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Profitability Strategies for Small and Medium Entrepreneurs in Michigan

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Abstract

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MS, Walsh College of Accountancy and Business, 2007

BS, Oakland University, 2005

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Abstract

Small businesses create 50% of all jobs in the United States, but at least 50% of all newly founded small businesses have failed since 2006, and only 1/3 have survived beyond 10 years. Small businesses have a high chance of failure in the first 5 years due to a lack of sustainable strategies. The purpose of this multiple case study was to explore the strategies small business owners need to sustain their business beyond 5 years in a purposefully chosen county in Michigan. A conceptual framework was constructed based on the stakeholder theory and its derived theories to provide a theoretical background and explore the sustainable business strategies used by the owners. Five small restaurant business owners who sustained their businesses for at least 5 years were purposely sampled. Data were collected via semistructured interviews and member checking was used to ensure the participants concurred with all transcripts; and triangulation was used to analyze a combination of synthesized interview data, reflective interview notes, and business financial documents. Computer software was used to analyze the data and to generate themes with their categories from the data automatically. From the data analysis, 4 themes emerged from the triangulated and analyzed data associated with small restaurant sustainability. The 4 emergent themes were that education enhanced owners' strategies and sustainability, personal traits drove owners to their business success, marketing and seasonal strategies assisted them in strategic planning and brand building, and business growth strategies assisted them in innovation and environmental management. The success of small businesses can generate jobs, stimulate the economy, and increase domestic and government revenue.

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Dedication

This doctoral study is dedicated to my mother, Tana Pepaj, for providing me with a prime example of how a mother should raise and educate her son; to my dad, Pal Pepaj, for being a great father; to my best friend for being so supportive and pushing me to obtain a doctoral degree; and to my sister, Alketa and her lovely kids, for being so supportive throughout the years. A special thank you to Dr. Janet Booker for all your support and encouragement.

Last but not least, this study is dedicated to my lovely wife Loreta for being a constant source of support together with my beautiful daughters, Aria and Agnes. Thank you for being there for me and supporting me on this journey.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study

Small businesses are key contributors to local communities throughout the United States (Altinay, Saunders, & Wang, 2014). Small to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are companies with fewer than 500 workers (U.S. Small-Business Administration [SBA], 2014). Half of all new small businesses in the United States survive for only 4 years; therefore, a need exists for strategies to prevent failure (Cader & Leatherman, 2011). Identifying the obstacles that start-up businesses face could help in overcoming the obstacles they face and in achieving success (García-Gutiérrez & Martínez-Borreguero, 2016). Among the complex causes of SME failure is the lack of effective profitability strategies, and a direct connection exists between profitability management and organizational performance (Elsayed, 2015). The focus of this study was exploring profitability strategies that owners of start-up restaurants needed to survive the first 5 years. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the success strategies small business owners used to sustain their business beyond 5 years in Macomb County, Michigan.

Background of the Problem

Small businesses in the United States comprise nearly 99.6% of all employers (Hatten, 2015). In addition, small business owners employ half of the private workforce (Chow & Dunkelberg, 2011). The rate of small business growth has doubled since 1986, and continued growth is likely (Wolff, Pett, & Ring, 2015). Half of all start-up small businesses fail within the first 5 years (U.S. SBA, 2014). Furthermore, 599,300 of 670,100 new businesses failed in 2005 (U.S. SBA, 2014). The reasons behind the failure are complex, but multiple researchers have indicated that a lack of effective profitability strategies is one of the critical reasons and that a direct correlation exists between profitability management and organizational performance (Elsayed, 2015). Small business owners who know profitability strategies could help their business grow (Blackburn, Hart, & Wainwright, 2013). A qualitative case study was suitable for exploring the business problem associated with success strategies in small restaurant businesses surviving beyond 5 years.

Problem Statement

Small businesses in the United States comprise 50% of all jobs; but since 2006, at least 50% of all newly founded small businesses experienced failure (U.S. SBA, 2014), and only 1/3 has survived beyond 10 years (Campbell et al., 2012). The general business problem is that many small businesses have a high failure rate within the first 5 years. The specific business problem is that some small business owners lack strategies to sustain their business beyond 5 years.

Purpose Statement

The purpose for this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the strategies that small business owners need to sustain their business beyond 5 years. The specific population was five restaurant owners in Macomb County, Michigan, who had remained in business for 5 years or more. This study contributes successful strategies for small start-up businesses, which could benefit the restaurant employees, families, local communities, and the local economy of Macomb County, Michigan.

Nature of the Study

In business studies, the three research methods are quantitative, qualitative, and mixed (Yin, 2014). A quantitative method is useful for collecting quantitative data in social research using instrument-based questions to examine relationships between variables with statistical information (Wester, Borders, Boul, & Horton, 2013). Qualitative research is useful for exploring and understanding the meaning and application of a phenomenon and its impact on a society (Mert, Bayramlik, & Turgut, 2014), and a mixed method involves comparing analyzed data using both quantitative and qualitative methods. Quantitative data were not necessary for this study because there were no variables or statistical information to address successful business strategies to sustain businesses beyond 5 years, so neither a quantitative nor a mixed method study was suitable for addressing the specific business problem. A qualitative methodology was most suitable for studying start-up business and sustainable strategies because qualitative data addressed the business problem, which related to the meaning and application of a phenomenon.

Qualitative research designs used in business research include narrative, phenomenology, ethnography, and case study (Marshall & Rossman, 2014). Ethnography is suitable for exploring feelings, meanings, and beliefs in relationships between people as they interact in a culture. Phenomenology is appropriate for studying individual views or lived experiences (Marshall & Rossman, 2014). The focus of this business problem was not exploring relationships between people or lived experiences, so ethnography and phenomenology were both not suitable for addressing the specific business problem in this study. The basis of a case study design is how and why questions that address a contemporary set of events over which investigators have little or no control (Yin, 2014). Case study researchers illustrate events with their specific context through semistructured interviews with open-ended questions to provide meanings from themes and patterns of phenomena (Yin, 2014). In this study, I chose a multiple case study design to investigate successful strategies in small, independently owned restaurants because it was the most suitable design to facilitate the collection of the kinds of data needed to address the specific business problem for this study.

Research Question

The central research question was as follows: What strategies do small business owners need to sustain their business beyond 5 years?

Interview Questions

In this qualitative multiple case study, I asked the following semistructured interview questions:

1. What were the business strategies you used with your employees to sustain your business beyond 5 years?
2. How did you ensure your employees followed your business strategies?
3. What was the impact that the successful strategies had on your restaurant profitability?
4. What business strategies did you make to enhance your restaurant sustainability?

5. What additional information can you provide to small business owners to sustain their business beyond 5 years?

Conceptual Framework

Stakeholder theory is a body of knowledge that researchers can use to explain and predict stakeholders' preferences and satisfaction related to business profitability (Samy, Odemilin, & Bampton, 2010). Since Freeman's development of the theory in 1984, the notion of a stakeholder has developed from strategic management to a stakeholder-orienting approach. In organizational activities, business leaders should consider their stakeholders as the individuals who can affect organizational objectives or the individuals whom organizational objectives can affect (Heikkurinen & Bonnedahl, 2013). The theory works as a valid normative assumption in determining stakeholder interests, action, and identity to evaluate organizational performance (Bridoux & Stoelhorst, 2014).

Business owners should manage the relationship with their stakeholders to generate value and profit (Bridoux & Stoelhorst, 2014). Different management strategies affect the relationship with stakeholders and business success. Treating stakeholders well enhances business performance and success, and observing the different strategies of successful businesses in practice through stakeholder management can lead to successful strategies in sustaining profitable growth (Bridoux & Stoelhorst, 2014).

As demonstrated by Heikkurinen and Bonnedahl (2013), stakeholder theory is applicable to sustainable business development. Stakeholders are increasingly critical to the success of sustainable development because they create sustainability-related turmoil around businesses. In addition, stakeholder theory can apply to the heterogenic business environment with multiple alternative strategies, such as responsive and beyond-responsive strategies. For example, *responsive strategies* are approaches used to react to stakeholder demands with upcoming changes in the marketplace, and *beyond-responsive strategies* refer to approaches applied to exceed expectations from stakeholders for sustainable development.

Since the development of stakeholder theory, researchers have used the theory to measure if a business meets the values, needs, and expectations of customers in terms of customer satisfaction (Heikkurinen & Bonnedahl, 2013). Stakeholder theory was suitable for this study. One of the most successful profitability strategies is business planning (Heikkurinen & Bonnedahl, 2013).

Operational Definitions

This section includes terms used in the study. The terms clarified include acronyms, terms that have special meaning, and common terms that have a particular meaning in the context of this study.

Business success: Business success refers to profitability and longevity for 5 or more years (U.S. SBA, 2014).

Entrepreneurship: Entrepreneurship is the practice of creating new businesses or developing new products or services (Parilla, 2013).

Small business: A small business is a firm with fewer than 500 employees (U.S. SBA, 2014).

Small to medium-sized enterprise (SME): An SME refers to a business or other organization that is somewhere between the small office or home office and large enterprises (Ogbuokiri, Udanor, & Agu, 2015).

U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA): The U.S. SBA is an independent agency of the federal government whose employees aid, assist, counsel, and protect the interests of small businesses in the United States (U.S. SBA, 2014).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

This section includes assumptions and limitations that were out of my control as the researcher and uncontrollable factors to this study. The assumptions are factors that I assumed needed identifying and addressing to avoid misrepresentation, the limitations were potential weaknesses and limits of this study, and the delimitations were restrictions that alerted readers to the scope of a study.

Assumptions

Assumptions are concepts accepted as truths without concrete proof (Field, 2015). In this study, I assumed that participants answered honestly and that participants were familiar with computers and using the World Wide Web. In addition, I assumed that a sufficient number of owners and top managers of small restaurant businesses surviving for 5 years or longer would be willing to participate. Another assumption was that the participants from successful small restaurant businesses would provide truthful answers and opinions to the interview questions.

Limitations

Limitations are the limits that a study cannot reach and uncontrollable threats to the internal validity of a study (Sufian, 2015). For example, participants could withdraw at any time, and participants who finish a study might not be truly representative of the population (Brutus, Aguinis, & Wassmer, 2013). Business leaders who validate the proficiency survey could not represent universally accepted expert opinions. This study had a time frame, as I gathered data within a certain length of time to represent information from that period of time. The small size of the sample limited generalizations from the data collected. Finally, the geographical limit was that I gathered data from Macomb County, and the data could not be the same as data from other areas.

Delimitations

Delimitations are restrictions that alert readers of the scope of a study (Parilla, 2013) and indicated what I did not do as part of this study. For example, I delimited participation to business owners with 5 years or more of experience in ownership. The definition of a small business from the U.S. SBA (2014) delimited participating businesses to the number of employees. I also delimited participation to the specific geographical area of Macomb County, Michigan; and only restaurant owners living and working in the county who had 5 years or more of successful business experience qualified to participate in this study.

Significance of the Study

In this study, I explored sustainable profitability strategies that helped small restaurant businesses to survive their first 5 years. The high failure rate of small businesses in the United States affects the health and well-being of the economy (U.S. SBA, 2014). This study could be a significant contribution to small business survival, which could contribute more jobs and economic opportunities to the local economy.

Contribution to Business Practice

The aim of this study was to identify profitability strategies that led small business owners to expand and develop their business. The economic contribution of small businesses has received widespread acceptance (Manolova, Manev, & Gyoshev, 2014). Profitable management practices can lead to sustainable and consistently high performance. For SMEs, effective profitability strategies are keys to the success of business performance and competitiveness (Ates, Garengo, Cocca, & Bititci, 2013).

Implications for Social Change

Small business owners generate 60 to 80% of new jobs and enhance economic growth in the United States (Lahm, Stowe, Carton, & Buck, 2011). Profitability strategies provide useful insights for small business owners to prepare themselves to manage the complexity of starting up and to gain profitability with sustainability, which will contribute to the prosperity of their employees, families, community health, and the economy. Decisions made at start-up have an impact on later stages of business growth, and small businesses are critical in job creation, competitiveness, innovation, and economic growth in the United States (Shukla & Shukla, 2014). Small business owners work to promote economic development (Mills, 2013).

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the strategies small business owners needed to sustain their business beyond 5 years. In this study, I interviewed the owners of small independently owned restaurants with 5 or more years in business in Macomb County, Michigan. To provide theoretical support to this study, the review of literature related to small business and its success follows.

Small businesses serve as the engine of economic growth in multiple economic bodies, and they create 60 to 80% of new jobs in the United States, which enhances economic growth (Decker, Haltiwanger, Jarmin, & Miranda, 2014; Lahm et al., 2011). To be successful, small business owners need to follow success strategies and to avoid failure factors. A successful small business is profitable and has been in business for 5 or more years (U.S. SBA, 2014). This literature review includes a description of the method used to review and analyze the literature; relevant theories and frameworks; and a discussion of small business, small business owners, the impact of small business on the economy, failure and success factors, entrepreneurship, small business success, financial strategies, marketing strategies, and business growth strategies.

Method for Reviewing the Literature

The purpose of this review was to search the literature to explore the profitability strategies that small business owners used to achieve sustainability by the end of the first 5 years after the start-up of their companies. The professional and academic literature review includes a summary and comparison of various literature sources related to this study and its research topic. The literature review includes an in-depth understanding of the literature and the conceptual framework. A thorough literature review includes a summary of a research subject to help identify research questions and to avoid duplicating existing research (Marshall & Rossman, 2014). The fundamental goal of this literature review was to find practical strategies for small business owners located in Macomb County, Michigan, to achieve profitability by the end of the first 5 years after start-up.

The literature review includes 169 peer-reviewed publications, with 92% of the articles published in or after 2013. The most frequently used databases to gather peer-reviewed full-text publications were ABI-INFORM Complete (ProQuest), ScienceDirect, Business Source Complete, Emerald Management Journal, government databases such as the U.S. Census Bureau and the U.S. SBA, SAGE Premier, and Google Scholar. The database searches included different combinations of the following keywords to access publications in the literature review process: *entrepreneurship, history of small businesses, small business, Michigan small business, small business owner, small business success, small business failure, small and medium-sized enterprises, small business financing, small business strategy, small business innovation, small business marketing, small business and economy, small business networking, small business type,* and *entrepreneurship theory.*

The source identification and accountability information of the literature review indicate that a total of 183 documents are used, in which 169 documents were published in 2013 or later. Peer-reviewed documents are 169, and peer-reviewed documents published in 2013 or later are 169; as such, the percentage of peer-reviewed documents published in 2013 or later is 92% (169/183).

Method for Analyzing the Literature

I reviewed the related literature and grouped the articles based on their relationship to the research themes. First, I defined the concepts of small business, small business owners, and entrepreneurship. Second, I reviewed the following themes: the impact of small business on the economy, perceived failure factors for small businesses, perceived success strategies for small businesses, profitability elements with sustainability, and problems related to the profitability of small businesses. In the literature reviewed, small businesses emerged as the engine of economic development, and their success is important for the national economy. A problem that emerged from the literature reviewed was that half of small start-up businesses fail in their first 5 years due to failures in profitability strategies; and more than half of small independently owned restaurant businesses fail in their first 3 years. An investigation of effective strategies in business planning led to a discussion of solutions and recommendations for small businesses and their survival.

