2019

Leveraging Internal Resources for Business Sustainability in Independent Quick-Service Restaurants

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This is to certify that the doctoral study by

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Abstract

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Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

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Abstract

Quick-service restaurant owners who fail to apply effective business strategies could risk business closure within the first 5 years of operations. The purpose of this multiple case study was to explore effective strategies that independent quick-service restaurant owners used to sustain business longer than the first 5 years. Resource-based theory was the conceptual framework for this study. Data were collected via semistructured interviews with 6 owners of independent quick-service restaurants in the southern region of the United States who sustained their businesses longer than the first 5 years, and from the review of business documents pertaining to sustainability. Data were also collected using business artifacts such as job descriptions, menus, websites, social media platforms, and business licenses, and analyzed using methodological triangulation. Member checking was used to help ensure reliability and validity of the interpretations. Six key themes emerged from the data: organization value, customer required excellence, financial perspective, human assets, physical operating materials, and technological prowess. The 6 themes aligned with the 5 types of internal resources established in the conceptual framework. The implications of this study for positive social change include the potential to support the welfare of the local citizens and owners of quick-service restaurants across the United States by providing strategies necessary to increase business survival rates, improve job sustainability, and encourage job creation.

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Dedication

I dedicate this study to my late mother and father, Deborah Ann Wallace and Elias Muhammad. My mother always encouraged me to believe in myself and to pursue life with a passion while conquering my fears. My father instilled in me the passion for education and life learning. I really miss both of them. I dedicate this study to my children for their patience with me throughout my 10 year educational journey. My children are the rock and they keep me grounded and motivated to accomplish my life goals. I also dedicate this study to Deidre McJunkins, the love of my life and dear friend, who believed in me like no other. She persuaded me to pursue this journey and supported me throughout it. Finally, I dedicate this study to Orange Mound, the community where I was born and raised. Without the life experiences I learned and earned in the “Mound,” I would not be the person I am today. Three fingers down and two fingers round.

Acknowledgments

Prior to my decision to leave Memphis, Tennessee and to relocate to Little Rock, Arkansas, the thought of me ever attaining a terminal degree, specifically a Doctorate Degree in Business Administration in Leadership was never considered. This reality began to rapidly grow after I experienced the doctoral culture at the University of Arkansas for Medical Science (UAMS) and when I attended my first residency at Walden University. As a result, I would like to thank everyone who assisted me along the way.

I would like to thank the twins Geraldine, my grandmother, and Earnestine, my great aunt, for instilling in my family values that go beyond any worldly measure. I would like to thank my uncles Charles Campbell and Elbert Woods for caring for me as a son and for believing in my ideas, abilities, and motivations.

I would like to thank Gladys, my Godmother, for honoring her friendship to my mother and filling in the motherly void that my siblings and I desperately needed.

I would like to thank Dr. Amber Smith and Sherie Brown for constantly motivating me throughout my career and higher educational experience. To Sherie, your trust in my ability to fill a training vacancy at UAMS changed my life’s trajectory.

I would like to thank Dr. Janie Hall, my Chair, for guiding and coaching me throughout the doctoral process. Your guidance is the reason why I availed.

Finally, I would like to thank all of my lifelong friends who have never doubted me and always support me throughout this journey. Specifically, I would like to thank Deadric Hollins, Byron Williams, and Allen Savage for their timely talks, their encouragements, and their guidance throughout the higher educational process.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study

More than 77% of newly established small businesses survived only one year, and less than 64.5% fail to survive beyond the first 5 years of business (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics [BLS], 2015; U.S. Small Business Administration [SBA], 2016a). SBA defined small businesses as independent establishments that employ fewer than 500 employees that purposely seek profit (Parsa, van der Rest, Smith, Parsa, & Bujisic, 2015; SBA, 2016a). Quick-service restaurants are small business establishments where patrons order and purchase their food from the counter before consuming it (U.S. Census Bureau [USCB], 2015). Quick-service restaurants account for more than 233,392 small business establishments across the United States (USCB, 2015).

Background of the Problem

Quick-service restaurants accounted from more than 2,014 restaurants in a city in the southern region of the United States, employing 46,122 residents (USCB, 2016). According to a 2013 to 2017 report obtained from the Department of Environmental Health Protection at the Arkansas Department of Health (ADH), more than 100 independent quick-service restaurants close on average each year or become inactive in a city in the southern region of the United States. Independent quick-service restaurants are independently owned and are not affiliated with a franchise. The high closure average of the independent quick-service restaurants has a detrimental effect on local economies (Parsa et al., 2015; Self, Jones, & Botieff, 2015). As a result, my aim with this study was to explore the strategies that successful independent quick-service restaurant owners used to sustain business beyond their first 5 years.

Problem Statement

Independent quick-service restaurants consistently fail at a high rate (Parsa et al., 2015). Less than 50% of small businesses survive beyond the first 5 years in business (BLS, 2015). The general business problem is that new business owners invest in independent quick-service restaurants without adequate strategies to manage their resources in the food industry. The specific business problem is that some independent quick-service restaurant owners lack strategies to sustain in business beyond the first 5 years.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the strategies that independent quick-service restaurant owners used to sustain business beyond the first 5 years. The population of this study included six successful independent quick-service restaurant owners in a city in the southern region of the United States, who used effective strategies to sustain their business beyond the first 5 years of operation. The findings of the study may provide independent quick-service restaurant owners with the strategies necessary to increase their survival rate. As a result, independent quick-service restaurant owners may improve job sustainability, enhance human capital development, and encourage job creation to support the welfare of the citizens in a city in the southern region of the United States.

Nature of the Study

Because qualitative researchers investigate real-world, lived experiences and contemporary behaviors of participants in a study, a qualitative research design was the most appropriate for this study. Researchers use qualitative research designs to understand the *what* and the *why* of lived experiences (Barnham, 2015). Furthermore, researchers use the qualitative research method to explore a phenomenon through designs such as grounded theory, narrative, ethnography, phenomenology, and case studies (Yin, 2018). Quantitative researchers use a quantitative method to describe, explain, and examine correlations and relationships through experimental and nonexperimental inquiries (Morse, 2015). Researchers use a mixed methods design to examine relationships and explore a phenomenon through sequential, concurrent, and transformative inquires (Anderson, Leahy, DelValle, Sherman, & Tansey, 2014). I did not seek to examine correlations, relationships, or combine methods. The goal of this study was to investigate the lived experiences of six successful independent, quick-service restaurant owners.

The research design used in this study was a multiple case study. Case study researchers seek to understand a contemporary phenomenon in a real-world context (Yin, 2018). Researchers use ethnographic research strategies to investigate cultural groups through observations and interviews in nonconfirmative settings (Hammersley, 2016). Researchers use narrative research strategies to explore stories of research participants as important sources of information for qualitative research (Bruce, Beuthin, Sheilds, Molzahn, & Schick-Makaroff, 2016). I did not choose the ethnographic and narrative qualitative research designs since they were appropriate methods for seeking contemporary phenomenon. I chose the case study design as the most appropriate strategy to understand the strategies independent quick-service restaurant owners used to sustain business beyond their first 5 years.

Research Question

What strategies do independent quick-service restaurant owners use to sustain business beyond the first 5 years?

Interview Questions

The specific interview questions for the qualitative multiple case study were as follows:

1. What strategies did you use to effectively sustain business beyond the first 5 years?
2. What were the key barriers to implementing your strategies to sustain business beyond the first 5 years?
3. What challenges did you encounter to sustain business beyond the first 5 years?
4. How did you address the key barriers to sustaining business beyond 5 years?
5. What were the most effective strategies to effectively sustain business beyond 5 years?
6. What additional information can you provide to assist me in understanding the strategies you used to sustain business beyond the first 5 years?

Conceptual Framework

The theory that I used as the conceptual framework for this study was the resource-based theory (RBT). Leaders use the RBT as a practical application for exploring how internal resources leverage a sustained competitive advantage (Barney, 1991). The RBT is an influential perspective in organizational science, strategy management, and entrepreneurship (Kellermanns, Walter, Crook, Kemmerer, & Narayanan, 2016) The internal resources of a firm include human resources, financial resources, physical resources, technological resources, and organizational resources (Greene, Brush, & Brown, 2015). Organizational leaders use the RBT as a process of exploiting internal resources to create a competitive advantage (Wernerfelt, 1984). Barney (1991) argued that the RBT provides a framework for leaders of firms to systematically analyze and evaluate their internal resources through the lens of valuable, rare, difficult to imitate, and nonsubstitutable to create a sustained competitive advantage. To the contrary, some firms attain a competitive advantage through strategic positioning in the market (Porter, 2008). Leaders of these firms examine and manage the forces of the external environment to achieve a competitive advantage. Leaders of firms compete for industry superiority through trading off noncompeting positions in the market while competing for either an overall cost leadership, a differentiation position, or a focus position (Porter, 2008). In this research study, I focused on internal factors and resources to achieve a sustained competitive advantage.

Operational Definitions

Competitive advantage: A firm has a competitive advantage when it is the first to implement and manage a value-creating strategy of which none of its competitors or potential competitors have taken advantage (Davis & Simpson, 2017).

Diversification: The term diversification is the ability of the firm to exploit existing resources and develop new resources; firms may combine existing resources of a firm with new resources to establish competitive advantage (Campbell & Park, 2017).

Heterogeneity: The term heterogeneity implies the act of bundling differential levels of superior internal resources to create a competitive advantage to compete in the marketplace (Campbell & Park, 2017).

Immobility: The term immobility implies specialization of a firm's internal resources to meet a firm's specific needs. Internal resources that are immobile have the potential to increase value in a firm and are extremely difficult to compete away by competition (Kordalska & Olczyk, 2016).

Independent quick-service restaurant: Independent quick-service restaurants are not a part of a franchise and serve fast-foods that are systematically prepared according to timely process flow and feature standard procedures including ingredients, service, and seating (Parsa et al., 2015).

Internal resources: Internal resources are both tangible and intangible assets that are semipermanently tied to a firm to support the firm's strategy and operations. (Mathooko & Ogutu, 2015).

Operations effectiveness: Operations effectiveness is the ability of a firm to perform operational activities more effectively and efficiently than competitors with less waste and variation and fewer defects while steadily enhancing customer value (Simatupang, Piboonrungroj, & Williams, 2017).

Resource based-theory (RBT): RBT is a conceptual framework that states that leaders of firms can sustain a competitive advantage through leveraging their internal resources (Mathooko & Ogutu, 2015).

Sustained competitive advantage: A firm has a sustained competitive advantage when it implements and manages a value-creating strategy that none of its competitors or potential competitors have the capability to imitate or duplicate (Campbell & Park, 2017).

Value chain: Value chain is a model for analyzing a firm's competitiveness through evaluation of its functional production flow (Davis & Simpson, 2017).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

There are several basic assumptions for the study that I clarified to ensure the credibility of the research. The limitations of the study included sample size and research design. I explain these constraints in detail to provide clarity and show awareness of their existence. There were several delimitations in the study that limited the scope of the research and restricted boundaries. I explain why the delimitations exist and how they could potentially limit transferability of research findings.

Assumptions

Assumptions are beliefs or hypotheses about the research that lack evidence or verification (Chandler, 2013). The primary assumption was the participants would be forthcoming and honest in responding to the interview questions in a controlled setting. I assumed that independent quick-service restaurant owners have never considered how to use their internal resources to leverage competitive advantage. I assumed that independent quick-service restaurant owners did not know how to leverage their internal resources to create a sustained competitive advantage. In essence, they did not know how to increase the value of their internal resources to enhance their service performance while mitigating external threats. Additionally, I assumed that independent quick-service restaurant owners did not have a formal way of collecting and analyzing the data from their internal resources to make optimal business decisions to innovate or enhance their operations. Lastly, I assumed that independent quick-service restaurant owners did not have a formal way of analyzing their competitor's internal operations to determine ways to outperform them.

Limitations

Limitations are constraints that could lead to potential weaknesses and challenges in a research study (Brutus, Aguinis, & Wassmer, 2013). There were two limitations in this study. The results of the study may have been different if the scope of the research expanded into other geographical locations and included a larger population. The second limitation was the research design. The design used in this research was a qualitative multiple case study. The sample size was small but practical for the research method.

Delimitations

Delimitations are factors that limit the scope of the research study or restrict the boundaries (Ody-Brasier & Vermeulen, 2014). There were two delimitations in this study. The first delimitation of the qualitative multiple case study was the geographical location of the study. The second delimitation was the targeted audience for the research. The delimitations may prevent generalizing the results across other independent quick-service restaurant owners and the make difficult the transferability of results to other business owners (Ody-Brasier & Vermeulen, 2014).

Significance of the Study

The results of my study might provide independent quick-service restaurant owners with the necessary methods to successfully sustain business beyond the first 5 years. The strategies that I gained from the research may assist independent quick-service restaurant owners in analyzing and evaluating their internal resources to create a sustained competitive advantage. My findings may provide independent quick-service restaurant owners with strategies necessary to increase their survival rate and as a result, aid in job sustainability and encourage job creation.

Contribution to Business Practice

The results of this qualitative multiple case study contribute to strategies that independent quick-service restaurant owners used to leverage their internal resources. The findings may help independent quick-service restaurant owners use their internal resources to develop better operational efficiencies and cost savings. The findings may also help quick-service restaurant owners valuate their tangible and intangible internal resources as well as those of their competitors to aid in business survival. The results of the research may also provide independent quick-service restaurant owners with a blueprint to establish a sustaining competitive advantage amongst local competitors in a city in the southern region of the United States, which could prevent business closures, job layoffs, and economic downturns in local communities.

Implications for Social Change

Positive social change is the concept of intentionally committing to finding ways to transform societal well-being inside and outside the boundaries of an organization (Stephan, Patterson, Kelly, & Mair, 2016). The implications for positive social change from this qualitative multiple case study include business sustainability and growth for independent quick-service restaurants, leading to job creation and human capital development. Business sustainability and growth contribute to an increase in customers, employee retention, talent acquisition and development, and profitability (Al Mamun & Hasan, 2017). Leaders who use strategies to create business sustainability and growth encourage job creation, which support the well-being of local citizens and transforms local economies (Kongolo, 2010). Another contribution to positive social change may be the investment in human capital. Internal resource dynamics contribute to the development of existing and acquired human capital (Teece, 2000). Strategic diversification of internal resources leads to employee training, education, certifications, and advancements. A company’s best investment is in its human capital (Teece, 2000).

The results of this qualitative multiple case study include strategies necessary to increase the survival rate of independent quick-service restaurants. Leaders may use this study to promote job sustainability and encourage job creation in local communities. The implications for positive social change include business sustainability and growth for independent quick-service restaurant owners.

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

In this qualitative multiple case study, I explored strategies used by small business owners in a city in the southern region of the United States, to leverage internal resources to sustain business beyond 5 years. The conceptual framework I used in this study was the RBT by Barney (1991). I collected articles from between 1959 and 2018 from Business Source Complete, EBSCOhost, ProQuest, and ABI/INFORM Complete, and Google Scholar for my literature review. For this literature search I used the following keywords: *research-based theory, knowledge-based theory, dynamic capabilities, competitive advantage, small business firms, the impact of small businesses on the economy, successful small business, small business failures, restaurant industry, quick-service restaurants,* and *operational effectiveness and efficiencies.* Table 1 includes a breakdown of the material reviewed.

Table 1

Sources of Data for the Review of Academic Literature

Publications	Published within 5 years of expected graduation date	Older than 5 years	Total	% of sources
Journal articles	94	3	97	74%
Government websites	13	0	13	10%
Seminal works/books	3	13	16	12%
Others	3	2	5	4%
Total sources	113	18	131	100%
% of sources	86%	16%	100%	

I identified and evaluated more than 97 peer-reviewed journal articles 16 seminal works and books published over a period of 59 years in this literature review. The extensive review of articles included 97 peer-reviewed articles published between 1959 and 2018. The peer-reviewed percentage of sources published within the past 5 years was 83%. My review of literature also included the analysis of 16 books. In this study, 86% of the sources in the literature had a publication date between 2014 and 2018.

I organized the literature review in four themes including (a) theoretical frameworks, (b) small business industry, (c) the success and failures of small business industry, and (d) the restaurant industry, specifically quick-service restaurants. In the first part, I explore literature on the RBT and alternative theories. In the second part, I explore the factors of the history of small businesses, the economic influence small businesses have on the global, national, and local economy small business successes and failures. Lastly, I explore the effects of the restaurant industry on the global, national, and local economy and the success, failures, and sustainability of quick-service restaurants. I used the RBT as a lens through which I analyzed the literature that contribute to this review of the professional and academic literature.

Resource-Based Theory

The RBT is a highly regarded influential perspective in the field of organizational science, the field of strategic management, and the science of entrepreneurship (Kellermanns et al., 2016). Barney (1991) established the RBT in response to the research question why certain firms outperform others. Some leaders of firms outperform other leaders by leveraging their internal resources to create a sustained competitive advantage (Barney, 1991; Campbell & Park, 2017; Wernerfelt, 1984).

The RBT is an extension of earlier resource-based theories and Porter's (1980) value chain model. Penrose (1959) asserted that the firm's objective is to know the limits of its bundled internal resources and to leverage them for the growth of the firm. Penrose identified resources as internal intangible and tangible resources owned by the firm. Campbell and Park (2017) and Wernerfelt (1984) discovered a firm's resources were labor, capital, and perhaps land. Penrose used a broader lens to view a firm’s resources. Penrose’s concept of the RBT was that a firm’s bundled internal resources and coordinated activities sustain and grow the firm. A firm is heterogeneous in nature because of its bundled resources (Barney, 1991; Penrose, 1959, 2000). Penrose (2009) postulated that the source of a firm’s competitive implication is how owners of a firm coordinated their activities. Wernerfelt advanced the RBT by evaluating the internal resources of a firm and its ability to use them to achieve economic rents and a sustained competitive advantage. Wernerfelt's theory was the first of the resource-based theories published in the field of strategic management (Barney, 1991). Wernerfelt posited that firms operated in imperfect markets because their internal resources were heterogeneous and some of their resources were immobile.

Before RBT, scholars argued that resources owned by a firm were homogeneous and mobile (Hatten & Hatten, 1987; Wernerfelt, 1984). Scholars advanced that internal resources could be competed away by competitors; therefore, they were not sources of sustained competitive advantage (Wernerfelt, 1984). Barney (1991) posited that not all resources of a firm are homogeneous and mobile and that most resources of a firm when compared to other similar firms are heterogeneous, and some resources are imperfectly immobile. Resources that are heterogeneous and immobile have the potential to be sources of sustained competitive advantage; resources of a firm that are not heterogeneous and immobile cannot be sources of sustained competitive advantage (Bromiley & Rau, 2016; Davis & Simpson, 2017). Barney (1991) theorized that diversified resources had the ability to create rents for firms and create a sustained competitive advantage. Wernerfelt (1984) viewed internal resources as a source of diversification, which could have a strategic implication (Barney, 1991). Unlike the resource-based theories of the firm, Porter (1980) analyzed internal resources of a firm from the value chain, internal compartmental perspective.

The value chain is the process by which a business converts raw resources into valuable products for market consumption (Porter, 2011). The value chain consists of two distinct activities that create value for products: primary and secondary (Simatupang et al., 2017). Porter (1980) stated that a firm's primary activities include inbound logistics, production, outbound logistics, marketing and sales, and services. The secondary activities include firm infrastructure, human resources, technology, and procurement. It takes an integrated effort of all the components of a value chain to create a valued product for market consumption. Barney (1991) argued that Porter's value chain model does not provide a systematic framework for analyzing internal resources to determine their value. Porter does not specify whether the indiscriminate valuable resources of a firm are human capital, technology capital, or organizational capital.

Leaders of firms create value through the internal resources controlled by the firm. Barney (1991) described resources as only those controlled by the firm. Greene et al. (2015) explained that internal resources of a firm include (a) physical resources, (b) financial resources, (c) technological resources, (d) human resources, and (e) organizational resources. According to Green et al. (2015), physical capital of a firm includes the geographical location, equipment, supplies, and any raw materials; organizational capital of a firm includes intellectual property, leadership, tacit knowledge, business acumen, culture, and relationships with customers, employees, and venders; financial capital resources of a firm includes economic value, operating budgets and profits, investments, return on investments, return on human capital; human capital of a firm includes the leader's business acumen, the leader's ability to dive performance, the leader's relation with the employees and customers, the employees, the talent of the employees, and the development of the employees; technological capital of a firm includes technological prowess, ownership of business technology such as point-of-sale technology, computer accessories (e.g. software), websites, and social media platforms. These five types of internal resources owned by a firm have the potential for generating a sustained competitive advantage when they can improve the efficiencies and effectiveness of a firm's outcomes while mitigating threats.

The internal resources of a firm include both tangible and intangible resources, but the intangible resources are the least understood and, if explored, can help sustain a competitive advantage (Davis & Simpson, 2017; Mathooko & Ogutu, 2015; Saeed, Yousafzai, Paladino, & De Luca, 2015; Fong, Lo, & Ramayah, 2014). Barney (1991) claimed that a sustained competitive advantage is not measured on the same criteria as a competitive advantage. Porter (2011) described competitive advantage as the ability of a company to outperform its competitors over a calendar period of time in which the company with the competitive advantage earns a greater profitability. Porter (2011) articulated that profitability is determined by the fraction price over cost. A company has a competitive advantage when its profits and shareholder's value exceed those of comparative companies over a period of time (Barney, 1991; Mathooko & Ogutu, 2015). A sustained competitive advantage is the inability of a comparative and competing company to duplicate the complexity of resources of another company.

Leaders of a firm can leverage their internal resources and create a sustained competitive advantage for a firm. López-Cabarcos, Göttling-Oliveira-Monteiro, and

Vázquez-Rodríguez (2015) articulated that the RBT can be used to examine the value and rareness of internal resources such as human capital, technology capital, and organizational capital to determine how to use them for a sustainable competitive advantage. Campbell and Park (2017) explained that the RBT consists of a process of bundling internal resources and exploiting them to create a sustained competitive advantage. Bundling is a process of combining internal resources together to create a stronger derived value for the customer (Barney, 1991; Gibbons & Kaplan, 2015). Barney (1991) theorized that owners of firms can create bundled resources by analyzing their resources using the value, rare, imitable, and nonsubstitutable (VRIN) systematic framework. Barney argued that the RBT provides a framework that leaders of firms can use to systematically analyze and evaluate their internal resources through the lens of valuable, rare, difficult to imitate, and nonsubstitutable attributes to create a sustained competitive advantage (Bromiley & Rau, 2016; Davis & Simpson, 2017).

Value. Barney (1991) explained that a firm's internal tangible and intangible resources are a source of a sustained competitive advantage when they are valuable, rare, and when they neutralize external threats. Barney (1991) described valuable resources as bundled resources that are difficult to imitate. Bundled resources are those that are diverse and heterogeneous in nature (Hitt, Xu, & Carnes, 2016; Wernerfelt, 1984). A valuable internal resource is rare, difficult to imitate, and nonsubstitutable (Barney, 1991; Hitt et al., 2016). A firm’s valuable resource is dynamic and complex in nature and the source of its value is difficult to conceive by competitors. According to Wernerfelt (1984), valuable resource allows a firm to sustain a competitive advantage while generating economic rents. These valuable resources are the best to exploit and to use to build a strategy (Hitt et al., 2016).

Rare. Unlike valuable resources, rare resources can create competitive parity, which means that multiple firms can have access to the same resource and still create economic rents (Barney, 1991; Kordalska & Olczyk, 2016; Wernerfelt, 1984). However, rare resources that are not valuable does not create a sustained competitive advantage. Barney (1991) postulated that bundled tangible or intangible resources can create competitive parity when exploited and used in a firm’s strategy. Porter (1980) explained that rare resource allows a firm to sustain pure performance. Three examples of a firm's internal resources are human capital, technology capital, and cultural capital (Barney, 1991; Porter, 1980).

Difficult to imitate. Competitors find it difficult to imitate some internal resources of a firm that make those resources hard to replicate. Barney (1991) expressed that difficult-to-imitate resources provide a sustainable competitive advantage. Difficult to imitate resources are diversified and have an ambiguous relationship that cannot be effectively explained by the firm. A few common examples of difficult-to-imitate internal resources are trademarks, patents, and culture (Barney, 1991; Wernerfelt, 1984).

Nonsubstitutable. Nonsubstitutable internal resources are those that cannot be competed away by other firms. Firm leaders who attempt to duplicate nonsubstitutable resources face challenges of restructuring their resources to meet the same obligation of a competing firm’s resource, which is costly and not attractive (Barney, 1991). Leaders of competing firms with similar resources do not have nonsubstitutable resources (Hitt et al., 2016). The nonsubstitutable resources are not a source of competitive advantage.

Historical Contribution of the Resource-Based Theory

Scholars agree that the RBT has contributed to major sources of research in the field of strategic management, academic scholarship, and entrepreneurial theories (Barney, 1991; Porter, 1980; Wenerfelt, 1984). The RBT is considered one of the more influential theories in strategy management (Mathooko & Ogutu, 2015). When searching the RBT using Google Scholar, more than 1,160,000 responsive articles were returned. The RBT is focused on the internal strengths and weaknesses and not on the external opportunities and threats (Barney, 1991). The historical contribution of the RBT is abundant and included in this subsection are some of the most notable examples.

Ulrich & Dulebohn (2015) affirmed that The RBT has made a contribution to the field of human resource management. Barney (1991) explained that some leaders of firms outperform other leaders by leveraging their human capital to create sustained competitive advantage. In the fields of human resource management, human capital is considered a valuable resource. The processing and utilization of knowledge in a firm give a firm its competitive advantage (Blome, Schoenherr, Eckstein, & 2014; Defeng, Lu, & Shibin, 2017).

Penrose identified internal intangible and tangible resources owned by the firm. In strategic human resource management literature, Ulrich & Dulebohn (2015) stated that human capital that is aligned with a strategy can give a firm a sustained competitive advantage. Barney’s (1991) RBT has contributed to the field of strategy and economics.

Researchers have used the consequences of path dependency to examine patterns of diverse resources of a firm. Routines, paths, and processes enhance the capability of tangible and intangible resources (Teece, 2000). Bromiley and Rau (2016) posited that consequences of path dependency support the RBT. Defeng et al. (2017) postulated that the RBT also has influenced the field of entrepreneurship, which considers the economic rents of cognitive processing, knowledge coordination, routines, and so forth. Grant (1996) and Teece (2000) explained that the value of resources is being able to coordinate them and learn new discoveries. Defeng et al. (2017) explained that the coordination of knowledge creates immobile and heterogeneous products and services. Penrose (1959) theorized that a firm's resources were labor, capital, and perhaps land. Lastly, Bromiley and Rau (2016) articulated that the RBT has contributed to the field of international business. The field of international business has been enriched by the RBT (Barney, 1991). Defeng et al. (2017) found that strategically bundled resources facilitate new knowledge, which is a competing factor creating innovation and offering different products and services (Barney, 1991; Porter, 1980). Barney's RBT has consistently contributed to research literature and to the field of strategic management.

