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Effective Strategies to Sustain Small Businesses in Rural Areas

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This is to certify that the doctoral study by

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Abstract

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by

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MBA, Columbia College, 2013

BS, Columbia College, 2011

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Business Administration

Walden University

April 2018

Abstract

Compared to their urban counterparts rural small businesses face unique socio-economic

and environmental challenges including isolation, lack of resources, poverty, limited

networks, and a smaller population of working age adults. The purpose of this qualitative

case study was to explore effective strategies that rural small business managers have

used to sustain a business in their area. The population for this study included a

purposeful selection of 8 rural small businesses. Institutional theory served as the

conceptual framework for this study. Data was collected using semi-structured face-to-

face interviews of participants. The data was analyzed and coded by using a modified

Van Kaam method which revealed themes: (a) customer satisfaction, (b) advertising, and

(c) location. Participants considered customer satisfaction, advertising, and location when

creating businesses strategies to remain sustainable beyond 5 years. This study may

contribute to positive social change by enabling more rural businesses to remain within

the economic cycle of the U.S. economy, and offer a more stable employment outlook,

hence supporting more families in rural areas.

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Dedication

I dedicate this study to my sons Holden and Ayden. Follow your dreams as big and wild as they may seem. This life is yours, make it whatever you want! To my father and best friend, Ray, for the unwavering support through all of my endeavors. For always being by my side, mentoring me through this crazy life, and instilling a foundation of unfaltering values. I can only aspire to be half the person you were and upkeep your legacy. Cowboy up! To my mother, Nancy, for being my biggest fan. To my Thelma, Angie, for being my rock through the process, keeping me sane, and for being the best side kick. To my best friend, Jimmy, for always being there for me, harboring my secrets, and being my partner in crime. To Tom, all the shoulder and baby C in the universe! Thanks for drawing the map, tolerating me, and the support while on this journey. To my friends, Susan, Nessa, Anthony, Jesse, and Nate for tolerating me throughout this process and keeping me only in mild amounts of trouble. To my friend, Grant, for getting me through one of the toughest times of my life and those awkward crying spells. To Zach, my biggest supporter, I miss our adventures, and I can only hope you are resting easy, Bonzo. To the greatest detective, Tim, for the best memories and making me a better person. Thank you for showing me the impossible and always pushing me to be better even in your absence. I used my ten pound brain for all those women's shoes but I never said ice cream! To Clinton, you are forever missed and loved. To my "husband", Eric, the strongest, positive, and most humble human I have ever met, I love you and rest easy. To Bradley, Jack, Kiya, and Haven dream big, laugh loud, and stay humble!

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study

Background of the Problem

A rural area is defined as a city or village with a population less than 20,000, recognized as an entity by the *U.S. Census classification*, and located in a county rated four through nine on the *Economic Research Service Rural Continuum Code* (U. S. Department of Agriculture [USDA] Economic Research Service, 2013). The United States Census Bureau (USCB) estimated that between 20-27% of Americans live in rural areas (USCB, 2015). In the U.S., rural residents occupy 72-90% of the land area (USDA, 2013). However, rural is no longer synonymous with agricultural (Lu & Jacobs, 2013). American agricultural output was 15% and 2.5% of the total GDP in 2007 (Council of Economic Advisors, 2014). Rural small businesses have moved from agricultural foundations to retail and service sectors. The retail sector is the largest provider of jobs in small communities (Ryu & Swinney, 2013). Small businesses account for 99.7% of U.S. employer firms (Small Business Administration [SBA], 2014). In 2012, 99.7% of all firms in the U.S. had less than 500 employees in which 89.6% of those firms had fewer than 20 employees (USCB, 2013). Small businesses produced 46% of the nonfarm private GDP in 2008 (SBA, 2013).

In comparison to their urban counterparts, rural small businesses face unique socio-economic and environmental challenges including increased levels of poverty, smaller population of working age adults, poor overall health, decreased living standards, and adverse cultural identities. In rural areas, small businesses face the challenges of limited resources, lack of capital, big box retailers, decreased networking resources,

technology availability, lack of managerial skill, economies of scale, and access to local marketing data (Moyes, Ferri, Henderson, & Whittam, 2015). The current professional literature demonstrates a lack of discussion of successful survival strategies of rural small business in the U.S., solutions for rural sustainability, or how rural managers can strategize within their unique environments.

Problem Statement

Isolation, economic conditions, big-box retailers, limited networks, supply chain access, shrinking population, and limited technology decrease long-term survival rates of rural small businesses (Frazier, Stoel, Niehm, & Eckerson, 2013). Urban *micro and small enterprises* (MSEs) had nearly a 25% greater chance of surviving the first years than their counterparts in rural locations (Liedholm & Mead, 2013). The general business problem is that MSEs operating in rural areas fail at a greater rate than MSEs operating in urban areas but face preeminent challenges of isolation, poverty, poor economic conditions, limited networks, and lack of resources. The specific business problem is that some managers of MSEs in rural areas have limited knowledge of effective strategies of how to successfully sustain MSEs in a rural community.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative exploratory case study was to explore effective strategies that managers of MSEs in rural areas have used to successfully sustain small businesses in a rural community. The target population was managers that own or operate small businesses in Kirksville, Missouri. Rural MSE entrepreneurs could use the findings from this study to develop effective strategies to achieve sustainable businesses. This

study may contribute to social change by enabling more rural MSEs to remain within the economic cycle of the U.S. economy, and offer a more stable employment outlook, hence supporting more families in rural areas.

Nature of the Study

Qualitative research was the method for this study. Researchers use qualitative research to explore the potential antecedents and factors of a phenomenon for which there is a limited or no knowledge (Khan, 2014). Researchers use qualitative methods to explore live process in their natural environment that can capture perceptions, realities, and behaviors that address culture, ideology, stories, perception, and cognition (Parker, 2014). Researchers use qualitative methods to explore the how, who, and why questions of individuals and organized collective action as it unfolds over time in context (Yin, 2014). Researchers use qualitative methods to explore the influence of actions of the actors or participants and the effectiveness (Leedy & Ormrod, 2015). The method was chosen based on the following criteria: (a) utilization of open-ended interview questions to capture the essence of rural strategy, and (b) ability to collect non-numeric data relevant to participant's lived experiences. Researchers use quantitative methods to test hypotheses and utilize closed-ended questionnaires to gather, analyze and interpret numerical data (McCusker & Gunaydin, 2015). A quantitative method was not applicable because no theories were being developed, tested, and there was no evaluation of numerical relationships in this study. Mixed methods research combines quantitative and qualitative research methods in the same research inquiry (Landrum & Garza, 2015). Combining methodologies or approaches can take away from the historical,

epistemological, and theoretical aspects of the research (Makrakis & Kostoulas-Makrakis, 2016). A mixed method was not applicable because there was no need to combine methods or collect numerical data for this study.