Relevant Theories and Frameworks

Researchers use stakeholder theory to define and explain stakeholder preference, including business strategies that relate closely to profitability in small businesses (Samy et al., 2010). The term *stakeholder* refers to employees, shareholders, and customers of a business. Freeman first described stakeholder theory in 1984; thereafter, researchers have used the theory as a valid way to determine the action, interest, and identity of stakeholders and, based on this, to evaluate business performance (Bridoux & Stoelhorst, 2014). Using stakeholder theory in the early stage of a business serves to address the responsibility of businesses to the owners and to the other stakeholders. For example, stakeholder theory is suitable for examining and determining how business owners undertake social responsibility in their routine business activities.

Since the further development of stakeholder theory in early 2000s, multiple scholars have used stakeholder theory, particularly since 2011, to evaluate if business strategies meet business needs, values, and expectations, which together enhance sustainable business (Heikkurinen & Bonnedahl, 2013). Fairness in stakeholder management can lead to value creation in sustainable businesses because a fair approach means treating all stakeholders fairly. Since all stakeholders value fairness, when they receive fair treatment from business owners, they motivate themselves to create value for the business. To promote stakeholders such as employees and managers, business owners need to take into account the complexity of human psychology and acknowledge the need for business strategies to consider more solid business management (Heikkurinen & Bonnedahl, 2013).

The roles of stakeholder theory are that it works in the sense of business and economic responsibilities and through its stakeholders by taking stakeholders as a confluence of constituent parts in businesses (Bridoux & Stoelhorst, 2014). Business responsibilities embody the norms, standards, and expectations to reflect customers' concerns, respect customers, and protect customers' moral rights. Including customer concerns in business strategies is a result of customer interaction and engagement. When owners apply stakeholder theory to a business setting, sustainable business development can result, as customer satisfaction indicates sustainable business profits. Successful business planning that leads to customer satisfaction can lead to profitability in small independently owned restaurants. Profitability of local businesses could have a direct impact on local communities and on societies (Heikkurinen & Bonnedahl, 2013).

Stakeholder theory relates to this study because business planning is a successful profitability strategy defined within the literature to increase customer satisfaction. Researchers can use the theory to examine if business owners are undertaking responsibility to increase customer satisfaction to maintain sustainable business development and profits (Bridoux & Stoelhorst, 2014; Heikkurinen & Bonnedahl, 2013). The following sections include a review of the concepts and theories of small business, small business owners, and profitable strategies.

Small Business

The sizes of *businesses* defined in the literature are: very large, which includes more than 500 employees; large, which includes 200 to 500 employees; medium, which includes 50 to 200 employees; small, which includes fewer than 50 employees; and micro, which includes fewer than 10 employees (Jones & Rowley, 2009). As the U.S. SBA definition of *small businesses* is firms with less than 500 employees (U.S. SBA, 2014), SMEs are organizations that meet the SBA definition of small businesses, including businesses not meeting the SBA definition of large business organizations. Small businesses are an important part of a country’s economy regarding job creation, innovation, and economic growth.

Small business and job creation. Small businesses are a large and growing part of the U.S. economy that account for 39% of the U.S. gross national product, and small business owners create two out of every three new jobs (Wolff et al., 2015). A generally accepted concept is that small business owners have more workers older than 65 years, have more workers with disabilities, have more workers with less education, and have more workers from rural areas compared to the owners of large businesses (Wolff et al., 2015). These facts indicate that small businesses are job creators that offer jobs to more job seekers.

Small business and innovation. According to Peltier (2013), innovation is the ability to discover a possibility through differentiation, which tends to increase the survival chances of small businesses when used appropriately (Peltier & Naidu, 2013). Particularly in the United States, innovation serves as a key to drive small business owners toward success (Berends, Jelinek, Reymen, & Stultiëns, 2014). Other authors have contended that innovation is a process that involves implementing new ideas to create value (Carayannis & Stewart, 2013; Somech & Drach-Zahavy, 2013). An organization cannot survive without innovation and improvement in its management (Bello & Ivanov, 2014; Ivanov, 2013). Innovation is important in job creation, economic growth, and competitiveness in small businesses in the United States (Shukla & Shukla, 2014).

Small business and economic growth. Based on the literature, small businesses are the fundamental engine of economic growth in the United States due to their importance in innovation, job creation, and business growth (Gale & Brown, 2013). For example, the powerful influence of small businesses on job creation has led to small businesses accounting for 2/3 of new private sector jobs since the 1990s (Chow & Dunkelberg, 2011; Haltiwanger, Jarmin, & Miranda, 2013). Small businesses are the source of most jobs created in the United States (U.S. SBA, 2014).

Small Business Owners

The differences between small business owners and entrepreneurs are that small business owners start a business with a personal goal to provide income for their family, but entrepreneurs aim to grow their business and achieve profit (Mills & McCarthy, 2014). Small business owners have little desire to grow their business larger, whereas entrepreneurs want to innovate and create opportunities (Berends et al., 2014). In addition, small business owners tend to provide an existing product or service to the existing market, and entrepreneurs bring new ideas to market or enter unexplored markets (Hurst, Pugsley, Haltiwanger, & Looney, 2011). The reasons for small business owners' success include their education and knowledge management, their innovativeness, and their personal traits.

Education, knowledge management, and success. Small business owners should realize the necessity of continuing education that they can use to acquire knowledge and new skills from multiple sources, such as trade shows, academic degree programs in colleges, SCORE Counselors to America's Small Business, the Small Business Development Center, and the U.S. SBA (Para, 2016). Federal government leaders created the U.S. SBA in 1953 to provide small business owners with low-interest loans to assist in their business start-up and development (U.S. SBA, 2014). All the resources provide services to help small business owners start, build, grow, and sustain their businesses.

Knowledge management, defined as a systemic process of capturing, coding, and handling information for improved interaction and replication in businesses, enhances the competitiveness of small business owners (Alegre, Sengupta, & Lapiedra, 2013). Glaub, Frese, Fischer, and Hoppe (2014) confirmed the above statement by conducting a qualitative study to investigate the roles of knowledge management among the small business owners of 20 business start-ups. Glaub et al. found that the most important factors contributing to small business owners' success are their financial literacy, funding negotiations, and business planning, as well as the effectiveness of launching a business; and the authors noted knowledge management can facilitate and enhance each factor.

Innovation and success. Successful small business owners use innovation as a useful strategy in enhancing their business sustainability (Berends et al., 2014). In a qualitative study, Berends et al. (2014) found that small business owners tended to adopt innovation when they faced competition and issues in business sustainability. Berends et al. (2014) selected the owners from independently owned and operated small businesses to study competition related to business sustainability. In addition, Jones, Simmons, Packham, Beynon-Davies, and Pickernell (2014) contended that small business owners who adopt greater levels of technological sophistication help their business grow faster than owners who do not consider technological sophistication to be important.

Personal traits and success. Personal traits of small business owners can determine their success, because, for example, when owners see their business as a way of life, their business survives longer; the more experience owners have, the longer the businesses survive (Owens, Kirwan, Lounsbury, Levy, & Gibson, 2013). Passion helps maintain business direction and helps owners stay involved, which results in success (Caliendo, Fossen, & Kritikos, 2014). The success of small business owners reflects the degree of their commitment to attaining the standard of excellence (Habibah, Anuar, & Idris, 2014). Furthermore, Kyser and Hill (2016) summarized the personal traits of successful small business owners as conscientiousness of success, openness to experience, and agreeability to dissent. The next topic discussed is the unique and significant contribution of small businesses to the U.S. economy.

Impact of Small Business on the Economy

The impact from small business on the economy serves as the engine of the U.S. economic growth. Small businesses enhance economic growth through job creation. They serve as the engine of economic growth through generating values and by contributing to social and economic development.

Economic growth through job creation. As the engine of economic growth (Mills, 2013), small businesses create 60–80% of new jobs in the United States and thereby enhance economic growth (Lahm et al., 2011). Small and medium-sized enterprises are an important source of both industrial development and economic growth (Mills, 2013). In addition, Christensen, Kent, Routledge, and Stewart (2015) explained that, as small businesses are critical for job creation, their profitability needs attention from society to improve their performance and to enhance economic growth. More city and state leaders in the United States are trying to find ways to increase job creation, such as supporting small businesses and enhancing economic development (Christensen et al., 2015).

Economic growth through generating value. The value generation of small businesses is important, particularly during difficult times in the economy when small business owners are able to partner with the leaders of other firms of different sizes to improve the economy (Mills & McCarthy, 2014). The reasons behind the value generation capability are the innovation and creativity of small business owners, which can lead to reversing down times in the economy (Alegre et al., 2013). Through innovation, creativity, and their customers, small business owners can enhance the economy during downtimes by increasing their sales volume (Brooksbank, 2013), as small business owners base their competitiveness on working closely with customers to generate more products and values.

Economic growth through contributing to social and economic development. Small business owners lead and drive the economy through technological sustention, as 1/3 of existing patents came from small businesses and their related technologies (Altinay et al., 2014). Cowling, Liu, Ledger, and Zhang (2015) considered small businesses the answer to global economic sustainability. Small businesses are key drivers of wealth creation in social and economic development (Blackburn et al., 2013). Reasons behind the entrepreneurship of small business becoming an important contributor to economic growth include the progression of information technology and the increasing importance of business knowledge.

Factors enhancing the effect of small businesses on social and economic development include stimulus programs from the government, such as those provided by the U.S. SBA, that act as gap lenders to support small businesses and their roles in sustainable and positive economic growth (Geho & Frakes, 2013). Numerous other programs are available, such as public policies and programs that can facilitate and subsidize credits for small business owners who otherwise will not be able to obtain credit, short-term loans, finance to fixed asset purchase, and financing private equity for small business (Gale & Brown, 2013). The following sections include a review of perceived failure and success factors for small businesses.

Perceived Failure Factors for Small Businesses

Scholars have defined *business failure* both narrowly and broadly. Narrowly, *business failure* refers to bankruptcy or liquidation, and broadly, it refers to the discontinuation of a business (Ucbasaran, Shepherd, Lockett, & Lyon, 2013). *Business closure* could not mean failure but can refer to the voluntary termination of a business due to the pursuit of other business ventures or simply retirement (Coad, 2014). Business owners can recognize business failure through business strengths and weaknesses (Rauch & Rijsdijk, 2013), and business failure can happen at any time, which means the longer a business lasts, the better its survival rate will be (Mas-Verdú, Ribeiro-Soriano, & Roig-Tierno, 2015). Chances of business survival increase when firms age (U.S. SBA, 2014). In addition, Garg and Garg (2013) contended that researchers can use a variety of phenomena to define business failure, such as surpassing a budget, lagging behind a projected schedule, and failing to meet expectations. Failure factors also include failed financial support, failed business strategies, and unfavorable economic environments, as discussed in the following sections.

Failed financial support. Inadequate capital and failure to acquire financial support are the biggest contributors to business failure (Cassar, Ittner, & Cavalluzzo, 2015). Financial difficulties derive from inappropriate management, such as mishandling product management, labor cost management, brand management, and partnership management (Kurvinen, Töyrylä, & Murthy, 2016). Failing to access sufficient intermediate and long-term capital is a major financial obstacle for many small businesses in the United States (Byrd, Ross, & Glackin, 2013).

Health insurance costs are a key factor in financial failure in up to 65% of small businesses (Blumenthal & Collins, 2014). Higher health insurance costs challenge profitability maintenance. Increased health care and related costs, together with higher taxes and excessive regulation, result in most small business failures (Kovacevich, 2014). As such, small business needs to maintain the balance between health care costs and business profitability.

To resolve financial difficulties, Jones et al. (2014) suggested that small business owners seek external financial support as the primary solution but also mentioned that external support could dilute ownership substantially. Small business entrepreneurs need to consider and balance external financial sources and ownership dilution to avoid business failure. In addition to external financial sources, Byrd et al. (2013) contended that credit access is another effective way to avoid financial failure. Small business owners should seek assistance through credit available through the government and other organizations to overcome financial obstacles.

Failed business strategies. *Business strategy* refers to a planned approach to secure a favorable position in the marketplace, which should be useful for most small businesses suffering from inappropriate business planning (van Gelderen, Thurik, & Patel, 2011). Frequent changes in business strategies could also lead to small business failure (Ucbasaran et al., 2013). Gupta and Muita (2013) defined *business strategies* as actions that provide guidance for attaining organizational goals; and Steyn and Niemann (2013) indicated that small business owners need to reconsider their business strategies to incorporate new ideas and principles and to fit to stakeholders' and societal expectations. Small business leaders who can avoid failure factors are more likely to be successful, as noted in the following section.

Perceived Success Strategies for Small Businesses

Different authors have defined the term *business success* in different ways. The commonly accepted definition comes from the U.S. SBA (2014), in which business success refers to profitability and longevity of 5 or more years in business. Leadership is critical for success, and entrepreneurs consider success to include satisfied clients and good customer service (Johnston & Marshall, 2016). In addition, finance is important because it has an impact on profit; return on investment; number of employees; and business survival, reputation, and sales (Cheng, Ioannou, & Serafeim, 2014). Nonfinancial factors are also important in business success, such as stakeholders' satisfaction (Dhalla & Oliver, 2013), business profitability, market share, total assets, and employee numbers (Ngo & O'Cass, 2013). Furthermore, business growth, turnover, and profits can serve to measure success in small businesses, as when owners intend to grow their businesses, they are ready to be successful (Gupta & Muita, 2013). According to the literature, success strategies in small businesses include leadership strategies, finance strategies, business growth strategies, and marketing strategies, which are the topics reviewed in the following subsections.

Leadership strategies. Leadership is critical for success in small businesses (Valdiserri & Wilson, 2010), because leadership qualities affect business profitability directly and define the success of a business. The lack and neglect of leadership leads to the failure of small businesses because leaders must be able to empower their employees to achieve success as a business goal (Valdiserri & Wilson, 2010). Business leaders need education to support and enhance good communication skills (Para, 2016). Success factors shared by SMEs are management knowledge in handling products and services and in doing business in the external environment (Glaub et al., 2014). Regardless of the sizes and ages of small businesses, adaptable and well-developed leadership skills are critical for achieving success and avoiding failure (White, 2015). Glaub et al. (2014) also indicated that the leadership skills of owners can reduce failure in small business ownership and development.

In addition to the owners, top managers with good leadership qualities contribute to success because of their direct involvement in the retention of high-quality employees, the prevalence of good products and services, and the excellent relationship with customers (Jaskiewicz, Block, Miller, & Combs, 2014). Relationship building involves building relationships between businesses, suppliers, and customers (Manuj, Omar, & Yazdanparast, 2013). As only half of new small businesses survive after the first 4 years (Cader & Leatherman, 2011), it is critical for small business owners to consider relationship building as an important strategy. The ability of small business leaders to develop business relationships in the market determines their business success or failure (Lerner & Malmendier, 2013). Small businesses should be flexible, and leaders should focus on quickly adapting to changes in customers' needs. The focus should include differentiation, which means that small business owners should demonstrate their capability to offer strategies other than those obtained in a competitive market (Morris, Schindehutte, Richardson, & Allen, 2015).