Criticism of the Resource-Based Theory

Leaders in the field of strategic management consistently discourse in the RBT as one of the most dominant paradigms in strategic planning (Kellermanns, et al., 2016). The theory has gain popularity, and it has also experienced extensive criticism by a number of scholars. Teece (2000) postulated that the RBT only focus on internal resources that are difficult-to-replicate and not factors of the external environment. Teece

(2000) stated that a company sustains a competitive advantage when it has unique and difficult-to-replicate dynamic capabilities. Porter explained that the industry is shaped by competitive forces and that companies manage the forces can sustain a competitive advantage. The 5 Forces include the threat of new entry, bargaining power of the supplier and the buyer, the threat of substitute products, and the threat of existing rivalry (Porter, 2008; Porter, 1980). Porter (1980, 2008) posited that the RBT ignores the external factors that erode profitability. Priem and Butler (2001) found that the RBT is not actually a theory at all but a framework. Barney's RBT does not fit the description of tautological (Priem & Butler, 2001).

Alternative Theories

Knowledge-based theory. Grant established the knowledge-based theory (KBT) in an attempt to shed light on economic rents of information-based production of a firm (Grant, 1996). Yang, Lee, and Cheng (2016) explained that a firm's competitive advantage comes from the development and acquisition of its tacit and explicit knowledge. The tenants of the KBV are (a) transferability, (b) appropriability, (c) capacity for aggregation, (d) specialization of knowledge acquisition, and (e) the knowledge requirement for production (Grant, 1996; Yang et al.,; Defeng et al., 2017). Grant (1996) described a firm's intangible assets as non-monetary such as problem-solving capabilities, people's capabilities, coordination of competence, and routines.

The knowledge-based theory (KBT) is an extension of the RBT. A firm's tangible and intangible resources is a source of competitive advantage (Barney, 1991; Ambulkar, Blackhurst, & Cantor, 2016; Priem & Butler, 2001; Wernerfelt, 1984). Firms are heterogeneous in nature and compete in imperfect markets (Barney, 1991). Bundled internal resources such as physical, human capital, and technology capital is the source of a firm's sustained competitive advantage (Blome et al., 2014; Mathooko & Ogutu, 2015; Wernerfelt, 1984). The KBT is an extension of the RBT. Grant (1996) explained firms are heterogeneous entities where leaders transform non-monetary resources into a profitable benefit. Defeng et al. (2017) posited that employees in a firm acquire, attain, and retrieve information for practical and strategic application to grow the firm. Yang et al. (2016) argued that internal resources such as management competencies, technical knowledge, and tacit are used to create a sustained competitive advantage. According to Grant (1996), knowledge is the most valuable and intangible resource in a firm that can create a sustained competitive advantage.

Dynamic capabilities. David Teece and colleagues established the framework of dynamic capabilities (DC) in response to company’s inability to achieve a sustained competitive advantage in today’s dynamic market (Breznik & Lahovnik, 2014; Feiler & Teece, 2014; Lin & Wu, 2014; Tsagn, 2014). Teece (2000) wrote that DC is the ability to integrate internal and external resources, build value in them, and reconfigure them to address the dynamic external market. The tenants of DC are (1) sensing, (2) seizing, and (3), reconfiguring (Breznik & Lahovnik, 2014; Teece, 2000). Sensing is the ability to analyzing the internal and external environments and take advantage of existing opportunities; seizing is the ability to convert the discovered opportunity into an innovative product or service to create a competitive advantage in the market.

Reconfiguring is the ability to make changes to the business model to take advantage of the innovative product or service (Bansal & DesJardine, 2014).

Dynamic Capabilities is an extension of Barney's RBT although the theories present clear distinctions (Teece, 2000). Bansal and DesJardine (2014) articulated that DC considers internal resources, paths, and processes and the RBT considers only tangible and intangible resources (Barney, 1991; Teece, 2000). Barney (1991) identified three types of internal resources human capital, technology capital, and organizations that create a sustained competitive advantage. Teece's framework supports the idea that a company's competitive advantage is determined by its difficult-to-replicate internal resources. But Teece speculated that having only difficult-to-replicate internal resources creates competitive parity. To create a sustained competitive advantage, companies must possess both difficult-to-replicate internal resources and dynamic capabilities (Teece, 2000). Bansal & DesJardine (2014) explained that owners of firms who leverage their dynamic capabilities know how to create long-term value for their firm.

Porter's 5 forces. Porter argued that a firm attained a competitive advantage through managing the forces that erode profitability within an industry (Porter, 2008). Leaders of firms compete for industry superiority through controlling resources and mitigating a strategic risk that comes from 5 compelling forces within an industry.

The threat of new entry. New entrants create competition for existing incumbents in an industry by bringing new capacity and a determination to gain market share from the existing incumbents. Dobbs (2014) argued that diversifying new entrants leverage their existing capacity such as brand, knowledge, and strategies, and reputation, which compete and erode probability of existing firms. Industry existing incumbents can soften the blow or mitigate the risk of new entrants by building barriers to entry and making the industry less attractive (Porter, 2008; Prasad & Warrier, 2016). Porter (1980) and Prasad and Warrier (2016) stated that industry existing incumbent can advantage the seven barriers to mitigate the force of new entrants: supply-side economies of scale, demand-side benefits of scale, capital requirements, incumbency advantages independent of sized, unequal access to distribution channels, and restrictive government policy. New entrants create challenges for existing incumbents when the industry is attractive because of low barriers to entry. These challenges erode the profitability of existing incumbents and threaten their stability. Existing incumbents have to create barriers to entry to protect their market share and profits (Adib & Habib, 2016; Porter, 2008).

Supplier power. Small and large businesses depend on suppliers for raw and specialized resources. Small and large business owners align with the appropriate suppliers of specialized and limited materials to convert into products for customer consumption (Porter, 1980; Porter, 2008; Porter, 2011). Suppliers have the ability to drive up the cost for suppliers and affect profitability when they have a strong hold on the market (Bourletidis & Triantafyllopoulos, 2014; Dobbs, 2014; Porter, 1980). Suppliers that have a competitive force can control local supply chains by reducing or increasing prices that erode profitability (Porter, 1980). Supplier power increases when a supplier is dominant in a market and it controls a specialized and limited resource (Porter, 1980; Porter, 2011). These suppliers capture value for themselves at the expense of the buyers. When this occurs, a supplier can easily drive up cost (Kordalska, & Olczyk, 2016; Porter, 1980; Pulaj & Kume, 2014). Buyers who purchase from a supplier with power subject themselves to the strains of the supplier. If another supplier exists with an alternative resource, the buyer may face high switching costs and instead of switching suppliers, the buyer remains in a strained relationship (Porter, 2011). This is a prohibiting situation that must be mitigated if the buyer wants to sustain in business.

Buyer power. Buyers have bargaining power in an industry when they are plentiful, and competitor's products are similar in nature (Bourletidis & Triantafyllopoulos, 2014; Dobbs, 2014; Simatupang et al., 2017). These buyers gain value by forcing down prices (Kordalska, & Olczyk, 2016; Porter, 1980; Pulaj & Kume, 2014). Buyers have bargaining power when they have perfect market knowledge and can informatively negotiate prices (Porter, 1980).

The threat of substitutes. The threat of substitutes are those products that provide the same functionality as existing products (Pulaj & Kume, 2014; Porter, 1980). Porter (1980) wrote substitute products can threaten sells of products from existing incumbents by eroding their profits. Owners of substitute products can affect economic rents in an industry through price erosion. Owners of substitutes can increase switching amongst buyers in an industry. Mathooko and Ogutu (2015) argued that owners of substitutes challenge existing products or services of incumbent business already existing in markets where similar products. The products of these owners can directly threaten the product sales of existing business owners.

Competitive rivalry. The threat of competitive rivalry is high when competitors offer undifferentiated products (Mathooko & Ogutu, 2015; Porter, 1980). Owners of firms who exist in crowded industries with like products and services reside in a competitive market. Some owners of small and large firms consider competitive rivalry the only concerning force and do not consider the other four forces. Additionally, some small business owners look at their industry forces to narrowly instead of looking at it with a broad lens. Intense competitive rivalry may result in decreased prices which lead to lower margins (Porter, 1980; Pulaj & Kume, 2014). Owners of firms seek for industries where competitive power is low which in turn provide more opportunities for firms to achieve higher economic rents.

The RBT is the best fit for my research. Hitt et al., (2016) explained that the RBT provides a method for analyzing the value of internal resources. The KBT and DC are both extensions of the RBT, and neither theory has an application for analyzing the value of internal resources. Barney (1991) posited that Porter's 5 forces examine only the external factors of an industry. The purpose of this research is to concentrate on internal resources owned by a firm and the owner of the firm's ability to leverage the resources to create a sustained competitive advantage.

Small Business Industry

The small business industry is an economic driver that is vast and dynamic (Tchamyou, 2017). Small businesses in the United States have the most dynamic sector in the business industry (Decker, Haltiwanger, Jarmin, & Miranda, 2014; World Bank, 2016). The small business sector comprises of firms with paid employees, non-employee firms, and exporting firms (SBA, 2016a; SBA, 2018c). Ninety-nine percent of small businesses have paid employees, 97.9% are exporting firms, 47,5% are private sector employee, and 40.8% are responsible for 40.8% of private sector payroll (SBA, 2018e). Small businesses have infused more than 55% new jobs into the economy (USCB, 2015; SBA, 2016a; SBA, 2018e). SBA defines small businesses as independent establishments that employ fewer than 500 employees, do not pose a dominating threat in the field, and purposely seeks profit (Parsa et al., 2015; SBA, 2016a).

Owners of small businesses play a vital role in the growth of local, national, and international economies (Sedláček & Sterk, 2017; Ribeiro-Soriano, 2017; SBA, 2016a); they add value to the economy by providing the majority of the world's exporting, patents, and innovation. Ninety-seven percent of small business in the United States are responsible for all of the nation's exporting (USCB, 2015). Small business exporters create a robust and viable economy (Dal Bianco, Amini, & Signorelli, 2017; USCB, 2015). Small business owners create value for the economy through patents. Small business owners choose patent production to separate themselves from their competitors and to establish a competitive advantage (Akcigit & Kerr, 2018). Patent production in small business creates value for international and national economies (Akcigit & Kerr, 2018; Hovhannisyan & Keller, 2015). In 2010, small business owners were responsible one-third of all patent’s productions (SBA, 2016a).

Small business owners contribute more innovative products to the economy than larger businesses. Innovation is a source of competition, subsistence, and economic stability for small businesses. Innovation is considered a new ideal and the process of transforming abstract concepts into new creations (Jardon, 2016). Innovation is the engine behind the success of some small businesses (Jardon, 2016). Small business owners who produce innovative products have more financial success and freedom (Zulu-Chisanga, Boso, Adeola, & Oghazi, 2016). Small business owners create vital and competitive economies through exporting, innovation, and patent production (Memili, Fang, Chrisman, & De Massis, 2015). Porter (2008) explained that competition was heightened in industries with lots of small businesses. Owners of small businesses influence the economy via stimulating job creation and economically growing and developing international, national, and local markets.

Influence of Small Business on the Economy

Small businesses have an undeniable influence on the local, national, and international market and economic growth. There are more than 30.2 million small businesses in America that account for 66% of new net jobs (SBA, 2018a; USCB, 2015). Between 2000 and 2017, small businesses created 8.4 million net new jobs (SBA, 2018e). Owners of small businesses create economic growth and market vitality through patent production, innovation discovery, exporting resources, and job creation (Dal Bianco et al., 2017; Jardon, 2016; Memili et al., 2015). Small business exporters in the United States identified constitute about 97% of all exporters (USCB, 2015). Some small business owners produce patent that creates value for international and national economies (Akcigit & Kerr, 2018; Hovhannisyan & Keller, 2015). Small business owners who produce innovations garner higher sales and firm growth (Bigliardi, 2013). Small business owners directly influence international, national, and local markets.

International economy. Owners of small businesses are major contributors to the gross domestic product (GDP) and growth in international economies (Decker et al., 2014; Laurențiu, 2016). In the United States, small businesses account for 50% of the nation's GDP and 66% of the jobs created in the past three years (Dal Bianco et al., 2017; SBA, 2016a). In China, there are six million registered private businesses that account for 65% of the country's GDP, which is a 10-fold jump since the mid-90s (Ahlstrom & Ding, 2014). In Japan, small businesses account for 64% of the GDP (Fouad, 2013). In Egypt, however, small businesses account for only 25% of the GDP, which is considered quite high in a developing country that is consistently in turmoil (El-Said, Al-Said, & Zaki, 2015). The role of small businesses in the international landscape is vital to the stability of the global economy, but their economic influence began in their national and local markets.

National economy. Small businesses account for 66% of all new jobs created in America and represent 99.7 percent of all employer firms (SBA, 2016a; SBA, 2018e). Small business with 1-499 employees add more jobs to the United States economy than larger businesses (SBA, 2014). Between 2015 and 2015, small business owners hired more than 55% of the entire workforce in the United States (Decker et al., 2014; Memili et al., 2015; SBA, 2016a; USCB, 2015). Today, there are more than 28 million small businesses in the United States (SBA, 2016a; USCB, 2015). In the United States, small businesses account for 50% of the nation's GDP (Dal Bianco et al., 2017; SBA, 2016c). In 2017, the GDP was 19.39 trillion United States dollars (U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis [USBEA], 2018). GDP is a measure of valued good and services produced by companies within a nation in comparison to goods and services provided by other nations

(USBEA, 2018). The GDP in the United States has consistently sustained its value and ranking for multiple years.

Small businesses in Arkansas. The growth of small businesses in local communities have created stability, addressed socioeconomic factors, and given hope to families (Memili et al., 2015). In 2018, small businesses in a city in the southern region of the United States accounted for 247,018 and employee more than 479,727, which is 47.8% of the private workforce (SBA, 2018b). In 2016, small business owners received 38,640 loans under $100,000 from lending institutions (SBA, 2018b). This research takes a broad view of the literature to assess the factors of failure and successes regarding small businesses, specifically quick-service restaurants. Owners of small businesses play a critical role in the stabilizing of the international, national, and local economies. Owners of small businesses are resilient and continue to stimulate international, national, and local economies.

Small Business Successes

The success and stability of small businesses are vital to the local, national, and international economy (Memili et al., 2015). Two government reports published that 49% of small businesses survive 5 years or more, a third survive at least 10 years, and a quarter stays in business 15 years or more (BLS, 2015; SBA, 2016a). Small businesses in the United States account of 50% of the employees in the private sector and 20% of job created by startups (Decker, et al., 2014). In the past 20 years, owners of small businesses have been responsible for the most successful products and services across the globe and the growth of the economy (Burns, 2016; Dal Bianco et al., 2017).

Between the 70's and 90's, stories of successful small business made the headlines across the globe. Citizens across the globe witnessed the effects of small businesses on the economy. Companies such as Apple, Microsoft, Alibaba, Netflix, Shake Shack, Amazon, and many more entered into their perspective industries and created innovative products, introduced new services, and grew internationally. In the late 1970s, Bill Gates and Paul Allen founded Microsoft, a small technology business, in the garage of Bill's parents. By 1980 and 1997, Microsoft had a turnover over more than $6.5 billion, and its employee staffing level has increased to 21,000 employees (Burns, 2016). Microsoft software products are used by millions around the globe.

Alibaba, a China-based company, founded by Jack Ma in his small apartment in China, entered the market in 1999 as a small online retailer using a website to help exporters in China sell their products internationally (Anwar, 2017). Jack Ma started the company with 18 other people and by 2014, Alibaba had become a global leader and was worth $231 billion dollars (Anwar, 2017). Apple, founded by Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak, two college dropouts who entered into the market in 1976 as a small technology business (Richard & Terrell, 2015). Jobs' founded the small business in his parent's garage. The first product they produced was the Apple I, built with a simple keyboard that announced their beginning in the computer industry. Jobs and Wozniak introduced the Apple II – the first-ever color graphic – which revolutionized the computer industry and by 1980 and sales had exceeded $117 million (Richard & Terrell, 2015). Jobs and Wozniak continued their success by introducing the iPod, iTunes, and the iPad (Richard & Terrell, 2015). Small businesses continue to be a crucial part of the international and United States economy although they have a multitude of challenges that threaten their very existence.

Small Business Failures

Small business owners have a strong role in stabilizing global markets, but the high percentage of small business failures threaten the stability of local, national, and international economies. Over the past 25 years, seven to nine percent of employee firms close a year in America (SBA, 2018a). Small business failure rates have been consistent over a 5 year period (SBA, 2016a). Eighty percent of small businesses with employees survive their first year in business and less than 50% survive their 5th year in business (BLS, 2015). More than 77% of newly established small businesses survived only one year, and less than half fail to survive beyond 5th year of business (BLS, 2015; SBA, 2016a).

There are multiple reasons for the low survival rates of small businesses. Some owners of small businesses fail to formulate long-term, competitive strategies that help them to sustain in businesses for a long period (Kaplan & Norton, 2008; Shukla & Shukla, 2014); some owners of small to medium-sized businesses who fail to innovate sustain in business for a short period (Porter, 2008). Although the previously mentioned statistics are alarming, I will address the lack of clarity surrounding how researchers conceptualize failure and the multitude of factors that lead to small business failures at a different level of analysis.

Researchers have conceptualized small business failures based on two distinct exiting factors: the failure of the firm and the failure of the owner (Jenkins & McKelvie, 2016). Researchers view the failure of the firm as a negative exit. Firms that fail are forced out of the business because of insolvency, mergers, and acquisitions. In 2015, owners of thirty-seven percent of small businesses existed the industry because of low sales and cash flow (SBA, 2018a). Researcher's view of the failure of an owner as a positive exit. Owners exit the business for multiple reasons when insolvency is not the cause. Owners harvest their investments to pursue other career opportunities, investment interest, and retirement (Jenkins & McKelvie, 2016).

In 2017, six percent of business closures occurred because the owners started another business (SBA, 2018a). Although the failure of an owner is considered positive, both types of failures contributed to the high percentage of small business failures in the United States that leads to economic instability in local markets. Knowing both failure types are important and helps to simplify the complexity of small business failures. But I did not design this research to disaggregate small business failure types in the failure of the firm or the failure of the owner. I designed this research to view business failure as an aggregate. In the next subsection, I take a closer analysis of small business failures at different levels. Research shows that some main reasons why small businesses fail are because of limited access to finance, inept skills, inattentive to business strategies, and inability to leverage human capital (SBA, 2018a; Teece, 2000; Barney, 1991; Kaplan & Norton, 2008; Self et al., 2015; Porter, 2008).

Limited access to finance. Owners of small business rely heavily on financial support from banks and creditors to sustain in business (Westrenius & Barnes, 2015; SBA, 2016b; SBA, 2018e). Small business owners need access to funding for multiple reasons but specifically for purchasing inventory and expanding their business (SBA, 2016b; SBA, 2018a). Small business owners fail to sustain in business because of tightening regulation (Westrenius& Barnes, 2015; Bourletidis & Triantafyllopoulos, 2014; Falkner & Hiebl, 2015). Owners of small firms cannot raise capital like large firms (Burns, 2016). Small business owners struggle to sustain in businesses because of limited financial opportunities that are afforded to large businesses (Falkner & Hiebl, 2015). Researchers have found that small business owners who have access to financing sustain in business longer (Palia, 2016).

The lack of small business lending by the banking industry and creditors is a factor in the instability and failure of some small businesses (Bishop, 2015). Between 2008 and 2014, executives of major banking institutes sustain from providing businesses loans to small business owners (Olubunmi, Timothy, Alabi, & Israel, 2014). Commercial bankers sustained from lending large sums of money to small businesses. As a result, the rapid backlash of the decision not to provide cash injections to small businesses caused unemployment to rise, wages to fall, and small businesses to close (Bishop, 2015).

By 2010, commercial bankers began to ease the tight lending conditions on small businesses that had begun in early 2007 (SBA, 2016b). The economic stability for small businesses rebounded and the vitality of local economies began to thrive. In a vibrant economy, owners of small business and startups receive at least three-quarters of the funds from banks via loans and creditors (SBA, 2016c). Owners of small businesses depend on business loans to sustain in business for a long period (Olubunmi et al., 2014).

Inept skills. Small businesses owners are the least skilled workforce in comparison to their counterparts, which contribute to their failure rate (Hitt et al., 2016; Bishop, 2015). Grant (1996) posited that intangible knowledge-based resources gives a firm its competitive advantage (Grant, 1996; Defeng et al., 2017). The acquisition of a firm's tacit and explicit knowledge and the development of its existing human capital give a firm its competitive advantage (Blome et al. & 2014; Yang et al., 2016). Bishop (2015) stated that there is a positive correlation between a firm's size and training. Owners of larger firms invest more in training and education and smaller firms invest in less training and education (Bishop, 2015). Owners of small firm's approach to training and educating their staff is by trial and error (Porter, 2008). Small business owners could consider human capital as a source of competitive advantage and begin to invest in it like their counterparts to sustain in business and compete for profitability. (Olubunmi et al., 2014).

Inattentive to business strategies. Some small business owners have an inattentive approach to strategy because of limited resources, which cause them to focus more on short-term fixes and not future horizons (Bengtsson & Johansson, 2014). Having limited and sporadic resources prevent small business owners from charting out long-term strategies (Schumann, Scott, Kalinowski, Kaliski, & Pragman, 2014). Porter (2008) stated that there is a positive correlation between analyzing, developing, and managing planning and the financial performance of a business. Small business owners who use strategies to sustain in business leverage their limited resources and make decisions about the future of the company (Hitt et al., 2016). They tend to analyze the external environment and identify opportunities to align their resources to the external market to maintain a competitive advantage (Gumusluoglu & Acur, 2016; Porter, 2011; Lueg, 2015). Owners of small and large businesses that fail to develop and manage strategies lack competitive advantage and survive short periods (Hitt et al., 2016; Porter, 2011).

Some small business owners fail to see beyond their business environment to identify potential threats and opportunities to capture in a strategy. Some owners of small businesses fail to recognize new entrants, substitute products, and strategies of their rivalries (Porter, 1980). Some small business owner’s failure to mitigate threats from new entrants, to know the competitor’s position, and to identify substitute products underscores business profitability (Porter, 2011; Safari, Farhang, & Rajabzadehyazdi, 2016). Some small and large businesses owners fail to understand the benefits of a strategy and how it can potentially increase their longevity and competitive advantage (Porter, 2011).

Inability to leverage human capital. Small business owners who fail to leverage their human capital have little success in achieving optimal growth in business (Michael, Saban, & Abdurahman, 2016). Human capital is a source of sustained competitive advantage when it is valuable and rare (Hitt et al., 2016; Jardon, 2016; Teece, 2000). Small business owners who lack formal education and skills find it difficult to determine the value and rareness in their human capital (Bishop, 2015; Jardon, 2016). Competitive advantage is created by having an internal resource that is both valuable and rare (Hitt et al., 2016). Barney mentioned that internal resources consisted of technology capital, organizational capital, and human capital (Barney, 1991). Kaplan & Norton (2008) described human capital at the individual level of employment. Human capital is valuable when leaders of corporations or small businesses invest in the development of their employees (Jardon, 2016; Teece, 2000). Small business owners who do not invest in their human capital fail to leverage this valuable resource.

Small businesses have a higher failure rate than larger firms (BLS, 2015). The failure of small businesses has been steady and consistent over a 5 year period (SBA, 2016a). The failure of some owners of small businesses is because of limited access to finance, inept skills, inattentive to business strategies, and an inability to leverage human capital (Westrenius & Barnes, 2015; Hitt et al., 2016; Porter, 2008). Not all owners of small businesses fail. In fact, the owner of small businesses who sustain beyond the first 5 years incorporates successful strategies that increase their sustainability.

Successful Small Business Strategies

Small businesses have been the cornerstone for vibrant national and international economies from decades (Decker et al., 2014; Memili et al., 2015). Small business owners have influenced local economies with massive job creation and international markets with strategic marketing and growth and development strategies (BLS, 2015; Porter, 2008). There are more than 20 million small business in the United States that are responsible for 63% of all new jobs created in America (SBA, 2016a; USCB, 2015). As a result, the success of small businesses vital to economic stability and socioeconomic development and growth. In this subsection, I will explore literature to learn about strategies that have led to small business success, long period growth, and sustainability.

Business strategic plans. Small and large business owners use business strategies to organize plans, to differentiate themselves from their competitors, and to set their strategic horizon (Ibrahim, 2015). The Harvard Business School in the 1920’s is the first formal academic treatment of the subject of strategic planning as a process that looks at long-term planning (Candy & Gordon, 2011; Davis & Simpson, 2017). Akkermans and Van Oorschot (2018) described strategic planning as a management process used for bridging together multiple financial and non-financial functions and activities to strategically advance a firm. Ensari (2016) argued that the essence of strategy formulation is to identify a unique position in the market and to establish a new and different set of activities to achieve unique and different results (Olubunmi et al., (2014) and Davis and Simpson (2017) posited that strategy is conceived through the lens of three parts: differentiation, focus, and overall cost leadership. A strategy is a management process that integrates the perspectives of financials, customers, operations, and human capital, including technology capital and cultural capital to create a manageable, sustained competitive advantage for a firm (Akkermans & Van Oorschot, 2018).

Researchers found that there are multiple frameworks and tools to build a business strategy. Porter (1980) explained that leaders, managers, and business owners who use the competitive strategy framework seek to be the more favorable and dominant in their markets. Porter’s competitive strategy framework identifies with three methods for building strategies: overall cost leadership, differentiation, and focus (Ensari, 2016; Porter, 1980). Leaders of firms compete for industry superiority through trading off non-competing positions in the market while competing for either an overall cost leadership, a differentiation position, or a focus position (Porter, 2008). Porter (1980) stipulated that companies gain competitive advantage through strategic positioning and choosing a unique set of activities that differ from their competitors. Leaders use overall cost leadership strategies to attract cost-sensitive customers (Ensari, 2016; Kyengo, Ombui, & Iravo, 2016). Owners of small and large firms who use the overall cost leadership strategy provide low-cost products at a reasonable price (Porter, 1980); they tend to compete on pricing and target cost-sensitive buyers (Ensari, 2016; Kyengo et al., 2016). Owners of small and large firms use differentiation strategies to attract customers who are willing to pay premium prices for products and services (Porter, 1980). Business owners who use differentiation strategies offer customers high-quality products and services that are deemed better than their competitors (Porter, 1980; Simeone, Marotta, & Rotondo, 2015).

Contrary to differentiation strategies, business owners use Blue Ocean Strategies (BOS) to chart their own independent, noncompetitive path and Platform strategies to leverage existing resources not owned by the firm to create a competitive advantage. Agnihotri (2016) explained that BOS seek to make the competition irrelevant. BOS are non-disruptive because practitioners of this framework expand markets without taking market share (Parker, Van Alstyne, & Choudary, 2016). Agnihotri (2016) postulated that Platform strategies are designed to coordinate task between the consumer of products and the producer. Business owners who use Platform Strategies use existing resources of non-employee producers to provide a quality service to customers (Fung, Fung, & Wind, 2007; Parker et al., 2016). Business owners develop technical applications that centralize interactions and transactions between consumers and producers (Agnihotri, 2016); these business owners create viable and profitable network markets where consumers and producers can trade roles at any moment and engage in transactions (Fung et al., 2007).

Human capital. Human capital is an intangible internal resource that has the potential to help a small business sustain a competitive advantage when the resource is exploited (Hitt et al., 2016; Jardon, 2016; Kaplan & Norton, 2008). Some owners of small businesses invest in their human capital by building capabilities to create a source of competitive advantage (Teece, 2000). Grant (1996) posited that knowledge-based internal resources are more superior then product-based resources. Some owners of small businesses acquire human capital that has the right capabilities to manage and deliver business value and aligns with the firm's strategic goals (Wright, Coff, & Moliterno, 2014).