A case study was the design for this study. Case study research is an investigation and analysis of a single or collective case intended to capture the complexity of the object of study (Hyett, 2014). A case study is an empirical research that uses contextually rich data from natural context and real-world settings to investigate a focused phenomenon without controls (Vohra, 2014). Within a case study, the researcher tries to understand the current subject or phenomena through data collection without intervening or disruption of the phenomena (Kim, Price, & Lau, 2013). Researchers use case studies to provide a research framework for observation or analysis of behavior as related to the structure that conducts mechanisms (Klonoski, 2013). Researchers use case studies in professional, individual, teaching, history, healthcare, social, and management settings (Simons, 2014). A design was chosen based on the following criteria: (a) there is no control over the participants; (b) the need to collect rich data from real-world settings (c) to investigate a contemporary phenomenon, and (d) to explore why and how questions (Yin, 2014). Narrative methods contrast to longitudinal studies often used in the medical field, which focus on individual narratives to capture critical moments or processes involved in change through storytelling and autobiographies (Kuronen, 2014; Raeburn, Schmied, Hungerford, & Cleary, 2015; Von Contzen & Alders, 2015). A narrative was not applicable because there was no medical basis for this study and it was not longitudinal. Researchers use phenomenology in psychological phenomena to investigate the lived

experiences of individuals to understand the essence of the cognitive processes of similar experiences (Percy, Kostere, & Kostere, 2015). A phenomenology was not applicable because there was no intention to examine psychological phenomena in this study. The characteristics of grounded theory include continuous collection and analysis of data to generate a theory that grounds in empirical phenomena (Robson & McCartan, 2016). Grounded theory was not applicable because there is no intent to produce a new theory from this study. Researchers use ethnography to describe a group or culture and how they live in the world through long-term researcher participation in the culture (Wall, 2015). An ethnography was not applicable because this study does not explore the cultural existence of the participants solely.

Research Question

What effective strategies are used by managers of MSEs in rural areas to successfully sustain a small business?

Interview Questions

1. What strategies have been utilized in the past 12 months to improve the sustainability of your business?

2. How do you define and measure the success of your business?

3. What managerial skills are necessary to operate a successful business in your area?

4. How have you adapted, changed, or altered your business strategies to fit your rural environment/culture? And why?

5. What do you feel are the most important factors of a business strategy for long-term rural success?

6. What differentiates your business strategy from other competitive small businesses in the area?

7. What strategies will you implement in the future to ensure the sustainability of your business?

8. What are the main obstacles or challenges of creating and implementing a successful business strategy in a rural community? And how do you overcome these challenges?

9. What are the most important factors you considered when creating your business plan or strategy?

10. What education and experience do you have that has contributed to your managerial success?

11. What impact if any does rural culture have on your business?

12. Which is more important to your success managerial skills, education, or understanding the community? And why?

13. What gives your business a competitive advantage to remain open and sustainable?

14. What qualities make a successful rural small business manager?

Conceptual Framework

Institutional theory was the framework for this study. Meyer and Rowan (1977) revived and brought about institutional theory. Institutional theory enables researchers to

explore the interplay between structure and agency to explain institutional change, the role of actors, and actions in creation or transformation of institutes despite pressures (Rigg & O'Mahony, 2013). The key constructs of institutional theory are the institution, actors, and actions. Institutions are social structures composed of cultural-cognitive, normative, and regulatory elements that together with associated activities and resources provide stability and meaning to social life transmitted by various types of carriers, including symbolic systems, relational systems, routines, and artifacts (Scott, 2004). Researchers use institutional theory to examine how processes by which structures including schemes, rules, norms, and routines establish as authoritative guidelines for social behavior. Rural structures and constructs are unique especially compared to their urban counterparts. Institutional theory enables researchers to put into perspective and understand how rural social behavior relates to local small business success and how managers strategize within a rural environment. Organizational success depends on factors other than efficient coordination and control of productive activities, independent of productive efficiency in which organizations existing in highly elaborated institutional environments succeed in becoming isomorphic to gain legitimacy and resources necessary to survive (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Rural small businesses require effective strategies to reach legitimacy and to obtain the necessary resources to survive in their environment. Institutional theory applies to this study because it helps to explain how businesses in small rural areas respond to external pressure, create a strategy, and obtain sustainability.

Operational Definitions

Cultural knowledge: A focus on locality-based shared knowledge and perceptions of a local population (Crona, Wutich, Brewis, & Gartin, 2013).

Micro and Small Enterprise (MSE): A micro enterprise is an operation with less than 25 employees, and a small business enterprise has fewer than 500 employees (Small Business Committee, 2015).

Rural: Defined as a city or village with a population less than 20,000, recognized as an entity by U.S. Census classification, and located in a county rated four through nine on the Economic Research Service Rural Continuum Code (USDA Economic Research Service, 2013).

Urban: An area with a population of 50,000 or more people (United States Census Bureau, 2015).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

Assumptions

Assumptions are what a researcher believes to be true but cannot prove. Assumptions should align with the participant's attitudes and the purpose of the study (Fox, 2013). In assumption, the selection of a qualitative method was appropriate to explore successful strategies for rural small businesses in Kirksville, Missouri. For optimal results, an exploratory case study was assumed appropriate to explore successful rural businesses in Kirksville, Missouri. Assumptions included that the study participants were intent on participating in this study and answered the interview questions honestly.

Limitations

A limitation of qualitative research was selection bias. When researchers target populations, there is no allowance for the generalization that comes from the randomized selection of participants, which can create selection bias (Prowse & Camfield, 2013). The participant size, geographical location, and interview responses were limitations of this study. The primary limitation of this study was the number of participants. The participants only reflected eight successful rural small businesses of the population in Kirksville, Missouri. Another limitation of this study may be participant responses that were culture-specific or relative to the geographical area.

The position of a researcher can reflect influence on participant's responses during an interview and create bias (Harvey, 2015). The *Informed Consent* form provided the purpose of the study, information regarding protection of participants, and the position of the researcher. Participants were comfortable and able to complete their interviews without external influence that could alter their responses.

