were used to deliver a doctoral view of successful small rural enterprises' strategies. After completing this study, I further appreciated how essential rural MSE is for rural communities' economic and social development. Finally, I appreciate the five MSE managers who devoted their time, shared their answers and organizational documents for this study.

Conclusion

Realizing and understanding successful strategies to sustain rural MSEs can assist MSE managers with sustaining their business. The findings of this study might help rural MSE managers recognize strategies to apply for long-term business sustainability. Three central strategies emerged from the qualitative analysis: (1) initiating the planning and implementation of the business plan to have tangible goals, (2) developing marketing strategies to attract customers, and (3) investing in the business and customer relationship to retain customers. The purpose of this study was to explore successful strategies that rural MSEs use to sustain operations beyond 5 years.

These results have implications for practice because MSE managers should employ successful strategies to increase the sustainability of their businesses (Navis &

Ozbek, 2016). The results of this study have implications for positive social change by providing successful business strategies for rural managers, which will reduce joblessness and advance communities' economic development. Improving skills and sustainable strategies might assist a rural MSE manager to achieve sustainability and profitability through continuous evaluation of the business plan, ongoing assessment of customer desires, and investing in the business. Utilizing the strategies in every segment of the business phase can allow rural MSE managers to thrive and achieve sustainability.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Researcher will open the interview.	Script: Hello, I am Katrina Chance a Doctoral student at Walden University. Thank you for taking time out of your schedule to participate in my study.
Researcher will introduce the interview and set the stage.	<p>Research Question: What strategies do rural MSE managers use to sustain operations successfully beyond 5 years?</p> <p>Script: Your participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to resign from this interview at any time.</p> <p>I will provide an informed consent form for the participant to consent via email by stating "I consent," documenting they agree to the interview and that they approve of the audio recording to ensure accuracy of the data during note-taking.</p> <p>I will inform the participant that the questions will be open-ended questions in a semistructured interview. The interview will take approximately 45 minutes; however, the time may vary depending on the time it takes for you to discuss your successful strategies business strategies.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Watch for non verbal cues • Paraphrase as needed • Ask follow-up probing questions to get more in-depth 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To what strategies do you attribute your business success? 2. What successful strategies did you implement to combat external pressures that affect your business? 3. What effective marketing strategies have you implemented to help sustain your business beyond 5 years? 4. What specific fiscal and management strategies did you apply during the first 5 years? 5. What effective strategies did you apply during economic challenges or hardships? 6. What additional information can you provide about your strategies to sustain operations during the first 5 years of starting your business?
Researcher will wrap up interview thanking participant.	My Script: Thank you very much for participating in this research study. Your participation in this study will assist me in gaining insight on successful strategies rural micro and small enterprises use to sustain business operations. Can you provide me with a date and time to conduct the member checking interview? I will provide you a copy of the documented interview notes before the interview.
Researcher will discuss follow-up member checking process.	My Script: The follow-up member checking process will occur within two weeks. I will provide a copy of the documented interview to confirm the data gathered is accurate. You will verify the information or include additional information. Thank you again.