Some owners of small businesses lack the capability and skill to navigate the strategic landscape and deliver unique value to their host organizations through effective strategic human capital practices. Owners of small businesses in less developed countries use human capital as a source of innovation to create competitive advantage (Jardon, 2016). Effectively recruiting, hiring, and investing in the talent development of human capital can have the potential to create a competitive advantage for a firm. Human capital is considered an internal resource that when used effectively and especially for discovering innovative products creates a rare value for small businesses (Hitt et al., 2016; Jardon, 2016; Teece, 2000).

Human capital is a source of competitive advantage when it is aligned with a company's strategy (Lueg, 2015). The concept of alignment of human capital to a strategy became popular in the book *Strategy-Focused Organization*. In this book, Kaplan and Norton (2008) explained that positive synergy comes from the alignment of human capital to a strategy. Small and large business owners who organize their human capital resources around a strategic direction have more resiliency than their counterparts (Hitt et al., 2016; Porter, 2011). Kaplan and Norton (2006) argued that human capital has to align with a strategy to achieve optimal outcomes. Kellermanns et al. (2016) postulated that human capital alignment to a strategy creates synergy and increases the chances of a firm achieving optimal outcomes.

Small business leadership. Leaders of small businesses are quite different than leaders in large firms (Burns, 2016). Leaders of small businesses lack the resources to train and educate their employees, so their employees learn through trial and error (Porter, 2008). Leaders of large firms invest in their human capital to ensure that they remain competitive in their roles (Kaplan & Norton, 2008). Training leaders on topics such as strategic thinking, finance, and emotional intelligence are commonplace. Leaders who lead with emotional intelligence tend to be able to better engage their workers (Holt, Marques, Hu, & Wood, 2017; Schutte & Loi, 2014); these leaders know how their emotions affect work outcomes (Holt, Marques, Hu, & Wood, 2017). These leaders understand the dynamism of work relationships and how to manage them for optimal outcomes (Holt et al., 2017; Schutte & Loi, 2014). Postma and Zwart (2015) expressed that a small business who are educated sustain in business longer than its counterpart.

Leaders who coach their employees and build their technical knowledge, technological management knowledge, business knowledge have the dynamic capabilities to adapt to changing environments (Wamba, Gunasekaran, Akter, Ren, Dubey, & Childe, 2017). Successful small business leaders understand how to examine their external markets and internal operations to reconfigure their businesses to sustain a competitive advantage (Lussier & Corman, 2015).

Technology capital. Technology is a major part of a firm's value chain and a source of competitive advantage (Porter, 2008). Small business owners who leverage technology to achieve a sustained competitive advantage remain in business longer (Hitt et al., 2016). Competitive technologies for owners of small businesses are enterprise resource planning system (ERP), social media platforms, mobile devices, and crowdfunding. Owners of small businesses in Thailand can gain a competitive advantage by adopting ERP and e-business applications (Konthong, Suwan-natada, & Sompong, 2016). An ERP is an integrated database platform that provides data mining, data integration, and data analysis. An e-business application is a customer-facing platform which gives the customer access to products via the internet; e-business is a web-based e-commerce solution that links internal operations to external desires. Konthong et al. (2016) found that having a unique and valuable ERP leverages competitive advantage by providing leaders, managers, and employees with access to a wide range of data. Leaders can use ERP data to analyze outcomes, make informed business decisions, and identify best practices.

Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and LinkedIn provide small businesses with low cost marketing and e-commerce functionality (Xie, Li, Wang, Chen, Li, Wang, & Min, 2016). Small business owners can set up social media accounts and use these accounts to promote their products, conduct low-cost e-commerce transactions, build partnerships, and establish bi-directional communication with their customers (Broekemier, Chau, & Seshadri, 2015). Small business owners can develop low-cost commercials using YouTube and integrate them across all mentioned platforms (Xie, et al., 2016). Owners of small businesses study consumer behaviors using these platforms data analytics functions to drive customer behavior (Xie, et al., 2016). Mobile technologies such as smartphones and tablets can create a source of competitive advantage for small business owners (Berman, 2016). Small business owners use inexpensive digital graphics and video and audio media to design marketing campaigns to communicate and market directly to customers (Berman, 2016). Consumer data that is captured on a business's ERP such as physical address, mobile telephone number, email address, date of birth, and anniversary can be used for mobile marketing directly to customers (Konthong et al., 2016). Crowdfunding is another use of technology that has become a source of financial stability and longevity for small businesses.

Crowdfunding is a social media platform used for fundraising. Small business owners are turning to crowdfunding as a source of financial infusion (Zhou, Lu, Fan, & Wang, 2018). Small business owners use crowdfunding to raise small amounts of money to help fulfill business endeavors to sustain in business for short and long periods

(Drover, Busenitz, Matusik, Townsend, Anglin, & Dushnitsky, 2017). Crowdfunding platforms such as GoFundMe is user-friendly and easily integrated into across social media platforms. Owners of small firms cannot raise capital like leaders of large firms (Burns, 2016). As a result, crowdfunding has become a source of funding for small businesses.

Innovation. Innovation is a source of competition, subsistence, and economic stability for small businesses. The potential for innovation in small businesses begins with creating a work environment that facilitates innovation. Jardon (2016) explained that a work environment that facilitates innovation is called innovativeness. An example of an innovativeness work environment is one that includes an R & D unit, information systems, multiple technologies, and dynamic human capital (Jardon, 2016; Teece, 2000). Teece (2000) articulated that the ability to innovate begins with reconfiguring tangible and intangible resources in a dynamic market (Teece, 2000). Grant (1996) wrote that human capital is a knowledge-based intangible resource that is a firm's most valuable resource and a source of innovation. Dyer, Gregersen, and Christensen (2011) make a case that human capital is a source of innovation. In the book *Innovator's DNA*, Dyer et al., (2011) wrote that innovation is a learnable skill that has five behaviors: (1) associating, (2) questioning, (3) observing, (4) networking, and (5) experimenting. When the five behaviors mentioned above are included in a work environment, the potential for innovation is high.

Researchers describe innovation in multiple ways, but its core meaning and functionality is the same. Innovation is considered a new ideal and the process of transforming abstract concepts into new creations (Bigliardi, 2013; Jardon, 2016). Innovation is the application of new solutions through a process of knowledge gathering, synthesizing, and processing that translates to and new or modified products or services (Christensen, 2003). Breznik and Lahovnik (2014) wrote that innovation is created through sensing unique concepts in the market, seizing them, and shaping or reconfiguring into tangible products or services for customer consumption. Dyer et al. (2011) wrote that the heart of innovation comes from diversity in the workforce, including leadership. Christensen (2003) wrote that innovators have creative intelligence skills that enable the discovery of new ideas and information. Having the capability to innovate is critical for the survival of small business owners because outcomes of innovation have sustained and advanced the small business sector.

Innovation is a driving force behind the success of some small businesses (Jardon, 2016). Researchers have studied the economic impact that innovation brings to small businesses. Researchers measure the effectiveness of innovation through products and sales, quality of a product, and impact on society (Hervas-Oliver, Sempere-Ripoll, & Boronat-Moll, 2014). Innovative small businesses have higher sales and profits than non-innovative small businesses (Zulu-Chisanga, Boso, Adeola, & Oghazi, 2016); they create economic growth and market vitality through patent production, innovation discovery, exporting resources, and job creation (Dal Bianco et al., 2017; Jardon, 2016; Memili et al., 2015). Innovative small businesses have diverse customer segments providing them with more economic opportunities (Zulu-Chisanga et al., 2016). Some small business owners produce patent that creates value for international and national economies

(Hovhannisyan & Keller, 2015; Akcigit & Kerr, 2018). Innovative small business is a source of economic stability for local communities (Jardon, 2016; Hervas-Oliver et al., 2014). Innovative new products create superior financial successes and a competitive advantage for small business (Zulu-Chisanga et al., 2016).

Internationalization. The term internationalization means the adaption of a global strategic business model, processes, procedures, protocols, and products for marketing to a foreign segment (Peña-Vinces, Casanova, Guillen, & Urbano, 2017). To enter into this market, owners of small businesses must study foreign cultures, governments, and products. Peña-Vinces et al. (2017) wrote that small business owners must understand the behaviors of international consumerism, specifically the countries they plan to service. Small business owners must become fluent in the foreign languages of their targeted countries or hire interpreters to assist them in communicating with the populace of their targeted countries (Peña-Vinces et al., 2017).

The attraction of small business owners to the international market has created friendly competition and have begun to stabilize local economies (Michael Saban, & Abdurahman, 2016). Some successful small businesses owners leverage their strategic prowess when they venture into international markets. The success of a small firm's global strategy depends on how differs from its competitors (Porter, 1980; Porter, 2008). (Porter, 1980; Porter, 2008). Owners of small and large firms who use differentiation strategies offer customers high-quality products and services that are deemed better than their competitors (Porter, 1980; Simeone, Marotta, & Rotondo, 2015). To survive as an international small business, owners must offer unique products that separate them from their competitors.

Business owners gain competitive advantage by using differentiation strategies and by acquiring and developing their human capital. Porter (2008) posited that owners of firms that compete internationally must use differentiation strategies to sustain. Cambell and Park (2017) found that exploited tangible and intangible internal resources of a firm can provide a sustained competitive advantage. Fang, Kotlar, Memili, Chrisman, and De Massis (2018) wrote that human capital is a knowledge-based resource that dynamically increases through the acquisition of new knowledge and new experiences. Pisano (2017) wrote a firm that has dynamic capabilities is nimble and a source of innovation. Owners of firms who use differentiation strategies and have the capabilities to sense, seize, and reconfigure products or services can have a sustained competitive advantage (Pisano, 2017).

The Restaurant Industry in the United States

The restaurant food service and drinking industry is the largest industry in leisure and hospitality in America adding 1.3 million jobs to the economy between 2010 to 2014 (BLS, 2014). According to the 2015 USCB, there are 476,492 restaurants in America with more than 9,292,093 employees. In 2015, the annual payroll for restaurants in American was $154,509,536 (USCB, 2016). The main two classifications of restaurants are full-service and quick-service restaurants. Owners of full-service restaurants offer unique and high-quality food at a premium price. Full-service restaurants are considered casual and fine-dining establishments where patrons pay after eating and are seated and serviced by waiters or waitresses (USCB, 2015). There are more than 243,100 full-service restaurants in America that contributed more than $97,880,864 to the economy and employed 5,253,936 (USCB, 2015). Quick-service restaurants are small business establishments where patrons order their food from the counter and drive-thru before eating (USCB, 2015); they account for more than 275,000 restaurants in America and employee more than 5,000,000 people across the country (USCB, 2015). Nonetheless, the restaurant industry is a driving factor in the growth of the economy in the United States. As a result, the sustainability of the restaurant industry is crucial for Americans. But according to Parsa et al. (2015), the restaurant industry's failure rates is the highest among the retail and service industries.

Restaurant failures. The restaurant industry is one of the driving forces in the United States' economy (Self et al., 2015). The definition of restaurant failure is rooted in bankruptcy and not other terminal types such as business turnover, geographic location, and positioning (Parsa et al., 2015). Previous researchers only concentrated their efforts on bankruptcy. As a result, there is no absolute definition of restaurant failure beyond the bankruptcy terminal type. Nonetheless, the definition I used in this study for restaurant failure is a change in firm ownership whether through the owner exiting the firm or the failure of the firm (Parsa et al., 2015). There are multiple terminal types of restaurant failures such as a size of the firm, over and underutilization of technology, management capabilities and inadequacies, bankruptcy, turnover, geographic location, environment, and positioning (Self et al., 2015). The failure types that I examined in this subsection are bankruptcy, turnover, geographic location, change of ownership, managerial incompetency, environment, and differentiation.

Bankruptcy. Bankruptcy is the most common type of restaurant failure reported. Bankruptcy accounts for 10% of all small business failures (Melcarne & Ramello, 2017). Unlike non-economic failures that go unreported, bankruptcy is a legal status that is filed through the courts and reported to creditors announcing the inability and/or negotiation to repay a debt (Jenkins & McKelvie, 2016). Owners of small businesses that file bankruptcy have a low financial performance in which the business becomes insolvent (Jenkins & McKelvie, 2016).

Turnover. The term restaurant turnover consists of multiple factors. Turnover describes the number of restaurant closures within a period of time and includes causes such as bankruptcy, change of leadership, management incompetencies, and environmental concerns (Parsa et al., 2015). In a study conducted by Parsa et al. (2015), they examined restaurant ownership turnover (ROT) using a sample of 2,439 operating-license permits from the Columbus health department. The sample included independent restaurants (1,483) and chain restaurants (956). They examined ROT between the years of 1996 through 1999, and they calculated for one-, two-, and three year periods. For independent restaurants, year one had the highest percentage of failure at 26.16% followed by year two at 19.23%, and year three failure rate of 14.35% (Self et al., 2015). The failure rate for independent restaurants 61.36% is based on a three-year cumulative average was slightly higher than chain restaurants 57.22% (Self et al., 2015). The main factors in the research identified a size of ownership meaning the number of units owned by the firm, family sacrifice, strategic positioning, and geographic location.

Geographic location. An inopportune geographic location of a restaurant is a cause for failure (Chou, Hsu, & Chen, 2008). According to Parsa et al. (2015), the density of a location where a restaurant resides is a factor in its sustainability or closure. Restaurant owners must consider the zip code, density of a community, and the demographics of a community when establishing a restaurant (Self et al., 2015). In a study conducted by Parsa et al. (2015), the findings show that restaurants located in communities with a non-household, renters (62.14%) had the lowest percentage of restaurant failures than those in home-owner communities. Renters in non-household communities supported and frequented local restaurants more often than families in home-owner communities. Owners of restaurants in overconcentrated communities must compete for market share if they plan to sustain in business (Chou et al., 2008). Competition is high in overconcentrated communities where business owners must use differentiation strategies to compete. Non-differentiated strategies reduce the chances of sustainability in overconcentrated communities (Parsa et al., 2015). Chou et al., (2008) wrote that accessibility and convenience are two factors for sustaining restaurants. Restaurants in prime locations have a better chance of sustaining for long periods.

Change of ownership. Ownership change in restaurants is common and sometimes leads to restaurant closures. In 2017, six percent of business closures occurred because the owners started another business (SBA, 2018a). Researcher's view of the failure of an owner as a positive exit. Owners exit the business for multiple reasons when insolvency is not the cause. Owners harvest their investments to pursue other career opportunities, investment interest, and retirement (Jenkins & McKelvie, 2016). Although view as positive, the change of ownership is a terminal type and disrupts economic growth in local communities.

Managerial incompetency. Some restaurant owners lack the necessary managerial skills and education to successfully manage their business (Bishop, 2015). Management capabilities are crucial in preventing restaurant failure (Self et al., 2015). Small firm's approach to training their staff by trial and error (Porter, 2008). Larger firms invest more in training and education and smaller firms invest in less (Bishop, 2015). In order for small business owners to sustain in business and compete for profitability, they must consider human capital as a source of competitive advantage (Barney, 1991). Restaurant owners sustain in business because of their ability to define clear business concepts and activities and effectively manage them. The term clear concept does not mean having a comprehensive long-term strategic plan but having a sensitivity to external and internal factors (Self et al., 2015).

Differentiation. Being unique is a factor in all industries but specifically in the restaurant industry (Morgan, 2015). Restaurant owners must know how to strategically differentiate themselves from their competitors (Ibrahim, 2015; Porter, 1980). Restaurant owners who fail to differentiate from competitors in a market increase their chances of failure. Parsa et al. (2015) wrote that restaurant owners in concentrated areas must stand out and offer different selections to compete in the marketplace. Differentiation is a strategy that attracts customers through premium products and services (Ibrahim, 2015).

Business owners that use differentiation strategies offer customers high-quality products and services that are deemed better than their competitors (Porter, 1980; Simeone et al., 2015).

The restaurant food service and drinking industry as a whole is an economic engine for the United States' economy that accounts for than 9,292,093 employees with an annual payroll of $154,509,536 (USCB, 2015). Yet, similar to all industries, the restaurant industry has opportunities to reduce its failure rate and to increase business sustainability rate. The two main contributors of the restaurant food service and drinking industry are full-service that account for 243,100 restaurants and quick-service restaurants that account for 275,000. Full-service restaurants account for 243,100 establishments and quick-service restaurants account for 275,000 establishments (USCB, 2015). Self et al., (2015) wrote that 25% of quick-service restaurants fail within the first year of business, and 60% survive less than 3 years. In the next subsection, I explore the phenomena of quick-service restaurants.

Quick-service restaurants. The quick-service restaurant industry is highly competitive and dominated by franchises (IBIS World, 2018). Franchise-based quick-service restaurant owners combined global brand value is about $240 billion and the 50 largest brands account for 20% of revenue (First Research, 2018). In 2018, McDonald's Corporation market share was 14.5%, Yum Brands such as market share was 6.9%, and Subway's market share was 4.1% in the fast-food, quick-service restaurant industry (IBIS World, 2018). In 2018, quick-service restaurants profited 14.8 billion and accounted for $56,628,672 in annual payroll in the United States (IBIS World, 2018; USCB, 2015).

More than 50% of restaurants in the United States are quick-service restaurants (USCB, 2015). Quick-service restaurants are small business establishments where patrons order their food from the counter or drive-thru before eating it (IBIS World, 2018). Patrons can either consume food and drinks on premises or place a call-in order or online orders for food deliveries (USCB, 2015).

Consumer taste drives the menu items and this translates into product sales (First Research, 2018). The product sales in percent for quick-service restaurants are hamburgers (40%), other (17%), sandwiches (12%), pizza (11%), Mexican (10%), and chicken (10%) (IBIS World, 2018; USCB, 2015). High-calorie menu items are descriptively appealing and attractive to consumers (Turnwald, Jurafsky, Conner, & Crum, 2017). Personal income is a driver of demand for quick-service restaurants. In 2018, personal income in the United States rose by 4.7% and in turn demand for quick-service restaurants increased by 6.2% (First Research, 2018). Owners of quick-service restaurants who study market trends and adapt them can sustain a competitive advantage (Porter, 1980). Owners of quick-service restaurants have to be able to sense, seize opportunities and reconfigure current operations to sustain a competitive advantage (Breznik & Lahovnik, 2014; Teece, 2000).

Profitability for quick-service restaurant depends on effective and efficient operations and strategic marketing (Porter & Lee, 2015). Porter (2011) posited that operational effectiveness is not a strategy but when it aligns with stratgey, it can create a competitive advantage. Operational effectiveness means to embrace best practices and to reduce waste in processes to increase volume, throughput, and speed (Porter & Lee, 2015; Porter, 2011). Some owners of quick-service restaurants drive outcomes through the speed of a transaction, which comes from efficient processes and competitive technology. Technology such as point-of-sale (POS) can help owners of restaurants operate more efficiently (First Research, 2018; Kaptein & Parvinen, 2015). Strategic marketing, on the other hand, is using traditional and internet-based marketing approaches. The Internet and social media marketing are transforming small businesses (Rad, Ghorabi, Rafiee, Rad, 2015). They are beneficial for small businesses to achieve a competitive advantage provided that branding is essential and non-traditional marketing is inexpensive (Mallapragada, Grewal, Mehta, & Dharwadkar, 2015). Technology has become essential for small businesses, but small business owners are hesitant to adopt modern Internet marketing strategies (Fillis, 2015). The lack of adopting new marketing practices is because of the lack of knowledge resources to effectively use social media platforms such as Facebook for business, Linked In, and Twitter (Sawmy & Ladkoo, 2015). Small business owners need a medium- to long-term Internet marketing strategy to create a sustained competitive advantage (Rad et al., 2015).

The leading threat to quick-service restaurants is shifting consumer preferences (First Research, 2018). Consumers are more health conscious and aware of health issues related to obesity, hypertension, and high cholesterol (IBIS World, 2018). Turnwald et al. (2017) stated that as obesity rates climb, consumers have begun to blame it on high-calorie meals offered at restaurants. One-third of daily calories come from dining out and one-third of adults in America are obese (National Center for Health Statistics [NCHS], 2016). In 2018, data from a healthy eating index showed that consumer's preferences for healthty options had increased (IBIS World, 2018; NCHS, 2016).

Consumers not only want nutritional and healthy food, but they also want the food to be tasty. Consumers want low-calorie and low-sodium meals that do not discriminate in taste when compared to high-calorie options. Consumers consider healthy food options in quick-service restaurants to be less tasty than unhealthy food items (NCHS, 2016). Consumers consider low-calorie options to be less appealing menu items than high-calorie items. According to Turnwald et al. (2017), healthy menu descriptions are significantly less appealing than unhealthy menu descriptions. Owners of quick-service restaurants have to provide an appealing description to low-calaories items if they want to compete in today's hyper-competitive market. As Americans become more health conscious, owners of quick-service restaurants have to offer appealing low-calorie items to mitigate the threat of shifting consumer preferences.

In Arkansas, quick-service restaurants accounted from more than 2,014 restaurants and employed more than 46,122 locals (USCB, 2015). Between 2015 and 2018, the USCB's data showed an increase (35 new restaurants) in quick-service restaurants in Arkansas. But this data did not show the annual survival rate between years (USCB, 2015). The USCB's data did not include the number of new restaurant establishments or the number of closures between years. To attain this information, I gathered public information on independent quick-service restaurants from the ADH. For this study, I concentrated only on independent quick-service restaurants in a city in the southern region of the United States.

Independent quick-service restaurants in Arkansas. Arkansas independent quick-service restaurants are independently own and not a part of a corporation, a chain, or a franchise. Self et al. (2015) wrote that 25% of independent quick-service restaurants fail within the first year of business, and 60% survive less than 3 years. Independent restaurants have a higher failure rate than franchise restaurants (Parsa et al., 2015). Franchise restaurant has a longer survival rate than independent restaurants (Self et al., 2015; Self, 2004). Parsa et al., (2015) identified some factors that cause independent restaurants to fail: (1) firm size, (2) finance, existing reputation, operation system, and leadership knowledge, education, and experience. Contrary to support for franchise owners, the fate of quick-service restaurants depends on the owner's decision-making ability to manage external and internal factors, to differentiate themselves, and to develop their employees. Yang et at. (2016) wrote that a firm's competitive advantage comes from the development and acquisition of its tacit and explicit knowledge. Independent quick-service restaurant owners are not a part of a collective team of executives, so their decisions are independent and can lead to poor choices.

According to a 2013 to 2017 report from the ADH, more than 100 independent quick-service restaurants in a city in the southern region of the United States close on average each year or become inactive. The failure of independent quick-service restaurants leaves thousands of displaced workers without a job. As a result, the aim of this study was to explore the strategies that successful independent quick-service restaurant owners used to sustain in business beyond their first 5 years.

Transition

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies that independent quick-service restaurant owners used to sustain in business beyond their first 5 years. This literature review focused on (a) theoretical frameworks, (b) small business industry, (c) the success and failures of small business industry, and (d) quick-service restaurants. In this literature review, I provided an exploration of the factors that can lead to the success of independent quick-service restaurants. The general problem of this study addressed the lack of strategies that independent quick-service restaurant owners use to manage their internal resources to in business beyond their first 5th years.

In this section, I addressed the problem that owners of independent quick-service restaurants face to sustain beyond their first 5 years in business. I also discussed the nature of the study, the research question, and operational definitions. As illustrated, I used current academic literature review to expound on the issues of independent quick-service restaurant sustainability.

In Section 2, I discussed the strategies I used in my role as a researcher to collect secondary information from sources such as government databases, journal articles, dissertations, books, and peer-reviewed sources. I also explained how I determined my sample size for the study and the four successful independent quick-service restaurant owners whom I interviewed. I explained how I used a semi-structured interview format including an interview protocol to collect primary data from independent quick-service restaurant owners in one-one-one interview sessions. I further elaborated on how I ethically approached the research and the data analytical strategies I used to ensure data reliability and validity. I also discussed the design and method that I used in this qualitative multiple case study to support my research questions and the basis of my research. Included in this section are the purpose statement, the role of the researcher, the participant recruitment, research method and design, population and sampling technique, ethical research, and data collection technique and analysis. The section also included a thorough discussion of the reliability and validity as it related to this research.

Section 2: The Project

This section lays out the design and method that I used in this qualitative multiple case study to support my research questions and the basis of my research. Included in this section are the purpose statement, the role of the researcher, participant recruitment, research method and design, population and sampling technique, ethical research, and data collection technique and analysis. The section also includes a thorough discussion of the reliability and validity as it related to this research.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the strategies that independent quick-service restaurant owners used to sustain business beyond the first 5 years. The population of this study included six successful independent quick-service restaurant owners in a city in the southern region of the United States, who used effective strategies to sustain their business beyond the first 5 years of operation. The findings of the study may provide independent quick-service restaurant owners with the strategies necessary to increase their survival rate. As a result, independent quick-service restaurant owners may improve job sustainability, enhance human capital development, and encourage job creation to support the welfare of the citizens in a city in the southern region of the United States.

Role of the Researcher

The role of the researcher in any qualitative study is direct and critical to the outcome of the research. The researcher has a direct role as an instrument in the research phenomenon under study (Yin, 2018). All researchers must adhere to the ethical standards of the Belmont Report, which minimizes any risk to participants, provides fair and equal treatment for each participant, and gives each participant the right to withdraw from interviews at any time (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [HHS], 1979). As a doctoral student, I adhered to the ethical standards of the Belmont Report throughout my research.

The purpose of my research was to explore the strategies that independent quick-service restaurant owners used to sustain in business beyond their first 5 years. I had no experience in owning or managing an independent quick-service restaurant; however, I had operated in various managerial positions at the University of Arkansas for Medical Science for the past 10 years. I had a view of business operations and business strategy through the lens of healthcare management, which included teaching leaders how to apply conceptualization frameworks such as the RBT in healthcare settings. I had never used the conceptual framework to evaluate internal resources in any small, entrepreneurial type firm. I used my knowledge of the RBT to inform my research and not to create bias in it.

I used a semistructured interview technique as a primary technique to collect data for analysis (see Appendix). Researchers who use a qualitative, multiple case study designs seek to understand a contemporary phenomenon using on-site, semistructured interviews or focus groups (Yin, 2018). I also conducted semistructured interviews with six owners of independent quick-service restaurants in a city in the southern region of the United States, who had been in business for more than 5 years. I used open-ended questions that were relevant to the study and that were investigatory and probing to collect in-depth information (Chenail, 2011). I also used bracketing throughout the study to mitigate biased preconceptions (Bansal & Corley, 2012). Bracketing is a concept used to prevent researchers from tainting the research process by annotating preconceived bias throughout the research (Bansal & Corley, 2012). I only focused the research on asking questions and collecting data directly related to the business environment of independent quick-service restaurants. I collected business artifacts such as job descriptions, company website, business license, and social media site to validate that the companies had successfully been in business beyond 5 years. To validate the data collection, I sought permission from the participants to audio record the session and to agree to participate in follow-up meetings for member checking. Member checking is used in research to increase the validity and accuracy of collected interview data (Silverman, 2013). I also coded the identities of the participants to ensure confidentiality. I addressed the participants and recorded their names on all of my research documents as Participant 1 (P1), Participant 2 (P2), Participant 3 (P3), Participant 4 (P4), Participant 5 (P5), and Participant 6 (P6).

Participants

The population sample I selected for this study included the owners of six independent quick-service restaurants in a city in the southern region of the United States who had sustained business beyond their first 5 years. I used the 2013 to 2017 publicly available report that I attained from ADH to select potential candidates for my research study. To be eligible for the study, the target population and their establishments must have met the following criteria: (a) meet the U.S. Census definition of a quick-service restaurants; (b) operate consistently in business in a city in the southern region of the United States for more than 5 years; and (c) be independently owned.