Delimitations

A researcher uses delimitations to set boundaries within the research to create a central focus (Mitchell & Jolley, 2014). The delimitations of this study included (a) sample size, (b) geographical location, (c) years of success, and (d) the number of employees. Researchers use delimitations to control the scope of the study (Kirkwood & Price, 2013). The placement of delimitations captured the phenomenon of effective strategies for long-term sustainment of rural small businesses in Kirksville, Missouri. A sample size of eight was suitable to understand the phenomenological occurrence. The

geographical location met the rural specifications and appeared to be adequate to represent a rural population. A minimum of five years of successful operation before the date of the interview was the set limitation. The size of enterprises explored fit the micro and small business category with fewer than twenty-five employees.

Significance of the Study

Value to Business

The purpose of this study was to explore the strategies of rural small businesses that cultivate successful long-term operations. About 25% of the United States population lives in rural areas (United States Census Bureau, 2016). The results of this study could assist enterprises operating or entering rural communities to understand effective strategies to sustain a rural small business. Collectively, there is limited research in rural areas and gaps in professional literature. Urban to rural migration increased from 1970 to 2014 (Stockdale & Catney, 2014). The focus of this study was the changing dynamic of rural business practices, rural managerial skills, and how small businesses adapt to the rural environment.

Contribution to Business Practice

The findings of this study may be of value to businesses by adding knowledge about successful strategies for managers who own and operate small businesses in rural areas. The findings may be of particular interest to entrepreneurs or managers who are considering establishing a new small business in a rural area. To understand and utilize the components of effective rural small business strategies could result in long-term sustainment for rural small businesses. This addition to academic literature could lead to

more efficient rural small business strategies and increase survival of rural small

businesses.

Implications for Social Change

The findings of this study may be conducive to positive social change as effective

strategies can create new jobs, stimulate the local economy, and add an element of

modernization that may be necessary for rural small business survival. The findings of

this study support social change by enhancing better business practices in rural areas by

altering managerial strategies to suit the needs of the evolving rural community.

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A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

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Researchers utilize a literature review to create a complete narrative to define,

search, select, analyze, and present a well-carved out section of literature related to the

topic (Wolfswinkel, Furtmueller, & Wilderom, 2013). This review of literature provided

information from existing literature related to micro and small business, rural dynamic,

rural demographics, challenges, and rural culture. A literature review (a) supports the

topic, (b) identifies contribution to the research, (c) builds the conceptual framework, (d)

establishes bibliography of sources, and (e) analyzes results (Rowley, 2012). Researchers

use literature reviews to help narrow the research topic, explain, and justify research

objectives, research design, and methodology (Shepard, 2013). The purpose of this

literature review was to compare, contrast, and build from various sources related to the

topic including government websites, journal articles, and books.

For this study, I reviewed 179 peer-reviewed journal articles, professional articles,

government publications, and books. Given the estimated graduation month of April

2018, publication of the sources included in this proposal, 88% were on or after 2013,

within 5 years of expected CAO approval. The databases used to retrieve sources include

ProQuest, Science Direct, Academic Search Complete, EBSCO Host, and Sage Premier.

Keywords for searches included a combination of *micro and small enterprises,*

rural America, rural culture, rural small business, rural small business survival, rural

dynamics, rural theory, rural small business failure, rural vs. urban, rural society, and

institutional theory.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore effective strategies for

rural small business sustainment. The purpose of this study was also to contribute

positively to social change by promoting more sustainable rural small businesses through

effective strategy to stimulate rural employment, and reduce the risk of workforce

migration. The basis of a conceptual framework for this study was institutional theory.

Researchers use institutional theory to explain how institutions and environments set the

rules and pressure to conform (Brundin & Vigren-Kristoferson, 2013). Researchers use

institutional theory to demonstrate the construction of social structures, norms, and social

guidelines. Supporting and contrasting theories include actor-network theory and regional

development theory. The actor-network theory contrasts to how the actors, rural small

businesses, interact and make decisions within their network including environment and

competition. Regional development theory is supportive by addressing the socio-

economic factors such as poverty and lack of resources as influences on rural policies. As

policy is not a significant element in this study, the underlying socio-economic and rural,

economic conditions are imperative to understand business performance and rural survival.

The discussion of potential themes that relate to rural small business strategy is in the sections of management skills, rural small business strategy, environmental factors, small business failure, and rural culture. The exploration of small business failure attempts to identify key concepts and patterns in rural small business strategy. The main subjects of this literature review include *conceptual framework, rural small business management skill, small business strategy, environmental factors, rural culture, rural opportunities, small business failure,* and *rural challenges.* The sub-sections include *current views of institutional theory, controversies and unanswered questions, application across culture, contribution to research, lower and decreasing population, economic conditions, big box retailers, lack of resources and technology, isolation, and limited networks.*

Conceptual Framework

Criteria for selecting a theory. The basis for the selection of theory for this study included the following criteria: (a) theory related to the rural phenomena, (b) offered insight into cultural aspects or cultural knowledge of rural areas, (c) reflected why strategies for rural small businesses are necessary, and (d) provided a foundation for exploration of rural small business and operation.

Review of institutional theory. Researchers use institutional theory to explain how elements create, adopt, adapt over space and time defused, and how they fall into decline or disuse (Scott, 2004). Institutional theory is central to understanding

organizational action and is specifically instructive in explaining how organizations respond to external pressures in ways that promote the appearance of homogeneity across populations (Chandler & Hwang, 2015). Institutional theory is the most suitable theory for this study because it helps to explore cultural factors, micro level external pressures, and how rural small businesses adapt to their environment.

Essence of institutional theory. Researchers use institutional theory to explain how institutional and technical environments set the rules and pressure to conform (Brundin & Vigren-Kristoferson, 2013). Rural small businesses face pressures that are unique and demanding compared to their urban counterparts. External pressures such as remoteness, lack of capital and technology, poverty, stagnate local economy, aging rural population, big-box competitors, and economies of scale present significant obstacles that require strategy to overcome. Creating new institutions or changing existing ones may take more effort than their maintenance but no institution is ever complete hence requiring constant work (Hatch & Zilber, 2012). Rural small business maintenance through effective strategy may be more beneficial in the long run than change or new creation. Rural small businesses must adapt to their changing environments to ensure long-term sustainment. Rural small businesses must create effective strategies to stimulate change to survive in their institutional environment. The organization's ability to conform and become legitimated by environmental institutions requires leadership and an understanding of changing fashions (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Creation of strategy and organizational change through strategy requires effective leadership and skills of managers. Rural small business managers must become equipped with the necessary

knowledge to begin creating effective strategies for long-term sustainment. The institution is viscous, the stronger the institution, the heavier the resistance to change, which is conducive to understanding rural development (Oiu, 2013). The lack of resources alone coupled with significantly strong institutional factors in rural environments may increase the resistance to change. Rural small business managers must realize the challenges of their environment and put forth the effort to make necessary changes to reach legitimacy and obtain long-term sustainment. Without change, rural small businesses may succumb to the pressures of the institution and environment in which they will most likely fail.