Finance strategies. Financial strategies are an important factor of business success because lack of access to capital and ineffective management are two major barriers to new venture success (Mason & Brown, 2013). Jones et al. (2014) indicated that financial strategies are critical because they affect business owners' ability to explore growth opportunities, particularly in small business. In addition, Miller, Xu, and Mehrotra (2015) noted that small business owners should focus their financial strategies on investing in human capital and business sustainability. McDonald (2016) suggested focusing financial strategies on qualified personnel, efficient operation and production, information management and administration, sales marketing, and customer service.

Government support to small businesses should be a factor of a positive and significant financial strategy (Doh & Kim, 2014). The federal government provides small business owners with multiple support programs, such as public policies and exemptions from numerous federal laws and regulations (Lacho & Mitchell, 2010). For example, a group of people in the Better Business Bureau (BBB) help accredited small businesses and business owners who are members of the BBB to increase the likelihood of success for small businesses. Owners could use information included in BBB reports on consumer arbitration and prospective vendors to take advantage of opportunities and analyze complaints to improve business operations (Lacho & Mitchell, 2010). In addition, small business owners can use the BBB-accredited logo to increase their reputation and to gain customers, as seven out of 10 customers indicated that they are more likely to do business with a company that has BBB accreditation.

Financing is important for SMEs, and even more so for start-up small businesses (U.S. SBA, 2014). Start-up small businesses can benefit from several exemptions in federal policy. For example, businesses with 15 or fewer employees are exempt from Title I of the Americans With Disabilities Act, businesses with 20 or fewer employees are exempt from the Age Discrimination in Employment Act and Title VII of the Civil Rights Act, and businesses with 50 or fewer employees are exempt from the Family and Medical Leave Act and the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (Gale & Brown, 2013).

Marketing strategies. Marketing strategies change both the shape and the nature of small business profits and marketing around the world (Blank, 2013), because even when a business has a great product or service, the owners need to motivate customers with information on where to buy. Marketing tools such as the Internet, electronic transactions, and other e-marketing tools create opportunities and reduce threats for small businesses (Blank, 2013). But marketing as a strategy needs planning to ensure success. Studying 30 small businesses revealed nine themes that are key in goods and services marketing: marketing planning, limited resource management, product management, pricing management, delivery management, competitor information gathering, customer information gathering, new customer acquisition, and existing customer retention (O'Donnell, 2011).

To understand how small businesses make decisions and take actions in marketing, Altinay et al. (2014) studied small firm owners and found factors related to marketing were formulating strategy, marketing theme, strength, values, and needs. Owners considered *marketing theme* to be the most important factor and *needs* to be the least important factor in marketing. To take online marketing as an example, the marketing theme that makes a business successful is being mobile friendly, as customers use cell phones and mobile devices to view products and make purchasing decisions (Mariotti, 2014). The availability of mobile versions of marketing could decide the success of marketing strategies and allows customers to view information about a company without having to go to physical stores. The e-marketing theme is a critical marketing strategy; thus, even if customers do not purchase products or services online, the e-marketing mobile version needs to be available as branding information for customers to search and view online (Alijani, Mancuso, Kwun, & Topcuoglu, 2014).

Business growth strategies. The success factors in small business growth are growth motivation, entrepreneurs' characteristics, willingness to work with others, level of education, and previous management experience (Jones et al., 2014). Small business owners with some of these success factors might focus on growth strategies to compensate for their disadvantages (Hilmersson, 2014). Investing in capital equipment to increase efficiency, acquisition strategies, new product development, and marketing strategies targeting customers' insights and needs can develop growth strategies (Kumar, 2015).

Effective growth strategies rely on the personal characteristics of small business owners (Blackburn et al., 2013). As entrepreneurs, small business owners need to have a strong internal focus on the need for, and control of, achievement contributing to business success. The main success factors of business growth come from business owners' personal characteristics, management practices, and entrepreneurial competencies (Parilla, 2013). Furthermore, the performance, success, and growth of small businesses rely heavily on the competencies of the owners or entrepreneurs (Keith et al., 2015).

Entrepreneurship and Small Business Success

The successful entrepreneurs of small businesses are owners who operate and organize their businesses with a clear vision to build on core values that leads to dynamically grown ventures (Miller, 2014). Mitchelmore and Rowley (2013) noted that successful entrepreneurs need to demonstrate extraordinary capabilities in finance, marketing, and strategic management to commit personally to business and community. In a qualitative study conducted to gain cognition and understand success factors, Grégoire, Cornelissen, Dimov, and Burg (2015) confirmed the definitions of small business entrepreneurs. The researchers of these studies showed that key success factors are finance management, personal commitment, business plans, and professional networks.

Personal commitment from small business entrepreneurs is an important part of business success. Business owners must have passion and must work hard to follow the business plan (Chawawa & Raditloaneng, 2015). Both listening to one's intuition with a creative mind and listening to others to turn a creative mind into practical ideas can lead to success. Owners need to know their limits, strengths, and weaknesses to solve business issues with relevant expertise and self-confidence. Self-belief is important for gaining knowledge from others to focus on the same objectives and to avoid risks based on intuition, fact, and experience.

Successful small business entrepreneurs use rules of thumb and mental heuristics to predict the future and make decisions, which can reduce risks even though entrepreneurs are higher level risk takers (Mitchelmore & Rowley, 2013). Such characteristics make entrepreneurs action driven and able to take advantage of the right opportunities at the right time to beat the odds and achieve success. In a study of 200 successful small business entrepreneurs, financial education and experience emerged as key success factors (Kamitewoko, 2013). The review of the literature indicates that effective profitability strategies of small business success are: successful financial strategies (U.S. SBA, 2014), successful marketing strategies (Altinay et al., 2014; Mariotti, 2014), and successful business growth strategies (Jones et al. 2014; Parilla, 2013); and they are the next topics discussed.

Entrepreneurship Financial Strategies

Financial management refers to evaluating and decision making in finance to add value to business and relying on outstanding credit and a good business plan (Chemmanur & Fulghieri, 2014). Financial management is necessary in lease negotiations to acquire sufficient business space for business and customers. Small business owners need to consider financial management as their key to success.

The primary goal of business success should be developing financial strategies to select funding sources and manage investment (Cassar et al., 2015). Short- and long-term financing resources such as credit, grants, loans, bonds, and private lending are available for small business owners to use in their start-up. Small business owners could also take advantage of funding options such as bootstrap financing, family funding, angel investors, and venture capital to reduce turnover, increase profits, and boost productivity (Manolova et al., 2014).

Bootstrap financing. Bootstrap financing is a finance method used to grow and develop businesses by relying on cash flow and personal capital to minimize expenses and enhance revenue reinvestment (Grichnik, Brinckmann, Singh, & Manigart, 2014). The goal of bootstrap financing is to meet financial needs without relying on external sources, and small business entrepreneurs can use it when public equity, bank loans, and venture capital are unavailable (Manolova et al., 2014). Small business entrepreneurs prefer using bootstrap financing at start-up to keep their financial balance under control (Malmström, 2014; Moles, 2014). Small business owners must act as marketing officers, salespeople, and financial officers, and bootstrapping helps to make them successful at the start-up of their businesses (Moles, 2014).

Angel investors. Angel investors provide investment funds and play a key role in building small businesses in the early stage and in creating jobs (Kurvinen et al., 2016). Angel investors can serve as long-term sources of finance for vital projects for small business entrepreneurs to fill the financial gaps left by venture capitalists and banks (Manolova et al., 2014). Three reasons serve to remind small business owners that angel investors are helpful in start-up and should not be neglected: (a) they help in job creation and boost the economy; (b) they help ensure profits; (c) they enjoy earning financial returns with the freedoms granted to entrepreneurs in business operations (Kurvinen et al., 2016). Angel investors are the largest external financing source of seed money for small and large businesses (Mason & Harrison, 2015). As wealthy private investors, angel investors are the fastest growing group in the capital market, and the best deal for small business owners, particularly when booting a start-up business.

Venture capital. *Venture capital* refers to funds available only to small businesses with high growth potential to support high-profile businesses in which only small businesses with excellent business plans are eligible (Kurvinen et al., 2016). The two types of deals are a high-return deal and a convenient deal that small business leaders can use to attract venture capital successfully (Manolova et al., 2014). Venture capitalists consistently look for small businesses with great ideas and the power to turn those ideas into profitable business actions (Stemler, 2013).

Venture capitalists' targets are businesses with the potential to generate millions of dollars within a couple of years due to high growth rates involving efficient services and financial strategies (Mason & Harrison, 2015). Capital investment should improve business management, experience, and networking to the maximum extent. For example, in venture capital investment, both investors and business owners are unbundled from the venture process to ensure all business actions are attractive and profiting (Senyard, Baker, Steffens, & Davidsson, 2014). Equity crowd funding helps small business owners raise funds to support their business and bank holding, which can offer long-term financial support to small businesses.

Financial strategies in start-up businesses. As shown in earlier sections, small business entrepreneurs need to develop a business plan or model to attract investments and gain equity financing (Abdulsaleh & Worthington, 2013). Effective financial strategies mean effective investment decisions with a period of financial return (Dimov, Clercq, & Thongpapanl, 2013). In the decision process, small business owners need to overcome financial challenges such as low-profit decisions and adverse selections, and the biggest challenge is always how to grow the business and increase capital (Gupta, Guha, & Krishnaswami, 2013). It is important for small business owners to understand how capital markets work and how risky assets can be valued to maintain capital growth (Cumming, Pandes, & Robinson, 2013).

Other financial challenges facing small business entrepreneurs are competition and regulations, such as regulation and challenges from environment, exploitation, assimilation, and information acquisition (Debrulle, 2013). Business owners need to become familiar with regulations and laws to take advantage of and avoid violating them (Kesan, 2013). Smart business entrepreneurs focus on future financial strategies because targeting future generations and future consumption is the most effective way to ensure survival in the 5 years after start-up (Gupta et al., 2013). Small business entrepreneurs need to keep in mind that fund investors focus only on those businesses aiming at future markets with effective financial strategies to survive in a wide range of business environments (Whitehead, 2013).

Entrepreneurship Marketing Strategy

Marketing strategy is a type of profitability strategy that includes marketing behaviors and decisions to develop and maintain business competition in the marketplace. As defined by Mohammadzadeh, Aarabi and Salamzadeh (2013), *marketing strategy* is a business process of marketing products, activities, and resources to fulfill business goals and customer needs. In profitability strategies, small business entrepreneurs need to develop marketing strategies based on product development, commitment to investment, and customer demand, which will ensure the profitability and sustainability of businesses. The following subsections include a review of the traditional marketing strategies known as the five Ps and a comparison with modern marketing strategies such as the Internet, e-mail, and social media to provide marketing challenges to small businesses.

Five Ps marketing strategies. Place, price, product, promotion, and people strategies comprise the five Ps, which were the most important marketing strategies in traditional marketing and are still applicable (Osiri, 2013). To be successful in marketing, small business entrepreneurs need to consider the importance of the five Ps in marketing, particularly in their customer strategy. In the start-up phase, business owners must construct their products to fulfill customer needs to survive the first 5 years (Achleitner, Braun, Metzger, & Schmidt, 2016). For small businesses such as restaurants, product marketing and branding are particularly important profitability strategies.

Product marketing. Product development and marketing contributes to the long-term success of small businesses because it creates local market acceptance (Pitta & Franzak, 2013). Pitta and Franzak (2013) conducted a qualitative study on new product marketing among 100 customers to investigate the relationship between product marketing and business success. Product marketing strategies include product selection and a strategic focus on customers' needs and responses (Hallbäck & Gabrielsson, 2013). Business owners should reflect customers' needs in product design, localization, variety, and existing media to achieve successful product marketing and business success. Small business entrepreneurs need to work with their marketing managers to ensure their marketing strategy meets and satisfies local customers' demand and gains local market acceptance.

Branding and its awareness. Three processes can increase the effects of branding and awareness in small businesses (Round & Roper, 2012). First, effective branding needs to predict customer value and satisfaction correctly. Second, a relationship exists regarding the views of branding between employees and customers, and the interrelationship from employees to customers promotes branding. Third, employees need to receive training on branding to be able to generate effective customer relationships that make substantial differences in branding, particularly in small businesses (Jussila, Kärkkäinen, & Aramo-Immonen, 2014).

The roles of small business entrepreneurs in branding are significant because small business entrepreneurs establish competitive relationships with customers (Altinay et al., 2014). Such entrepreneurs also promote tracking customer responses and analyzing the responses to understand customer needs and behaviors. Based on the tracked information, business owners can understand customers better and deliver the right products to the right receivers (Stone & Woodcock, 2014).

Three strategies for small business entrepreneurs in branding and its awareness are: (a) to make products popular in local communities; (b) to make popular products the culture of a business to ensure customer satisfaction matches the brand promise; and (c) to nurture, cherish, and identify new branding to maintain their popularity (DeMartine, 2013). Small business owners can only be successful if they keep improving and maintaining their marketing technology in competition, and they will benefit from the technology with affordable costs (DeMartine, 2013). The traditional marketing strategies are important and useful in marketing; but modern marketing requires small business entrepreneurs to be fully aware of, and skillful in, using the Internet, e-mail, and social media marketing.

Internet marketing. Internet marketing changes traditional marketing strategies and allows small business owners to build their brands and products online and internationally (Shani & Chalasani, 2013). As a tool to attract, track, and identify the right techniques and products in connection with customers, Internet or web marketing includes unique pathway to small business success. Business owners can use Internet marketing to develop customer relationships, interact with customers, and make sales online (Chen & Li, 2013). In addition, business owners can expand their market with lower costs through Internet marketing strategies to increase customer visits and to promote their products and services to reach larger customer populations (Jada, Shachak, & Yeung, 2013).

It is important for small business entrepreneurs to learn and handle new technologies related to Internet marketing, such as search engine optimization and other related knowledge (Eid & El-Gohary, 2013). The new knowledge in Internet marketing will help increase customer visits, improve website quality, and improve website traffic. Combining search engine optimization with suitable search keywords and phrases can improve the market position of small businesses and promote sales and marketing that results in business success (Visser & Weideman, 2014). In addition to Internet marketing, e-mail and social media marketing are two other marketing strategies derived from technology.

E-mail marketing. E-mail is a modern technology that small business owners can use to build and maintain customer relationships in small business marketing (Eid & El-Gohary, 2013). Small business owners can use e-mail marketing to notify their customers of sales and the latest products and to increase traffic to their websites. Eid and El-Gohary (2013) contended that small business owners can use e-mail marketing to develop and maintain customer relationships because e-mail notices remind customers of businesses and brands, which can help ensure they revisit and make sales in the future.

Other benefits from e-mail marketing are that it is affordable, easier to use, and able to generate fast responses. As such, e-mail marketing will benefit small businesses and their success.