I used the ADH report to identify potential research participants for my study. I identified multiple successful independent quick-service restaurants in a city in the southern region of the United States that fit the criteria mentioned above. Once identified, I drafted documents and submitted them to Walden University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) for approval. The documents included recruiting strategies for contacting the independent quick-service restaurant owners, which was through telephone calls, e-mail correspondence, and/or a letter of inquiry. Research participants are more accessible since the advent of the internet (Janghorban, Roudsari, & Taghipour, 2014). Researchers send invitations via e-mail as a soliciting strategy (Chiou & Huang, 2013). I communicated with the potential participants via e-mail or telephone and scheduled a meeting with each of them to identify the best six successful independent quick-service restaurants to conduct my research once the documents were approved by the IRB.

I introduced myself in an e-mail inquiry communication by identifying myself as a doctoral student who sought to learn strategies that independent quick service restaurant owners used to sustain in business beyond the first 5 years. Researchers introduce themselves and explain to participants the details of the research (Dove, Knoppers, & Zawati, 2014). Additionally, researchers inform participants of any risks to them that are associated with the study (HHS, 1979). In addition to risk, I included in the e-mail that I would use a face-to-face, semistructured interview method for collecting data. The participants determined the time and location of the interview. First I built a rapport with the participants. Peterson (2014) wrote that participants feel comfortable and safe in face-to-face interview settings (Peterson, 2014). Collins and Cooper (2014) posited that researchers must create a comforting environment and consider the participants' needs and desires regarding the research (Collins & Cooper, 2014). I talked with participants via the telephone prior to physically meeting with them to explain the purpose and value of the research. I described the steps in the research as listed in the interview protocol (see Appendix). To build trust, I discussed potential interview locations with the participants and agreed with each to a safe location for conducting the interviews. Researchers must build a trustworthy working relationship with participants through objective means (Yanchar, 2015). I provided each participant who met the criteria for participation with an informed consent form. The owners and their establishments needed meet the following criteria: (a) meet the U.S. Census definition of a quick-service restaurants; (b) operate consistently in business in a city in the southern region of the United States for more than 5 years; (c) and operate independently and not as a part of a franchise. I e-mailed the participant the informed consent form, which included language on how to sign the form and return it to me via e-mail after the participant had stated a willingness to participate. I also included information in the informed consent form that explained how I would use data collected from the semistructured interviews.

Research Method and Design

The purpose of a research method and design is to provide a planned approach for investigating a phenomenon (Ahmed & Ahmed, 2014; Fletcher, De Massis, & Nordqvist, 2016). The three most prevalent research methods used in modern research are qualitative methods, quantitative methods, and mixed methods with different research design options applying to each method (Fletcher et al., 2016). This section includes the type of research sample, the interview protocol, and the technique for collecting and analyzing data. In the section below, I explain the qualitative multiple case study research design that I used in the research study.

Research Method

Researchers use qualitative research methods to explore events through human experiences (Ahmed & Ahmed, 2014; Birchall, 2014; Yilmaz, 2013). Researchers use qualitative research designs to understand the what and the why of lived experiences (Barnham, 2015; Cairney & Denny, 2015). Qualitative researchers seek to understand cultural experiences, narrative experiences, and/or contemporary experiences (Cronin, 2014; Yin, 2018). Researchers use qualitative research designs to explore a phenomenon through methods such as grounded theory, narrative, ethnography, phenomenology, and case studies (MacGregor & Wathen, 2014; Yin, 2018).

Quantitative research is a rigorous approach to research in comparison to qualitative research. Researchers who use quantitative methods use both descriptive and inferential statistical methods to explain phenomena (Westerman, 2014; Yilmaz, 2013). Quantitative researchers consider a positivist view of research in which empirical statistical analysis explains research phenomena (Khan, 2014). Quantitative researchers use quantitative designs to describe, explain, and examine correlations through experimental and nonexperimental inquiries (Morse, 2015). Quantitative methodology was not appropriate for this study because the purpose of this study was to explore strategies used by independent quick-services restaurant owners.

Researchers use mixed method designs to examine relationships and explore a phenomenon through sequential, concurrent, and transformative inquiries (Anderson et al., 2014; Maxwell, 2015). Researchers use mixed methods to analyze data from both qualitative and quantitative methods to understand a phenomenon (Anderson et al., 2014; Kim, Han, & Kim, 2015). Novice researchers must exercise caution with the use of the mixed methods design because it can become confusing and time-consuming; instead, they should focus on either a qualitative or quantitative design (Patton, 2015; Robson & McCartan, 2016). I did not seek to examine correlations, relationships, or combine methods. I sought to investigate the lived experiences of owners of six successful independent quick-services restaurants. Mixed methods research was not appropriate for this study because the purpose of the study was not to clarify findings using a combined approach of qualitative and quantitative methods but to learn contemporary behaviors of independent quick-service restaurant owners.

Research Design

A case study research design includes either single or multiple cases (Hyett, Kenny, & Dickson-Swift, 2014; Yin, 2018). I selected the qualitative, multiple case study design to capture a contemporary phenomenon (Colorafi & Evans, 2016; Yin, 2018). A case study is based on immediate real-world events that cannot be captured in a survey (Duff, 2014; Hancock & Algozzine, 2015). Researchers use the case study design because it requires a deeper understanding of the experiences of participants (Bernard, 2013). Researchers who use case study designs capture data using semistructured interview methods, gathering business artifacts such as training documents, or through observing operational systems, including people (Yin, 2018). Case study researchers seek to understand a contemporary event in a real-world context (Yin, 2018). Researchers who use the case study design seek to understand a contemporary phenomenon using onsite, semi-structured interviews or focus groups (Yin, 2018). Using the case study research design, I looked at a real-world, contemporary situation and captured information to explain a phenomenon.

I considered phenomenological research as the research for understanding cultural experiences. Phenomenological researchers seek to understand the lived experience of an individual (Chan & Walker, 2015; Gill, 2014). The phenomenological research approach is subjective provided that researchers explore the phenomena through the perspective of the research participant (Shtudiner, Klein, & Kantor, 2017). The world-view of the research participants is the focus of the research (Berglund, 2015). I did not choose a phenomenological qualitative research design for this study because it focused only on the individual experience and not the experience of multiple participants in a research study. Researchers who use an ethnography approach seek to study in-depth group, community, or a personal life experiences (Hammersley, 2016; Letourneau, 2015). Researchers who use an ethnography design seek to understand a particular way of life of a community or individual from the perspective of the participant (Astin, Horrocks, & Closs, 2014). Researchers use narrative research strategies to explore stories of research participants as important sources of information for qualitative research (Bruce et al., 2016). I did not choose the ethnographic and narrative qualitative research designs because they were not the appropriate methods for seeking contemporary phenomenon.

I investigated the success factors of six independent quick-service restaurant owners by conducting semistructured interviews with each owner. I used member checking during and after the interview to increase the validity and accuracy of the research (Silverman, 2013). Researchers reach data saturation when the collected information for the study replicates (Horter, Stringer, Reynolds, Shoaib, Kasozi, Casas, & Du Cros, 2014; Yin, 2018). Data saturation is attained when data from participants becomes redundant (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Silverman, 2013). Therefore, I probed research participants until I reached data saturation.

Population and Sampling

The criteria used for research population and sample included the sampling selection process and the characteristic of the population. A population is a well-defined group people who fit the research purpose, method, design, and characteristics (Yin, 2018). Sampling is the method used to describe the process for selecting participants in a research study (Palinkas, Horwitz, Green, Wisdom, Duan, & Hoagwood, 2013).

Population

The population sample I used for this proposed study included owners of six independent quick-service restaurant owners in a city in the southern region of the United States who had sustained in business beyond their first 5 years. The four owners and their establishments had to fit the following eligibility criteria: they met the U.S. Census definition of a quick-service restaurant, they operated consistently in business in a city in the southern region of the United States for more than 5 years, and they maintained independent ownership. I used the 2013 to 2017 publicly available report that I attained from the Department of Environmental Health Protection, at the ADH to select potential candidates for my research study. ADH inspectors record the term *active* when business owners open new establishments or renew existing ones. The 2013 to 2017 report from the ADH inspectors removed bias in the data provided that every restaurant owner must renew their health permit annually to operate in businesses and if there is a change in ownership, the new owners of the restaurant must attain a new permit. I used ADH inspector report to guide my sampling method.

Sample

The purpose of my research was to explore the strategies that independent quick-service restaurant owners used to sustain in business beyond the first 5 years. The research sampling method is as important to data collection process as the actual collecting of data (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Researchers must consider both theoretical and practical underpinning when selecting a sampling method (Benoot, Hannes, & Bilsen, 2016). Researchers use the snowball sample to build their sample by asking research participants for recommendations for potential participants who could be a part of the research study (Robinson, 2014). Researchers have options when using the purposeful sample approach such as choice of site, sampling strategy, and sampling size (Yin, 2018). Researchers can select participants who have experienced the phenomenon being studied in a phenomenological study (Yin, 2018). Researchers use the purposeful sample because it provides a theoretical underpinning when the research aligns with the proposition of the research and the research design (Robinson, 2014). I chose purposeful sampling for my research because I had the option and flexibility in how I selected participants whether it was through a choice of site, a sampling strategy, and a sampling size. I also chose purposeful sampling because the method aligns with my research study and design. Purposeful sampling is the preferred method for qualitative research and supports the ethical the strategies of the researcher (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Yin (2018) posited that purposeful sampling is the best method for a qualitative case study design. Purposeful sampling is used to seek an information-rich case for in-depth studies (Yilmaz, 2013). Purposeful sampling as real-world examples and deliberate selections, not theoretical samplings (Gentles & Vilches, 2017). A purposeful sampling was a perfect fit for my research study.

Researchers meet data saturation when data replication occurs, and the data collection method do not lead to new data, new themes, or new coding (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Data saturation is complicated for researchers who use qualitative research designs because they have to consider both quality of data and quantity of the data to ensure saturation (Fusch & Ness, 2015). The quality of the data is its richness and robustness of the collected research data that support the research protocol and line of inquiry; the quantity of the data is the amount of information collected by researchers during semi-structured interviews, direct observations, or focus groups sessions. Yin (2018) wrote that 5 samples are sufficient for a multiple case study design to attain data saturation. Researchers must ensure data saturation including use a standardized line of research inquiry and asking unbiased probing questions (Yin, 2018). All research participants respond to standardized research questions, which moves the target and leads to data saturation (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Researchers reach data saturation when they have both sufficient data quality and data quantity for analysis. Data saturation is attained when data from participants becomes redundant (Silverman, 2013)

I did not initiate the sampling selection process until I received approval from Walden University's IRB. Once approved, I began the sampling selection process by emailing a Letter of Inquiry to 10 potential candidates found in the 2013 to 2017 report from the Department of Environmental Health Protection who fit the criteria of my study (see Appendix). I reviewed the responses from the potential candidates and selected only six of the 10 candidates to participate in my research study, I then emailed the six participants an Informed Consent form to sign, retain a copy for their records, and return the original form to me. I included in the Informed Consent language that explained the purpose of the research, the sample group, and the degree of involvement of the participants. I also included in the Informed Consent language that explained the method for data collection, the potential risk to the participant, and how participating in the study was voluntary and confidential. The research participants were not be obligated to answer any of the interview questions. According to the Belmont Report, participants will have the right to withdraw from interviews at any time (HHS, 1979).

Participants determined the time and location of their interview to ensure their comfort and safety. Before interviewing the research participants, I described the purpose of the study and informed the research participants of any risk to them before the interviews. I explained how I provided fair and equal treatment and how each research participant had the right to withdraw from interviews at any time without penalty. I informed the participants that the interview session were audio-recorded and that their identities would be coded to ensure their anonymity and confidentiality. Each research participant had the right to withdraw from the study. I also informed the participant that all external electronic devices such as flash drives, hard copy interview notes, and business artifacts will be secured in a secure location for 5 years of the data of the published research then destroyed.

Ethical Research

Researchers must consider ethical ramification and considerations before approaching the research (Harriss & Atkinson, 2015). The Belmont Report communicates three ethical principles that all researchers must adhere to in their research study (HHS, 1979). These three ethical standards minimize any risk to participants, provide fair and equal treatment for each participant, and give each participant the right to withdraw from interviews at any time without a penalty (HHS, 1979). Although these three ethical standards are imperative to all research studies and researchers, they are not the end all be all. Researchers also have obligations to their institutional IRB.

Researchers appeal their study to IRB using written documents that explain how they will apply ethical practices throughout their research. Researchers adhere to their ethical research protocols, including strategies to solicit participants for the study such as a Letter of Inquiry, an Informed Consent form, Interview Protocol, and data for review before meeting with research candidates. Researcher have to adhere to the informed consent protocol which give participants the right to meet with participants, conduct their research, and adhere with all of the ethical rules as determined by their institutional IRB.

I followed all ethical considerations for my study and submitted research documents to Walden University's IRB to obtain approval IRB number to conduct the study. The research documents included a Letter of Inquiry, an Informed Consent form including language of non-compensation for the research, and interview questions. Once I determined multiple qualified research candidates for my study, I sent a Letter of Inquiry to multiple independent quick-service restaurant owners who fit the criteria for this study. After receiving responses from six successful independent quick-service restaurant owners, I emailed each research candidate an Informed Consent Form to sign, retain a copy and return the original form to me via email or in person. The research participant could withdraw from answering any or all of the interview questions at any time. Participants had the right to withdraw from interviews at any time without penalty (Sims, 2010). I also informed the participants that the research did not include compensation. However, participants could get a copy of the completed study via their email.

I informed each research candidates of any risk to them, how I provided fair and equal treatment, and how each participant had the right to withdraw from interviews at any time (Sims, 2010). I informed the participants that the interview session would be audio-recorded and that their identities would be confidentiality. During the interview, I addressed the participants by name and record on all of my research documents the terms Participant 1 (P1), Participant 2 (P2), Participant 3 (P3), Participant 4 (P4), Participant 5

(P5), and Participant 6 (P6). I also informed each participant that all external electronic devices such as flash drives, hard copy interview notes, and business artifacts that I used to collect data would be secured in a secure location for 5 years of the data of the published research then destroyed in an ethical manner to protect the participants' confidentiality. Researchers must inform participants of any risk to them and the necessary steps to mitigate the risk (HHS, 1979). I reduced risk to the participants by coding their names on all of my research documents as Participant 1 (P1), Participant 2 (P2), Participant 3 (P3), Participant 4 (P4), Participant 5 (P5), and Participant 6 (P6). I coded all of the documentation that I collected from participants with the label *Document 1 (D1), (D2), (D3), (D4),* and continued in this format. I will personally have the electronic devices reformatted and professionally shred the hardcopy research documents. Mitchell and Wellings (2013) posited that researchers are required to store research documents for 5 years of the publishing date and destroy those (Mitchell & Wellings, 2013). The Walden IRB approval number for this study was 02-12-19-0598788.

Data Collection Instruments

Qualitative research is an exploratory process that researchers use to looks at contemporary, real-life situations for attaining an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon (Yin, 2018). In any qualitative study, the researcher has a direct role that is critical to the outcome of the research. The researcher acts as the instrument for data collection in the research phenomenon under study (Gatsmyer & Pruitt, 2014; Yin, 2018). There are six sources of evidence used in qualitative case study research: (a) documentation, (b) archival records, (c) interviews, (d) direct observation, (e) interviews,

(f) participant-observation, and (g) business artifacts (Yilmaz, 2013). Each source of evidence has its strengths and weaknesses and researchers must use at least two data sources when conducting their research (Yin, 2018). I used my interview protocol (see Appendix) to collect data during face-to-face interviews. I also collected data through business documentation and archival records to validate the collected data.

Qualitative researchers use open-ended interview questions in a systematic manner to explore and elicit elaborated responses (Paine, 2015). In qualitative research, there are three types of interview categories, (a) structured, (b) unstructured, and (c) semi-structured (Yin, 2018). In structured interviews, the researcher never deviates from the original set of research questions and uses the same set of questions without additional exploration with each participant (Anyan, 2013). In unstructured interviews, the researcher allows the spontaneity of the conversation and interaction to drive the creation of additional questions without limitations (Anyan, 2013). In semi-structured interviews, researchers use an interview protocol that includes open-ended questions to guide a systematic interview and to elicit responses from the participant (Yin, 2018). The researcher has the permission to explore and probe beyond the questions in the interview protocol with a limited scope when the participants freely express themselves to capture more elicit elaborated information (Fusch & Ness, 2015). The semi-structured interview was the most appropriate for my study to provide structure and flexibility. Researchers avoid irrelevant questions that are beyond the scope of the research. But they can create probing questions that are exclusive of limited responses that align with the central research questions and questions in the interview protocol (Yin, 2018). I used the semi-structured interview including the case study protocol to explore and capture elicit in-depth responses from my research participants. The case study protocol consisted of a brief description of the case study, interview questions, and data collection procedures (Yin, 2018).

I informed each research participant of any risk to them, how I would provide fair and equal treatment, and how each participant had the right to withdraw from interviews at any time before the commencement of the semi-structured interview (HHS, 1979). During interview preliminaries, I informed the participants that I would audio-record interview session and make confidential their identities. I also informed each participant that I used external electronic devices such as flash drives to capture interview data. During the interview, I followed the interview protocol and probed for additional information when participants freely express themselves. For clarity, I asked participants to repeat the answer when responses were not clear. I also collected business documentation and archival record to validate the collected data. To validate the data collection, I conducted follow-up interviews with the participants using member checking methods to remove any errors in the interview summaries. Member checking is used in research to increase the validity and accuracy of collected interview data (Silverman, 2013). Member checking consists of participants reviewing their interview summaries with the intent to identify and remove errors to increase the validity and the accuracy of the interview responses (Birt et al., 2016). To complete transaction review, I performed data cleansing by having participants review summaries of their interview transcripts to ensure that no errors exist. Member checking and data cleansing increase the validity of the research (Silverman, 2013). Qualitative researchers ensure a sound review of data when they follow the interview protocol, clarify responses throughout the interview, conduct member checking and data cleansing to augment reliability and validity (Wahyuni, 2012).

Data Collection Technique

The research question that I used in this study was: What strategies do independent quick-service restaurant owners use to sustain business beyond the first 5 years? I used the central research question to guide the questions in my interview protocol to ensure alignment. There are six types of sources of evidence used in qualitative, case study research: (a) documentation, (b) archival records, (c) interviews, (d) direct observation, (e) interviews, (f) participant-observation, and (g) business artifacts (De Massis & Kotlar, 2014; Yilmaz, 2013). Researchers integrate insightful data through sources like (a) interviews, (b) observations, and (c) archival documentation (De Massis & Kotlar, 2014). The most common data collection technique used in qualitative research is the interview (Onwuegbuzie & Byers, 2014). Researchers use semi-structured interviews used for case studies provide researchers with information that is a vital study (Singh & Gibbs, 2013). Researchers who use case study interview methods seek to gather in-depth information (Birt et al., 2016). The data collection techniques that I used in this study was the semi-structured interviews and business documents.

All data collection techniques have their advantages and disadvantages; researchers use semi-structured interviews because they have their advantages in which they allow for flexibility (Yin, 2018). Researchers can explore to capture more elicit elaborated information (Fusch & Ness, 2015). When using semi-structured interviews, researchers are not free to create spontaneous questions that lack relevance to the scope of the research, but they can create probing questions that are exclusive of limited responses that align with the central research questions and questions in the interview protocol. The disadvantage of semi-structured interviews is the laborious task of coding (Yin, 2018). Researchers read through the interview notes and listen to the recordings multiple times with the intent to remove all errors and accurately code the interview notes (Yilmaz, 2013). Researchers also use member checking and methodological triangulation to increase the validity of the collected data. Member checking increases the validity and accuracy of the collected interview data (Silverman, 2013). Qualitative researchers analyze multiple sources of evidence and use methodological triangulation (Cope, 2014). Scholars and researchers use multiple sources of evidence in qualitative research are interview transcripts, business artifacts, and interview notes. Researchers triangulate multiple documents such as interview transcriptions, interview notes, business artifacts to validate data collected in a research study (Wahyuni, 2012). Scholars and researchers who use the semi-structured interview approach must ensure that they adhere to the Belmont ethical principles rule (HHS, 1979).

I scheduled six independent, 45-minute face-to-face interview sessions with six owners of independent quick-service restaurants in a city in the southern region of the United States at a time and convenient location as determined by the participant. I informed the participants that I would audio-record the interview sessions and make confidential the participants' identities. I also informed each participant that all external electronic devices such as flash drives. I used two Olympus WS-852 digital recorder devices to ensure that I captured the audio interviews. During the interview sessions, I followed the interview protocol and probe for additional information when participants freely expressed themselves.

To validate the data collection, I scheduled a 30-minute post-interview session with the participants to review summaries of their interview transcripts where I used member checking methods to remove any errors in the interview summaries. Scholars use member checking in research to increase the validity and accuracy of the collected interview data (Silverman, 2013). The validity of a research study depends on the researcher's ability to provide a sound review of data (Wahyuni, 2012). Member checking consists of participants reviewing their interview summaries with the intent to identify and remove errors to increase the validity and the accuracy of the interview responses (Birt et al., 2016). Researchers also use follow-up interviews to achieve data saturation.

Data Organization Technique

I organized the data collected in my research using coding, audio recorders, and Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis (CAQDAS) software. Researchers use coding to organize data into patterns and emerging themes (Woods, Paulus, Atkins, & Macklin, 2016). Researchers' code data in alphabet letters, shorten keywords, and groups to organize themes (Singh, Meng, & Hansen, 2014). I coded the identities of the participants to ensure confidentiality. I addressed the participants by name and recorded their names on my research documents as Participant 1 (P1), Participant 2 (P2), Participant 3 (P3), Participant 4 (P4), Participant 5 (P5), and Participant 6 (P6). I coded the documentation that I collected from participants with the label Document 1 (D1) through Document 4 (D4).

I used Temi online media to assist me in transcribing the interview data and Atlas.ti to assist me in identifying emerging theme and patterns in the interview data. Temi is an artificial intelligence online media that uses a speech algorithm formula to capture interview data and convert it to a comprehensive transcript (Kenny, n.d.). Artificial intelligence is comparable to human capabilities and allows common users to interact with intelligent technologies to produce quality outcomes (Oh, Lee, Kim, Park, & Suh, 2017). A researcher's first reaction to artificial intelligence is fear and apprehension because of their lack of knowledge of the technology, but their thoughts change as they witness and experience the quality of the technology (Nelson, Clark, & Stewart, 2018). I uploaded the interview audio files to Temi and Temi converted the files to text within 5 minutes and displayed them in its web-based editor (Kenny, n.d.). The web-based editor included the original audio files along with the transcribed files for editing. I cleaned up any incorrect text in the transcripts, downloaded the transcribed Word files onto my encrypted flash drive, and save them. Atlas.ti is a software program that augments a researcher's ability to effectively code, theme and analyze large sums of qualitative, unstructured data (Lensges, Hollensbe, & Masterson, 2016; Zamawe, 2015). For data collection, I interviewed the participants and collect business documentation. First, I conducted follow-up interviews with the participants to share interview summaries and interview transcript to increase reliability and validity. Yin (2018) argued that transcription review increases the accuracy of interview data and increases validity. Second, I collected business documentation to use for triangulation. Lastly, I processed the unorganized interview data and business documentation data into Atlas.ti for organizing and data analysis to identify emerging themes and patterns. The process of data analysis which considers coding identifies emerging themes and patterns in data (Woods, Paulus, Atkins, & Macklin, 2016). In a qualitative case study, researchers collect large sums of data for data analysis to answer the research question. Using Atlas.ti, I coded and theme the collected data in a more formal process that includes tables, graphs and other forms of data to arrange information for communication in research.

I will store the research sources of evidence in a secure location for 5 years of the data of the published research then destroyed in an ethical manner to protect the participants' confidentiality. I established a contractual relationship with participants using the Informed Consent Form (see Appendix) to ensure the participants' confidentiality. I will personally have the electronic devices reformatted and professionally shred the hardcopy research documents. Mitchell and Wellings (2013) posited that researchers are required to store research documents for 5 years of the publishing date and destroy those (Mitchell & Wellings, 2013). To increase the integrity of my research, I will secure the research for 5 years and then destroy it to protect the research participate and uphold my contractual agreement.

Data Analysis

In qualitative research, data analysis consists of examining sources of evidence through a process of discovering, identifying themes, and organizing themes that help to answer the central research question (Guo & Guo, 2016). Qualitative researchers examine and analyze sources of evidence to identify and discover new sources of information to inform the research (Morse, 2015). Data analysis includes analyzing and interpreting the collected data with the intent to develop themes to help to answer the central research question (Burau & Andersenm, 2014). Yin (2018) stated that there are five steps in analyzing qualitative research data: (a) compiling, (b) disassembling, (c) reassembling and arraying, (d) interpreting, and (e) concluding. In this study, I examined sources of evidence from six interviews with owners of independent quick-service restaurants and multiple business documentations to organize unstructured data, identify repeated information, and to analyze themes that aligned with the conceptual framework of the research (Derobertmasure & Robertson, 2014).

Atlas.ti is the qualitative technology that I used in this study to assist me in analyzing large sums of data. Atlas.ti is a software program that augments a researcher's ability to effectively code, theme, and analyze large sums of qualitative, unstructured data (Lensges et al., 2016; Zamawe, 2015). Researchers use Atlas.ti to assist them in analyzing data through a process of organizing, theming, and interpreting (Zamawe, 2015). The version of Atlas.ti that I used is Atlas.ti 8. I shared interview summaries with participants to evaluate them for errors to ensure the reliability of data. Member checking consists of participants reviewing their interview summaries with the intent to identify and remove errors to increase the validity and the accuracy of the interview responses (Birt et al., 2016). I also conducted a follow-up interview with each participant in my research to review the interview transcripts to ensure the reliability of data. Next, I processed the interview transcripts, interview notes, and business documentation into Atlas.ti. I used Atlas.ti to organize the data into groups for coding. The process of coding identifies emerging themes and patterns in data (Woods, Paulus, Atkins, & Macklin, 2016). Researchers use coding to organize data into patterns and emerging themes (Woods, Paulus, Atkins, & Macklin, 2016). I coded the identities of the participants to ensure confidentiality. I addressed the participants by name and recorded their names on all research documents as Participant 1 (P1), Participant 2 (P2), Participant 3 (P3), Participant 4 (P4), Participant 5 (P5), and Participant 6 (P6). Next, I coded the documentation that I collected from participants with the label Document 1 (D1), (D2), (D3), (D4), and continued until I coded each document. After completing the coding, I conducted a thematic analysis of the coded, organized data to draw a conclusion of the data. Researchers use thematic analysis to identify patterns across data in qualitative research including words, phrases, or passages of text to interpret, describe, and draw conclusions (Braun & Clarke, 2016). Researchers organize data then use thematic analysis to interpret the data in more a detailed account (Fugard & Potts, 2015). Researchers must ensure that the themes that evolve from their research align with their research question and the conceptual framework (Davidson, Paulus, & Jackson, 2016; Derobertmasure & Robertson, 2014). After I drew a conclusion from the data, I used the triangulation method to analyze multiple sources of evidence provided by each participant to ensure the reliability of the data.