Institutional theory model. The three pillars of institutional theory include regulative process, normative pillar, and culture-cognitive pillar (Brundin & Vigren-Kristoferson, 2013). The three pillars help to break down the significance of different context that forms the whole. Researchers use the pillars to explain the social norms and values that identify businesses within the community and the process of making sense of reality within the rural environment (Brundin & Vigren-Kristoferson, 2013). Identifying the three pillars supports understanding of the rural environment. Unique rural environments may have an equally varying degree of environmental factors that affect institutions and challenge rural small businesses. The regulative process contains the set rules for the institution and how it has conformed to such rules (Brundin & Vigren-Kristoferson, 2013). An examination of the rules portrays the institution's ability to operate a business within the environment. The regulative process offers insight into potential constraints or opportunities that are unique to the area of discussion. The rules

may be formal such as the law or less formal such as norms and values (Brundin &

Vigren-Kristoferson, 2013). The focus of the normative pillar is less on the institution's

interests and more towards the institution's social obligations (Brundin & Vigren-

Kristoferson, 2013). Rural social obligations may vary a great deal compared to urban

areas. The remoteness and small population of rural areas often create tight-knit

communities that heavily rely on each other for survival. Researchers use the normative

pillar to identify the role of the institution or the goals of (Brundin & Vigren-

Kristoferson, 2013). Researchers use the cultural-cognitive pillar to outline the process of

making sense of social reality and creating an understanding (Brundin & Vigren-

Kristoferson, 2013). Identifying the rural area's social reality can be conducive to

creating effective strategies. The cultural-cognitive pillar is imperative to form the

institution's social identity and how it will adapt to the cultural belief system (Brundin &

Vigren-Kristoferson, 2013). The rural cultural belief system has the potential to

significantly affect operating businesses and their success. An organization reaches

legitimacy when the three pillars reflect cultural alignment, normative support, and

consonance with relevant rules or laws (Brundin & Vigren-Kristoferson, 2013).

Achieving legitimacy should become a priority for rural small businesses. Legitimacy

will, in turn, offer the ability to achieve long-term sustainment within the particular rural

environment.

Researchers noted institutional theory as having a historical process related to

heritage and the institution evolution related to that origin (Oiu, 2013). The history of the

rural area is imperative to understand change and the process of evolution of institutions

within that environment. Cultural analysis plays a significant role in understanding

institutional environments and business strategies (Oiu, 2013). The cultural analysis of a

rural community is required to formulate an effective business strategy. Cultural contexts

vary primarily by region and require rural small business managers to examine their

immediate cultural location. Institutions as related to history portray a result of historical

struggles over prevailing understandings and rules (Brammer, Jackson, & Matten, 2012).

An analysis of the historical struggles of the rural region offers insight into methods to

overcome current or future conflicts. To understand a particular institution interested

parties must review the historical origins, economic function, life, power relationships,

and influence of social actor's identities (Brammer et al., 2012). Researchers use

institutional theory to emphasize the importance of institutional analysis while not

ignoring the actions including interests, strategies, and distribution of power (Oiu, 2013).

Researchers use institutional theory to examine how institutions and technical

environments set the rules and pressure others to conform to be competitive within the

market (Brundin & Vigren-Kristoferson, 2013). Researchers use institutional theory

regarding economy to view markets as being socially embedded within a wider field of

social networks, business associations, and political rules (Brammer et al., 2012).

Effective markets require particular institutional supports (Brammer et al., 2012). Rural

small businesses must maintain effective strategies to remain competitive in an efficient

market. Economic growth and development of a system innovation correlate with

permanent institutional changes (Cooke, Uranga, & Etxebarria, 1997). To achieve long-

term sustainment rural small business will require economic growth. Strategy is

necessary to achieve economic growth within the rural environment. Learning is linked to an institutional structure that requires institutional change, cultural change, or changes in rules and habits (Cooke et al., 1997). Learning the rules, constructs, and norms of the institutional environment will be beneficial in the long term to obtain legitimacy and sustainability. Rural institutions may require change through learning to become competitive to survive in the efficient market. Low-status actors initiate change through new practices (Chandler & Hwang, 2015). Institutions constrain certain types of action but, in turn, enable new kinds of action (Brammer et al., 2012). Managers can use institutions to turn influence into an advantage by incorporating external demands from powerful actions and adopting practices (Chandler & Hwang, 2015). The goal of institutional theory is to adhere to the standards of the desirable, proper, and appropriate behavior of the socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions (Brundin & Vigren-Kristoferson, 2013). By reaching the goal of institutional theory through strategy, rural small businesses have the opportunity to achieve long-term sustainment and remain competitive.

Current views of institutional theory. Current views of institutional theory include the work of Fiss, Kennedy, and Davis (2012) and Quirke (2013). Fiss et al. (2012) examined how adopters modify diffusing practices over time and consider the nature of practice relating to the adoption environment. Fiss et al. (2012) specifically examined severance agreements or *golden parachutes* in their peer-reviewed article. The nature of practice and how it relates to adoption has little to no previous examination. Fiss et al. (2012) discussed the analysis of causes and consequences of practice

extensiveness and similarity during diffusion. Fiss et al. (2012) provided a profound

examination of the diffusion process and how cause and consequence are relative. In

traditional institutional theory, diffusing practices were universally accepted, taken for

granted, and were expected, adopted, or face a loss of legitimacy (Fiss et al., 2012). The

ultimate goal of institutional theory is to reach legitimacy. Fiss et al. (2012) expressed

that variations of diffusing practices do not necessarily always result in loss of

legitimacy. The use of practice in one sphere of social life need not coincide with or lead

to acceptance in other spheres consistent with the notion that society has institutional

logics to determine what is appropriate (Fiss et al., 2012). Managers and executives

currently look for acceptance of their practice within their immediate circle or direct

influencers. Society's current institutional logic has a high degree of variation that causes

significant levels of acceptance or tolerance. An important emphasis includes

organization level mechanisms that affect practice variation not directly defined by macro

mechanisms or constructs (Fiss et al., 2012). Traditional institutional theory discussed the

significance of macro constructs and ignored organizational level mechanisms.