E-mail marketing also enhances other modern marketing strategies, such as social media marketing, because small business owners can use e-mails to create customer connections through social media, such as Twitter and Facebook (Spiller & Tuten, 2015). E-mail marketing has become one of the most important marketing tools for small business owners to exchange marketing information with buyers, and successful e-mail marketing campaigns increase product sales and chances of success (Kozlenkova, Samaha, & Palmatier, 2014). Komberg (2013) noted that, because e-mail marketing generates many leads, it is the most popular tool for customer communication in the world. Lam (2013) indicated that e-mail marketing offers opportunities to small business owners to maintain connections with their buyers in business referrals and leads.

Social media marketing. Popular social networking sites include LinkedIn, YouTube, Twitter, Digg, and Facebook. The key benefits of social media marketing are that small businesses can share product information with customers online without specific connections to them. A study on social media marketing trends indicates that YouTube attracts worldwide customers, Twitter is a marketing tool to increase future social media, and Facebook is popular for world marketing (Paniagua & Sapena, 2014). Customers can communicate and interact personally with small businesses regarding their needs, desire for products, and questions about products through social media marketing campaigns as part of marketing, the advertising plan, and the public relationship to promote marketing (Durkin, 2013).

Kwok and Yu (2013) indicated that LinkedIn dominates social media marketing in small businesses, with millions of active members through which more than 68% of small business entrepreneurs communicate with other business owners and customers. LinkedIn assists small business owners with network building, gaining professional insight, and branding through reaching out to local and global customers. Twitter marketing is also an important avenue for small business owners to share their product prospects with customers to build brands and awareness (Fletcher, Greenhill, Griffiths, & McLean, 2016). Business owners can collaborate with other businesses, connect with customers to gain benefits, and improve sales growth through a Twitter account.

The most popular social media for marketing is Facebook, and small business owners use it to track their customers and develop relationships (Kwok & Yu, 2013). Facebook is not just a social network and commerce platform, but it can extend business benefits by reaching millions of customers to promote new products and services and to attract new customers by calling or messaging (Schaupp & Bélanger, 2013). Round and Roper (2012) contended that Facebook is popular in marketing because it is an effective way to build a brand and to improve customer values and satisfaction. As the largest marketing platform, Facebook had 900 million members in 2014 (Jones, Thom, Davoren, & Barrie, 2014). Facebook reaches more than 90% of customers in social networks worldwide (Child, Mentes, Pavlish, & Phillips, 2014). Its total sales surpassed $15 billion, which included sales of storefront retailers to social network customers (Gajewski, 2013).

Profitability marketing strategies are significant for small business entrepreneurs because they are an effective tool for product advertisement to fuel business effort and to reach customers (Gupta & Tyagi, 2013). Small business owners need to learn the importance of, and promote and enhance, their marketing strategies to drive conversion, engagement, and interest if they want to benefit from their products and services (Troester, 2013). Profitable strategies and their management are the next topics discussed.

Entrepreneurship and Business Growth Strategies

Strategy management plays a key role in successful small businesses in which effective strategies align and build the foundation of strategic management and good relationships between business owners and employees (Ismail & King, 2014). Strategic management influences strategic behaviors and strategic alignment to define employee and manager behaviors. Strategy management is significant because poor strategic management causes business failure (Mitchelmore & Rowley, 2013).

Leadership in the 21st century refers to the ability to motivate employees to complete business goals and the business vision. Leaders face more opportunities than challenges and complicates which impact particularly private and small business sectors at all levels, because leaders need to require entrepreneurship and provide quality services to global customers (Lofstrom, Bates, & Parker, 2014). Strategic leaders need to focus on how the start-up, job completion, and business profiting capabilities align with business opportunities and external needs. Based on a study on the marketplace, Ates et al. (2013) noted that small business entrepreneurs need to have a competitive vision in order to improve their management strategies. Effective strategic management can help small businesses to grow and gain profitability because it helps satisfy customer needs (Bagire & Namada, 2013).

Syed (2013) indicated that strategic management contributes to profitability and success in small businesses because it serves to encourage creativity toward business objectives. In a study of 56 small businesses, Mwaanga (2014) claimed that strategic management includes product development, strategic planning, and implementation. Strategic management is a requirement for small business leaders who wish to focus on strategic planning for 3 to 5 years from the start-up of a business to guide and shape business values and to ensure business profitability (Salkic, 2014).

Transition

Section 1 indicates that the problem found in the literature was that half of small businesses fail within the first 5 years. The review of the literature indicates that profitability strategies can help ensure small business success including financial strategies, marketing strategies, and business growth strategies. The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to investigate the successful profitability strategies of small restaurant businesses located in Macomb County, Michigan. Data obtained in this study could contribute to the participants' and other small business restaurant owners' strategy preparation to ensure sustainable profitability.

Section 2 includes a detailed description of the research design and methodology of this study. The section includes an examination of the role of the researcher, the sampling method, the participants, the methods of data collection, and the methods of data analysis. Section 2 indicates a discussion on ethical research and its application to this study. The end of the section includes a discussion on the reliability and validity of the study.

Section 3 includes the data results from the data collected and analyzed from semistructured interviews with small business restaurant owners. Section 3 includes a discussion of the data results in combination with the literature review information provided in Section 1. The section closes with a discussion of the research findings and recommendations for further research.

Section 2: The Project

Small businesses lead the global marketplace and drive the economy forward (Altinay et al., 2014). The aim in this case study was to determine successful profitability strategies to help small businesses survive 5 years or longer. The focus of this qualitative multiple case study was the effect of profitability strategies on small restaurant businesses through collecting and analyzing data from responses to interview questions. The results from this study could help the same owners who participated and the owners of other small start-up businesses. This section includes discussions on the purpose, role of the researcher, participants, research design and method, and data reliability and validity.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore what strategies small business owners need to sustain their business beyond 5 years. The specific population was small restaurants in Macomb County, Michigan, which had remained profitable for 5 years or more. The restaurants fit the purpose of this study because they were small businesses based on the number of employees. Small businesses have less than 500 employees (U.S. SBA, 2014). This study could contribute to profitability strategies in start-up small businesses, which could benefit restaurant employees, families, local communities, and the local economy of Macomb County, Michigan.

Role of the Researcher

As the researcher, I served as the primary data collection instrument to collect data from participants with minimal bias. I defined this role based on instructions from Bryman and Bell (2015). I selected the appropriate methodology, designed the research, and collected and analyzed the data. In the data collection process, I conducted face-to-face interviews with open-ended questions (see Appendix A). Semistructured interviews provide in-depth information based on participants' experience and viewpoints because the interviews include prepared questions used to lead the conversation but allow free and open answers from participants (Yin, 2014).

I am a small business owner, and I currently work and live in Macomb County, Michigan, which made knowing and contacting local small restaurant owners convenient to facilitate this study. To minimize errors and researcher bias, I attempted to mitigate bias and engaged in judgment based on evidence about the studied phenomenon. Bias mitigation and engaging in judgment are necessary steps when studying business phenomena (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013). I tried to avoid all attempts to control participants' reactions in the interviews to mitigate bias. To minimize personal bias, I followed the interview protocols (see Appendix A) to ensure that I did not skip any important steps to achieve consistency and reliability among participants.

The participants were carefully selected male and female adults who had more than 5 years of successful experience owning small restaurant businesses in Macomb County, Michigan. To follow the ethical requirement, I invited potential participants to participate in this study based on their willingness to participate, and I sent them the consent form to sign and the questionnaire to review prior to the interviews. I called the potential participants to determine their time schedules and preferred location for the interviews. Participant information remained confidential in accordance with the information provided in the Ethical Research subsection.

I carefully planned, prepared, and practiced interviews to mitigate bias and to avoid viewing data through a personal lens or perspective by following the qualitative research methods and rules in data collection. The process followed was in accordance with the instructions provided by Yin (2014). The semistructured interviews lasted 30 to 60 minutes and facilitated the collection of comprehensive and in-depth information based on the research questions using open-ended questionnaires described in the Research Method section. I listened to the participants carefully, recorded the interview conversations, and made notes for any data that I did not record. I collected interview data by transcribing recorded video files using NVivo software, and I checked my notes for data that I was not able to record. NVivo software was useful in the cross-analysis of interview transcripts with business financial documents (Golicic, Flint, & Signori, 2017). I transcribed the interview records into Excel files before organizing, analyzing, and coding them using NVivo software to generate themes and in-depth insights for further analysis. Data collection and analysis from the small restaurant business owners led to useful information to understand business planning and to meet consumers' expectations to result in profitability in small restaurant businesses.

In this research, I followed the ethical requirements of the *Belmont Report* protocol and its guidelines (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 1979). I ensured that all participants received, understood, and signed the participant informed consent, which included information regarding the ethical principles of this research. Only responders who signed and agreed to the informed consent became participants (Nolan, Hendricks, & Towell, 2015). I followed the *Belmont Report* protocol to respect the rights of the participants and to protect their personal information. For example, I used alphanumeric identifiers, such as P1 to represent participant number 1, to replace the names and identifying information of the participants to ensure their confidentiality. Alphanumeric identifiers protect participant identities in qualitative research (Marshall & Rossman, 2014), whose identity information should remain confidential (Wilkerson, Iantaffi, Grey, Bockting, & Rosser, 2014). I notified the participants that all the data gathered from them would be confidential and that they could withdraw from the study at any time (Marshall & Rossman, 2014). I will keep participants' information safely on a CD-ROM in a locked cabinet for at least 5 years, and I am the only person with access to the cabinet. I will burn and destroy all the participants' information 5 years after the study.

Participants

I used the local chamber of commerce and professional contacts to compose a list of small restaurant business owners who fit the inclusion criteria by being owners of small restaurant businesses that had survived the first 5 years in business. Participants had no connection to my employer. I recruited participants using purposeful sampling based on the requirements of data saturation. Saturation means that data become repetitive, and a researcher can obtain no more information from the participants (Fenton, Hill, Stocker, & House, 2015). In the purposeful sampling, I selected participants based on several criteria: the owner or manager of a small restaurant; the restaurant was profitable at the end of 5 years in business; the restaurant was in Macomb County, Michigan; and the participant was at least 18 years old. I followed proper ethical procedures, ensured participants' human rights to avoid violations, and obtained approval from the Walden Institutional Review Board (IRB) before I conducted this study.

After participant selection was complete, the next step was to send invitation letters to each prospective participant through e-mail that included an explanation of the study and of the participant informed consent process. The first five participants who responded and signed the informed consent became the participants, as they had indicated their willingness to share related information openly and honestly. Nolan et al. (2015) defined *participants* as those who signed informed consent forms and agreed to participate in a study. I scheduled the interviews with selected participants through phone calls after informing them that participation was voluntary, they could withdraw at any time or skip any questions, and data collected would remain anonymous and confidential. It is important to build honesty and trust with participants to ensure correct outcomes and data collection (Park & Lee, 2014). For those who requested it, I shared a condensed summary of the study results regarding business profitability strategies.

Research Method and Design

As noted by Yin (2014), qualitative research is an appropriate way to obtain data from personal business experience to identify effective strategies in small business sustainability. This qualitative multiple case study involved exploring the profitability strategies used by small restaurant business owners to sustain their restaurants for 5 years or longer in Macomb County, Michigan. The qualitative research method was helpful in connecting the business owners and creating work relationships with them.

Research Method

As mentioned in Section 1, fundamental research methods include quantitative, qualitative, and mixed approaches in which scholars apply quantitative research as a scientific approach (Venkatesh, Brown, & Bala, 2013). The focus of the quantitative method is measuring causal relationships between variables. In contrast, the focus of the qualitative method is understanding a phenomenon in a context that fits the purpose of the study.

Qualitative research is a naturalistic approach advocated through a social phenomenon and is suitable for gathering data (Wester et al., 2013). Scholars working on qualitative research consider reality as socially constructed. Accordingly, I chose qualitative research as the research approach in this study because this approach is useful in exploring a social phenomenon. I built a relationship with the research population to investigate the target context in depth. Compared to quantitative research, qualitative research includes an in-depth approach to a social experience with a focus on obtaining and clarifying data from a phenomenon. Wherever necessary, researchers can combine qualitative methods with quantitative methods to provide a project with measures of objective and subjective data (Berger, 2015).

Based on the measures and requirements of this study, the qualitative method alone was more suitable for obtaining qualitative data related to profitability strategies in small restaurant businesses. The dynamic and complex contexts in small businesses and the relationship between profitability strategies and business success indicate qualitative research methods are more suitable for providing methodological support for data clarification (Mert et al., 2014). Therefore, I applied a qualitative method, as one aspect of the methodological design of this study was to inquire into and obtain research data.

Research Design

Research design refers to a plan that involves exploring research questions and reaching conclusions to prepare a report on a study (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013). Multiple designs are available in qualitative research, such as narrative, ethnography, phenomenology, and case study (Marshall & Rossman, 2014). Researchers use ethnography to explore feeling, meaning, and belief in relationships between people as they interact in a culture (Fields & Kafai, 2009). As I was not studying a culture, ethnography was not suitable for this study. Researchers use phenomenology to study individual views or lived experiences on identifiable issues to develop common themes in the world, which often requires more than 20 cases (Marshall & Rossman, 2014). I conducted the study to obtain the lived business experience of identified issues but had difficulties obtaining a sufficient number of cases and reaching data saturation; therefore, I did not select phenomenology. Narrative design is suitable for exploring small samples to capture the essence of a phenomenon such as lifelong stories (Yin, 2014). This design was also not suitable for the study because capturing the essence of lifelong stories of the small restaurant owners would not add value to the understanding of small business sustainability.

A case study design offers the chance to explore in-depth information in a small number of cases (Yin, 2013) and involves using how and why questions to address a contemporary set of events over which investigators have little or no control (Yin, 2014).

Case study researchers use viable means to investigate emerging ideas from multiple resources, which is useful when researchers need to take into account the contextual condition of phenomena. Case study research is suitable for illustrating events within a specific context through semistructured and open-ended questions to provide meanings from themes and patterns of phenomena (Yin, 2014). For this study, I used a qualitative multiple case study design to investigate profitability strategies in the success of small restaurant businesses because it was the most suitable design for this purpose.

As defined by the literature, a case study design is suitable when a researcher has little or no control over the studied events, the research questions are why or how questions, and the study focus is current and not historical (Yin, 2014). These conditions fit this study, which confirmed the suitability of the research design. Of the three types of case study, which are descriptive, explanatory, and exploratory, a descriptive case study was the most appropriate type, as it is suitable for illustrating business events in their specific context and for facilitating the description of successful profitability strategies in small restaurant businesses.

Researchers can use a triangulation method to analyze data collected from interview questions because triangulation increases assurance and validity when data come from multiple sources (Yin, 2013). Through triangulation, researchers can use data from one source to corroborate data from a different source to reduce risks of misinterpretation based on a single source of data. A study with a descriptive multiple case design aligns with qualitative research, and the triangulation methodology facilitates the analysis of data from multiple sources to obtain comprehensive results (Heale & Forbes, 2013).