Triangulation is a method of analysis used to compare multiple sources of evidence to verify documentation and to manage bias in research (Joslin & Müller, 2016).

Fusch and Ness (2015) noted that triangulation is an in-depth process of analyzing data for exploring different perspectives. Yin (2018) reported that there are four types of triangulation: (a) data triangulation, (b) investigator triangulation, (c) theory triangulation, and (d) methodological triangulation. Qualitative researchers use methodological triangulation the most in case studies (Cope, 2014). Researchers use methodological triangulation to control mitigating bias during data analysis (Anney, 2014). Methodological triangulation helps to mitigate the participants' self-serving attribution bias in this study. They type of triangulation method I used in this study was methodological triangulation. Methodological triangulation is a method of using multiple sources of evidence to arrive at a comprehensive conclusion (Cope, 2014). The multiple sources of evidence that I used in this research involve information collected from interviews and business documentation.

Reliability and Validity

The rigor of reliability and validity in a qualitative case study begins with managing the truth throughout a research study by incorporating the concept of member checking, data cleansing, triangulation, and etcetera (Bailey, 2014). In a qualitative case study, researchers create reliability through the lens of dependability. Researchers create validity through the lens of credibility, confirmability, transferability.

Reliability

Reliability is the process of ensuring that the quality of data is used in a research study (Baškarada, 2014). Researchers seek to collect data that is repeatable and yield reliable results (Baškarada, 2014; Gheondea-Eladi, 2014). In qualitative research, researchers must establish a repeatable procedure in which they conduct their research and explain the procedure in such accurate details pursue that any researcher can follow the details and replication the results (Yin, 2018). Researcher seeks reliability through the repeatability or dependability of instruments used in qualitative studies (Baškarada, 2014). Reliability is the concept of providing transparency during data collection, coding, and analysis of data in a qualitative to ensure readers may trace the results (Wamba, Akter, Edwards, Chopin, & Gnanzou, 2015). To increase reliability, I interviewed the participants using the interview protocol (see Appendix). I asked the interview questions in the order of 1 through 6. I recorded each interview using two digital recording devices to ensure that I captured each interview and to increase the reliability and validity of the data. I saved my interview notes, interview summaries, and interview transcript on external electronic flash drive devices. I shared the interview summaries with participants to examine for errors and I conducted a follow-up interview session with the research participants to review their interview transcripts. Member checking consists of participants reviewing their interview summaries with the intent to identify and remove errors to increase the validity and the accuracy of the interview responses (Birt et al., 2016).

Dependability

Dependability is the process of procedural replication that yield the same results (De Massis & Kotlar, 2014). Dependability is the extent to which researchers evaluate the quality of the data instrument, the data collection, and the data analysis. In this study, I ensured dependability by structuring the interview process so that it was performed the same way per participant. To protect the names of participants, I recorded their names on all of my research documents as Participant 1 (P1), Participant 2 (P2), Participant 3 (P3), Participant 4 (P4), Participant 5 (P5), and Participant 6 (P6). I coded the documentation that I collected from participants with the label *Document 1* (*D1*), (*D2*), (*D3*), (*D4*), and continue in this format. I made sure that I conducted the actual interview and follow-up interview in a room where distractions were minimal. Participants provide effective feedback when they are in a setting that is comfortable and relaxing enough so that they can focus (Yin, 2018). I shared interview summaries with participants to examine for errors, and I conducted a follow-up interview session with them to review the interview transcripts. Member checking and transcript review consist of participants reviewing their interview summaries with the intent to identify and remove errors to increase the validity and the accuracy of the interview responses (Birt et al., 2016). Transcript review and member checking increase the dependability of research data and ensure the trustworthiness of data results (Harvey, 2015).

Validity

Researchers seek to validate their research using a credible instrument and always checking for accuracy in the data. The validity refers to the quality and accuracy of an instrument used in qualitative research to measure the outputs of a phenomenon under study (Singh & Gibbs, 2013). In qualitative research, validity is determined by the three elements of credibility, confirmability, and transferability to check and verify the accuracy of the data in a qualitative research study (Anney, 2014).

In this study, I interviewed six successful owners of independent quick-service restaurants to learn about strategies they used to sustain in business beyond the first 5 years. I conducted semi-structured interviews using an interview protocol for data collection and gathered business documentation for analysis. I analyzed the sources of evidence using Atlas.ti to assist in organizing the data into codes, theming the data to draw conclusions, and reviewing and comparing the data to enhance its credibility through member checking and triangulation. Member checking consists of participants reviewing their interview summaries with the intent to identify and remove errors to increase the validity and the accuracy of the interview responses (Birt et al., 2016). Triangulation is a method of analysis used to compare multiple sources of evidence to verify documentation and to manage bias in research (Joslin & Müller, 2016).

Credibility

Credibility is confirmed by the participants of the study who determine that the collected data in a research is credible (Yilmaz, 2013). Researchers use credibility as the process of ensuring that collected data is accurate according to participants (Birt et al., 2016). I confirmed the credibility of data through a process of member checking. Member checking is used in research to increase the validity and accuracy of collected interview data (Silverman, 2013; Birt et al., 2016). After the initial interview with the participants, I met with each participant and allowed them to review the summaries of the interview transcripts to ensure that their words were captured correctly. I also used the methodological triangulation to increase the validity and reliability of the research. Methodological triangulation is a method of using multiple sources of evidence to arrive at a comprehensive conclusion (Cope, 2014). Triangulation is a method of analysis used to compare multiple sources of evidence to verify documentation and to manage bias in research (Joslin & Müller, 2016).

Transferability

Transferability means that the results of a research study can be generalized by other researchers and is transferable to other research contexts (Yilmaz, 2013). Researchers can enhance transferability by clarifying every step of the research such as a type of interview guide, including the interview protocol, discussing the geographical location of the study, and the type of sample. Researchers use transferability to provide clean and precise pathways of information that align with a process from data collection to analyzing the research (Black, Palombaro, & Dole, 2013). Transferability of the findings create a logical approach to research so that other researchers understand the context of the study (Elo, Kaariainen, Kanste, Polkki, Utriainen, & Kyngas, 2014). Qualitative research use descriptions as mile markers throughout their study to enable transferability (Anney, 2014). I used clarifying steps and descriptions of research throughout my study to ensure that researchers could analyze the contexts of my research for transferability.

Confirmability

Researchers confirm information through multiple strategies and include probing questions and triangulation. Confirmability refers to the objectivity and interpretation of research data (Yilmaz, 2013). In a qualitative case study, the interview is critical to conformability. The research must ask probing questions throughout the interview to make sure that he and the participant have the same interpretation of collected data. This can be done by repeating the same question, asking for clarity of a response, or paraphrasing the participants' words to ensure that the researcher interpreted them correctly (Yilmaz, 2013). Researchers maintain confirmability by consistently discussing and verifying findings in the research (Woods et al., 2016; Yin 2018). Confirmability is a concept of verifying information through referencing field notes, probing and repeating questions, and member checking (Zitomer & Goodwin, 2014). Researchers ensure confirmability through the data cleansing process, member checking, and aligning quotes with emerging themes (Cope, 2014). I ensured an objectivity and interpretation of research data approach to my research by maintaining an auditing trail so that researchers can confirm the methods and strategies used in my research.

Data Saturation

Researchers reach data saturation in qualitative research when sources of evidence stop yielding new information, themes, or patterns, which leads the researcher to discontinue data collection (Saunders et al., 2018). When researchers reach data saturation, any additional collected data beyond saturation is unnecessary because the data will not yield new information (Saunders et al., 2018). Researchers who fail to reach data saturation in their research jeopardize the quality and validity of the research (Fusch & Ness, 2015). In my study, I asked probing questions until exhaustion with all participants during the interview process to attain all relevant information related to questions in the interview protocol. I conducted follow-up interviews with all participants using member checking and transcript review strategies until the interview data did not yielding new information. Transcript review and member checking increases the dependability of research data and ensure the trustworthiness of data results (Harvey, 2015). I collected documentation from all participants and performed document reviews and triangulation until the data did not yielding new information. I interviewed and used probing questions, follow-up interviews, member checking, and extensive document reviews to ensure data saturation.

Transition and Summary

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies that independent quick-service restaurant owners used to sustain in business beyond the first 5 years. Section 2 contained subsections that focused on the researcher, the participant, the research methods and design, and the collection of data. In this section, I articulated the reason why the researcher was used as the instrument in a qualitative multiple case study, the size of the population, the collection and analysis of data, and the reliability and validity of sources of evidence. In the Role of the Researcher subsection, I discussed that the researcher is the instrument. The researcher has a direct role as an instrument in the research phenomenon under study (Yin, 2018). I discussed the ethical standards that the researcher must adhere to as the instrument in the study. In the Participant subsection, I included information about the four successful independent quick-service restaurant owners whom I used in the study. I discussed the eligibility criteria and how the four successful independent quick-service restaurant owners fit it. I provided a detailed planned approach for investigating the Research Method and Design subsection. I compared and contrasted qualitative and quantitative methods as well as contrasted qualitative designs and made an argument for the best design.

In Section 2, I also discussed the ethical ramification of the study as well as data reliability and validity. In the Ethical Research subsection, I discussed the 1979 Belmont Report and cited that researchers must consider ethical ramification and considerations before approaching the research (Harriss & Atkinson, 2015). In the Data Collection subsection, I discussed the six types of sources of evidence used in qualitative, case study research and argued for the best type to use in my study. I discussed the process of data analysis and how I planned to incorporate coding, organizing, theming, and triangulation.

In Section 3, I discussed how my findings related to the central research question: What strategies do independent quick-service restaurant owners used to sustain business beyond the first 5 years? I discussed how the findings of the study could affect social change in the local communities that had independent quick-service restaurants. I also discussed bias in the research and opportunities to expand on the research. I included a reflection and a conclusion subsection.

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the strategies that independent quick-service restaurant owners used to sustain business beyond their first 5 years. The initial sample size for the study was four successful independent quick-service restaurant owners in a city in the southern region of the United States who used effective strategies to sustain in business beyond their first 5 years. Upon completing my fourth interview, I realized that I had not reached data saturation. As a result, I interviewed a total of six owners of independent quick-service restaurants and reached data saturation. When researchers reach data saturation, any additional collected data beyond saturation is unnecessary because the data will not yield new information (Saunders et al., 2018).

All six participants in my study controlled internal resources that were heterogeneous in context and some imperfectly immobile. The participants' responses varied when asked about the casually ambiguous informal strategies they used to sustain in business beyond their first 5 years. Some participants implemented valuable, socially complex strategies that uniquely supported their business attributes. Some participants implemented operational effectiveness strategies that increased efficiencies; some participants leveraged historic values to acquire and retain customers; one participant used his knowledge of urban population demographics to create a source of business sustainability. The participants' heterogeneous internal resources and independent experiences contributed to findings that can successfully guide owners of independent quick-service restaurants in a city in the southern region of the United States.

Presentation of the Findings

The central research question for this qualitative multiple case study was: What strategies do independent quick-service restaurant owners use to sustain business beyond the first 5 years? The participants came from diverse demographic backgrounds and had heterogeneous internal resources and unique business experiences that guided their socially complex business strategies. The participants’ personal demographics and business attributes influenced their responses to the interview questions.

Tables 2 and 3 include categories that provided a broad overview of the participants’ personal demographics and business attributes. These categories were critical to this study because they shape the interview responses and findings of the study. Table 2 comprises the participants’ personal demographics and consists of the following four categories: (a) education/business background, (b) gender, (c) ethnicity, and (d) generation. Three out of the six participants achieved college degrees; four out of six participants were male and two female; three out of the six participants were Caucasian, two were African American, and one was Middle Eastern; and three out of 6 participants were Baby Boomers, one Generation X, and two were Millennials. Baby Boomers (born 1944 to 1964) are committed workers who grew up during industrial economic prosperity; they are not reliant on technology (Heyns & Kerr, 2018). Generation X (born 1965 to 1980) is a much smaller generation than the Baby Boomers. They experienced a poor economy, high crimes, and absentee parents and believe in work-life balance and spending time with their children (Woods, 2019). Generation X used technology as a means to an end but did not consider it a necessity. Millennials (born 1981 to 1995) are the largest generation who were raised during the digital age (Heyns & Kerr, 2018). They are the essence of the information age, and they are reliant on technology (Woods, 2019).

Table 2

Participants' Personal Demographics

Participants	Education / Business Background	Gender	Ethnicity	Generation
P1	College Degree	M	Middle Eastern	Millennial
P2	High School	F	Caucasian	Baby Bomber
P3	College Degree	M	Caucasian	Baby Bomber
P4	High School	M	African American	Baby Bomber
P5	College Degree	F	Caucasian	Millennial
P6	High School	M	African American	Generation X

Table 3 comprises the business attributes and consists of the following categories: (a) years in business, (b) employee retention, (c) private brand offerings, (d) catering, (e) wholesale offerings, (f) location, and (g) number of locations. Barney (1991) posited that a firm's attributes can enable a firm to implement value-creating strategies. The business survival rates ranged from 5 years to 35 years. Three out of the six participants' employee retention rates sustained longer than 10 years and two less than 6 years. All of the participants had private band offerings; five out of six of the participants provided catering offerings; three out of the six participants provided wholesale offerings to local or regional businesses; four out of six participants owned businesses that were located in urban areas and two in suburban areas; and two out of six participants had multiple locations.

Table 3

Participants' Business Attributes

Years in business	Employee retention	Private brand offerings	Catering	Wholesale offerings	Locations	# of locations
15	10 years	X	X		Suburban	1
25	12 years	X	X	X	Urban	1
35	20 years	X	X	X	Suburban	2
30	15 years	X			Urban	1
5	6 months	X	X	X	Urban	3
20	10 years	X	X		Urban	1

The conceptual framework I used in this study was the RBT. Mathooko & Ogutu (2015) argued that leaders of firms can sustain a competitive advantage through leveraging their internal resources. Barney (1991) posited the RBT only includes internal resources owned by the firm. I developed the research questions for this study in support of the RBT to collect information to inform how owners of successful independent quick-service restaurants use their internal resources to create a sustained competitive advantage.

To analyze the recorded audio data, I completed three phases of data analysis. First, I uploaded the six recorded audio files to Temi, the artificial intelligence technology, to convert the recorded audio files into comprehensive transcripts. Temi converted recorded audio files into comprehensive transcripts in less than 30 minutes. While in Temi's web-based editor, I made minor edits to the six transcripts and removed any errors. It took me 4 hours to make the minor edits to the transcripts. Next, I downloaded the six transcripts onto my lap computer and uploaded them to atlas.ti where I begin reviewing and sorting the transcripts for coding along with information I identified in the collected notes and business artifacts. Lastly, I conducted two cycles of analysis: initial analysis including theming the data in which I aligned the emergent themes to my conceptual framework. I also aligned the emergent subthemes to emergent themes. The results of the initial analysis comprised of the following six emergent themes: (a) organization value, (b) customer required excellence, (c) financial perspective, (d) human assets, (e) physical operating materials, and (f) technological prowess. The results of the second analysis comprised the alignment of the six emergent themes with the five types of internal resources of a firm: (a) organizational capital, (b) financial capital, (c) human capital, (d) physical capital, and (e) technological capital. Greene et al. (2015) explained that internal resources of a firm include (a) physical resources, (b) financial resources, (c) technological resources, (d) human resources, and (e) organizational resources.

The five types of internal resources owned by a firm have the potential for generating a sustained competitive advantage when they can improve the efficiencies and effectiveness of a firm's outcomes while mitigating threats (Barney, 1991). The five types of internal resources can also be sources of sustained competitive advantage when they are immobile, heterogeneous, and coordinated to increase value for customers and the business. In contrast, the internal resources of a firm can have no effect on a firm's value or strategy and negatively contribute to a firm (Barney, 1991). The internal resources can actually be ineffective resources that negatively affect profitability and damage a firm's reputation. Table 4 includes the five types of internal resources of a firm, the emergent themes, emergent subthemes, and codes.

I present the remainder of the study in three phases. First, I present an organized explanation of the findings of the study. I explain the alignment of emergent themes to my conceptual framework and subthemes to their emergent themes. I independently expound on the findings of each emergent theme and each subtheme using quotes, business artifacts, notes, and examples found in my study. I explain the last two emergent themes and subthemes using fewer quotes and more business artifacts, notes, and examples to provide a more descriptive approach for the participants' strategies. I used academic literature and attributes from my conceptual framework to support the emergent themes and codes. I also explain the value of the resources used by participants. Secondly, I discuss application for professional practice, social implications, and recommendation for action. Lastly, I discuss further research and reflections and conclusion.

Table 4

Participants' Internal Resources of the Firm

RBT's internal resources	Emergent themes	Emergent subthemes	Codebook
Organizational capital	Organization value	1. Business acumen 2. Intellectual properties	1a. Transferrable knowledge 1b. Iterative learning 1c. Application of knowledge 2a. Secret sauce 2b. Employees with tacit knowledge
	Customer required excellence	1. Types of customers 2. Customers relationships 3. Culture	1a. Customer acquisition (e.g. marketing) 1b. Customer retention 1c. Noncustomers 2a. Owner offline relationship with customers 2b. Owner online relationship with customers 3a. Customer service 3b. Customer diner experience 3c. Customer accommodation
Financial capital	Financial perspective	1. Funding sources 2. Diversified revenue streams	1a. Personal savings 1b. Financial institutions 2a. Retail offerings 2b. Wholesale offerings 2c. Catering offerings 2d. Private brand offerings
Human capital	Human assets	1. Leadership 2. Talent and development	1a. Owner-frontline employee 1b. Owner relationship with employee 2a. Recruiting good employees (Family) 2b. Employee wages 2c. Employee development
Physical capital	Physical operating material	1. Physical material 2. Raw material	1a. Property 1b. Location 2a. Effective supply cost controls 2b. Storage of supplies 2c. Quality products
Technological capital	Technological prowess	1. Business technology systems	1a. Point-of-sale systems 1b. Website presence 1c. Social media presence

Table 5 includes a brief definition of the five types of internal resources owned by the firm. Researchers and readers should use the table as a reference source throughout Section 3 to clear up any confusion regarding the meaning of the five types of internal resources. The five types of internal resources are organized in a sequential order in which I explained my findings.

Table 5

RBT's Five types of Internal Resources of a Firm

Themes	Definition
Organizational capital	Organizational capital of a firm includes reporting structures, planning processes, coordinated systems, intellectual property, leadership, tacit knowledge, business acumen, innovation, and culture, and relationships with customers, employees, and venders.
Financial capital	Financial Capital of a firm includes economic value, operating budgets and profits, investments, and return on investments, return on human capital.
Human capital	Human capital of a firm includes the leader's business acumen, the leader's ability to dive performance, the leader's relation with the employees, and customers, the employees, the talent of the employees, and the development of the employees.
Physical capital	Physical capital of a firm includes its geographic location, equipment, supplies, and any raw materials.
Technological capital	Technological capital of a firm includes technological prowess, ownership of business technology such as point-of-sale technology, computer accessories (e.g. software), websites, and social media platforms.

Note. The table provides definitions for each of the internal resources of the firm.

Table 6 displays the six emergent themes that constitute the framework of the study. The six emergent themes perfectly align with the five types of internal resources in my conceptual framework; yet, some elements of the emergent themes contradict parts of the research in the Academic Review of Literature subsection. For example, Porter (2008) stated that technology is a major part of a firm's value chain and a source of competitive advantage. Yet, only a few of the participants in the study truly embraced technology as an internal resource that had potential to be a source of competitive advantage. The six emergent themes also answered the central research question proposed in this study. The six themes emerged from 12 subthemes, 32 codes identified in the participants' transcripts.

Table 6

Emergent Themes

Themes	Frequency	%
Organization value	107	29
Customer required excellence	128	35
Financial perspective	44	12
Human assets	38	10
Physical operating material	41	11
Technological prowess	8	3
6	366	100 %

Note. Frequent of themes comprises the aggregate count of subthemes.

Emergent Theme 1: Organizational Value

The first theme to emerge from the data was organization value (Table 6). Organization value consisted of two subthemes and five codes. I aligned organization value with the internal resource organizational capital of my conceptual framework. Organizational capital consisted of a firm's reporting structures, formal and informal planning processes, coordinated systems, innovation, managers, and workers (Table 5). All six participants had the business attributes including intellectual properties that had the potential to be sources of sustained competitive advantage. Their organizational capital was unique, independent of their competitors, historically evolved, socially complexed, and supported their informal business strategies and business context. Their organizational capital was not homogeneous or mobile and were not equally the same as their competitors. Regarding Barney's VRIN evaluation instrument, their organizational capital was valuable, rare, difficult-to-imitate, and nonsubstitutable. They participants offered a level of social complexity that could not be duplicated by competitors. Therefore, their organizational capital could not be competed away by competitors. Internal resources that are not equally distributed across competing forms can potentially be a source of a sustained competitive advantage (Barney 1991). The participants' organizational capital was both heterogeneous and immobile.

Organization value was consistent with the view of some scholars in the literature. Porter (1980) explained that leaders, managers, and business owners who use the competitive strategy framework seek to be the more favorable and dominant in their markets. All six participants had informal approaches to their planning processes. The participants did not necessary set aside time to formally create a two to five year strategic plan, but they used cognitive processing through iterative learning to synthesize and coordinate their internal resources to innovate and create value for their customers. Successful small business leaders understand how to examine their external markets and internal operations to reconfigure their businesses to sustain a competitive advantage (Lussier & Corman, 2015). Innovation is the application of new solutions through a process of knowledge gathering, synthesizing, and processing that translates to and new or modified products or services (Christensen, 2003). These leaders knew how to align their internal resources to the firm’s informal strategy to create a source of competitive advantage. Kellermanns et al. (2016) postulated that human capital alignment to a strategy creates synergy and increases the chances of a firm achieving optimal outcomes. Kaplan and Norton (2008) explained that positive synergy comes from the alignment of human capital to a strategy.

Organizational valve consisted of into two categories: business acumen and intellectual properties. Both subthemes were heterogeneous and immobile in the context of the study. I explained each subtheme in detail in the following subsection. The subthemes were consistent with the view of some scholars in the literature.

Table 7

Organizational Value Subtheme I

Themes	Subthemes	Frequency	%
Organization value	Business acumen	45	66
	Intellectual properties	23	34
	2		100
		68	%

Note. Frequent of subthemes comprises the aggregate count of codes.

Business acumen. Business acumen can be a source of a sustained competitive advantage of firms when owners of firms use their experience, knowledge, and skills to create strategies, optimize operational effectiveness, and coordinate internal resources to increase value for customers (Barney, 1991). For the study, business acumen was defined as acquired knowledge through transfer (e.g. education or former career), iterative learning, and application. P1, a college graduate and former business owner, shared that one of his strategies for the success of his business ventures included a business environment with a perfect balance amongst ethnicities:

> Before I moved to a southern region of the United States, I had a successful business that afforded me luxuries. My competitive advantage was competed away by a demographic shift. The demographics for my businesses includes a perfect balance of whites, blacks, Hispanics, and Asians. I moved to a city in the

> southern region and located my business in this community because the demographics provided that perfect balance.

P1 said that he learned that his niche was operating in demographic with a perfect balanced of ethnicities from a former business venture. P3 and P4 also used transferrable knowledge from former careers to garner success in the restaurant industry. P3 (a college graduate) entered into the quick-service restaurant industry by purchasing an existing successful restaurant. P3 reported how his transferrable knowledge reduced the complexity of managing a restaurant:

> This restaurant was established in the 70s. I purchased it 10 years ago as an investment. Although I came from a different industry, I worked at several restaurants throughout my high school and college years. I also have a good business and finance background. So, managing the finances of a restaurant came easy.

P4 (a college graduate) also entered the independent quick-service restaurant industry by purchasing an existing successful restaurant. P4 shared that her knowledge as an economist prepared her for the restaurant industry:

> Watching your numbers, your labor, and your ingredients in this industry is key. I always approach every day like I am broke. I am an economist by trade. In my former life, my success was literally looking at historical data and figuring out how to improve business outcomes.

Transferrable knowledge was a luxury for the participants in the study, but it was not a common reality for small business owners. According to extant literature, small businesses owners are the least skilled workforce in comparison to their counterparts, which contribute to their failure rate (Hitt et al., 2016; Bishop, 2015). Some participants in the study were skilled and had transferrable knowledge to increase their odds of success. Nonetheless, only three participants used transferable knowledge to achieve organization value. Each participant used iterative learning to achieve success in their business. In the study, iterative learning was defined as a process of learning through evaluation. In the study, I used the concept of strategic planning to explain iterative learning. All six participants used informal approaches to develop strategic plans, optimize their operations for their restaurants. They did not follow a formal strategic planning approach for their business. In fact, their business strategies came from their ability to make logic deductions from limited resources to achieve successful outcomes. This view was consistent with the view of some scholars in the literature. Small business owners who use strategies to sustain in business leverage their limited resources and make decisions about the future of the company (Hitt et al., 2016). Having limited and sporadic resources prevent small business owners from charting out long-term strategies (Schumann, Scott, Kalinowski, Kaliski, & Pragman, 2014). Surprisingly, all six participants directly or indirectly practiced strategic differentiation. Small and large business owners use business strategies to differentiate themselves from their competitors (Ibrahim, 2015). Business owners who use differentiation strategies offer customers high-quality products and services that are deemed better than their competitors (Porter, 1980; Simeone, Marotta, & Rotondo, 2015). P1 identified differentiation strategies he used to sustain in business.

> Repeat customers come to me for quality products. I differ from other Mediterranean restaurants in [the southern city]. I sell high-quality Mediterranean food at a low cost. My competitors sell low-quality food at a high cost. I don't make a lot of the money off my meat in the butcher shop. But I make up for it when I transfer the meat to my restaurant. The percent of profit is higher in my restaurant than in my butcher shop. Before the meat gets old, I freeze it then prepare it for my restaurant. Other owners of Mediterranean restaurants have to through it out.

P2 explained that her niche strategy was focusing on creating an ambience and products that are pleasing to God. P2 aligned the aesthetics of the restaurant, the colors, uniforms, and menu items to reflect her religious view. P2 shared that she sustained in business because she gave to her church, her community, and her neighborhood. P2 credited God for her success. P3 and P6, on the other hand, indicated that their diner experiences distinguished them from their competitors. P3 explained the following:

> It is like a social club in the kitchen and on the diner. There is a saying in the diner, "When Mama ain't happy, ain't nobody happy." When customers walk in the door, they look for their favorite server, friend, and family to socialize with before they order. Customers know the names of my employees and the names of their children.

P4's main product was bread thereby making her restaurant one of the few independent quick-service restaurants in a city in the southern region of the United States to provide fresh, hot, and ready bread. P4's used her bread not only as a standalone product, but also as complementary product with her deli meat. P4 shared her niche strategy for competing in the market:

> Our bread is our niche and this is where we differ from other local restaurants. There are not a lot of places around where you can go to and get a sandwich on baked fresh bread. Our bread and sandwiches complement each other and that is not something you find at any other local restaurant here.

P5 shared that history created his differentiation strategy. P5 said that because of social unrest in the south, his restaurant (along with many restaurants) grow into fame and became a historic landmark. P5 also purchased a particular fish from local fish farmers that was not on the menu of most local fish restaurants in a city in the southern region of the United States. P5 said, “The type of fish I sell is difficult to cook, so everybody comes here for this fish.” According to the RBT, unique historical conditions can create a sustained competitive advantage (Barney, 1991). Along with its history, P5 emphasized that the quality of his particular fried fish sustained him in business:

> Because I always used quality products, all of my fish are quality products. Unlike other fish restaurants in a city in the southern region of the United States that buy imported fish, I have always bought fresh fish from local fish farmers in the south. Customers can taste the freshness of my fish when they bite into it.