    Quirke (2013) focused on non-traditional rogue private schools as institutions to

examine fringe actors that evade conformity within institutional theory. New

institutionalism centralized the field as a concept mostly uniform and comprised of

isomorphic pressures (Quirke, 2013). Researchers suggest that isomorphic pressures have

different roots but have the same appearance. Pressures from old institutionalism or

historical events appear the same or have the same weight in new institutionalism or

modern times. Organizational actors can choose to be discreet in adapting to change and

innovate in response to external pressures (Quirke, 2013). Complete conformity may no longer be necessary to reach legitimacy. Rural small businesses may adapt by discovering strategies, business practices, or niches that support their sustainability within their unique environment. Rural small business managers can support adaptation by cultivating skills, resources, and tools to stimulate growth and lessen the impact of institutional pressures. Legitimacy can be unconventional and organizations can maintain legitimacy without compromising their practices to isomorphic pressures (Quirke, 2013). Organizations do not need to support environmental norms to reach legitimacy (Quirke, 2013). Responses to external pressures can portray variation even non-uniform methods identified as a rogue and still attain legitimacy. The agency nature of organizations emphasizes that organizational actors may strategically respond to institutional pressure in non-uniform ways (Quirke, 2013). Evolving environments offer a different platform for institutions to achieve change or to innovate. Reviving dormant organization practices can increase heterogeneity and variation of the field (Quirke, 2013). Often it is important to reach heterogeneity before entering or approaching homogeneity.

Controversies or unanswered questions. The effect of critique and observation is to shift the focus from diffusion studies of institutional theory toward heterogeneity that calls for more sophisticated concepts of iterative relationships between institutional forces and actors (Chandler & Hwang, 2015). There appears to be limited literature and focus of detailed examination of how actors reach heterogeneity, especially in turbulent environments. The emerging concept of achieving legitimacy within non-conformity puts pressure on scholars to examine the factors and relationships leading to heterogeneity

success. In-depth examinations of organizational actors' responses to their environment are rare (Quirke, 2013). The emphasis in existing literature appeared to be on what pressures exist within the environment and the institutional forces that guide pressure to specific actors. Questions remain unanswered of exactly how organizational actors responded to their particular environment and situation. Examinations often exclude micro or organizational level factors. However, for the purpose of this study examination of micro and organizational level factors are imperative to understanding internal factors that cultivate success of rural small businesses.

Application across cultures. Institutional theory has a strong relationship with a culture that can carry across various cultures. The building blocks of institutions and cultures are symbols that are capable of carrying a variety of meanings (Hatch & Zilber, 2012). Having the same, foundation suggests that institutional theory can be relative to rural culture. Institutions and culture work with variability in interpretations of socially shared symbols that support the diversity on which cultures thrive and institutions depend on (Hatch & Zilber, 2012). Utilization of institutional theory can enhance the understanding of differences between rural and urban institutions and culture. Specifically, to identify the need to tailor small business strategies to the particular culture researchers can examine the intersection of the relationship between culture and institutions. The tacit knowledge that drives organizational actors engages the process from which organizational culture arises (Hatch & Zilber, 2012). Organizational culture can play a significant role in understanding the institution and how they vary across organizations. Tacit knowledge can act outside of intellectual awareness within emotional

and aesthetic consciousness relative to culture (Hatch & Zilber, 2012). Researchers use institutional theory to emphasize the importance of norms and values within the environment or culture. Norms and values of the population or by location in which the business operates significantly influence business practices, approach, and managerial strategies especially in rural communities. Culture, norms, and value vary widely by location, and a generalized approach will not be effective. Institutional theory like culture has interpretative and symbolic origins especially through discourse (Hatch & Zilber, 2012). Discourse through failure and struggle is how many managers learn to adapt, strategize, and learn. Discourse in culture and institutions are often a strong indicator of the need for research or change hence the focus on adaptation and adoption of actors in institutional theory. The research of rural discourse and small business failure is essential to sustain rural economies, decrease poverty, and support the growth of rural America.

 Supporting theories. Actor-network theory and regional development theory relate to this study. Actor-network theory relates to the manner in which rural orders of humans and nonhumans assemblages move across time and space with a concentration on embodied practice and performance of rurality (Michael, 2017). Researchers use actor-network theory to explore the relationships between the actor and the network. The actor could be the rural small businesses and the network the rural community. Networks can relate to social constructs, ruralities, and political environments (Michael, 2017). Considering actor-network theory does not reflect deep enough into the underpinnings of rural culture to support the significance in the development of effective strategies for rural business survival it is not applicable to this study. Researchers use regional

development theory to examine the relationship between space, development, and the creation of regional policies (Gore, 2013). Rural areas can become dependent on development and policy to survive. The basis of regional development theory is components of regional science, regional economics, and theoretical geography (Gore, 2013). Considering regional development theory is a framework to examine development at a macro-regional level and has a significant emphasis on political policy, it is not applicable to this study

Contrasting theories. Theories that contracts to institutional theory include resource dependency theory and contingency theory. Researchers use resource dependency theory to understand the relationship between organization and environment (Drees & Heugens, 2013). Resource dependency theory is an essential framework to explain competitive advantages and performance outcomes (Kozlenkova, Samaha, & Palmatier, 2014). Resource dependency theory contracts to institutional theory because the advantages, performance and environmental factors influence organizational strategy. The focus of resource dependency theory is using available resources to build brands, relationships, and knowledge to create a competitive advantage (Kozlenkova et al., 2014). Organizations respond to resource dependencies by creating interorganizational agreements such as alliances, joint ventures, and insourcing arrangements to become more autonomous and to reach legitimacy (Drees & Heugens, 2013). Researchers indicate that utilizing institutional theory suggests that organizations must utilize similar agreements to obtain the best strategies for long-term business sustainment. Resource dependency theory can assist to identify unique marketing opportunities and resource to

offer direction in marketing research and strategy (Kozlenkova et al., 2014). Most importantly, resource dependency theory contrasts as it puts an emphasis on the importance of social acceptance and culture. Understanding rural culture is critical to exploring successful strategies for creating sustainability. Researchers using resource dependency theory suggested that organizational actions do not always aim to satisfy economic performance but aim for social acceptance (Drees & Heugens, 2013). Researchers utilize resource dependency theory to evaluate how informational, social, cultural, and economic resources flow in and out of communities (Chalmers, Price, & Jensen, 2013). Creating a framework to study rural small business requires a conceptual framework that identifies the importance of culture, strategy, and social acceptance within a rural community.