Population and Sampling

Sampling refers to the process of sample sourcing and selection. Sampling is a strategy widely used to select a suitable research target and research population from which to obtain data (Robinson, 2014). This is necessary, as data quality and richness are always more important than data volume and number of interviewees. I applied sample sourcing and selection in this study because it was important during the data selection process.

Scholars often accuse qualitative researchers of using sample sizes that are too small to provide sufficient evidence to support their conclusions (Lucas, 2014). Qualitative research data originate from small predetermined samples to reach the goal of a study (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013). It is particularly important to justify data sourcing and selection based on the principle of providing sufficient evidence. Robinson (2014) described purposeful sampling as one of the 16 sampling methods in qualitative research mentioned by Patton. The focus of purposeful selection is the research question, events, and processes, with the clear purpose of allowing researchers to choose appropriate participants and events to explore in the research process. I used purposeful sampling and recruited a target population for this study. Based on the research question, the main research topic was which strategies small restaurant owners used to sustain their business beyond 5 years.

Sample size planning was an important part of the sampling design of this descriptive and analytic study. A goal of sampling is to determine an appropriate number of participants (Marshall, Cardon, Poddar, & Fontenot, 2013). Researchers should determine a suitable sample size based on data saturation standards when data turn repetitive, which indicates that no more new information is obtainable by increasing sample size. A sample of five business owner participants will reach data saturation and the study will include triangulation for data analysis. Data saturation can help ensure the quality and sufficiency of collected data to enhance reliability of a study (Fenton et al., 2015).

Based on the principle of purposeful selection and the research question on entrepreneurs and their profitability strategies, the study included five restaurant owners as participants. Business owners should understand the concepts of strategy making and implementation (Jayaram, Dixit, & Motwani, 2014). Semistructured interviews took place to measure how the business owners handled, interpreted, and practiced strategy changes. This purposeful selection allowed me to access and interact with leaders who had rich knowledge and diverse perspectives on strategy changes, their implementation, and their success.

I selected participants from multiple small restaurants within the same category because of their diverse qualities and business strategy handling. I recruited restaurant owners in Macomb County, Michigan, and all the owners had been in businesses for longer than 5 years. By investigating and comparing data from interviews, I was able to clarify and confirm new findings and interpret data to reach conclusions. With the purposefully selected participants, I was able to reach an understanding of the dynamic and practical relationships between restaurant owners and customers.

Researchers choose purposeful sampling to obtain innovative and important data (Bryman & Bell, 2015). The sampling process suited qualitative research, and in particular suited the needs of this study to obtain rich and thick data from small restaurant business owners, which helped me concentrate on specific events to generate rich and varied data to answer the research question of this study. It was practical to adopt the purposeful sampling method but not to adopt any other conventional sampling methods such as probability or nonprobability sampling.

Ethical Research

An important and critical aspect of this study was its research ethics, and I followed the requirements of research ethics to protect the participants. Researchers send informed consent forms to participants that contain participants' right to privacy to protect their identity and personal information and participants' right to avoid physical emotional or harm from any other reason (Kaye et al., 2015). The informed consent form included a description of potential risks:

> This type of study involves some risk of the minor discomforts that can be encountered in daily life, such as becoming tired or fatigued while sitting for 45 minutes. Being in this study would not pose risk to your safety or wellbeing.

All participants signed the informed consent form before beginning their participation in this study. All participation was voluntary, and the participants could withdraw by e-mail or phone at any time. No participants received incentives or compensation for participation in this study.

The restaurant owners received assurance that the information collected for this study would be for research purposes only, and the personal information of the participants would remain confidential and anonymous. The identifiers of the participants were P1, P2, P3, P4, and P5, where P referred to *participant*. I encrypted the collected data and stored them in a password-protected external hard drive, and I will delete the data 5 years after data collection is complete. Approval from the IRB (IRB Number: 1-800-925-3368) at Walden University was obtained before data collection began.

Data Collection Instruments

I was the primary data collection instrument in this qualitative multiple case study. Data collection involved conducting semistructured interviews with open-ended questions. The archival records used for data gathering included the monthly cash flow and yearly profit and loss documents. Archival records are among the six types of sources for a case study provided by Yin (2013). The other five are direct observations, documentation, interviews, site visits, and physical artifacts.

This study included two primary data sources: interviews and business document review. Semistructured interviews involve prepared interview questions guided by identified themes from the literature in a systemic and consistent manner with meaningful probes to enable elaborate responses from interviewees (Yin, 2014). I designed and followed the interview protocol (see Appendix A) because it was the key to ensuring topic focus and reliability enhancement. As noted by Yin (2014), an interview protocol of a case study consists of an overview, data collection procedures, interview questions, and a guide for a case study report. I conducted a transcript review in which I asked all participants to examine the transcribed files to check for errors and missing information.

A transcript review, also called data cleaning, helps to ensure no useful data are missing and no wrong data based on the research topic and questions become part of the data analyzed (Yin, 2014). I reentered verified and confirmed data, which subsequently underwent analysis using NVivo. I also coded and interpreted the data with themes and exported the analyzed data to Excel files.

Data Collection Technique

Interviews are an important data source in case study, and the three types of interviews are structured, semistructured, and unstructured (Doody & Noonan, 2013). Unstructured interviews are complex and difficult to interpret, and structured interviews often limit discovery potential and limit participants from further discussions of questions and issues (Elo et al., 2014). Semistructured interviews give researchers the flexibility to modify the sequence and structure of questions based on the interview situation to enable comparability and compromise (Doody & Noonan, 2013).

I conducted semistructured interviews, as I needed to modify the order and content of questions, depending on the interview situations and answers. I conducted the study based on information provided by Doody and Noonan (2013) and Elo et al. (2014). I conducted face-to-face interviews with the participants, and I asked probing questions that were unique for a particular participant or to explore with in-depth questions in a specific social context. Semistructured interviews provide the opportunity to probe answers when researchers want interviewees to explain, or build on, their responses (Elo et al., 2014).

Semistructured interviews are suitable for conducting a case study because researchers aim to understand the meaning from interviewees in a social interaction (Doody & Noonan, 2013). Interviewees or participants can express themselves in different ways according to each person and situation to enhance the depth and significance of information and to enhance the research depth of the subject (Yin, 2014). Appendix A includes a copy of the open-ended questions for the semistructured interviews for this study. To enhance validity and reliability prior to conducting the interviews, I conducted an expert review of the interview questions and protocol based on the information obtained from the literature review. An expert review of interview questions and protocols can help ensure the design of the interview questions and protocols follows the literature and the requirements of an ethics board (Kallio, Pietilä, Johnson, & Kangasniemi, 2016).

Scholars reported both advantages and disadvantages about semistructured interviews. The advantages of semistructured interviews are obvious, as they help avoid bias and maintain the trustworthiness to ensure the quality of a qualitative study (Elo et al., 2014). When researchers use open-ended questions in interviews, they could capture descriptive details targeting a phenomenon (Morse, 2015). Under suitable conduction, researchers can use semistructured interviews to collect usable and descriptive data (Young et al., 2016). The disadvantages of semistructured interviews are disturbing visibility and requiring well-formulated interview questions and a higher level of interview concentration (Irvine, Drew, & Sainsbury, 2013). The advantages helped me improve and enhance my semistructured interviews to obtain usable and descriptive data and to avoid the disadvantages to ensure the data collection. I followed the semistructured interview protocol to design well-formulated interview questions and made sure to choose a quiet office location to avoid being disturbed and to enhance concentration.

In addition, I used in-depth semistructured interviews to obtain inside knowledge and to reach a comprehensive understanding of hard-to-measure concepts. I conducted semistructured interviews based on suggestions from Doody and Noonan (2013). For example, following the in-depth interviews, I understood the methods the owners and top managers used to design new profitability strategies from business trends and to explain these strategies to their sales personnel. In-depth interviews are useful tools to probe individual owners' and top managers' needs, behaviors, and attitudes toward the profitability changes in their strategies. I used the in-depth interviews and open-ended questions to assist with the interpretation of information from the small businesses to find key concepts and data that would help me understand the reasons behind these owners' success.

To ensure data quality, accuracy, and reliability, the interviews took place with five owners from different restaurants in different locations. I defined the interview setting following the suggestions from Elo et al. (2014). Based on the purpose of this study, the owners I interviewed were responsible for developing and overseeing the implementation of strategies. I transcribed all recorded interviews into Microsoft Excel files after gaining permission to record the interviews.

I set up the time schedules of interviews by phone with each participant to schedule a convenient time and setting. I provided each participant with a copy of the consent form, reviewed the form with each participant, answered any questions, and asked for a signature. I provided all participants a copy of the consent form to retain for their records. These steps took place just prior to the inception of the interviews. I audio recorded each interview, and I made notes in case the electronic recorder stopped working.

Member checking is a helpful method for promoting credibility in a qualitative case study because it serves as an opportunity for the participants to review the accuracy of interview data interpreted by the researcher (Gittoes et al., 2011). Member checking is a participant validation process used to ensure the accuracy and credibility of data collected, and the process is important in an interview study (Koelsch, 2013). After data collection was complete, I analyzed the data and member checked all analyzed data by sending the data to participants to ensure the validity of data. As one of the most critical validity strategies in a qualitative study, member checking is useful for strengthening data trustworthiness (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013). I enhanced the data accuracy of this study by using member checking and sharing collected and analyzed data with the participants to ensure the accuracy and validity of the data collected.

Data saturation occurs at the point in which research data become repetitive, with no new data emerging during a coding process (Fenton et al., 2015; Fusch & Ness, 2015). In a qualitative study, the point of data saturation occurs when the researcher has captured everything important. Saturation has occurred when additional analysis does not result in new phenomena, interpretive models, or reaction typologies (Habersack & Luschin, 2013). I collected data until I reached data saturation, which meant I could not obtain any new information and data began to replicate.

Data Organization Technique

This qualitative multiple case study included two main data sources: semistructured interviews and business documents. I followed the suggestions from Doody and Noonan (2013) that researchers can obtain qualitative data from interviews and business documents. The data include responses to the semistructured interviews and relevant company documents from each participating restaurant. I collected interview data by transcribing recorded video files using NVivo software, and I checked my notes for data that I was not able to record. I transferred the transcript files to Microsoft Excel files in a computer installed with Windows 7 software. In addition, I collected secondary documents from each participant. I organized the interview data files by naming the files with the interview date and time, and keeping the participants anonymous helped ensure data_availability, and clarity for further data processing and analysis. I organized the data based on suggestions from Yin (2014).

Prior to file processing in a qualitative study, good data management is necessary (Yin, 2014). Therefore, I made copies of all files, including all primary and secondary data files, and I conducted data processing procedures using only the copied files rather than the original files. I made a data list for each type and category of the primary and secondary data files to help identify interview transcripts, specific notes, and secondary documents. The data list containes demographic characteristics of research events such as the schedule, event name, and sample. I listed all these elements in the data list, depending on the original site visits and interviews.

As described in the Data Collection Instruments section, I performed transcript reviews by asking all participants to examine the transcribed files to ensure no useful data were missing and no additional wrong data had become part of the file. Yin (2014) recommended researchers use data cleanup or transcript review. After transcript review, I reentered verified and confirmed data from the transcript review into the Data collection instrument section, and I processed the checked data using the data analysis software NVivo. I coded the data and interpreted them with themes, and I exported analyzed data as Excel files.

I stored collected data in alignment with the IRB requirements, which meant I encrypted and stored data in a password-protected external hard drive, and I was the only person with access to all data. I locked the hard drive with the saved primary data, the interview printed files, and the secondary documents from each restaurant in a cabinet drawer in my office; and I am the only person with access. I will delete and destroy all collected files 5 years after data collection.

Data Analysis

Triangulation as a paradigm is useful when researchers gather data from multiple sources (Yin, 2013). Information came from more than one restaurant within the same category for purposes of triangulation. In particular, all data came from owners of restaurants that were small businesses to correlate profitability strategies from their implementation processes, and I confirmed the consequences using the financial documents collected. When performing an integration study across units, the specificities and differences between units are necessary to obtain unbiased results and to reach unbiased conclusions (Yin, 2014).

A triangulated integration study provided a clearer picture of reality in the group of restaurants compared to restricting the study to one single restaurant. Triangulated integration results in increased internal validity through accurate analyses of information from the efficient financial events of businesses (Heale & Forbes, 2013). The evidence from the occurrence of an event could reflect or have an influence on another event in the same or a different business. As such, evidence from only one restaurant might have been limited and misleading and might have led to an incorrect conclusion. Gathering evidence and information across restaurants rather than focusing on one provided greater understanding in integrated profitability strategy outcomes.

An integrated triangulation study across sources is consistent with the requirement of a case study in which a researcher should consider the research target in totality (Yin, 2013). A suitable case study on restaurants should include multiple units, which could be different from other disciplines in social sciences. The purpose of using more than one restaurant owner was not to challenge previous studies but to stress the complexity of management activities under profitability strategy changes in local businesses. Comparing interview data from different participants in this study could result in increased triangulation (Yin, 2013).

Researchers have performed data analysis using several coding steps: data set organization; data coding, classification, and interpretation; and data reporting

(Blackburn et al., 2013). I coded, analyzed, verified, and cleaned up data using NVivo software with participants' names replaced by a letter and numbers, from P1 to P5. I determined codes and themes using NVivo to identify word meaning and frequencies from the data.

I used the data initially analyzed by NVivo to conduct an in-depth data analysis. Data analysis can involve separating data into groups, regrouping data into themes, assessing data, and developing conclusions (Yin, 2014). In the final step of data analysis, I organized and analyzed the assessed data with themes based on the conceptual framework of entrepreneurial theory and the information from the literature review. I explored and compared effective profitability strategies in small restaurants businesses to findings in the literature, from which I drew and developed conclusions and findings.

Reliability and Validity

Researchers can evaluate qualitative case study data for reliability and validity because the data form the foundation of the study. Evaluation concepts include reliability and construct, internal, and external validity (Yin, 2014). I used the strategies of data saturation and member checking to enhance the reliability and validity of the data in this study.

Reliability

One of the strategies used to warrant and enhance reliability is data saturation, because it can help ensure the quality and sufficiency of collected data to enhance the reliability of a study (Fenton et al., 2015). Data saturation occurs at the point that research data become repetitive with no coding, no new themes, and no new information.

Saturation occurs when additional analysis does not result in new phenomena, interpretive models, or reaction typologies (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Habersack & Luschin, 2013). In qualitative research, one way to reach data saturation is to start with initial interviews and conduct additional interviews until reaching data saturation, but this has a limitation, which is larger populations and more interviews.

Another way to enhance reliability is through member checking. Consistency is one of the important concepts in determining the reliability of qualitative studies to minimize errors and biases (De Massis & Kotlar, 2014). Member checking involves conducting an initial interview, interpreting information shared between participants, and sharing the interpretation with participants to enhance data reliability (Koelsch, 2013). I continued with member checking until I completed the data analysis.