The last of the three variables to business acumen was application of knowledge. Application of knowledge was the process of learning through experience, cognitive processing, and even trial and error. PI explained that seeking for a fast dollar was not an option and that patience was a virtue in the independent quick-service restaurant industry:

> I have learned in this business that you have to be patient. Some people want to make quick money, so they buy low quality products to increase their profits. They will make more profits than I do, but fast money won't last. It might be good for one month and after that nothing. Customers won't return.

P2 and P4 echoed the same sentiment as P1 regarding quality food, seeking a quick profit, and tarnishing customer relationships. P2 pointed out that customers knew quality and expected consistency.

> People will come back for quality food. You can trick people a few time but in reality quality will win. Overtime, we have learned that quality and consistency are great values. Customers want the product to be the same every time.

P5 summarized his process for discovering the right ingredients for his fish batter and achieving the best product for his business:

> I wanted to make a quality product. So, I began testing different fish batter ingredients and serving them customers to find out what worked. And I eventually found several perfect batter ingredients. I always used quality products, but I learned how to create the best products.

P3, P4, and P6 concurred with P1 and P2 but elaborated more on operational effectiveness. Through iterative learning, they focused more on cost savings through efficiencies. P3 explained:

> For me, it was more about learning about operational cost savings. There was a lot of inefficiencies. Too many people on the clock, which led to some people not doing hardly anything. This affected my operational cost. So, I cut the staffing

quite a bit to balance out the work. I've always been very, very slow to hire new people even if it means that we all have to work harder.

P6 shared that operational efficiencies began with controlling staffing, overhead, and capacity: “After years in this business, I’ve learned that being able to control staffing, overhead, capacity, and presenting food in a timely manner help you to stay in business.”

The participants in my study all used their business acumen to either to deduce strategies from limited resources, to differentiate themselves in the market, to apply knowledge from learned experiences, or to increase cost savings through process improvements. Not only did their business prowess help them to compete in business, it also helped them to capitalize off their intellectual property.

Intellectual properties. The participants understood the effects of their intellectual properties on their financial bottom-line and how their intellectual properties helped them compete in business. In this study, intellectual properties were defined as tacit knowledge, creations, innovations, and/or invention that are owned by the firm that are heterogeneous and immobile. The common intellectual properties of all six participants were their secret sauces and employees with tacit knowledge. All six participants had secret sauces. The majority of the participants’ secret sauces were directly linked to their employees who possessed tacit knowledge. As a result, they protected their secret sauces and employees with tacit knowledge to prevent them from being perfectly mobile. The participants’ secret sauces and employees with tacit knowledge created a level of social complexity that could not be competed away from their competition.

P1 owned and operated a family-centered, Mediterranean quick-service restaurant in a city in the southern region of the United States that served recipes that came from a small city in the Middle East. The recipes were actually older than the United States; yet, they still had the authenticity of modern Mediterranean cuisines. P1 elaborated on how he used his recipes as a strategy to advance his business goals. P1 expressed that the authenticity of his recipes were inseparable to from him and his father:

> I have a unique recipe for all of my meat that comes from my old town. My father and I are the only two that knows the ingredients. I stick to the recipes and won't change anything about them because they have flavors that bring people back. If the people want to good Mediterranean sandwiches, they'll come and get them here. It's like the McDonald's Big Mac. People know that Burger King's Whopper is bigger than the Big Mac, but some of them like the ingredients of the Big Mac.

P2 shared that her secret sauces were blessed by God. P2 explained that her strategy was to always use locally authentic ingredients to make homemade sauces to advance her business goals.

> All of our foods are quality, homemade, and blessed by God. Other owners use canned and boxed products to make their products, and they make more profits than I do. But their products are not unique or special. They use boxed cakes for their desserts that are not all bad. But their flavors are not unique. Customers want unique flavors.

P3 and P4 inherited their secret sauces and the majority of their employees through the purchase of their restaurants. Their secret sauces were inseparable from the employees who created them. Their employees possessed tacit knowledge that was protected by royalties, incentives, and salaries upwards of 30% higher than the market. P3 explained:

> We have a turkey salad spread that Mama makes that every day. Sometimes she makes it twice a day, and sometimes four times a day. People love this product. In fact, we have some customers who now live in other cities that want the Mama’s turkey salad spread shipped overnight to them. They'll pay more in shipping than it calls for the product because the flavor is so unique. Mama’s turkey salad and other authentic recipes bring customers to the restaurant.

P4 inherited a baker who had been with the restaurant for more than 25 years. The baker was inseparable from the secret sauce. He understood the science of baking to extend the shelf life of the product while using his recipes to deliver fresh, hot, and ready delicious bread. P5 offered a secret sauce that attracted local executives and politicians. P5’s fish batters were his secret sauces. P5 used them on various types of fish. He was the only person who knew the recipes. P6 operated a family-owned, local soul food independent quick-service restaurant that offered authentic soul food. The recipes he used were inseparable from the family members who accounted for the majority of his employees. P6 shared that his secret sauces were embedded in the tradition meal that he adored throughout his childhood:

> I grew up eating my mother’s soul food. The soul food ingredients used in food at my restaurant comes from our family’s legacy. The ingredients are the key to the success of my business. We have several products but soul food is our main product. Basically, our soul food sauces are what brings people in. Most people don't either know how to cook soul food or they cannot prepare it correctly.

All six participants understood that their intellectual properties were the key to their business longevity and success. As a result, they built barriers around their intellectual properties to prevent them from being competed away. The participants used their business acumen and intellectual properties to determine their markets and to create a business culture of excellence. Their secret sauces and employees with tacit knowledge were layered in social complexity and casual ambiguity; therefore, the resources created a sustained competitive advantage for the participants. Socially complexed resources of a firm are the resources that are interpersonally influenced; casual ambiguous resources of a firm are imperfectly understood (Barney, 1991). Similar to informal strategies, resources of a firm that are socially complexed and casual ambiguous have the potential to create a sustained competitive advantage.

Emergent Theme 2: Customer Required Excellence

The second theme to emerge was customer required excellence (Table 6). Customer required excellence consisted of three subthemes and eight codes. I aligned customer required excellence with the internal resource organizational capital of my conceptual framework. Customer required excellence encompassed the organization’s customer acquisition, retention strategies and relationships with customers (Table 5). All of the participants in the study had dynamic relations with their customers that were independent in context and socially complexed. Their acquisition and retention strategies and relationships with their customers appeared to provide elements of homogeneity and mobility. They appeared to be commonly practiced by competitors in their industry where they could be competed away. Barney (1991) argued that no industry attributes are perfectly homogeneous and mobile; there is always some degrees of heterogeneity. Their relationships with their customer had a degree of social complexity and casual ambiguity. Their culture consisted of a historical condition and social complexity that were inexplicable even by the participants. As a result, they could be sources of a sustained competitive advantage.

Some of the findings of customer required excellence contradicted parts of the extant literature in this study. Customer required excellence is a broad theme that includes three categories that directly or indirectly support the above items of organizational capital: (a) types of customers, (b) customer relationships, and (c) culture. All three subthemes are heterogeneous and immobile for the participants in the study (Table 8); as a result, they can be a source of sustained competitive advantage.

Table 8

Organizational Value Subtheme II

Themes	Subthemes	Frequency	%
Customer required excellence	Types of customers	47	39
	Customers relationships	21	18
	Business culture	52	43
	3	120	100 %

Note. Frequent of subthemes comprises the aggregate count of codes.

Types of customers. All participants had direct and/or indirect strategies for entertaining the three types of customers. Eggert, Ulaga, Frow, and Payne (2018) argued that business is about knowing your customers and creating value for them. The three types of customers found in this study were customer acquisition, customer retention, and noncustomers. Owners of firms maximized long-term profitability through customer acquisition (Miettinen & Stenbacka, 2018). Customer acquisition is the process of using strategies to procure or driving new customers into the business to sustain and grow the business.

Five out of the six participants used word-of-mouth advertising strategies to procure new customers. One out of the six participants used both word-of-mouth and mass media advertising to procure new customers. Word-of-mouth advertising is an unpaid, referral based form of promotion in which satisfied and dissatisfied consumers tend to spread positive and negative comments about the services of a business (Li, Yang, Yang, Xiong, Wu, & Tang, 2018). Word-of-mouth advertising is effective at driving product growth and creating by strong ties with the community (Eisingerich, Chun, Liu, Jia, & Bell, 2015). P1 explained that the quality and portion of his food create word-of mouth advertising opportunities:

> My gyro is the biggest in town. I have a unique recipe for my gyro that no other restaurant has. I use a different kind of meat that is lean and do not have a lot of fat. The meat costs a lot of money. But the meat quality is different than meats at other restaurants. Customers eat my gyro sandwich and go and tell others about it.

P2 commented that her most valuable resource was her cakes. P2 expressed that God anointed them. P2 continued, “I never paid for promoting them and people come in droves for them. They are my hottest product.” P2 said that the cakes promoted themselves. P3 explained that quality of his food, the ambience, and the culture of his restaurant created satisfied customers.

> We are a community oriented center. We’ve been here since 74. I do little, if any advertising. People know us, they come in and expect good food and clean diner. They expect the floor shine and the furniture to be clean. They love our food and service quality. It is familiarity that they expect. It is comfortable that keeps existing customers returning and new customers coming.

P4 expressed that her bread and customer service were the key ingredients that influenced satisfied customers who promoted her business.

> Our bread and our customer service are what influence customers to promote our business. There are not a lot of places around to get a sandwich on fresh baked bread. All of our ingredients are natural. We don't use any preservatives in our ingredients. I think that our customer service is contagious. We try to spoil everybody that comes in here.

Although P5’s restaurant has a celebrated historic context, the owner shared that the quality of his fish, his fish batter, and his relationships with his customers helped him to sustain in business without having to pay for advertisement. P5 reported that his customers knew him on a first name basis. P6, on the other hand, used both word-of-mouth and mass media communication to advertise to promote his business. P6 responded that advertising was essential for acquiring new customers and retaining existing customers. P6 summarized his approach for advertising:

> Basically, the best strategy to bring customers into your business is word-of-mouth. But I’ve tried other marketing strategies as well. When I opened my business, I started with passing out flyers and radio advertising. I still do pass out flyers today. I used to do a lot of radio advertising and a little bit of television, but using social media has saved a lot of money. If you have a good product, people will try your product. To sustain in business, you have to let people know what products you actually have.

Customer acquisition was a strategy used to maximize long-term profitability, but customer retention is a strategy used to sustain customer equity. Customer retention is the cornerstone of customer equity in a firm (Ascarza et al., 2018). Customer equity is the combined total lifetime of customers who frequent your business (Eggert et al, 2018). All participants in the study used informal strategies to retain their customers. The participants offered no detailed plan for their retention strategies, but they presented underling factors that were strategic and socially complexed in context. P1 and P2 expressed that consistent delivering of superior value to their customers sustained their customer equity. They consistently provided the same level of service quality to their customers without compromise. P2 shared her strategy for delivering superior service:

> Customers valued consistency. They want their products the same way every time without compromise. For example, with catering, customers value being provided more than anything else such as quality and appearance. When you consistently offer products and services that customers like, they will come back again and again.

P4 shared his strategy for retaining his customers and creating a family-centric environment that complimented his products.

> It is the experience that keeps them returning. It is the comfortable environment. When they walk in the door, not only do they want quality food, but they also want to see their favorite employees and familiar faces of customers. It is also about our quality products, quality services, and familiarity.

P5 and P6 relayed that the consistency of their quality products and services, longevity in the same community, and relationships with customers sustains his customer equity. P6 explained:

> Our customers are everything to us. We started 20 years ago in this location and we are still here because of our customers. I do so much for our customers. They are the ones who make you and break you. They always want quality food, good services, and special treatment. The people can tell when you are truly into what you're doing and they'll support it.

None of the participants in the study express that they used formal retention strategies to sustain their customer equity. But they did articulate how coordinated resources helped them to sustain the longevity of their customers. The participants knew how their efforts created value for their customers.

According to Blue Ocean Strategies, there are three types of noncustomers: 1) soon-to-be, 2) refusing, and 3) unexplored (Chan & Mauborgne). Soon-to-be noncustomers are existing customers who see no real value in the firm’s offering and spends with the firm out of necessity. Refusing noncustomers are customers who know the value of a firm but refuse to support the firm. Unexplored noncustomers are potential new customers who have never considered supporting a firm. In this study, noncustomers were a combination of refusers “difficult noncustomers” and unexplored noncustomers.

Three out of six participants in the study addressed informal strategies they used for converting and/or ignoring noncustomers. P1 and P5 expressed that they always sought to convert noncustomers into customers, but they disliked some noncustomers who attempted to negotiate their menu prices. P1 emphatically expressed that he sold high-quality products at a low price, which lowered his profit margin. Therefore, P1 refused to entertain negotiating menu prices with difficult noncustomers:

> If someone tells me he knows another place that have the same product at a lower price, I tell him good. I cannot lower my prices like other restaurants who sell low-quality products. If I lower my quality, I will get low-quality customers who are always looking for a discount, a dollar or two cheaper. I am not trying to get these type of customers. I do not want these type of customers.

P5 explained that he established his menu prices at a certain price point to make his desired profit margin. P5 reported that his menu prices derived from years of trial and error to set menu prices that were both market friendly and profitable. As a result, P5 stressed that he did not negotiate his menu prices with difficult noncustomers:

> My fish is a high-quality product that I sell at a reasonable market price. I have a few customer who come, look at my menu, and turn around or complain and walk out. They think my prices are not competitive. They are used to paying for low-quality imported fish. They often tell me that they can go to somewhere else and get six or seven pieces of fish for cheaper. I nicely tell them to go buy their fish somewhere else.

In contrast, P3's approach was quite different than P1 and P5. P3 made it a practice to always attempt to convert noncustomers to customers whether they were refusers or unexplored noncustomers. P3 summarized his strategy for converting noncustomers:

> We can spot noncustomers when they entered into the diner. We help them order and accommodate them with a complementary with soda or a sample of fresh dessert while they wait. If they try to negotiate prices, I would let them negotiate

> and make accommodations from time to time. I always have a little margin to negotiate prices. Whenever I convert a noncustomer, I consistently make money off him. Noncustomers have high expectations that only need to be satisfied.

P2, P4, and P6 did not offer strategies or examples to address noncustomers, but they did shared that they had negative and positive experiences with noncustomers. All of the participants agreed that they disliked dealing with difficult noncustomers, but they half of them always sought to convert noncustomers into customers. Whenever they converted noncustomers, they immediately began the process of building a relationship with them.

Customer relationships. The participants in the study recognized that building relationships with customers helped to ensure longevity in business. Building relationships with customers increased customer equity (Eggert et al, 2018). The categories identified in the study for customer relationships were the following: owner offline relationship with customers and owner online relationship with customers.

Owner who build offline relationships with customer not only build trust and satisfaction, but also relational capability (Diffley, McCole, & Carvajal-Trujillo, 2018; Flynn & Davis, 2017). All of the participants built offline relationships with their customers and shared that having the relationships helped them to determine value creating strategies for their customers. The relationships they build with their customers had elements of social complexity and casual ambiguity. As a result, the relationships had the potential of creating a sustained competitive advantage. P1 expressed, “You have to build honest relationships with your customers to know what they want.” P2 shared that fostering a relationship with customers built trust, opened communication to gain first-hand knowledge of their expectation. P2 shared her strategy on responding to price sensitive customers:

> The cost of food has really hit us hard and created challenges in our service delivery. When we go up a dollar, customers complain. This make it difficult for us to maintain margin. But supplier prices change so often and we have to make a profit. So, we have to strike a balance with our customers. This is good customer service, and it wins people over, along with being flexible.

P4 interacted with her customers all the time when she was not busy. She filled their empty cups with coffee and cleaned off their table to make customers comfortable when they socialized. P4 said, “When they're leaving the restaurant, I don't care if I'm way back in the back room. I will yell “Thank you. Have a great day.”

P5 stated, “You have to build a relationship with your customers. Some customers come for the food and the environment, and some come for me.” P6 briefly commented on the strategy he used to build a rapport with customers:

> I believe that building a relationship with our customers is key. To build some type of rapport or relationship with our customers, we interact them when they throughout their stay in the restaurant. We make sure that they are pleased with our services and food. We have customers who have come here since we began. We have been in business for 20 years.

Crowd-sourced, social media platforms such as Yelp, City search, and Trip Advisor are valuable resources for small business owners to directly communicate with customers. Customers used these platforms to provide feedback from their restaurant experiences. They use this platform to rate their experiences from one to five and leaving a comment that is accessible to millions around the globe. Customers use crowd-sourced, social media platforms to show their interest, satisfaction, and dissatisfaction with restaurants (Diffley et al., 2018). Harvard Business School Assistant Professor Michael Luca conducted a recent study to evaluate online consumer reviews from platforms such as Yelp, City search, and TripAdvisor to see how they impact restaurant's revenues. The findings were that each star rating added on a Yelp review translated to between five percent to nine percent revenue effects (Blanding, 2011). Two out of the six participants shared strategies for interacting with customers who used crow-sourced platforms to rate their businesses. They expressed that they interacted with consumers to build trust, to show a concern for their comments, and to mitigate potential risk.

P1 shared his strategy for responding to customers who used crow-sourced platforms:

> When customers receive poor services from your business, they are going to leave a negative review on Yelp or TripAdvisor. Since I am not at my business all the time, I have to entrust my employees to provide excellent customer services. As a result, I do not know whether customers came to my business and had good or bad experiences. Therefore, I review Yelp and TripAdvisor every day to ward off problems.

P6 indicated that he reviewed comments of raters who used crowd-sourced platforms and responded accordingly:

> I think Yelp is great. It gives tourist's and local customer's insight on local businesses. When I travel to other states, I use it as well. I did not know that Yelp existed until I received a negative comment from a customer. To make a long story short, I responded to the comment and resolved the problem. It was a misunderstanding. But since they day, I faithfully review and respond to most comments.

All of the participants in the study shared strategies for building offline and online relationship with customers. The relationships offered huge benefits and customer sustainability. Having a relationship with customer offers a short-term and long-term benefit (Miettinen & Stenbacka, 2018). Two out of the six participants shared the benefits of using crowd-sourced customer review platforms. Customers use crowd-sourced, social media platforms to show their interest, satisfaction, and dissatisfaction with restaurants (Diffley et al., 2018). Participants in the study unknowingly used socially complexed strategies to develop customer relationships that were difficult to compete way. Culture, on the other hand, was a more complexed resource than building customer relationships. Participants in the study had socially complexed and casual ambiguous cultures that were impenetrable by competitors.

Culture. All of the participants in the study fostered socially complexed and casual ambiguous cultures that were both heterogeneous and immobile. Their cultures were unique and specific to their business strategy and context. Culture is defined as a social environment with shared behaviors that represent values, norms, and beliefs (Tian, Deng, Zhang, & Salmador, 2018). According to the RBT, culture has a social complexity and casual ambiguity that is somewhat difficult to explain by members of an organization; therefore, it is difficult for competitors to understand and imitate (Barney, 1991). The categories for culture identified in the research were the following: (a) customer service, (b) customer diner experience, and (c) customer accommodation. P1 shared strategies that he used to foster his culture. P1 articulated that the core elements of his culture were customer service, quality products, and social responsibility:

> Some customer have come here and asked me to cook their food. If I'm not busy, I will cook the food. They know me from my caterings and they trust that I'll give them the best food and service. They come for the meat. My meat is expensive and it comes from a western state. It's a high-quality meat and I sell it for low. The meat has a low fat content and tender. People love the quality of my meat.

P1 continued:

> I believe in giving back to the community. Every day I pack seven or eight plates in my van and deliver them to homeless who wait at the local gas station. I take drinks also. They come running when they see me and it brings me joy. This is a big deal for me because I will receive a blessing from God for my favor. Other restaurant owners throw their food away.

P2 stressed that she created a reciprocal culture. P2 said, "We believe in giving and receiving. We give to our church, our community, and our neighborhood." P2 also expressed that she used employees with the best customer services skills in her diner to engage with customers. P2 said, "We have employees who are great with customer service. They have a lot of experience in the businesses and they add to our retail service delivery." P2 also discussed how she accommodated her customers.

> Being accommodating with customers is good customer service. It wins people over along with being flexible. Retaining the same employees overtime help to deliver great customer service. If you make people feel uncomfortable when delivering customer service, they will not return.

P3 summarized strategies he used in his restaurant to foster an engaging culture. P3's strategy consisted of working alongside his employees to create a contagious employee environment, an engaging customer experience, and an accommodating customer experience:

> Our culture is family and community oriented. The key aspect to my culture is having strong people behind the counter in the kitchen. My employees do not just come to work for work sake. They come to be with their family. I work alongside them to model excellent behavior, and it becomes contagious for my employees and it spreads across the counter to the customers.

P3 shared how he created an exception diner experience for his customers: "People come here for the experience. It is almost like a social club on both sides of the counter. If somebody behind the counter is going through a rough time, the customers will know it and show their concern and vice versa."

P3 summarized how he cooked and served specialty dishes in his restaurant to accommodate his customers:

> I brought in Norwegian salmon before for people that wanted to try it. They wanted something different and they wanted to eat it here because of the experience and comfort. So, we will do just about whatever the customer want.

P4 trained her employees to always go beyond expectation to spoil her customers. P4 said, “Our customer service is our most valuable resource. It’s our culture. We try to spoil everybody that comes in here.” P5 built his culture on superior customer service, efficiency, and quality products. P5 said, “I keep my staff level down to offer competitive process. Customers always get their orders in less than 10 minutes.” P5 continued, “I buy quality products from local fish farms and I do not import fish from other countries. My fish is always fresh.” P6 reported that his culture comprised of customer service, community service, and quality products. P6 shared that he was from the community where his restaurant was located. As a result, he gave back to his community. P6 continued, “I am here on a daily basis in order to deal with my clients and customers.” P6 shared that he purchased quality products because his customers always expected quality products.

Culture has the potential to be a source of a sustained competitive advantage when it drives in customers and mitigate threats. Business culture is a critical factor in business economic growth, innovation, and customer equity (Tian, Deng, Zhang, & Salmador, 2018). The six participates in the study created socially complexed cultures that supported their business context and strategy. Their cultures were heterogeneous and perfectly immobile.

Emergent Theme 3: Financial Perspective

The third theme to emerge was financial perspective (Table 6). Financial perspective consisted of two subthemes and six codes. I aligned financial perspective with the internal resource financial capital of my conceptual framework. Financial capital of a firm consisted of economic value, operating budgets and profits, investments, and return on investments, return on human capital (Table 5). The financial capital of the participants in the study were uniquely complexed and diversified. Perhaps the essence of money is homogeneous and mobile, but the access to financial resources are not equally distributed. The collective body of subthemes and codes in this theme were heterogeneous and immobile. They could not be competed away by a competing firm; as a result, they created create sources of a sustained competitive advantage. Regarding Barney's VRIN evaluation instrument, the internal resources were valuable, rare, difficult-to-imitate, and nonsubstitutable. Two out of six participants in the study had access to financial institutions and the rest of the participants did not. They had to use personal savings, borrow from family members, friends, or local organizations. Two out of the six participants had college degrees, functioned as executives in their former careers, and had savings and investments. They also has access to lenders who supported their business opportunities. The majority of the participants in the study had limited resources that they leveraged in isolation of their competing firms. Their limited financial resource were used to advance their independent business strategy and business context. Their financial resources were heterogeneous but not necessary immobile. As a result, they were sources of sustained competitive advantage. According to extant literature, financial institutions are reluctant to finance small firms (Song, Yu, & Lu, 2018). Owners of small firms cannot raise capital like large firms (Burns, 2016). Small business owners struggle to sustain in businesses because of limited financial opportunities that are afforded to large businesses (Falkner & Hiebl, 2015). The subthemes (Table 9) for financial perspective were funding sources and diversified revenue streams.

Table 9

Financial Perspective Subthemes

Themes	Subthemes	Frequency	%
Financial perspective	Funding sources		
		7	16
	Diversified revenue streams	37	84
	2	44	100%

Note. Frequent of subthemes comprises the aggregate count of codes.

Funding sources. Four out of the six participants in the in the study started their business with personal savings. Two out of six participants started their business with personal savings, investments, and funding from financial institutions. The findings from the study support the extant literature. The lack of small business lending by the banking industry and creditors is a factor in the instability and failure of some small businesses (Bishop, 2015).

P1 share his financial strategies for starting his business. P1 expressed, “Family members load me money to start my first business. It was an athletic shoe business in the south." He continued, "I did not go to the bank for money. So, I don't know if they would loan me money. P1 also said that he borrowed money from local religious institutions.

P2 reported that a personal family situation forced her and her sister into business and that she was not prepared and not financially stable in the beginning. P2 said: "We started in our mother's kitchen and the business grew from there. My sister's became the company vehicle." P2 continued, "My sister, my mother, and I pulled together money to start the business. We did not have credit or a history of loans. We had no other help but God and family." P2 summarized, "We knew that we liked to cook. So, we sent out letters to local businesses soliciting for catering opportunities. Within no time, we were rolling."

P3's and P4's financial strategies comprised of personal savings, investments, and access to financial institutions. They had successful careers that afforded them access to financial capital and investments. P3 expressed that he initially purchased his restaurant for an investment. P3 never intended on actually working there. P3 and P4 used their personal savings, investments, and access to financial institutional to start their business.

P5 shared that he used his personal savings to start his business. P5 reported that he sought access from financial institutions but to no avail. As a result, he relied on his personal savings and investments launch his business. P6 reported that he had to pull money together from family members. P6 said that he did not initially have the right investments or access to financial institutions.

The findings from the study supported the extant literature. Small business owners struggle to sustain in businesses because of limited financial resources that are afforded to large businesses (Falkner & Hiebl, 2015). Four out of the six participants used personal savings and some also used their investments to start their business. The majority of the participants in the study did not initially have access to financial institutions to attain funding to start their businesses or to sustain in business. Nonetheless, they eventually gained access to financial institutions to grow their businesses; they diversified their revenue streams to stabilize profitability.

Diversified revenue streams. All of the participants in the study had diversified streams of income. Not all of the participants categorically offered the same diversified revenue streams identified in the findings. Alternative sources of revenue helps to stabilize business profitability and productivity, create cash flows, and debt obligations (Mahnken & Hadrich, 2018). To offset high product cost, shrinking margins, competitor threats, the participants in the study created diversified revenue streams. Diversified revenue sources create opportunities to offset low market prices and to stabilize and balance limited resources (Mahnken & Hadrich, 2018). The categories for diversified revenue stream comprised of retail, wholesale, catering, and private brands.

P1 shared that he offered retail and catering services to grow his profit margins because local retail competition erodes his profitability. P1 said other local business similar to his business sold low-quality meats at low prices, which forces him to sell his high-quality meats at a lower competitive market price. P1 reported that he still made a profit because he sold his meat at different prices in his butcher shop and restaurant. P1 summarized how catering helped to stabilize his business and created cash flows:

> When business is slow, I make a lot of money outside with my catering business. In the restaurant, people come and negotiate prices and this affects my profit. There are weeks when I have caterings orders every day. I live outside the restaurant doing catering. Catering is better for me than the retail business. Yes, I'm busy all day here. But I do not make a lot of money here. Therefore, I provide catering.