Contingency theory can help to bridge institutional, and organization change literature to explain organizational change and social networks by showing the degree in which changes diverges from institutional status quo to enable adoption (Battilana & Casciaro, 2012). Contingency theory can provide a direct link to bridge institutional and organizational theories and concepts. Contingency theory is the foundation for many organizational and strategic management theories (Van de Ven, Ganco, & Hinings, 2013). Researchers use contingency theory to account for internal factors that contribute to success or failure (Dinh, Lord, Gardner, Meuser, Liden, & Hu, 2014). Contingency theory contrasts to institutional theory by underlining the importance of internal factors. Researchers use contingency theory to suggest that current managers are searching for distinct and competitive ways to increase innovation within their internal and external

environment to become successful (Van de Ven et al., 2013). Contingency theory contrasts to institutional theory as differentiation, and competitive advantages are the foundations for strategy. Researchers use contingency theory to examine how organizations cultivate peak performance with environmental uncertainty by using internal differentiation (Van de Ven et al., 2013). By using an examination of internal differentiation, this contrasts to institutional theory as the focus shifts from solely examining external pressures. Contingency theory provides a link between internal analysis and external pressures to create change (Battilana & Casciaro, 2012). As related to institutional theory, utilizing strategy creates organizational change. Researchers use contingency theory to examine a complex organizational context including design choice, control, formality, duration, and unit of analysis of active and passive agents (Van de Ven et al., 2013). Contingency theory expands beyond institutional theory to examine more contingency factors and influence that impact organizations. Contingency factors that relate that influence organization and decisions include age and size of an organization, strategy, technology, and task characteristics (Dinh et al., 2014). As contrasting to institutional theory social implications and behavior are direct influences of strategy. Researchers use contingency theory to explore social influence, altered attitude or behavior in response to another actor's actions (Battilana & Casciaro, 2012).

Contribution of theory in research. Sine, Haveman, and Tolbert (2005) examined the development of institutions to reduce the risk of entry of new sectors by use of novel or established technologies. The contribution of Sine et al. (2005) is important as it signifies the need to utilize existing technologies and capitalize on competitive

advantage to ensure survival. Hwang and Powell (2015) utilized institutional theory to

conduct an empirical study of how professional values and practices influence the

character of nonprofit organizations. The contributions of Powell (2015) are powerful as

the evaluation of micro factors and values are proven to be critical to understanding

business practices. Weber, Davis, and Lounsbury (2009) considered local conditions and

global institutional pressures related to the consequences of creating a national stock

exchange in developing countries. The contribution of Weber et al. (2009) is compelling

as the examination of micro and macro factors together form a complete picture of the

risk associated with creating stock exchanges. Kennedy and Fiss (2009) examined

diffusion by the interplay between economic and social considerations in adoption

decisions of institutional theory. The contribution of Kennedy and Fiss (2009) is

significant as the authors showed the importance of social and cultural factors to provide

a deeper understanding of the true impact on business practices and decisions.

Rural Small Business

  Rural small business management skills. Cognitive skills play a critical role in

the managerial process and recognition of opportunities (Wright & Stigliani, 2013). The

cognitive skills of managers are an essential factor in successful business operations,

sustainability, strategy, and growth. Chinomona (2013) showed evidence that links skills

and training to productivity, sustainability, and performance of small businesses.

Blackburn, Hart, and Wainwright (2013) concluded that manager characteristics and

business style are important as internal structural conditions determine performance.

Cognitive and knowledge structures are mental models used to make sense of information

that rely on correlative thinking to make connections or form relationships that generate
rules and generalizations (Wright & Stigliani, 2013). Managers with formal education
and business experience may have increased cognitive knowledge and skills to sustain a
business. Managers use knowledge structures to make assessments and judgments to
identify opportunities and make decisions for their business (Wright & Stigliani, 2013).
Managers with advanced knowledge structures may be better equipped to identify
business opportunities or obstacles to create adequate strategies.

Match quality between manager and businesses is imperative to success as
enterprises owned by non-founders have a higher rate of failure in the first two years
compared to enterprises belonging to the entrepreneur (Sarasvathy, Menon, & Kuechle,
2013). Many managers are not knowledgeable in business disciplines and lack
management skills (Van Auken, 2015). Evidence from professional literature suggested
that managers lacking business knowledge and management skills have a higher risk of
failure. Rural managers may be at greater risk because of the lack of educational
opportunities and available resources. Rural managers often do not have access to formal
training and skill building opportunities because of isolation and lack of resources.
Moyes (2012) stated that it is unlikely that small rural managers are specialists in
marketing or possess the skills and resources to undertake an effective strategy. Solomon,
Bryant, May, and Perry (2013) indicated that management skills and outside influences of
the firm's competitive environment are the significant determinants of small business
failure. Chinomona (2013) cited the lack of requisite skills or expertise including
management, entrepreneurial, and marketing skills of small business managers is a

determinant of small business failure. Small businesses especially those that are new often lack the experience and managerial skills to innovate or adequately use technological resources (Barber, Metcalfe, & Porteous, 2016). Due to geographical isolation, rural small businesses may be particularly vulnerable to missing out on technological advancements, growth opportunities, and opportunities to gain new customers. There is a significant volume of evidence in professional literature to suggest that rural small business managers require management skills, cognitive skills, and experience to successfully sustain a business. To maintain rural business operations, employment, or business terms individuals must often re-skill or diversify (Townsend, Sathiaseelan, Fairhurst, & Wallace 2013). Rural managers especially may need to seek assistance in building skills through formal training or collaboration to meet the needs of their business, community, and customers. Small business survival and growth depends on outside support to increase managerial and technical knowledge (Solomon et al., 2013).

Small business strategy. There is a gap in professional literature of research between what a small business manager should be to become successful, what strategic decisions the manager makes, and the conflict between the two (Fisher, Maritz, & Lobo 2014). Blackburn et al. (2013) identified strategy as one of the most important factors for small business success. Researchers have noted a lack of systematic planning in small business (Gaskill, Van Auken, & Kim, 2015). Few small business managers create formal plans for their business unless required to obtain financing (Blackburn et al., 2013). Most often businesses must provide a formal written business plan that includes a strategy for

consideration for commercial financing. Otherwise, strategy is not required and is at the

discretion of the enterprise managers or proprietors. Time constraints, limited knowledge,

lack of expertise, and lack of openness can contribute to the lack of strategy (Gaskill et

al., 2015). Rural small businesses are particularly vulnerable due to lack of knowledge,

resources, expertise, and skills, which ultimately can result in significant disadvantages.