Researchers can narrow the research scope to reach data saturation and enhance data reliability (Foley & Timonen, 2015). In a case study, a narrow scope such as five sources can lead to in-depth data and help reach data saturation. I narrowed my research scope to five restaurants to ensure I could interview qualified owners with successful business strategies. I used follow-up member checking interviews to ensure the accuracy of data interpretation. Researchers should follow reliability criteria such as confirmability, dependability, credibility, and transferability (Morse, 2015). To ensure and increase confirmability and dependability, I elaborated the interview methods used in all phases of the study to make them stable and to maintain similarity.

Validity

Validity of a qualitative study can include construct, internal, or external validity. Construct validity means the accuracy of a file represents the reality of social phenomena (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013). For construct validity, I used data saturation to ensure I collected all necessary data and to ensure the data reflected the reality of successful restaurant business strategies. I interviewed restaurant owners until I could not collect any new information.

Researchers can also use triangulation in data analysis to validate data. Triangulation can serve as a validity strategy to strengthen a qualitative study because multiple sources of data comparison using triangulation can provide measures from multiple situations and environmental conditions to explain the same phenomenon (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013; Yin, 2014). Researchers can enhance data validity through data saturation, member checking, documents collected from businesses and literature, and triangulation of data collected from interviews. Such processes ensure and enhance the accuracy and validity of collected and analyzed data in a qualitative study (Koelsch, 2013; Yin, 2014).

Transition and Summary

Section 2 includes discussions on the research method, research design, data collection and analysis, ethical research, and data reliability and validity for this multiple case study. I ensured data reliability and validity through data saturation, member checking, document collection, and triangulation. To investigate successful profitability strategies in restaurants that were small businesses to help ensure survival for 5 years or more, I collected related data to provide useful information for these and other similar small businesses. The research application to professional practice and implications for change in profitability strategies appear in Section 3.

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore what strategies small business owners need to sustain their business beyond 5 years. According to Boitnott (2016), small business owners need to avoid making mistakes when they start up their businesses. Business owners can avoid business failure by using different techniques and knowledge to assist in small business success. Multiple strategies are available to help small businesses survive, such as knowing the customers and their needs, developing a realistic business plan, selling a business to investors, and analyzing the market for business growth (Boitnott, 2016). To explore reasons for failure and to identify sustainable business strategies, I conducted semistructured interviews with five restaurant business owners in Macomb County, Michigan. The businesses had survived for at least 5 years. Analyzing the interview data helped me find answers to the central research question, and triangulating the integration methodology helped me analyze the results and generate findings.

Section 3 includes a summary of the findings of this study, which includes the following: owners' education enhanced their strategic planning and business sustainability; owners' personal traits such as passion for their jobs and commitment to their businesses drove them to their success; owners' marketing and seasonal strategies assisted them in strategic planning and brand building; and owners' business growth strategies assisted them in innovation and environmental management. Section 3 includes a presentation of the findings, implications for social change, recommendations for action, recommendations of further research, reflections, and study conclusions.

Presentation of the Findings

The overarching research question of this study was: What strategies do small business owners need to sustain their business beyond 5 years? Based on this research question, I conducted a qualitative multiple case study on five restaurant business owners to study their sustainable business strategies in Macomb County, Michigan. All five restaurant businesses survived longer than 5 years and met the small business criteria from the U.S. SBA (2014).

A research study should not contain personal information; thus, this study does not include any descriptive demographic information. I recorded participants' information, including names, identities, and demographics, in a Microsoft Word document on a flash drive and secured it in a locked drawer in my office. To follow the requirements of the IRB to ensure confidentiality, I used the codes P1, P2, P3, P4, and P5 to name and distinguish the participants, and I used other alphanumeric designators in a series to signify participants' company documents and demographics in the data analysis process. The alphanumeric designators do not appear in this document for confidentiality reasons; only the participant codes appear.

I used a semistructured interview with six open-ended interview questions in my interviews of the five business owners to gain an understanding of, and insights into, their sustainable strategies. Semistructured questionnaires with open-ended questions allow researchers to collect expertise and perceptions from participants (Yin, 2014). In my semistructured interviews, I stopped the interviews and data gathering when data saturation occurred. Data saturation occurs when there is enough information to replicate the study and participants provide no new information (O'Reilly & Parker, 2013; Walker, 2012). The study involved entering all gathered data from the five small businesses, including interview transcripts, interview notes, income statements, cash flow statements, and concepts from the theoretical framework and the central research question into NVivo for data analysis. I used all the data to perform validation using cross verification to validate data from different sources. Verner and Abdullah (2012) suggested that researchers use these validation methods to increase result trustworthiness.

Researchers can use the triangulated integration methodology to triangulate data from interviews and secondary documents (Yin, 2014); and NVivo is useful in cross-analysis of interview transcripts and business financial documents (Golicic et al., 2017). I combined and analyzed the emergent themes to yield the owners' profitability strategies, and I answered the central research question and its derived six research questions from a wide-ranging analysis of the emergent themes, theoretical framework, and literature review. The new concepts and theories that emerged were consistent with the conceptual framework.

Based on the data analysis using NVivo and triangulation, I developed four major themes: education contributed to owners' strategies and sustainability, market research assisted owners in strategic planning and brand building, passion and commitment were successful factors, and adaptation led to innovative changes in technology and the environment. Summaries of the responses from the five restaurant business owners follow under the four emergent themes and theories.

The findings generated multiple links to the reviewed literature, the central research question, and the conceptual framework. In the findings, the synthesized theme summaries identify themes and functions related to stakeholder theory in the restaurant businesses studied. The data and analyzed results underwent a comparison with concepts and theories from the literature review, and the findings from this study either confirmed existing theories or updated the extant references. Furthermore, I updated the reference list to reflect the latest researches of the peer reviewed journals and added additional references to present evidence and theories with more detail or more targeted concepts. The discussion of the four themes ties to the conceptual framework and existing literature on effective business practice.

Theme 1: Education Enhancing Owners' Strategies and Sustainability

The first emergent theme indicates that the educational levels of the small restaurant business owners helped them to understand their business strategies better and enhanced the 5-year sustainability of their businesses. Two business owners had a bachelor's degree in business (P1 and P4), one of the business owners had a degree in finance (P3), one of the business owners had bachelor's degree in culinary arts (P2), and one of them took a few courses in business (P5; see Table 1). Education helps business owners understand their business strategies and thus sustain their businesses (Johnson, 2017). According to Johnson (2017), business practitioners must know about communication, science and technology, world culture, language, and psychology, among other liberal arts skills, to operate successfully in the highly matrixed and global environment of 21st-century business.

Table 1

Educational Levels of the Five Business Owners

Education levels	No. of participants	% of participants
College graduates	4	80
College business courses	5	100
Business work experience	5	100
Business trainings	5	100
Marketing skills	5	100
Strategic planning	5	100
Business start-up planning	5	100

All five interviewed owners noted that having business knowledge before starting their businesses helped them determine business strategies. All five business owners and managers also indicated that having a bachelor’s degree did not necessarily prepare them for their businesses but helped them think strategically about how to apply their knowledge to strategic planning. The owners recognized the importance of education and its relationship to business success, which led them to hire educated and experienced managers to work in their restaurants. Even though P5 did not have a college degree, he intended to hire a business-educated manager who knew how to deal with employees and paperwork. This helped him focus on the business and spend more time with the customers.

Numerous researchers have investigated the importance of a college education for self-employed business owners. For example, a meta-analysis study of the respondents from almost 100 different research studies found that education improved business survival (Van der Sluis, Van Praag, & Vijverberg, 2008). Small business owners had higher success rates when they had a degree in business compared to those who did not have a degree in business because those with a bachelor's degree found it easier to understand the market and the market techniques that helped them open a business and stay in the business for a longer period of time (Asoni & Sanandaji, 2016).

The most general form of the small business theory of entrepreneurship indicates that new venture success is a function of management knowledge (McMullan & Kenworthy, 2015). Even after earning their initial educational degrees, small business owners should continue their educational learning process to acquire up-to-date skills and knowledge from multiple sources (Para, 2016). Recommended sources are college academic programs with degrees, trade shows, the U.S. SBA programs, programs from the Small Business Development Center, and the SCORE Counselors to America's Small Business. Business owners also need to learn how to management knowledge to improve business interactions and enhance competitiveness in small business environments (Alegre et al., 2013; Glaub et al., 2014).

Major Theme 1 answers the Interview Question 2 about the strategies that the owners used to satisfy customers through their managers or employees. Participants made their business strategies based on their education, which enhanced their business's sustainability. All the participants developed different strategies to satisfy their clients, and all of them noticed the importance of their clients. They all believed that customer loyalty was hard to achieve.

P3 and P5's strategies of maintaining customer loyalty, for instance, were recording the most valued customers' special occasions and sending them gift cards on their birthdays. Customers appreciated these strategies. The other strategies were communicating with customers every time they visited the restaurant and making sure all customers were happy with the service provided. Owners considered active communication between the business owners and the customers to be the best strategy to ensure client satisfaction.

Stakeholder theory from the conceptual framework is closely aligned with all participating restaurant owners and their daily business practices. The theory emerged in early 2000s; and scholars have since used it to determine if business strategies meet the needs, expectations, and values of businesses because its application can enhance business sustainability (Heikkurinen & Bonnedahl, 2013). Stakeholder theory was applicable to this study because the data show that, to develop a plan and succeed in the market, business owners must know how to analyze the market and apply strategic planning to their businesses. Most of the owners developed their business capability through education. The owners used their business-related degrees to plan successful business strategies, as confirmed by the literature that indicated education improves business survival; and small business owners have higher success rates when they have a degree in business than when they do not (Asoni & Sanandaji, 2016). The skills and knowledge that the participants described as contributing to owners' success were business planning, financial literacy, and business launching effectiveness, which related to Theme 2.

Theme 2: Personal Traits Drive Owners to Success

Theme 2 indicates that the business owners considered passion for the job and commitment to the business as two crucial factors that every entrepreneur should have for a new business to succeed in the market. P2 stated, “The restaurant business is a very time consuming and energy consuming business and you have to have passion and dedication to do this job if you want to keep your business running for a long time” (personal communication, December1, 2017). P3 also noted, “This job is very stressful, and in order to make it work, you have to have a lot of patience and be a 100% committed to your job” (personal communication, December 1, 2017). The opinions that the personal traits of small business owners determine their success rates because owners with qualified personal traits can sustain their businesses longer appear in the literature (Owens et al., 2013). For example, the passion of owners helps owners’ involvement and helps owners maintain the correct business direction (Caliendo et al., 2014), and their commitment to an excellent standard of business assists in business management and results in success (Habibah et al., 2014).

All the business owners valued passion for the job and thought that passion led them to dealing with different employees and customers on a daily basis (see Table 2). P4 stated,

> Owning a restaurant is not easy. You have to be there before the restaurant opens and after the restaurant closes. You have to deal with paperwork, employees, managers, suppliers, and customers, and you have to work overtime in order for your restaurant to function (personal communication, December 1, 2017).

Passion for the job, as one type of personal trait, appears in successful business owners as openness to experience, agreeability to dissent, and conscientiousness of success (Kyser & Hill, 2016).

Table 2

Personal Traits of the Five Business Owners

Personal traits	No. of participants	% of educated participants
Passion	5	100
Commitment	5	100
Hands-on expertise	4	80
Knowledge	5	100

The participants indicated that owners entering the restaurant business should understand that their job is their life. Many owners assume that working in a restaurant means having an 8-hour shift, but this was not what happened to the participants. Restaurant owners and restaurant employees should understand that working in a restaurant requires more work and longer schedules than working on other jobs. As P5 shared, “I have to think about my restaurant even when I am not working, and I have to have the same passion about this job that I had when I wanted to first start this business” (personal communication, 2017).

According to Silverstein (2015), entrepreneurs often have the passion to start their businesses, but not the requisite skills to sustain the businesses successfully. Restaurant owners should prove themselves over and over in their sustainability. These entrepreneurs might establish themselves in the market, but restaurant business requires people to give their best all the time to keep their customer loyalty. As seen in this study, customers and the business environment changed over time; restaurant owners without passion might not be able to keep up with these changes. Determination and passion drove their jobs and being determined to keep up with the changes helped the restaurant owners save and expand their customer base.

A relationship existed between commitment and schedule, which the owners demonstrated through the way they dealt with flexible working hours. For instance, most of the owners had to work with unstable and flexible working schedules, and only one of the owners (P1) managed to have a clear schedule in his restaurant. But even this owner needed to check on his restaurant when he was not at work and dealt with employees and suppliers when off duty. Their commitment drove them to commit fully to their restaurant to keep their businesses stable. Flexible working hours also appeared in the literature as leading to improved business benefits through greater employee productivity and higher business profitability (Shagvaliyeva & Yazdanifard, 2014). Flexible working hours also facilitate and promote work–life balance. P2 mentioned that the restaurant was his life, but that life outside the restaurant was important as well. Flexible working hours give both employers and employees time to perform outside of their work roles and to help balance their work and life (Shagvaliyeva & Yazdanifard, 2014).

Theme 2 answers two different interview questions: Questions 1 and 3. The topic of Interview Question 1 was satisfaction strategies and their impact on customers, and Theme 2 shows that the owners used their personal traits to gain insight into the strategies to keep their customers' satisfaction at high levels. The success of these businesses depended on their personal traits to keep their customers' loyalty. By using different strategies to meet the needs of their clients, the five small businesses were able to keep their restaurants in business for longer than 5 years.

This theme also answers the Interview Question 3 about how the owners ensured that managers and employees followed satisfactory strategies. In some cases, such as during restaurants’ rush hours, the business owners were not able to greet and communicate with all their customers. One of the best personal traits was making sure their managers covered half of the customers and the head servers dealt with the other half of the customers. Most of the employees in charge followed the strategies. P2 stated that when he was not in the restaurant, the manager’s only job was making every client satisfied. The manager’s job was visiting every table and making sure that the customers were receiving the best service. In his absence, his manager’s job was to oversee the other servers and to deal only with the customers.

Theme 2 supports the stakeholder theory from the conceptual framework, which emphasizes the promotion of stakeholders such as employees and managers (Heikkurinen & Bonnedahl, 2013). One of the promoting options is fairness in stakeholder management, which means that restaurant owners need to consider fairness when treating stakeholders. This is important because employees and managers value fairness, and they feel motivated in value creation only when they receive fair treatment. The restaurant owners under study successfully used this promotive strategy in their business practice. The owners assisted their managers in their daily services; and when more services from the managers were necessary, the owners made sure the focus of their jobs was only on customer satisfaction to avoid overloading to their managers. This finding matched the stakeholder theory, as it indicated that business owners need to consider the complexity of their managers' jobs and understand when planning strategies for solid management (Heikkurinen & Bonnedahl, 2013).

Theme 3: Marketing and Seasonal Strategies Assist Owners in Strategic Planning and Maintaining Profit

Theme 3 signals that those owners with marketing strategies had better business strategic planning and brand building. According to the participants, market research was one of the hardest and most time-consuming processes in starting a business. With regard to the geography and demographics of the specific area, their fundamental strategies were starting their businesses to establish their brands. Based on this fundamental goal, the owners considered it important to understand the population's needs and to know their compatibility in the market allowed them to focus more on their business's performance. The owners all indicated that, to develop a plan and to be successful in the market, business owners must know how to analyze the market and apply strategic planning to their businesses.