P2 started her business doing catering. P2 summarized that catering paved the way for all of her success. She expressed, “We have catered for about 20 years. Most people remember us from catering. We still cater today. P2 reported that her catering was very lucrative and helped to offset retail obligations. She said, “With catering we have learned that being prompt is more important and valuable than quality and appearance.”

P3 was the only participant who offered all four categories of diversified revenue streams. P3 sold high-quality products with moderate profit margins. But he made huge profits because he sold in volume. P3’s restaurant turned over multiple times a day and increased his profitability due to volume sells. P3 sold private brands in his restaurant, local stores, and in retail chain stores across the country. P3 sold wholesale smoked and packaged meats to consumers and sometimes wholesale to local restaurants. P3 reported that catering was also an important revenue stream. P3 stated, “Catering is important. Our catering orders are consistent and they provides steady revenue. They start at 25 to 50 people. So, we're not delivering three, three sandwiches to a location.”

P4 stressed that wholesale offering and catering helped to stabilize business profitability and productivity, and created cash flows. P4 used her wholesale operations to create cash flows:

> Last year we focused on building our wholesales side of the business. We have wholesale customer accounts were we furnish about 800 to a thousand hamburger buns to a restaurant six days a week. We have multiple accounts in cities in the southern region of the United States. Most accounts are filled once a week. We're constantly looking for more ways to grow our wholesale business. Right now, I am trying to figure out how much labor I will need before I pick up more wholesale accounts.

P4 also stated that she currently used a third party vendor to manage her catering offering:

> Catering is something that I really am trying to expand this year. I have to get the word out because not a lot of people know that we offer catering. Right now we use a third party catering company to manage our catering. They call us with orders; we delivered the catering orders. If the order include tables and staffing, we provide them as well. Catering has really been profitable.

P5 shared that he operated as an owner-frontline employee with limited staffing. As a result, he did not have the necessary staffing resources to offer catering or wholesale. P5 took large catering orders for customers who picked up their orders from his restaurant. P5 wanted to offer wholesale products but not at the risk of his retail operations. P5 offered his fish batter as a private brand to consumers. P5 desired to grow his private brand product to offer it at local stores. P5 said, “I sell this fish batter by the bag where you can batter your own fish at home. They love it. They love this batter, and they be calling for saying I want more fish batter. I mix this up myself.”

P6 used alternative sources of revenue to help stabilize his business profitability and productivity. P6 reported that he offered catering from time to time, but catering was not consistent and he did not market the service. P6 stated that he could better control the quality of his food in his restaurant. P6 expressed that he only sold quality food in his restaurant and that he could not ensure the level of quality food at catering events. P6 expressed that he bottled his wing sauce and sold it as a wholesale product. “Yes, we sell our bottled wing source to wholesale to a couple of businesses. They changed the name, but it is the same sauce.” P6 continued:

Our sauce has become so popular that now we bottle it in the restaurant. We do not sell it in local stores but that is something that we need to look into. I know that it is profitable and I have done a little research on it. I am still figuring out how to place it in local stores. It is going to be something that we are going to invest in within the near future.

All of the participants in the study either used personal savings to finance their business, had investments, and/or access to financial institutions. Only two out of the six participants had access to funding from financial institution. Banking institutions limited funding to small businesses (Bishop, 2015). All of the participants had diversified revenue streams, but they differed in their offerings. The participants understood that diversified revenue sources create opportunities to offset low market prices and all of them expressed that they planned on growing and expanding their diversified offerings. Collectively, the participants' limited financial funding resources were not a potential source of a sustained competitive advantage. But the participants' diversified revenue streams had elements of social complexity and casual ambiguity to be sources of a sustained competitive advantage.

Emergent Theme 4: Human Assets

The fourth theme to emerge was human assets (Table 6). Human assets consisted of two subthemes and five codes. I aligned human assets with the internal resource human capital of my conceptual framework. Human capital is a tangible internal resource that has the potential to help a small business sustain a competitive advantage when the resource is exploited (Hitt et al., 2016; Jardon, 2016; Kaplan & Norton, 2008). Human assets are tangible internal resources. Some of the findings in the subthemes contradicted parts of the extant literature in this study. For example, Michael, Saban, and Abdurahman (2016) posited that small business owners who fail to leverage their human capital have little success in achieving optimal growth in business. Some of the participants in the study did not leverage their human assets and still managed to achieve optimal outcomes. Kellermanns et al. (2016) postulated that human capital alignment to a strategy creates synergy and increases the chances of a firm achieving optimal outcomes. Defeng et al. (2017) posited that employees in a firm acquire, attain, and retrieve information for practical and strategic application to grow the firm. None of the participants in the study reported that they strategically aligned their human assets to create positive synergies to advance their strategies. They also did not report that they ever explained to their employees their role in the firm's strategy. Nonetheless, based on their years of sustainability, they used informal approaches to align their human assets to their strategies, which created a level of social complexity that could not be competed away by their competition.

Human assets can be both heterogeneous, and immobile, and also mobile, meaning that they can be competed away by competitors (Barney, 1991). In the study, both leadership acumen and talent development had the potential to be sources of sustained competitive advantage. All of the participants of the study were owner-leaders at their establishments. They were committed to their business and their leadership styles aligned with their business strategies and business context. As a result, they were heterogeneous and immobile fixtures of their businesses. Several of the participants did not value investing in their employees; therefore, their employees could be competed away by competitors, meaning that they were not valuable to the participants. They could not be used to conceive a competitive strategy that created value for customers. Human capital is valuable when leaders of corporations or small businesses invest in the development of their employees (Jardon, 2016; Teece, 2000). The participants who valued investing in their employees had imperfectly immobile human assets. As a result, all of the human assets in the study were heterogeneous and some were immobile. Internal resources that are highly mobile cannot be a source of a sustained competitive advantage, but they can create value for customers (Barney, 1991). The two subthemes for human assets were (a) leadership acumen and (b) talent and development. I explained each subthemes in detail in the following subsection.

Table 10

Human Assets Subtheme

Themes	Subthemes	Frequency	%
Human assets	Leadership acumen	28	67
	Talent and development	17	40
	2	42	100%

Note. Frequent of subthemes comprises the aggregate count of codes.

Leadership acumen. All of the participants in the study operated as owner-frontline employees. They worked in locked step with their employees to achieved business outcomes. They contributed hard work daily to their business and their employees reciprocated the same behavior. According to Northouse, the participants of the study operated as transformational leaders. Transformational leaders lead with a purpose and their followers entrust their leadership and deemed their business processes fair (Northouse, 2018). They understand the dynamism of work relationships and how to manage them for optimal outcomes (Holt et al., 2017; Schutte & Loi, 2014).

Some of the findings related to leadership acumen were not consistent with the view of the extant literature. Bishop (2015) posited some restaurant owners lack the necessary managerial skills and education to successfully manage their business. Three of six participants in the study had formal education in business management, so they were considered highly competent. The other three participants did not have a formal education, but they were considered equally competent in their business practices. The three participates without a formal education sustained in business on average longer than 10 years and had high-performing businesses. Some of the participants' lack of education did not have any effect on how they lead and managed their business. Some of the participants learned leadership skills through iteration and experience, and they were able to transform their teams and create dynamism. Their ability to transform their teams using limited resources that were heterogeneous created a level of social complexity, which could not be competed away by competitors.

P1 stressed that he led by example. "Often times I go in the kitchen and work with my workers. They like this. I answer questions and clear up confusion for them." P1 also shared how he mitigated the high turnover of his employees:

> It is hard to find good workers to work for you. You can teach them and they still leave you for a dollar more. What do I do? I cannot afford to pay more. I lose money while I teach them. So, since I have a small business with four employees, I have learned how to do everything in the business. When the employee leave, I step in and do the work. This works for me.

P2 shared that she worked about 60 hours a week in the business alongside her employees to ensure business success. P2 said, "Our strength is God, our quality food, and our longevity in business." P3 reported that his presence in the restaurant created his success. P3 shared that building an honest and trustworthy relationship with his employees created a family culture in this restaurant. P3 stressed that role modeling was contagious for employees, which spilled over onto the customers. P3 shared his strategy: "I have really worked at building relationships behind the counter so that my employees feel like they are family. They come to work to be with their family. That spreads across the counter to them customers.” P3 continued:

> When I bought the business, I had no intention on working in it. It was just an investment. I learned that right away that this is not the industry where you can passively own something. Initially, my biggest challenge was having to come here every day. I naively thought I would keep my so called day job.

P4 shared multiple philosophies on how to lead as a leader and what worked for her:

> You have a couple of different philosophies for small business owners; some of them feel like they have to be there all the time, and some of them feel like they don't have to be present in the business; actually there are three philosophies; some of them feel like they don't need to be there at all; some of them are in between. My philosophy is that if you want to be a successful in this business, you almost have to be here every day. You have to keep your pulse on what is going on in the business.

P5 contrasted with P1’s, P2’s, and P3’s strategies for leading workers. P5 worked alone and sometimes with one helper or two. P5 did not invest in his helpers. P5 shared that when he invested in them, his turnover was still extremely high. “I have a small restaurant with a small kitchen. The young people don’t have good work ethics. They crowd the kitchen, hide in the restroom, and stay on their phones.” P5 reported that he only needed employees to assist him on Friday and sometimes on Saturday, which he called his busy days. P6 shared his strategy for leading his workers. “I am here from sun up to sun day every day. I pitch in and they follow my lead. That's all it take. They will pitch in and help in a lot of different aspects."

Owner-frontline leaders worked alongside their employees to motivate them, mitigate high turnover, and save on spending. They worked in their establishments to control the day-to-day operations to reduce waste. The owner-frontline leader knew how to transform their employees to deliver business outcomes and to feel motivated in the process. Grant (1996) explained firms are heterogeneous entities where leaders transform non-monetary resources into a profitable benefit.

Talent and development. Three out of six participants directly addressed talent and development and all six indirectly addressed it. Kaplan and Norton (2008) argued that talent and development drives the strategic capabilities of a firm and the performances of the employees. Wang, Werner, Sun, Gilley and Gilley (2017) defined the development of employees through learning-related activities to support the desired performance of the form. Yang, Lee, and Cheng (2016) explained that a firm's competitive advantage comes from the development and acquisition of its tacit and explicit knowledge. Human capital is a source of competitive advantage when it is aligned with a company's strategy (Lueg, 2015). According to extant literature, leaders who coach their employees and build their technical knowledge, technological management knowledge, business knowledge have the dynamic capabilities to adapt to changing environments (Wamba, Gunasekaran, Akter, Ren, Dubey, & Childe, 2017).

Some of the findings related to the subtheme talent and development contrasted the extant literature. Porter (2008) write that leaders of small businesses lack the resources to train and educate their employees, so their employees learn through trial and error (Porter, 2008). Although limited resources, all of the participants in this study supported their employees with training, education, and assistance whenever requested or needed. The participants refused to risk their businesses because of the improper support for training and education. The categories that supported the subtheme talent and development were owner relationship with employee, recruiting good employees, and employee wages. P2 shared the strategy she used to recruit and train and develop her employees:

> We pay our employees better wages than our competitors because we do not want a big turnover. We want quality people. We train them on the first day and they work beside us till they get all of the concepts. We have had people here for 12 years. It is common for employees to remain with us for 4 to 5 years. Our success starts with hiring the right person, training them, and working hands on in our business.

P3 reported the strategies he used for developing his talent. P3 expressed that lowering staffing levels and creating team dynamics were the most difficult experiences:

> In the beginning, I was challenged to learn about team and to teach them how to work better as a group. There was not a sense of unity or teamwork. So, I cut the staffing quite a bit and did some key hires along the way. I also trained them on new more efficient processes. I have always been very slow to hire new people even if it means we all have to work harder.

P3 continued:

> I was fortunate to inherit the majority of my employees when I purchased the business. The oldest workers has been here for 37 years. Her daughter has been here about 19 years. I have four others who has been here close to 15 years. So, my retention rate is impressive. I have hired a few over the past 10 years. To retain employees, you must offer them a fair and equitable salary. I pay my employees 30% more than the market rate and it pays off.

P4 expressed that the majority of her workers were family members and college students. “Family members stay throughout the ups and downs. College student are only here for temporary work.” P4 inherited the baker who had more than 25 years with the company. P4 shared that she was in the business every day and worked alongside her workers. P4 expressed that the college students were not there long enough to learn the ins and outs of the business. But P4 started training and developing all of her workers on their first day on the job. P6 shared his strategy for recruiting and developing his employees.

> I train my employees to be able to do everything. I motivate them to help out a lot because everybody have to be willing to help out. One thing I like about smaller businesses is that once you find the right help, he becomes like family. He will pitch in and help out a lot.

Retaining the same employees overtime helped to create employee’s tacit knowledge and develop a sense of team spirit in turn helped to create value for customer. The retention of employees created a level of social complexity that could not be competed away by competition. The three out of six participants in the study had valuable talent that were heterogeneous and immobile. Small business owners who lack formal education and skills find it difficult to determine the value and rareness in their human capital (Bishop, 2015; Jardon, 2016).

Emergent Theme 5: Physical Operating Material

The fifth theme to emerge was physical operating material (Table 6). Physical operating material consisted of two subthemes and five codes. I aligned physical operating material with the internal resource physical capital of my conceptual framework. Some elements of physical operating material contradicted parts of the extant literature in this study. Chou, Hsu, and Chen (2008) argued that an inopportune geographic location of a restaurant is a cause for failure. Some participants in the study had restaurants in located in desolated communities. The restaurants were located in non-commercial residential communities where abandoned homes made up a high percent of the community; yet, they managed to thrive in these conditions. Owners of restaurants in overconcentrated communities must compete for market share if they plan to sustain in business (Chou et al., 2008). Some participants in the study had restaurants in overconcentrated communities where they were one out of 20 restaurant on a city block; yet, they managed to thrive in these conditions. All six participants had heterogeneous and immobile physical operating materials.

The physical operating material in this study were heterogeneous and both immobile and mobile. The majority of the physical operating material were socially complex, tied to bundled resources, and fixed to the business. As a result, the physical operating material was valuable, rare, difficult-to-imitate, and nonsubstitutable. Some of the physical operating material had the potential to be mobile, but they were bundled with other resourced enhanced their immobility. For example, the raw material such as produce can be competed away through thief or spoilage. But the participants in the study had safety protocols to prevent these events. Physical operating material had two categories: (a) physical material and (b) raw materials.

Table 11

Physical Operating Material Subtheme

Themes	Subthemes	Frequency	%
Physical operating material	Physical material	13	27
	Raw material	35	73
	2	48	100%

Note. Frequent of subthemes comprises the aggregate count of codes.

Physical material. All of the participants possessed all of the identified findings of physical material in the study. Physical materials consisted of a firm's geographic location, equipment, supplies, and any raw materials (Table 5). The categories for physical material were property and location. An inopportune geographic location of a restaurant is a cause for failure (Chou, Hsu, & Chen, 2008). Some of the participants had properties in inopportune locations and some of them had properties in overconcentrated communities; yet, these conditions did not have a negative effect on the participants' outcomes. Parsa et al. (2015) argued that restaurants located in communities with a non-household, renters (62.14%) had the lowest percentage of restaurant failures than those in home-owner communities.

The majority of the participants in the study had restaurants located in communities with non-household commuities, but they all have survived on average of 10 years in these communities with limited resources. P1 shared that he had one location that was in an urban community where there was a balance of non-residential and home-owners. P1 shared that he opened his business in the particular commuity in a city in the southern region of the United States because of its balanced demographics of ethnicities. P1 was located in proximity to university, in the center of a home-owner commnuity, and one block away from more than 10 apartment complexes. P1's location afforded him access to multiple customer groups. Regarding his busisness exterior, P1 used large images of his food that identified with his brand and market. P1's business interior including funiture that repesented the culture of the Middle East.

P2 reported that had one location on a main avenue where other restaurant ownersrespected each other's territitory but offered friendly competition. P2's restaurant was located in a surburban, home-owner community where new construction was highly active. P2's business was located on a busy main street where customer had direct access to it. The exterior of her business had a modern design that looked resembled a franchise businness. P2 designed the interior to resemble the ambience of a a fine dinner. P2 had modern funiture and photos of her products throughout.

P3 shared that he had two unique locations that attracted different types of customers. P3 expressed that one of his locations was in an overconcentrated suburban home-owner community where he had to compete against more than 10 other restaurant on a city block. P3's other restaurant was located in a rural home-owner communuty right off a highway. P3's restaurant in the overconcentrated home-owner community attracted walking and driving customers. P3's business was in a plaza with a huge parking lot adjacent to other restaurants. P3's storefront exterior included large windows that displayed his business sign and the interior of the restaurant. P3's business interior was pristine. P3 had 70's décor and a huge dining area with a moderate sized kitchen. P3 expressed that his customers expected for his dinner to be pristine at all times and he obliged them. P3's restaurant located in a rural community attracted highway travelers who travelled the road at least 20 times a month. The location was adjacent to the highway in a historic business district. Customers walked up to the window and placed their orders or came inside and ate in the diner. P3's business exterior and interior resembled the décor of restaurants established in the 1960's.

P4 expressed that she had three locations and all of them targeted completely different market segments. P4 shared that the strategies she used for each location were completely different. All three of her restaurants were located in an urban community. One was located in a home-owner community and the other two were located in non-residential communities. P4 reported the different market dynamics of each location:

> There is absolutely no predictability of how my customer flows in my restaurants. On a rainy day, you could predict that it was going to be slow. But man that is not a guarantee. I have a location downtown that when it rains, you can guarantee it is going to be slow. Nobody wants to go out there and walk from the parking lot

> from the parking lot. I have a location in the administration building with a completely different market. It is always crowed during rainy days and snow days maybe because customers do not have to park so far away. Maybe because they can run inside and not get wet, I don't know. I guaranteed you that I know that they are just different markets.

P4 shared that she organized her resources to meet the demands of each location and she make abjustments according to supply and demand. All three locations of her restaurants were located in business plazas; therefore, P4 had no control of exterior the curb appeal. P4 could only hang a business sign that branded her business logo. P4's business interior had a huge kitchen and a small dinner area. Baking racks and large ovens were littered across the kitchen. P4 dressed the interoir with photos of the restaurant's products.

P5 reported that had one location. P5 bought his restaurant more than 35 years ago during a heightened peoriod of racial discourse in the south. The neighborhood was polular during the racial crisis but soon afterward lost its polularity. P5 restaurant was location in a desolated areas where adandoned houses littered the block; yet, P5's restaurant consistently remained busy. P5 preserved the historical aesthetics of the interior and exterior. P5's business exterior had not changed in years. P5 had not rennovated his restaurant in more than 25 years. P5's business interior had booths for seating that were designed more than 20 years ago. P5's kitchen had not change either.

P6 shared that he had one location that was located in the urban community where he lived all of his life. P6 expressed that open his resturant 20 years ago in the location to support his community. P6’s restaurant was located in a commercial and residential community where more home-owners lived than non-residential tennants. P6’s restaurant was located on a main street where commuters with business obligations and residentials travelled by daily. P6 did not get a lot of traffic from people who did not live in the community. Regarding his exterior, it looked modern. P6 consistently rennovated it as necessary to provide new aesthetics for his customers.

Raw material. All of the participants in the study used raw resources to produce products for profitability. For this study, raw materials were considered unprocessed commodities such as meats, poultry, wheat, and dry ingredients used to produce and transform goods for consumption. Although homogeneous in nature, the participants in the study processed and marketed the raw material differently. They also sold their raw materials to niche populations. As a result, they were considered heterogeneous in context and had the potential to create a sustained competitive advantage. Most of the raw material had the potential to be mobile, but they were bundled with other resourced enhanced their immobility. The raw material had a level of social complexity because of how it was prepared and marketed.

P1 explained that he purchased high-quality meats that were sacredly process for consumption. P1 said that his sacred meat was expensive and offered small profit margins. P1 stressed that he could not compromise on his meats.

> All of my meat is fresh USDA Certified. My pound is seven dollars and 30 cents right now. I am selling it $7.99. So, I make a little profit off my meat in the butcher shop. But I make the big profit off my meat in my restaurant.

He shared his strategy for reducing the cost of his supplies:

> Always try to reduce cost of supplies through shipping cost. For example, if I buy a 1000 pound pallet of supplies from another state, I order 500 pounds from one supplier and another 500 pounds from another supplier. I save money this way. If you buy from one suppliers it going to kill your profits.

P1 also shared that he controlled his raw meat supply by initially selling it in his butcher shop and later selling it in his restaurant. P1 said that he had a low percent of spoilage.

P2 stressed that she only sold quality meat that was prepared in a raw state. P2 said, "You never want to serve inferior food. So, I buy quality food at a higher cost and we cook everything from a raw state. We do not use pre-cooked anything. I do not want to take a chance on food that do not look fresh." P2 reported that if she had tainted meat, she trashed it. She also expressed, "I did not sell canned or boxed products because the flavors were not original. But other restaurants do because they can make a larger profit."

P3 did not share where he purchased his products or how he storaged them to reduce soilage, but P3 explained how he bundled his resources to create quality and original products:

> Mama use the turkey to make turkey salad every day, sometimes twice a day, sometimes four times and a day. People love that product. In fact, we have some customers who pay to have it shipped. They'll pay more in shipping than it cost for the product because they want to have it.

P3 shared that his customers expected seasoned and quality food, and he always obliged them. P3 said that once one of his customers travelled to another state to attend a party and did not like the coleslaw that was being served. As a result, she called P3 and he explained the recipe to the chef at the event. “She said that he came close, but it was not the same.” P4 shared that she controlled her supplies by managining supply portions and labour.

> You do not only have to watch your numbers, you have to watch your labor, your ingredients, your portion, and what your employees are cooking. You also have to watch how much meat your employees put on sandwiches, how much cheese they use, and make sure that they are doing business the right way.

P4 reported that she sold quality products and used all natural ingredients. “We use all-natural ingredients. No, we don't do any preservatives or anything like that's very unique in the marketplace.” P4 continued, “Our products complement each other.”

P5 did not share how he storaged his supplies or prevented from spoilage, but he summarized strategies used to sustain quality products at affordable prices.

> I sell good quality food with a nice price so that I can afford to stay in business. All of my products comes fresh from local fish farmers in the south. I do not buy frozen imported fish. So, I pay a good price for it. My fish cost me $5 per pound. I sell in volumn so I always make a nice profit. I have some cheap prices, some reasonable prices to balance my menu.

P6 shared that he prepared all of his quality food products from a raw state and not a pre-cooked frozen state. P6 said that this I what created his business succes:

> We have a great products. Our main product is soul food. It is the main meal that basically brings people into the restaurant. We know how to prepare soul food and most people don't know how to cook it or not prepare it correctly. So, it is the key to the success of the business. You have to have quality products and be able to prepare it the same way all times.

The physical operating material in this study were heterogeneous and both immobile and mobile. Some of the findings in the study contradicted extant literature and some of it supported the literature. The participants in the study unknowingly and knowingly used social complexed and casual ambiguous strategies to sustain in business. As a result, their physical operating materials were sources of a sustained competitive advantage.

Emergent Theme 6: Technological Prowess

The sixth theme to emerge was technological prowess (Table 6). Technological prowess consisted of one subtheme and three codes. I aligned technological prowess with the internal resource technological capital of my conceptual framework. Technology capital includes technological prowess, ownership of business technology such as point-of-sale technology, computer accessories (e.g. software), websites, and social media platforms. Some elements of technological prowess supported parts of the extant literature and some elements contradicted parts of it. Porter (2011) argued that business technology is a critical secondary activity of a firm including infrastructure, human resources, and procurement. The participants in the study used technology to either augment their business operations or advance their informal strategy. Fillis (2015) posited that technology has become essential for small businesses, but small business owners are hesitant to adopt modern Internet marketing strategies. Not all of the participants in the study valued business technology. In fact, one of the participants had not upgraded his business technology since the advent of the fax machine. He did not share his reason for not valuing business technology, but he knew the benefits of business technology.

The participants in the study had varying degrees of technological prowess. Five out of the six participants had a point-of-sale system (POS), a website, and a social media account. Five out of the six participants infrequently managed their websites and social media accounts; two out of the six participants fully engaged in their social media platforms. The business technologies of the participants were valuable in context but rare and did not have the potential to be sources of a sustained competitive advantage. Large numbers of their competitors possessed the same technologies with varying degrees of technological knowledge, thereby they could implement the same strategy using the technologies. Collectively, their technological prowess for using their business technology was not a source of a sustained competitive advantage. Their inability to use the technology to conceive competitive business strategies did not increase value for their customers. As a result, the participants' technological capacity operated at the level of a novice with no experience. They lack of experience did not garner a sophisticated level of social complexity that could not be duplicated by competitors. However, if they had bundled their technology resources with other internal resources, they could increase their value. Bundled internal resources such as physical, human capital, and technology capital is the source of a firm's sustained competitive advantage (Blome et al., 2014; Mathooko

& Ogutu, 2015; Wernerfelt, 1984). I evaluated the subtheme of technological prowess as cognitive capacity to determine the competitiveness of the internal resource. The only category for the subtheme technological prowess was business technology systems.

Table 12

Technological Knowledge Subtheme

Themes	Subthemes	Frequency	%
Technological prowess	Business technology systems	26	100
	1	26	100%

Note. Frequent of subthemes comprises the aggregate count of codes.

Business technology systems. Five out of six participants used point-of-sale business technology to maintain data flow, to track spending and supplies, and to create efficiencies in the operations. Technology such as POS can help owners of restaurants operate more efficiently (First Research, 2018; Kaptein & Parvinen, 2015). Consumer data that is captured on a business's ERP such as physical address, mobile telephone number, email address, date of birth, and anniversary can be used for mobile marketing directly to customers (Konthong et al., 2016). Five out of the six participants in the study used POS to augment their business operations.

P1 shared that he used a cash register and a merchant credit card machine to check out his customers. P1 reported that he only needed a merchant machine device for registering credit card transactions. P1 used a Facebook social media page as a landing page for his business to attract customers instead of the traditional website.

P2 reported that she used her POS system for registering credit card transactions, manage inventory, warehouse data, and create efficiencies. P2 shared that she used the data to make daily operational business decisions. P2 had a robust website that she used for attracting, managing, and retaining customers. P2 explained that her website included her mission and direction for the business as well as announced specials, holiday meals, new menu items. P2 updated the content and functionality of her website often to remain relevant with younger generations.

P3 echoed the same information as P2 about the strategies he used for his POS system. P3 reported that he used his POS system for registering credit card transactions, manage inventory, warehouse data, and create efficiencies. P3 indicated that with two locations he needed a robust transactional system to assist him in managing supplies and labor at multiple locations. P3 analyzed the data in the POS to order supplies for both locations, track day-to-day sales, managing spends. P3 used his website to attract customers but he did not spend a lot of time on studying the flow of customers who visited the site. P3’s website branded both locations of his businesses by featuring photos of them and promoted his products. P4 also echoed the strategies of P2 and P4 regarding POS systems. P4 recently started using a POS system registering credit card transactions, manage inventory, warehouse data, and create efficiencies. P4 said, “Just recently, year and a half ago, we start using the square by taking orders at the tablets. It is really cool. Regarding record keeping, sales, and trends, you can go back to whenever we first started it and see charts. That is really neat.” P4 had the most robust website out of all the participants in the study. P4 used her website to attract, manage, and retain customers. P4 announced all of her specials, new products, and holiday meals.