  Ibrahim (2015) stated that business strategies include (a) niche, concentration on a

particular market, customer base, product or service, (b) cost leadership, a firm aiming to

be a low cost producer, (c) differentiation, offering a unique product or service that

allows the firm to charge a higher price, (d) defender, carving a narrow market and

heavily protecting it, (e) analyzer, continuously scanning the environment for new

opportunities, and (f) prospector, pursuing two different strategic directions. Considering

the limitations of rural small businesses, not all or some strategies are feasible. Gaskill et

al. (2015) conducted a study of 92 successful, 91 failed small firms and concluded that

successful small businesses exhibited greater market, financial, and inventory planning

than failed firms. By examining failed firms Gaskill et al. (2015) offered a new

perspective of strategy for small business which suggested that successful businesses

utilize strategy whereas failed businesses lacked strategy. Ibrahim (2015) determined that

a niche focus is the most effective strategy for small business. Few customers have

discretionary income to purchase high priced, or quality products when lower priced

comparables are available (Thomason, Simendinger, & Kiernan 2013). Often considering

competition, environmental factors, and big box retailers small rural firms must capitalize

on niches to survive. A small business with a niche strategy creates a competitive

advantage in a narrow niche to avoid head-on collisions with large competitors (Ibrahim, 2015). Strategy can enhance the ability to create a niche and overcome negative factors that often affect rural small businesses.

Long term strategic planning leads to a considerable level of success (Gaskill et al., 2015). Wright and Stigliani (2013) stated that cognition and strategic management are necessary for firm growth. A combination of cognitive managerial skills and strategy may produce the best results for rural small businesses. How managers use strategy should vary depending on the type of available resources and should consider how resources relate to the characteristics and abilities of the manager of the small business (Greene, Brush, & Brown, 2015). The strategic planning process is a critical activity for small business to gain competitive advantage (Gaskill et al., 2015). The uniqueness of the rural landscape often requires small businesses to gain a competitive advantage to survive. Small businesses embrace a strategy to plan the usage of resources and implement them into business activities to become successful (Blackburn et al., 2013). When managers implement strategy, resources will allocate accordingly and purposefully. The effective implementation of strategy greatly relies on the manager's skills to successfully cultivate resources, identify opportunities, and efficiently conduct business activities. A strategy can benefit from awareness, combinations, allocations, and commitments of resources (Greene et al., 2015). Rural small managers can evaluate their environment and pull from the community the knowledge and resources to create effective strategies. The lack of resources and capital of rural small businesses negatively influences the manager's ability to create effective strategies. Frazier et al. (2013)

suggested that rural survival is more likely when existing businesses adopt strategies and actions that capture community acceptance and support. In rural communities, word of mouth and support from community members can often be more important than other factors of potential business sustainment. Managerial understanding of rural culture and society are imperative to create a successful strategy. Business strategy must be able to adapt to the external environment by internal management (Blackburn et al., 2013).

To understand the business cycle to produce strategy managers must evaluate determinants and market performance (Sarasvathy et al., 2013). Blackburn et al. (2013) stated that organizations build strategies over time, and flexible or unconstrained strategies are more useful to small businesses. Building strategies over time allow small business managers to evaluate determinants, market performance, and their environment. Change is inevitable, and rural small business managers must strategize to sustain their operations and hedge against environmental factors to support growth. Strategic decisions made in the early years have long lasting implications for performance for the duration of the life cycle of the enterprise (Wright & Stigliani, 2013). There appears to be a direct link between strategy and business performance. Rural small business managers must consider a strategy to avoid failure or stagnation. When faced with failure managers must create strategies for recovery and assess their networks to devise new opportunities (Wright & Stigliani, 2013). Rural small business managers must complete an evaluation of networks and opportunities considering their remoteness, access to technology, and small networks. Strategy creation, evaluation, and implementation of rural small businesses require review of the firm's competencies. Distinct competencies that are

important for small businesses include quality of product or service, location, know-how, uniqueness, and pricing (Ibrahim, 2015).

Environmental Factors

Rural fits broadly into two categories: geography and social representation (Townsend et al., 2013). The rural community institutional environment may have an influence on efforts to attract and retain new businesses in rural communities (Frazier et al., 2013). High levels of uncertainty and ambiguity characterize rural small business environments (Wright & Stigliani, 2013). Rural sustainability not only relies on approach to external factors but how local community and capacity of local institutions face local priorities, limited information, and lack of resources (Measham, Darbas, Williams, & Taylor, 2012).

Lower and decreasing population. Compared to urban areas rural locations have a higher percentage of the aging population (Cejda, 2012). Gyawali et al. (2013) conducted a quantitative study of 875 counties in the southern United States to examine the rate of urban sprawl and rural rebound of the last thirty years. Gyawali et al. (2013) discovered an increase in the older population of rural areas had a negative contribution to rural development and incentives. Gyawali et al. (2013) identified a 2% decrease in rural population and a 34% in urban while the young population decreased 31%, and retiree population increased 12%. The younger working age populations of rural locations are relocating to urban areas, and older retirees are moving from urban to rural landscapes. This movement can put a strain on human capital that is available for rural small businesses along with otherwise negative constraints on rural sustainability. This

shift results in decreased rural development and less active economically productive populations in rural communities. A healthy community has high levels of social, ecological, human, and economic capital (Gyawali et al., 2013). Living in a rural area increases the risk of being poor as an affected of local labor markets and other negative rural factors (Gyawali et al., 2013). Rural small business managers must consider the density and age of the area's population to target consumers and create strategies.

Martin, McNeill, and Warren-Smith (2013) conducted a qualitative study of rural eco-innovation of eight rural small businesses to examine location, technological and farming incentive issues. The rural community dynamic is becoming more diverse as incomers are migrating from metropolitan areas. Rural population diversity affects attitudes and lack of commitment to local products (Martin et al., 2013). Rural immigrants coming from urban areas may not have the same norms, values, and perceptions of those in rural communities. Rural natives do not always have the assumed values and expected image of business and perception of incomers (Martin et al., 2013). Understanding the uniqueness and dynamics of rural communities helps rural small business managers to cultivate innovation and maintain sustainable business in rural communities. Martin et al. (2013) concluded that marketing strategies and relationships were factors of successful rural small businesses. Rural small business managers must consider market strategies and relationships to ensure long-term sustainment.

Terry, Pjesky, and De'Armond (2013) conducted a qualitative case study of Canadian, Texas that detailed the history of the unique qualities and niches that have led to the small town's success and compared it to literature regarding rural development. As

the rural population decreases, many individuals with limited resources, education, and abilities have no choice but to move to urban areas to pursue other job opportunities (Terry et al., 2013). Rural conditions often force inhabitants to relocate for survival. Bleak rural conditions and migration from rural areas negatively impact rural communities and rural small businesses. The shrinking rural population has decreased the street type business in rural areas as their economies of scale decrease, and consumers are dwindling (Terry et al., 2013). A shrinking consumer base is pushing up prices for rural businesses as they cannot enjoy the benefits of economies of scale as their urban counterpart. Therefore, rural small business managers must strategize to hedge inflated costs of operating in a rural location. Often economies of scale push up the prices for costs of goods and operations for rural small businesses, which results in inflated consumer prices. Terry et al. (2013) concluded that rural survival is dependent on new generations of leaders, entrepreneurship, management, and niche products. The rural population shift trends proved to have adverse effects on rural business.