This theme confirms the theories from Anderson, Foros, and Kind (2017), who noted that start-ups are subject to a market selection process, and analyses of post entry dynamics provide insights regarding the owners of which types of firms that can manage their establishment in the market. Market research is an important element in business establishment and survival, as those businesses with sufficient marketing research usually manage their businesses better and survive longer. Marketing strategies determine both the nature and the shape of small business profits, because even a business with great service needs to motivate customers (Blank, 2013). Marketing strategies require planning, and the subthemes in planning are marketing planning, product management, delivery management, pricing management, competitor information gathering, limited resource management, customer information gathering, new customer acquisition, and existing customer retention (O'Donnell, 2011). Almost all nine subthemes appeared in the five studied businesses, which explains the reasons behind their success.

In addition, geographic location was important to the businesses I studied. For example, all business owners chose their restaurant locations in areas with high median household incomes and higher industrial diversity. The business owners recognized that the marketing competition was also high in the areas, but they managed the intensive competition well with different strategies to best adapt to the needs of the populations in the areas. These results indicated that marketing is an important element in the businesses' success, even in geographic locations with high competition, as supported in the literature. The business owners did their analysis on the market place allowing them to implement effective strategies and improve competitive advantages. According to P1 their geographic location positively impacted their business growth and success. If the same business was located in less developed area, it would not survive the market (P1, December 1, 2017). Costa Baptista (2017) noted that business owners should intensely analyze location as an important element in firms' success rates and use effective marketing to overcome geographic defects. Bell and Figueiredo (2012) and Barbosa and Eiriz (2011) found that firms located in regions with more industrial diversity tend to exhibit a higher growth rate that depends on marketing strategies.

The restaurant owners in this study used different strategies to manage the seasonal changes in the local market, because summer is not a good season for their businesses due to people going on vacation. During this season, their marketing strategies involved trying to attract customers by giving special offers on their menus and providing coupons to motivate customers to visit their restaurants. Different strategies for the summer seasons from the restaurant owners appear in Table 3.

Table 3

Marketing Strategies for Business Survival in Summer

Effective strategies	# of participants	% of participants
Advertisement	5	100
Marketing research	5	100
Environmental formulation	5	100
Customer loyalty concentration	5	100

Seasonal cycles and their impact on small business have been well-researched in the literature. For example, the swings in sales and business operations resulting from seasonality affect both small business profits and a region's employment situation, with potential implications for small business viability (Shields & Shelleman, 2013). Seasonal cycles might result in market exit for many start-up businesses. Hence, understanding how to survive during these seasonal cycles is vital for the survival of small businesses.

P3 stated that understanding the seasonal cycles helped him overcome many obstacles in his restaurant. P2 indicated that it was important to know about lost sales. P2 stated, "Lost sales were one of the riskiest aspects of my business" (personal communication, 2017). P2 understood that businesses might go through lost sales and noted the best strategy for his business was to keep the lost sales as low as possible. P2 aimed to increase demand as much as possible during the busiest season of the year to balance the loss of the sales during the slower seasons. This strategy was effective in the success of his restaurant.

By triangulating my interview notes and the financial profits of the businesses, it was clear that all the businesses struggled during the summer seasons. Businesses in this area performed better during the fall and the winter seasons, and they did not perform well during the summer, although all the businesses managed to make a small profit during the summer. The restaurants achieved profits in the summer because all the business owners recognized the importance of understanding the seasonal cycles and overcoming the challenges presented in seasons where demand for their services was lower than usual. The consequences derived from their strategies appear in Table 4.

Table 4

Consequences of Marketing Strategies of the Five Business Owners

Consequences	# of participants	% of educated participants
Knowledge on seasonal cycles	5	100
Slow sales	5	100
Lost sales	3	60
Decreased number of staff	5	100
Promoted customers	5	100

Although P1, P2, and P5 noted that they had experienced lost sales in the past, they were able to maintain most of their customer bases. P3 and P5 had different strategies to use in avoiding lost sales. For instance, P3's restaurant was closer to local business areas, which helped in establishing business customer loyalty in his restaurant. All restaurant owners promoted customer loyalty using various promotional strategies, which was a strategy confirmed in the literature. According to Batinić (2017), promotional activities play an important role in managing a restaurant and related facilities, because all restaurant owners must take the necessary and effective measures to maintain regular customers and approach potential new customers.

Another reason that the restaurant business owners did not stop their work operations during the summer was significant for the businesses. Although sales were slower during the summer seasons, the restaurants did not lose sales as much as businesses that closed operations in summer did. P5 avoided losses in sales during the summer because he never stopped working and enhanced the restaurant's carry-out and catering menu. P5 created relationships with different businesses in the area that required the restaurant's services throughout the year. The staff of the local businesses also gave the restaurant business with multiple business fairs in different locations around Michigan during the summer seasons and helped the business sustain its profits.

Understanding the business seasons is crucial in order to stay in business. Many businesses deal with seasonal changes when it comes to their profitability, and knowing how to reduce the cost in the slower seasons help the small business owners stay in business for a long time. The business owners I interviewed mentioned the concept of cutting costs. This is a profitability strategy that includes cutting the employees' hours, and reducing some other expenses such as water or energy. All the studied businesses decreased the number of employees during the summer seasons. Some employees with younger children were willing to take time off in the slow seasons. Other employees had fewer working hours, and many managed to find other seasonal jobs in local areas. The limited number of employees helped reduce restaurant budgets and increase profits.

Employee management is an important factor in business management and survival, and although it is possible to analyze and identify effective employment strategies, it is impossible to generalize better or worse strategies (Schleifer, Sullivan, & Murdough, 2014). Thus, the strategies that work in a specific business should be sound strategies to apply to business practices to reduce costs and increase profits (Battisti & Perry, 2011). Successful business owners, as entrepreneurs, must demonstrate their capabilities in strategic and marketing management and must commit to their businesses and communities personally.

Theme 3 answers the Interview Questions 4 and 5. The focus of Interview Question 4 was whether the satisfactory strategies attracted customers. Theme 3 shows that customers tend to feel more comfortable and happier with the food when they liked the management team and the services offered by the restaurants. When the customers did not feel like they received appropriate treatment, they would not return to a restaurant, even when they really liked the food. The responses from the customers depended on the marketing strategies, and all five restaurants had created, maintained, and expanded their own customer bases by improving their marketing and seasonal strategies.

The focus of the Interview Question 5 was the impacts from the satisfactory strategies on restaurant profitability. The marketing and seasonal strategies used by all five business owners improved business profitability. For instance, P4 stated that since he had started e-mail marketing with his clients, he had seen higher profitability in his restaurants. Strategies used by all five restaurant owners to retain their customers had a positive impact on profitability.

I updated the information needed with current researches and added additional references based on the findings in Theme 3. With regard to the finding on the impact from business commitment on flexible working hours, I added the reference from Shagvaliyeva and Yazdanifard (2014) to give a deeper understanding, which expanded the discussion from being simply about personal traits in Theme 2 to their application to flexible hours and the direct impact on the owners' work–life balance in Theme 3.

According to stakeholder theory, business responsibility needs to respect customers' needs, reflect their concerns, and protect their rights as stakeholders (Bridoux & Stoelhorst, 2014). Customer concerns and their consideration in business strategies could result in customer engagement and interaction with businesses, which enhance customer satisfaction. Business strategy planning that leads to customer satisfaction is a powerful indication of profitability and sustainability. The restaurant owners studied considered customer satisfaction important to the profitability of their businesses. The owners had created and maintained strong customer bases and used strategies to attract more customers. All owners used promotional activities such as special menus and offers to promote customer loyalty to maintain their regular customer bases and gain new customers. The next theme indicates the personal commitment of the restaurant owners to their businesses.

Theme 4: Business Growth Strategies Assisting Owners in Innovation and Environment Management

Theme 4 shows that restaurant business owners can use business growth strategies to help them manage innovation and the environment. All the restaurant owners noted that innovation is an important element that keeps their restaurants in business (see Table 5). They knew competition could lead to the failure of their restaurants, and to beat the market, the restaurant owners thought they needed to understand new trends in technology. As firms transition from start-up to the growth stage and beyond, innovation becomes most important, and only start-ups whose owners manage innovation correctly and efficiently can survive and move forward (Peltier & Naidu, 2013). Business owners need to keep their innovation strategies as they grow and could use different types of innovation that could differ and unfold over time. Berends et al. (2014) noted that owners could use innovation strategies with open-ended, resource-driven, and stepwise strategies to plan their business activities and to reach their goals.

Table 5

Business Growth Strategies of the Five Business Owners

Business growth strategies	# of participants	% of educated participants
Innovative marketing	5	100
Knowledge of technology	5	100
Social media use	5	100
Business challenge	4	80
Training and programs	3	60

Within Theme 3, the restaurant owners mentioned that they could use technology to increase their restaurants' presence in the market. They used novel Internet technology to let customers know about their new menus and special offers, and they used technology to get to know more about what their customers needed and about the strongest competition in the market. Carayannis and Stewart (2013) noted that business owners can apply various strategies to innovative technology, and potential technology users with various intentions could adopt and accept different technologies to meet their needs. Somech and Drach-Zahavy (2013) contended that various team compositions could affect innovation strategies and their implementation, and business owners should allow individual heterogeneity and team creativity.

Most of the owners agreed that developing innovative ideas in a restaurant business is not easy. In the 21st century, just as in other businesses, the owners of restaurant businesses need to learn how to adapt to the rapidly changing technology and environment. Evidence from the literature indicates that restaurants can improve quality and reputation, cut costs, and increase sales and profits through innovation (Lee, Hallak, & Sardeshmukh, 2016). A continuous innovation process helps restaurant owners raise the barriers to imitation to keep their portfolio ahead of the competition, which establishes a long-term competitive advantage (Lee et al., 2016).

In addition to innovation, the business environment is important because restaurant owners needed to be familiar with their environment to improve the chances of survival. The restaurant owners encountered novel challenges every day while running their businesses, and they needed to learn how to overcome the challenges to stay in business. Shukla and Shukla (2014) noted that small businesses need to fit in their unique business climate to increase business growth. Small businesses with a focus on innovation in their marketing and other business strategies aligned with novel technology could have better sustainability and survival rates (Bello & Ivanov, 2014).

One of the innovative strategies the restaurant owners used was offering training programs for their chefs, management team, and themselves. Constant training helped the employees and the owners better understand new trends in the economy and better analyze the environment in which they were providing their services. The findings in the literature confirms that business owners could receive training to meet the requirements of novel technology to improve their business survival rates (Ivanov, 2013). Classen, Carree, Van Gils, and Peters (2014) contended that significant disparities exist, and owners of small businesses who invested more in innovation outperformed those who invested less in terms of process innovation outcomes.

Successful business growth strategies are growth motivation, willingness to work with others, entrepreneurs' characteristics, level of education, and previous management experience (Jones et al., 2014). Owners of small businesses with some of these successful growth factors should consider using their advantages to assist in their business growth (Hilmersson, 2014). All four themes found in this study are successful growth factors, and different restaurants possessed some or all of these factors. Business owners should realize what advantages they possess and what strategies are targeting their advantages to ensure business sustainability. In addition, businesses with a shortage of some of these factors could use capital equipment available to increase efficiency, new product development, and acquisition strategies (Kumar, 2015). Furthermore, owners could use marketing strategies to target their customers based on their needs and insights and to develop growth strategies.

Theme 4 answers the Interview Question 6, which was about future improvement to customer satisfaction strategies. The majority of participants noted that the most common type of business growth strategies used was social media marketing. The restaurant owners recognized the importance of using social media as a strategy to connect more often to their existing clients and their new clients. Social media is the best way to inform new customers about what restaurants can offer and to remind them of special dishes and special promotions. For example, P1 and P5's future strategies were to e-mail surveys to their customers to learn what services the customers liked the most at their restaurants and what the owners needed to improve. As society is constantly changing, the restaurant owners recognized the need to adapt to changes to bring more customers to their restaurants.

Based on the stakeholder theory from the conceptual framework, enterprise owners need to determine if their business strategies meet their market requirements (Heikkurinen & Bonnedahl, 2013). The business owners in this study recognized that to be successful in the market, they must come up with different strategies to best adapt to the needs of their population. The business growth strategies from the restaurant owners illustrated the applicability of stakeholder theory in the restaurant field because the theory indicates that business planning is a profitability strategy and that it can increase customer satisfaction (Heikkurinen & Bonnedahl, 2013). The theory is suitable to evaluate if a restaurant owner is responsible for developing sustainable business with growing profits (Bridoux & Stoelhorst, 2014).

Summary of the Four Themes

The four themes represent the four strategies the business owners used to sustain their small businesses. The first strategy was owners' education-based strategy to enhance strategy planning and business sustainability. Their education helped them understand their business strategies better and enhance their business's 5-year sustainability. All five interviewed owners believed that having business knowledge before starting their businesses helped them determine business strategies. This strategy had support in the literature, which indicates that small business owners should continue their educational learning process to acquire up-to-date skills and knowledge from multiple sources (Para, 2016).

The second strategy was that the owners' personal traits drove them to their business success. The five business owners, particularly P2 and P3, noted that passion for the job and commitment to the business were two crucial factors and described what every entrepreneur needs to be successful in the market. The passion of the owners helped them maintain the correct business direction, helped with their involvement, and led them to deal with different employees and customers on a daily basis. The literature review confirmed that the personal traits of small business owners enhance their business success, because owners with qualified personal traits can sustain their businesses longer (Owens et al., 2013).

The third strategy was marketing and seasonal strategies that assisted owners in strategic planning and maintaining a profit. All five owners considered market research as one of the hardest and most time-consuming procedures in the process of starting a business. They all agreed that business owners must know how to analyze the market and apply strategic planning to make their businesses successful. This theme confirmed the theories by Anderson et al. (2017), who suggested that start-ups are subject to a market selection process, and analyses of their post entry dynamics provide insights regarding which types of firms can manage their establishment in the market.

The fourth strategy was that restaurant business owners can use business growth strategies to help them manage innovation and the business environment. As firms transition from start-up to the growth stage and beyond, innovation becomes more important, and only owners who manage innovation correctly and efficiently can survive and move forward. The owners used novel Internet technology to communicate with their customers and to understand their customers' needs and the competition of the market. Evidence from the literature indicated that restaurant owners can cut costs, improve the business's reputation, and increase sales and profits through innovation (Lee et al., 2016).

As indicated at the end of each theme, the stakeholder theory is closely aligned with all participating restaurant owners and their daily business practices. The synthesized theme summaries identified stakeholder-theory-related themes and functions in the studied restaurant businesses through business strategic planning, the promotion of employees and managers, and the promotion of customer loyalty.