P5 corroborated the same information as P1 regarding strategies he used for his business transactions. P5 used a cash register and a merchant credit card machine to check out his customers. P5 did not value business technology. P5 mentioned that he had not upgraded his business technology since the fax machine. P5 expressed that he did not have a website or social media account. P6 corroborated the same strategies as P2, P4, and P4 regarding his POS system. P6 used a POS system for registering credit card transactions, manage inventory, warehouse data, and create efficiencies. P6 also used the data in his POS to market to the customers.

Four out of six participants understood the value and benefits of leveraging POS systems. But none of the participants effectively exploited the technology for maximum effect. Internet and social media marketing are transforming small businesses (Rad, Ghorabi, Rafiee, Rad, 2015). Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and LinkedIn provide small businesses with low cost marketing and e-commerce functionality (Xie et al., 2016). Social media is a great marketing platform to promote products, to build relationships with their customers, study competitors, and brand products. The lack of adopting new marketing practices is because of the lack of knowledge resources to effectively use social media platforms such as Facebook for business, Linked In, and Twitter (Sawmy & Ladkoo, 2015).

Online customer relationships help bridge the gap between producer and consumer to create value for the customer (Xie, Li et al., 2016). But online customers behave differently than offline customers (See Customer required excellence). Owners who promoted online offerings increase brand loyalty and frequency of visits (IBIS World, 2018). Owners who created online ordering experiences can lure a larger amount of customers to their site (IBIS World, 2018). Five of the six participants had social medial accounts but used it for marketing to consumers than for building online relationships with customers. Two out of the six participants shared strategies for building online relationships with customers. They collectively explained that it took different skill set and patience to build online relationships with customers using social media platforms. The rest of the participants expressed elements of strategies they used on social media that were not highly engaging.

Facebook was P1’s and P6’s preferred social media platform to interact with customers. Both P1 and P6 had active Facebook accounts that provided evidence of their engagement with customers. Posting and responding to posts create social media engagement cycles where the business owner and consumer can engage in a healthy and productive discussion about their offerings (Sawmy & Ladkoo, 2015). P1 expressed that he used social media to interact with customers, market products, and increase his brand. P1 talked directly with the customers using Facebook live. P1 also uploaded videos to his page regarding his produce and products in his restaurant. P1 posted daily and stressed about how social media has enhanced consumer’s knowledge:

> Consumers they are wide awake now. They know the good businesses from the bad ones because of Facebook postings. So, when they come in your business, they expect good food and good attitudes from you. If you don’t meet their

expectation, they’re going to come to you with a bad attitude, which is a problem because most business owner strive to please their customers. Some of the workers fail to meet the customer’s expectation.

P1 continued:

The first thing I do in the morning is login Facebook to respond to my customers. I try to respond to all of my post within 24 hours to show them that I care about their concern. I get between 5 to 6 post everyday asking about my products or responding to an experience in my restaurant. I respond to both good experience and bad ones. This has really helped my business.

P2 used social media to make announcements, respond to customers, to increase his brand. P2 posted special for holidays. All of her posting were recent. Appeared to be a one way communication. P3 shared that he used social media to make announcements, respond to customers, and to increase his brand. Whenever he introduced a new product, he announced it on Facebook. P3 did not manage his site daily. P4 used social media ever so often to make announcements, respond to customers, to increase her brand.

P6 used social media to interact with customers, to poll customers, to make announcements, and to increase his brand. P6 stressed his satisfaction with using social media to building relationships with customers:

Before Facebook, a lot of people were not familiar with my products or services. They heard about by business through work-of-mouth or just happened to run across it in passing. And I only built relationships with families in this community and their associates. Since I started posting on Facebook, I meet and build

> relationship with about 5 potential customers a week. I persuade about half of them to come in and try my food and they become diehard customers.

Building online relationships with customers through social media were essential to acquiring new customers, retaining customers, bridging the gap between producer and consumer to creating value for customers. In this study, Facebook was a preferred platform for building relations with customers. All of the participants in the study shared their strategies for leveraging business technology. Some of the participants did not value business technology, thereby did not use the technology to conceive strategies to create value for their customers; some of the participants valued business technology but had limited knowledge of its application to create value for their customers. As a result, the participants on this study lacked the technological prowess to fully leverage their business technology to create a sustained competitive advantage. Greene et al. (2015) explained that one out of the five competitive internal resources of a firm is technology. Porter (2011) argued that business technologies are evolving to have one of the biggest effects in business.

Applications to Professional Practice

The findings of this qualitative multiple case study could help owners and future owners independent quick-service restaurants in a city in the southern region of the United States and across the country engage their internal resources to sustain in business for longer periods. The findings of the study could contribute significantly to professional business practice by (a) providing a guide for operating an independent quick-service restaurant with limited resources, (b), determining whether internal resource are heterogeneous and immobile, (c) evaluating internal resources to determine their competitive advantage, and (d) leverage internal resources to achieve optimal outcomes. In the subsection, I used the RBT's VRIN evaluation instrument and the *Independent Quick-Service Restaurant Integrated Social Complexity and Casual Ambiguity Model* to explain how the findings in the study can be used to apply to professional practice.

Resource-Based Theory's Value, Rare, Imitable, and Nonsubstitutable Evaluation Instrument Example

The RBT's VRIN evaluation instrument in Table 12 consists of eight categories from left to right. The left column includes three of the internal resources identified in the study and the far right column includes the evaluated results of the internal resources. I presented an organized explanation of the evaluation of each internal resource. First, I summarized how participants in the study used their internal resources. Next, I evaluated their internal resources according to their business context and business strategy. Lastly, I explained whether their internal resources are sources of sustained competitive advantage. If the resources are not sustainable, I explained how to enhance the value of their resources.

Table 13

Resource-Based Theory's Value, Rare, Imitable, and Nonsubstitutable Evaluation Instrument

Internal resource	Immobile	Heterogeneous	Valuable	Rare	Difficult -to- Imitate	Non-substitutable	Conclusion
Intellectual properties	X	X	X	X	X	X	SCA
Talent and development		X		X			NSCA
Technological prowess	X	X					NSCA

Note. The X is used to show the value of each internal resource according to the model.

Intellectual properties. All of the participants in the study had intellectual properties that were both heterogeneous and, in some degree, immobile. The participants had secret sauces that were either created by the owner of the establishment or created by the employees. The secret sauces that were owner-centric were definitely heterogeneous and imperfectly immobile. The owner was a permanent fixture in his or her establishment without any intent to sell the business. The secret sauces that were created by the employees were heterogeneous and, in some degree, immobile. The employees who created secret sauces had collectively worked for the restaurants for more than 20 years. They were paid 30 percent beyond the market salary and had contractual agreements with the owner for the rights of their intellectual properties. The contractual agreements were not discussed in this study. As a result, I could not fully evaluate whether the employees who created secret sauces were mobile or immobile. The secret sauces had a level of social complexity, historical conditioning, and casual ambiguity that could not be fully understood or duplicated. Regarding the VRIN instrument, the secret sauces were valuable, rare, difficult to imitate, and non-substitutable, As a result, they were sources of a sustained competitive (SCA). The secret sauces had the ability to enhance value for the firms while mitigating threats.

Talent and development. All of the participants recruited, trained and developed employees who they hired. All of the participants had employees who were strategically aligned and helped them to advance their informal strategies. But not all of the employees were immobile. For example, participant 5 only recruited and hired employees to assist him in delivering orders to customers in his diner. He refused to teach them the recipes to the secret sauces or even how to run the daily operations. They were only extensions of his arm, meaning he used them when he needed them. Their work schedules were inconsistent and their tenure was less than 6 months. He only employed one worker at a time. He was a one man operation. As a result, the employees were perfectly mobile and not sources of sustained competitive advantage (NSCA). As a result, they did not create value for customers. Regarding the VRIN instrument, participant 5's employees were not valuable or rare. Independently, they did not provide a level of social complexity or casual ambiguity for the firm. To enhance their value, participant 5 could train and educate his employees on all of the operational processes and procedures. He also could teach them how to use the merchant credit card transactional device or give them key access to the restaurant. He could also use them to order and manage supplies or even to provide feedback to online customers through crowd-sourced review platforms such as Yelp. If he had a website and social media account, he could use them to manage his accounts to attract customers to the restaurant.

Technological prowess. None of the participants had the capacity to effectively sustain competitive advantage through technological knowledge. The participants' technological capacity operated at the level of a novice with no experience. Some of them had basic knowledge to navigate social media platforms. But they did not have the capacity to exploit them. Their lack of experience did not garner them a sophisticated level of social complexity or casual ambiguity that could not be duplicated by competitors. Regarding the VRIN instrument, the resources offered no sustaining competitive advantage (NSCA). To increase the value of resources, the owner had to build his or her knowledge of technology and bundle it with other internal resources to increase value for customers. Bundled internal resources such as physical, human capital, and technology capital is the source of a firm's sustained competitive advantage (Blome et al., 2014; Mathooko & Ogutu, 2015; Wernerfelt, 1984).

Independent Quick-Service Restaurant Integrated Social Complexity and Casual Ambiguity Model

The *Independent Quick-Service Restaurant Integrated Social Complexity and Casual Ambiguity Model* (ISC model) is a cause and effect instrument that is designed to enhance value for customers while creating a sustained competitive advantage for the firm. The model includes 6 categories that emerged from my study (Figure 1). According to the RBT, informal strategies have the potential to create a level of social complexity and casual ambiguity that are rare and difficult-to-imitate (Barney, 1991). In my study, owners of independent quick-service restaurants operated with perfectly imitable, limited resources; as a result, the majority of their internal resources were highly mobile. The perfectly imitable and mobile resources used independently and in isolation were not likely to be sources of a sustained competitive advantage. The ISC model is designed to integrate and bundle internal resources owned by the firm to create a level of social complexity and casual ambiguity to be a source of a sustained competitive advantage. Bundled internal resources such as physical, human capital, and technology capital is the source of a firm's sustained competitive advantage (Blome et al., 2014; Mathooko & Ogutu, 2015; Wernerfelt, 1984).The ISC model has three operating components: the crust layer, the slab layer, and integrated social complexity.

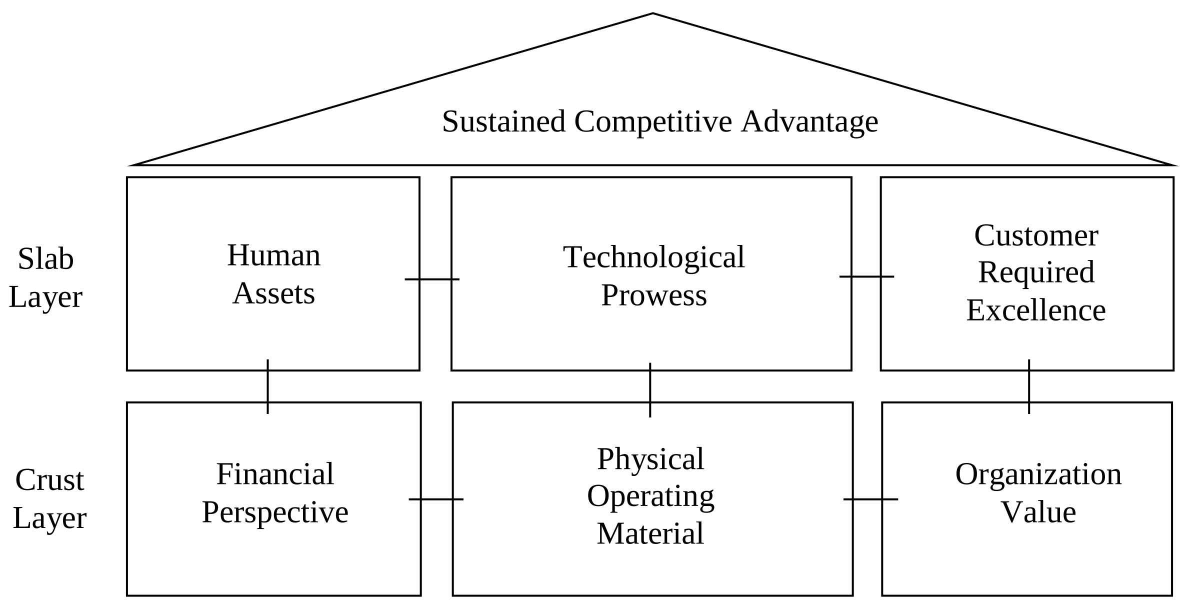

Figure 1: The model shows internal resources, layers, and integrated social complexities.

Crust layer. The crust is the bottom layer of the ISC model. It includes the components: (a) financial perspective, (b) physical operating capital, and (c) organization value. Owners of independent quick-service restaurants must fully understand the components and elements of the model and know how to take advantage of them. The financial perspective has two elements: funding sources and diversified resources. Funding sources are personal savings and financial institutions. Owners of independent quick-service restaurants must initially have personal savings and know how to organize friends, family, and local investors to assist them. If possible, they must also have access to financial institutions. To get a business loan, they must meet the following qualifications: (a) have a qualifying credit score of at least 700, (b) have a strong business plan, and (c) provide collateral (e.g. house and vehicle). They must also diversify their portfolio offering. They must develop offerings beyond their retail offerings that create multiple streams of revenue (e.g. catering, wholesale, and private brands). Physical operating material has two elements: physical material and raw material. The actual property and all of its operating machinery and furniture are considered physical materials. Independent quick-service restaurants must be strategically located and thematically appealing. The products must be prepared from a raw state and the recipes must be originally homemade. Customers are attracted to original flavors. Organization value has two elements: business acumen and intellectual properties. Owners of independent quick-service restaurants must consistently use transferrable knowledge, iterative learning, and application of knowledge. They must apply knowledge acquired from former careers or education including their experiences to deduce strategic information from limited resources to coordinated systems, create innovation, and create efficiencies in processes. Lastly, they must research, study, and create intellectual properties such as secret sauces. They must also be able to retain good employees and build their tacit knowledge.

Slab layer. The slab is the foundational layer of the ISC model. It includes the components (a) human assets, (b) customer required excellence, and (c) technological prowess. Owners of independent quick-service restaurants must fully understand the components and elements of the model and know how to take advantage of them. Human assets has two elements: owner-leadership and owner relationship with employee. Owners of independent quick-service restaurants must be owner-leaders. They must be fully engaged in their day-to-day operation and be a role model for their employees, meaning they must be able to function in every role when needed. The must create independent and dynamic relationships with each employee. The must be approachable, open, and transparent. They also must recruit the right talent to support their informal strategies and operational processes, procedures, and systems. They must consistently train and develop their employees and meet strategic obligations; they must also pay their employees living wages. Customer required excellence has three elements: types of customers, customer relationships, and culture. Owners of independent quick-service restaurants must be able to effectively manage the three types of customers: acquisition, retention, and noncustomers. They must have unique strategies to acquire new customers, retain existing customers, and convert noncustomers. They must build dynamic relations with offline and online customers. They must know the names of customers who enter their diner or recognize them upon entering. They must understand consumerism and engage in crowd-sourced customer review platforms such as Yelp. Technological prowess has one element: business technology. Business technology includes point-of-sale systems, website presence, and social media leveraging. Owners of independent quick-service restaurants must effectively utilize business technology to sustain in business in the information age. They must train and develop their employees on the functionality of business technology and delegate responsibilities accordingly. They must have a business website that interfaces with a database to capture data such as customer online site visits, transactions, and purchases. They must also have social media accounts and often engage in social media marketing and interacting with customers.

Integrated social complexity and casual ambiguity. Integrated social complexities and casual ambiguities are the connectivity that links together the components and elements of the ISC model. Integrated social complexities and casual ambiguities are the lines that connect the themes (squares) in the model. Socially complexed resources of a firm are the resources that are interpersonally influenced; casual ambiguous resources of a firm are imperfectly understood (Barney, 1991). The links are influenced by the owner-leader's cognitive ability to systematically bundle together internal resources to create positive synergy among the internal resources owned by the firm. Owners must bundle together internal resources through a trial and error process to test their capacities. Each owner has to figure out what linkages work for his or her business context and business strategy. The owner must learn through iterative learning by testing and applying the knowledge learned to attempt to find the perfect prescription for his or her business context. There is no ideal linkage that is perfect for all owners of independent quick-service restaurants. The owner of the firm must protect the detailed knowledge of the perfect linkages from the general employee body. The perfect linkages must be poorly understood by employees of the firm to generate a sustained competitive advantage. Employees who can easily describe the perfect linkages of a firm's internal resources that are used to generate a sustained competitive advantage can potentially be recruited by a competing firm in which the competing firm can reduce the original firm's ability to sustain a competitive advantage. The perfect prescription of linkages creates a level of social complexity and casual ambiguity that competing firm cannot understand and compete away.

Cause and effect. The main premise of the ISC model is to use it to create layers of integrated social complexities and cause and effect synergies. First, the components and elements of the crust layer must be researched, studied, learned, and applied. Owners of independent quick-service restaurants must build and manage their credit scores, pitch business plans to financial institutions, and diversify their financial portfolios. The must also build their intellectual properties and business knowledge. Lastly, they must create a business environment that is conducive to their business context and strategy.

Secondly, the components and elements of the slab layer must be researched, studied, learned, and applied. Owners of independent quick-service restaurants must operate as an owner-leader, recruit and hire employees who support their business context and strategy, and identify the targeted customer audience in which to market, acquire, retain, and upsell. They must also understand how to build offline and online relationships with customers. To build online relationships with customers, owners must manage and engage in their website and social media platforms. Lastly, the owner must create a culture that is heterogeneous and imperfectly immobile. Cause and effect is created by perfectly aligning and integrating components and elements of the crust layer with the slab layer which in turn theoretically creating a source of competitive advantage.

The findings of the study contributed to the body of knowledge that expands the volume of extant literature. Owners of quick-service restaurants created a sustained completive advantage using limited resources. The identified emergent themes and subthemes in the study provided a detailed analysis of the internal resources and specific strategies they used to sustain in business for long periods. The RBT evaluation instrument can be used by owners of quick-service restaurants to determine the value of their internal resources. They ISC model can be used as a guide to assist owners of quick-service restaurants to create business strategies to advance their business practices.

Implications for Social Change

Independent quick-service restaurants are global, national, and local economic drivers that is vast and dynamic (IBIS World, 2018). The restaurant food service and drinking industry is the largest industry in leisure and hospitality in America adding 1.3 million jobs to the economy between 2010 to 2014 (BLS, 2014). Although franchises dominate the quick-service restaurant industry, the industry is highly competitive and account for more than 275,000 restaurants in America and employee more than 5,000,000 people across the country (IBIS World, 2018; USCB, 2015).

The results of this study may help improve the chances of survival for owners of independent quick-service restaurants in a city in the southern region of the United States and across the United States by providing them with successful strategies to evaluate and leverage their internal resources to determine their competitive advantage and to sustain in business beyond the first 5 years. Social change is the concept of intentionally committing to finding ways to transform societal well-being inside and outside the boundaries of an organization (Stephan et al., 2016). It also means to contribute to society in ways that positively alter the conditions of society (Stephan et al., 2016).

The findings of this study identified multiple ways for owners of independent quick-service restaurants to contribute to social change in local communities by (a) enhancing the value of internal resources to create business growth in local communities, (b) increasing job stability by sustain for longer periods, (c) reducing the unemployment rate in local communities. By adopting the recommendations for further action, owners of independent quick-service restaurants can avoid the pit falls of failure by using the recommendations as a guide to create superior value for customers, strategies for sustainability, and strategies to mitigate risk from local competition.

Recommendations for Action

The findings of this study may contribute to the growth and sustainability of independent quick-service restaurants across the United States. The findings of this study is not only valuable for existing owners of independent quick-service restaurants, but also valuable for anyone who considers investing or venturing into the industry. Using the strategies identified in this study may (a) minimize the challenges of day-to-day business operations and sustainability for novice and some existing owners of independent quick-service restaurants; (b) enhance owners’ ability to evaluate their internal resources, and (c) increase owners capacity to integrate limited, internal resources of a firm to create socially complexed integrated resources.

The findings of this research should not only be privy or limited to owners of independent quick-service restaurants to use as a guide for business growth sustainability, but they should also be shared with other outlets such as academic journals, business literature, consulting firms, the Association of Strategic Planning, the Harvard Business School and others like ones, the Harvard Business Review, prominent scholars of theories such as Porter's Five Forces, Blue Oceans Strategies, and Platform Strategies, the Small Business Association, and National Center for Health Statistics, local environment health protection agencies, IBIS World, and First Research. The findings of this study provided new strategies for owners of independent quick-service restaurants, investors, educators, and all interesting parties a blueprint for leveraging their limited internal resources to create a sustained competitive advantage.

Recommendations for Further Research

The findings of this study contributed to new knowledge to the current body of literature regarding how owners of independent quick-service restaurants can leverage their limited internal resources to sustain in business beyond their first 5 years. The qualitative method and design that I used in this research study inherited limitations because of their structure. The qualitative research method is designed to seek to understand cultural experiences, narrative experiences, and contemporary human experiences (Cronin, 2014; Yin, 2018); Hancock & Algozzine (2015) posited that the case study design has limitations because it is based on immediate real-world events that cannot be captured in a survey unlike that of a quantitative or mixed method design. As a result, the chosen method and design used in this study created limitations and opportunities for further research.

The primary limitation of this study was the size of the population. The population size of the study consisted of 6 owners of independent quick-service restaurants. Such a small population size prevents generalizability of the findings to a larger population. Researchers should consider furthering this research using a larger population.

The second limitation of this study was the lack of ethnic qualification regarding participants. The criteria for the study did not include a specific ethnicity group for considerations such as Mexicans, Africans, African Americans, Jews, Arabs, and Chinese quick-service restaurant owners. Researchers should consider furthering this research by focusing on a specific ethnicity.

The third limitation of this study was the geographical location, which was a city in the southern region of the United States. The research could have included owners of independent quick-service restaurants in bordering states such as Tennessee, Mississippi, Oklahoma, or Texas. A study of a broader geographical scope could reveal a broader range of successful strategies for leveraging limited internal resources to sustain in businesses beyond the first 5 years. Additionally, the scope of this research study created a limitation since it only identified with the independent quick-service restaurant industry. This research could have included owners of small businesses in other industries such as manufacturing, technology, farming, and clothing. The incorporation of other industries could have revealed other valuable findings regarding the utilization and diversity of internal resources.

The fourth limitation of this study was the lack of a gender consideration. A report from the SBA revealed that minority women business owners lack the necessary financial support to sustain in businesses as their counterparts (SBA, 2016b). Since the study did not consider gender, researchers should expand this study by focusing on a specific gender population.

The fifth limitation of this study was the lack of focus on specific dietary factors. The threat to owners of independent quick-service restaurants is shifting preferences of consumers (First Research, 2018). Consumers are more health conscious and aware of health issues related to obesity, hypertension, and high cholesterol (IBIS World, 2018). Some consumers prefer menus with healthy low-calorie items then those with high-calorie items. Researchers should expand this study by focusing on shifting consumer preferences. Finally, researchers should employ a different qualitative research design, such as ethnography or phenomenology design or a quantitative research design such as experimental to explore or to examine further strategies for leverage and diversity internal resources to create a sustained competitive advantage.

Reflections

The doctoral process was a rewarding experience that exceeded my expectations and challenged me beyond measure. The coursework was a labor of love with a dual benefit. The courses I took in the program were directly applicability to the workforce. In DDBA 8151 Organizational Leadership, I learned about different styles of leadership,

leadership history, and the practical applications of the leadership styles. Northouse (2018) wrote that leaders find ways to influence others in organizations to achieve the mission of the organization. Transformational leader was the style of leadership that peaked my curiosity. Transformational leaders lead with personal zeal and organizational purpose and their followers entrust their ability to develop them and deemed their business practices and processes fair and equitable (Northouse, 2018). As an internal consultant at the University of Arkansas for Medical Science, I design and develop leadership curriculum and facilitate workshops to enhance leadership potential in the healthcare industry. The knowledge that I obtained from the leadership course enhanced my ability to educate leaders at University of Arkansas for Medical Science on the different styles of leaders and foster a culture of conscious leaders who began to transform divisions within the organization. Nonetheless, my coursework was definitely a dual, rewarding experience. But my experience at my first residency changed me as a student.

The first residency was in sunny Orlando Florida. I did not know what to expect, so I was totally overwhelmed with the regimented residency activities. But the staff at Walden University had already considered our anxieties and created activities to make our first residency the best learning experience.

The overall doctoral process enhanced my knowledge of ethics in research. I learned that ethics in research was not an option but a mandate. All researchers must strive for ethical quality research (Yin, 2018). Research that is not ethical is only flawed information that cannot be used to further a research study. Ethical violations that are found in a research study could lead to approval problems (Yin, 2018). Once I learned about ethics in research, I was ready to take on the doctoral study.

After I completed my coursework, I was assigned my Chair and Committee. This was by far the most challenging part of the process. I had to build a trusting relationship with educators who challenged me to think differently. At times, our relationship felt strained and this really frustrated me. But I endured with the help of my family, work colleagues, Chair, and Committee.

Throughout the doctoral process, I became more diligent, focused, and commitment to the process, and I learned a lot. The doctoral process gave me a sense of greater accomplishment and enriched my life. The data collection permitted me the opportunity to listen to the strategies of owners of independent quick-service restaurants and to understand their on challenges; the data analysis permitted me the opportunity to identify themes and subthemes within the transcripts that provided solutions for failures and sustainability of owners of independent quick-service restaurants. This research experience has fortified my purpose in life and that is to continue to conduct research to find solutions to business problems for national, regional, and local business owners to seek to create a profit while growing the national economy, creating jobs, and sustaining local communities.

Conclusion

Owners of independent quick-service restaurants confront challenges with limited resources every day in business. The finding of this study revealed that successful owners of independent quick-service restaurants knew how to respond to challenges; they knew how to leverage their limited internal resources using informal strategies to create a sustained a competitive advantage. Some leaders of firms outperform other leaders by leveraging their internal resources to create sustained competitive advantage (Barney, 1991; Campbell & Park, 2017; Wernerfelt, 1984). The owners know how to create value or their customers.

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the strategies that independent quick-service restaurant owners use to sustain in business beyond the first 5 years. The strategies identified in the findings provided solutions that owners of independent quick-service restaurants can use to grow and sustain in business.

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Appendix: Interview Protocol

Before interviewing any research candidate, I will describe the purpose of the study and collect their informed consent forms. I will then share the following with each candidate.

1. Thank the participant for volunteering and dedicating time to this study.
2. Inform the participants that their identities were coded to ensure confidentiality.
3. Inform them of any risk to them and how each research candidate has the right to withdraw from interviews at any time.
4. Inform the candidates that the interview session will be audio-recorded.
5. Remind the participant that I will not offer any incentives for participation in this study.
6. Explain the estimated duration of the interview.
7. Inform the participant that I will schedule a follow-up interview with them to verify my interpretation of their responses to the interview questions.
8. Inform them that all external electronic devices such as flash drives and hard copy interview notes and business artifacts will be secured in a secure location for 5 years of the data of the published research then destroyed.

After I share the above information, I will ask the participant the following interview questions in order as they are listed.

1. What strategies did you use to effectively sustain in business beyond the first 5 years?

2. What were the key barriers to implementing your strategies to sustain in business beyond the first 5 years?
3. What challenges did you encounter to sustain business beyond the first 5 years?
4. How did you address the key barriers to sustain in business beyond 5 years?
5. What were the most effective strategies to effectively sustain in business beyond 5 years?
6. What additional information can you provide to assist me in understanding the strategies you used to sustain in business beyond the first 5 years?