The update and renewal of the references from the literature review improved the currency of the study and enhanced the theoretical support from the current literature to the study findings. As such, these literature updates and renewals represented an accumulation of stakeholder theory findings from existing journals and richer research materials, and they linked the conceptual framework to the findings and answered the central research question.

To summarize the relationship between the themes and the interview questions, Theme 1 answers the Interview Question 2, Theme 2 answers the Interview Questions 1 and 3, Theme 3 answers the Interview Questions 4 and 5, and Theme 4 answers the Interview Questions 6. Most importantly, this study provides the answer to the central research question about the four strategies from the four themes that restaurant business owners used to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years.

Applications to Professional Practice

The implications for practitioners in the area of small restaurant business entrepreneurs and their perception of sustainable strategies could offer a new way of analyzing the businesses success. To understand the dynamics of small restaurant business owners and the strategies they perceived as sustainable in business, it is necessary to understand their perceptions and considerations to appreciate what draws and motivates the owners beyond their circumstances.

This study provides a new window through which to understand new strategies and guidelines for small business owners, particularly restaurant owners, to assist in their strategic planning, marketing strategies, and business growth and success strategies to sustain beyond 5 years. The findings of this study are appropriate for providing sustainable strategies for small restaurant business owners to ensure profitability. As such, this study is important and transcending for the owners of small restaurant start-ups seeking to survive and avoid failure in their first 5 years.

Stakeholder theory is applicable to all small restaurant businesses because it is closely aligned with all participating restaurant owners and their daily business practices. Based on stakeholder theory and its developmental fields, small business owners can use at least three different theories derived from stakeholder theory to guide their small businesses to success: business planning strategies, stakeholder management, and customer management (Heikkurinen & Bonnedahl, 2013). The business planning strategies from the restaurant owners illustrated the applicability of stakeholder theory to the restaurant field because the theory suggests that business planning is a profitability strategy. Business planning strategies used by the restaurant owners included marketing strategies, innovation strategies, and business growth strategies.

In addition, stakeholder theory emphasizes the promotion of stakeholders such as employees and managers to allow fairness in stakeholder management and promote their participation. Stakeholder theory also suggests that business owners have the responsibility to respect their customers' needs responsibility needs, reflect their concerns, and protect their rights (Bridoux & Stoelhorst, 2014). Because of the awareness of these practically useful and effective strategies, the small business owners were successful in ensuring their business's sustainability, which is a recommendation for current and future small restaurant owners and practitioners. The focus of the findings of this study was the professional practice of small restaurants and the findings add to the concepts of stakeholder theory that could be useful to other small restaurant and business owners to generate profits and achieve sustainable success beyond 5 years. The expansion of stakeholder theory to the application of small restaurant businesses could benefit their business performance and functions in the restaurant industry both nationwide and worldwide.

Implications for Social Change

Small businesses and their owners make major contributions to local communities and the economy in the United States (Altinay et al., 2014), generate 60 to 80% of new jobs, and enhance economic growth (Lahm et al., 2011). However, half of all new small businesses survive for only 4 years, and effective strategies are necessary to prevent business failure and ensure success (García-Gutiérrez & Martínez-Borreguero, 2016). In the literature review, multiple reasons emerged relating to small business failure and success. Failed business strategies emerged as a major reason or cause. As a planned approach, business strategies secure a profitable position in the market and restaurant owners can use effective strategies to save businesses from inappropriate planning (Ucbasaran et al., 2013). Small start-up business owners whose businesses are failing need to reconsider their strategic planning, incorporate new ideas and skills to fit stakeholders' and technological requirements and social expectations (Steyn & Niemann, 2013). Findings from this study include examples of successful start-ups and profitable strategies for unsuccessful small restaurant owners. The findings in this study add to the theories from Ngo and O'Cass (2013) that nonfinancial factors such as owner education, innovative marketing strategies, and stakeholder management are important to business success. The findings in this study also expand the theories from Johnston and Marshall (2016) that entrepreneurs evaluate success through satisfied clients with good customer services to the restaurant field.

Business planning strategies from the findings in this study might serve as useful insights for small restaurant owners to prepare themselves to manage the complexity of start-ups and to gain profitability with sustainability. Profitable and sustainable small businesses could contribute to the prosperity of employees, their families, community health, and national economy. Decisions made at start-up could have an impact on later stages of business growth, and small businesses are critical in job creation, innovation, competences, and economic growth in the United States (Shukla & Shukla, 2014). Small business owners work to promote economic development (Mills, 2013).

Findings from this study could link the success of small business start-ups to social exchange and impact. The success of small restaurant start-ups could enhance job creation and net job change to promote a social impact (U.S. SBA, 2014). As job creators, small businesses play a significant role in the U.S economy (Shukla & Shukla, 2014). This study and its findings are aligned with Gagnon, Michael, Elser, and Gyory's (2013) claim that success in start-ups results in widespread positive economic and social outcomes. Even though this study took place on a small scale, its results contributed to a social change. As confirmed in the literature, the continuous success and financial consequences of small businesses can improve employee incomes, generate jobs, stimulate the economy, and increase gross domestic product and government revenue (Gagnon et al., 2013).

Recommendations for Action

The aim of this qualitative multiple case study was to determine the business strategies of small business owners in sustaining their businesses beyond 5 years. The research population came from small restaurants with fewer than 50 employees located in Macomb County, Michigan. The small restaurants chosen were profitable start-ups that had survived for a minimum of 5 years. As such, the potential of the findings in this study came from the owners' personal experience. Entrepreneurs from other small restaurants and other businesses could use the data results and findings obtained in this study to benefit their business practices and reduce the risk of failure.

Restaurant owners have their own business understanding related to their business type and perception, which facilitates business owners learning and practicing restaurant-specific strategies to communicate their businesses' mission and goals to specific customers. In addition, their understanding could include the use of appreciative inquiry to build nascent entrepreneurial organizations in businesses with similar environments. Furthermore, the business understanding could help business owners coordinate with their managers and employees to establish strategic planning for their businesses and to strategize against competition inwardly and outwardly to sustain their businesses. This finding in business strategy management confirms the suggestion from Schleifer et al. (2014) that owners cannot generalize better or worse strategies but can only identify and analyze effective strategies.

Individuals who need to act based on the findings are those new or failed restaurant owners ready to start or improve their entrepreneurship. The literature shows that the owners of failed small businesses often started their venture without adequate knowledge and preparation (Kurvinen et al., 2016). Small business difficulties, management strategies, innovative technology, and flexible working hours are factors that decide the future of entrepreneurs. Hence, small restaurant owners need to learn from the information in this study and in other literature related to materials, assets, management, policies, and practices. Failed restaurant owners need to adopt whatever strategies work in a specific business and apply them to their practices to reduce costs and increase profits (Halpin & Smith, 2017).

Current and future restaurant owners in Macomb County, Michigan, and other areas and regions should review and adopt the findings from this study in their business practices. The administrators from the Michigan branches of the U.S. SBA and Fairfax County Economic Development Authority can disseminate the findings from this study to all prospective small restaurant owners. These findings with the specific cases might also be suitable for integrating into counseling, support, and training programs and practices in the U.S. SBA business education syllabus. All small restaurant owner participants will receive a summary of the findings that could assist them in fully understanding what other owners' strategies were and how to take action to improve their own business strategies.

Recommendations for Further Research

Based on this study and its findings, I recommended further research and studies. In the area of understanding small restaurant business leadership perceptions, I recognized through this study that an unseen or unknown connection binds owners together from various situations in business strategic planning. Therefore, to take the study of owners to the next level, I recommended conducting a longitudinal study with participants identified as having business loss experience, as well as those who are the sole supporters of their family businesses. Such studies could provide a deeper understanding and direct strategies to combine with the findings from the successful owners in this study to give accurate recommendations to the failed small restaurant owners and family restaurant owners.

To understand owners in business, and more specifically small restaurant entrepreneurs, when selecting participants for a study, I recommended expanding the demographics to include owners entering entrepreneurship with preliminary conditions, such as comparing restaurants located in areas without obvious seasonal downtimes to those with obvious seasonal differences, because these participants will need a unique understanding or strategies in their business practices.

I assumed in Section 1 that participants could withdraw at any time and that participants who finish a study might not be truly representative of the population. The basis of this assumption was theories from Sufian (2015) and Brutus et al. (2013), who noted that limitations are uncontrollable threats to the internal validity of a study. In fact, when I conducted this study, none of the chosen participants withdrew, but I cannot avoid the other limitation factor that participants who finished the study might not be truly representative of the population. I attempted to avoid this limitation by selecting owner participants with different backgrounds, locations, and restaurant types to reflect the true and representative population.

Another limitation was that the business leaders who validated the proficiency survey might not represent universally accepted expert opinions. I gathered the research data within a certain length of time to represent information from that period. The anticipated small size of the sample also might have limited generalizations from the data collected. The collected data and findings represented the five restaurant owners' perception. But as I carefully selected them to represent the local restaurant business, the data results and findings are representative of the business population.

An additional limitation was geographical; because I gathered data only from Macomb County, the data could not be the same as those from other areas. However, as the local population composition and business styles were not unique but similar to most other areas of the United States, the findings could be applicable to other cities and states in the United States. The findings and recommendations could also be applicable to areas around the world with a similar population composition and similar business styles.

Reflections

My doctoral study experience was impressive, appreciated, and unforgettable. The study goal was unique and important for local and national small restaurant owners such as those working and living in Macomb County, Michigan. The possibility that the study findings could benefit the restaurant employees, their families, and local communities encouraged me to work harder and faster. My intention was to find sustainable business strategies helpful for small business owners with opportunities to improve their profitability and achieve success.

I attempted to reduce personal bias or preconceived ideas and values in this study. Confirmation bias can occur in business research when researchers are close to the data they will collect (Roulston & Shelton, 2015). My passion for finding business strategies in small businesses triggered my interest in the high failure rates in small start-ups and in conducting this study. In addition, I had seen the power of sustainable business strategies and its impact on business success. In this study, I attempted not to allow my experience to affect how I interpreted the data, but a potential criticism exists that the interpretation was biased. I recognized this potential and attempted to build rigor into the research design to counter any biases. I attempted to eliminate this type of bias using triangulation and member checking, which the literature confirmed as useful tools to validate themes and avoid biases. For example, member checking with participants and comparing data obtained from different participants validate and nuance findings through further discussion (Koelsch, 2013).

During the interview process, I recognized that solidarity exists among small restaurant owners, although described in various ways. I also noticed that the undercurrent of self-sufficiency was strong and motivated in small restaurant owners and their businesses. As a result, passion and commitment among owners existed that strengthened and encouraged others to engage in business life as an active participant and to overcome adversity. Recognizing adversity enables those who would and could triumph over it and empowers them and those around them.

As an individual who has attained the highest education, I would be remiss if I did not recognize the strength from my family members while I was growing up. The owner participants dedicated themselves to providing me with everything available to make this study possible and successful. Their personal and business characteristics of dedication, motivation, energy, leadership, and values were unique and encouraging. For this reason, other small restaurant owners can stand on the shoulders of these small restaurant owners and announce that they can achieve and excel while encouraging and strengthening others.

Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore what strategies small business owners needed to sustain their business beyond 5 years. I conducted semistructured interviews with five small restaurant business owners using open-ended questions, and I recorded the interview conversations privately at their business locations in Macomb County, Michigan. All participants were over 18 years of age, small restaurant entrepreneurs operating small restaurants successfully for at least 5 years, and willing to volunteer for the interview.

I analyzed the data gathered from interview transcripts, owner income statements, owner cash flow statements, and interview notes using NVivo, in which the interview data provided information about the owners' business strategies and the financial documents provided information about the businesses' profitability. I used software to analyze the coded data to generate themes, subthemes, and theme categories automatically. The procedures of data gathering, storing, and analyzing data, as well as storing participant information, were compliant with the IRB requirements.

To conduct an integration study across units, specificities and differences between units are necessary to obtain unbiased results (Yin, 2014). Accordingly, I used triangulation methodology to assist in triangulating various data obtained from interview transcripts, owner income statements, owner cash flow statements, and interview notes. A triangulated integration study can increase internal validity through the accurate analysis of information from financial events in businesses (Heale & Forbes, 2013).

This study generates findings about what contributes to running a successful business among small restaurant entrepreneurs. The findings indicate that the stakeholder theory is closely aligned with all participating restaurant owners and their daily business practices. Under the guidance of the stakeholder theory, the findings are as follows. First, the owners used education-based strategy to enhance their strategy planning and business sustainability. Second, personal traits such as passion for the job and commitment to the business were two crucial factors that every entrepreneur should have to be successful in the market because the owners used their passion to maintain the correct business direction and increase their involvement, and their passion drove them to deal with employees and customers on a daily basis.

Third, the participants used strategic planning to manage and improve restaurant management. The participants used multiple marketing and seasonal practices in the strategic planning and to maintain profit in their small businesses. All participants indicated that business owners must know how to analyze the market and apply strategic planning to make their businesses successful. Fourth, restaurant business owners can use business growth strategies to help them manage innovation and the business environment. As firms transition from start-up to the growth stage and beyond, innovation becomes more important, and only those owners of start-ups who can manage innovation correctly and efficiently can survive and move forward. This study involved small restaurant business owners as defined by the U.S. SBA (2014), with robust data on their lived experiences that influenced their sustainable business strategies. The study also included implications of practice and recommendations for future research.

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Appendix A: Semistructured Interview Protocol

In this study, the main research question is: What profitability strategies do start-up entrepreneurs need to sustain small restaurant businesses successfully?

In this qualitative multiple case study, I used seven semistructured open-ended questions in the interviews to gain ideas and insights from experienced restaurant owners of small businesses in Macomb County, Michigan. The protocol listed in the table were followed in the semistructured interviews.

Protocol Steps	**Particular Actions Taken**
1. Participant selection	Research contact participants by phone calls or emails.
2. Time schedule and location for interviews	Participants select time and location for interviews.
3. Study processes are explained to participants	Study purpose, verbal consent will be recapped to each participant with a consent form.
4. Interview participants with content recorded	Each interview will be recorded, and participant will be thanked in person and with a thank you card.
5. Interview record transcription	Each interview record will be transcribed.
6. Member checking	Transcription files will be sent to participants for verification.
7. Questions to participants derived from data	Additional questions could be asked for data clarification purposes.
8. Semistructured Interview questions	Besides recording, notes will be made during each interview as data backup.

1) Briefly describe to me if your restaurant tried to satisfy customers? If so, what impact do you think that the satisfaction strategies **had on customers, as well as the whole business?**	
2) What were the strategies that you used in satisfying customers through your managers or employee**s under your leadership? Did some strategies appear to work better than others? If yes, which ones and why?**	
3) Did everyone in your restaurant follow the strategies? How did you ensure that managers and employees followed the strategies? If they did not **follow, what did you do?**	
4) What were the responses from the customers to the satisfaction strategies? Did the strategies attract more customers?	
5) What were the impact that the customer satisfaction strategies had on your restaurant profitability? Did the strategies improve the business profitability?	
6) What will be your future improvement to your customer satisfaction strategies in order to enhance your restaurant profitability? Or do you have any strategy recommendations to other start-up restaurants?	