The local process, social divisions, and local gerontocratic structures allow the older generation control of land resources and often this generation is reluctant to transfer power to the next generation (White, 2012). The aging population may have less trust and confidence in the younger generation's abilities to sustain small businesses. An aging rural white population made up of the Baby Boom Generation will leave behind a population increasingly made up of minority young people with poor parents that often worked low-paying jobs with little opportunity for advancement (Litchter, 2012). Rural

residents have a lack of access to formal education and opportunities that limit their abilities as potential successful managers.

      Economic conditions. Litchter (2012) concluded that the rural economy has significantly been affected by the globalization of labor, structure of agriculture, stagnate economic development, culture change, environmental changes, a decline in the rural labor force, lack of education, and poverty. Lu and Jacobs (2013) attributed poor rural economic conditions to rural areas experiencing the challenges of a declining and aging population, weakening social institutions, shrinking resources, and that the federal government has been devolving roles and responsibilities down to state and local governments. Often local governments lack the funding to offer services or benefits to the rural residents in need, which only deepens the obstacles of the community and small businesses. Macro-socioeconomic stressors such as limited education, unemployment, and poverty put a strain on program and services availability in rural areas (Kerstetter, Green, & Phillips, 2014). Rural residents face isolation and a lack of services often including access to basic medical services. Paired with chronic government neglect of rural infrastructure has created angst of rural living (White, 2012). Poor rural economic conditions can diminish the quality of life for rural residents, which can negatively affect business patronage and spending. Many times rural residents that face harsh economic conditions have no choice but to relocate to an area with better opportunities. Limited education and economic opportunities contribute to a decreasing population in rural areas, which makes it difficult for local small businesses to remain in operation and for government entities to fund services (Kerstetter et al., 2014).

Rural areas have been experiencing economic and population declines over the past 30 years (Ilbery, 2014). Litchter (2012) indicated that rural America has been in decline for the past 40-50 years due to industrial and economic restructuring. There is no consensus among scholars on the exact time when the rural economic decline began; however, most scholars recognize a significant problem. Several scholars have attributed the downgrade in the rural economy to the shift from an agricultural focus to manufacturing or service industries. American agricultural output was 15% and 2.5% of the total GDP in 2007 (Council of Economic Advisors, 2014). In the United States, in 2013, rural business contributed almost 10% of the GDP (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2014). Today entrepreneurs and rural residences have limited access to land because of corporate or absentee acquisitions of community land, micro land grabs, and intimate exclusions (White, 2012). Limited access to land can affect rural small growth potential and rural community survival.

About 25% of the U.S. population resides in rural areas (USDA Economic Research Service, 2013). Cohn and Hastings (2013) cited that 15% of rural America lives below the poverty line compared to 12% in urban areas. Persistent poverty is when a county has 20% or more of the population in poverty over thirty years and in 2000, the last year of calculation 88% of persistent poverty counties were in rural areas (Cejda, 2012). Rural poverty has been persistently above the national average (Vernon-Feagans & Cox, 2013). Staggering rates of poverty in rural areas creates a negative effect on rural small business managers as consumer purchasing power is limited, and the economy is stagnating. There is a link between rural economic stagnation, low wages among the least

educated, and growing income inequality (Litchter, 2012). Rural areas have a higher rate of uninsured residents and an increased amount of individuals below a high school education (Cohn & Hastings, 2013). Rural areas have experienced an increase in lower paying service section jobs with irregular work hours and fewer benefits (Vernon-Feagans & Cox, 2013).

Young adults in rural areas are less likely to attend college (Cejda, 2012). Rural residents have limited reach because of their local social networks, and their skills are not in demand outside of rural areas, but urban residents have a larger reach because of their communication and higher education (Herslund, 2012). The significant amount of uneducated and unemployed residents greatly affects the economy and business activities. The large population of uneducated rural residents proves difficult for small businesses in finding qualified job candidates. Compared to urban areas opportunities appear diminished as urban residents have advantages such as no geographical isolation, more public commuting options, and options to seek education. Rural residents earn less than their urban counterparts (Thomas, DiClemente, & Snell, 2013). Rural communities competing with urban areas have difficulties obtaining economic survival (Townsend et al., 2013).

The rural economy has faced competition for cheap labor and opportunities for mobility in which economic incorporation is limited (Litchter, 2012). Rural areas have suffered job loss and economic downturn due to the dramatic decrease in the manufacturing sector such as steel, textile, and furniture as they are increasingly moving overseas (Vernon-Feagans & Cox, 2013). The outsourcing of manufacturing affects rural

small businesses, as they cannot compete with the cheap labor, economies of scale, and low prices. As jobs move out of the area, rural economies and residents suffer, and less revenue flows through the community.

Rural communities often experience underdeveloped infrastructures, job scarcity, and upward mobility (Vernon-Feagans & Cox, 2013). White (2012) stated that a significant deskilling of rural youth has resulted in the decline of rural farming and quality of life. After 2000, farm-related occupations comprised a small percentage of rural American jobs (Vernon-Feagans & Cox, 2013). Rural youth has less exposure to farming and agriculture activities compared to their elders. Limited exposure has further capped young rural resident's abilities to obtain employment or expand into other job markets. White (2012) suggested that the decline of rural conditions contributed to the alienation of young people from agricultural knowledge and rural life skills caused by political correctness and anti-child labor campaigns that don't allow children to work on rural farms. Lack of education and rural disadvantages leave little room for upward mobility and expansion of employment and small business opportunities.

Measham et al. (2012) conducted a qualitative study to examine rural regional concerns and how they shape the future of rural living. Measham et al. (2012) examined demographics of migration, economic cycles, tourism, and service needs. Rural sustainability not only relies on the approach to external factors but how local communities and institutions face local priorities, limited information, and lack of resources. Rural success may be dependent on nurturing the community and supporting local businesses. Resources are essential to the creation and growth of small firms

(Greene et al., 2015). Measham et al. (2012) used the theory of communicative action to address local challenges at a rural level. Measham et al. (2012) concluded that rural communities' migration flows are significant to the outcomes of regional economic fortunes as economic changes exert through social interactions and learning. Some rural communities have little to no acceptance of migrants and reject outsiders entirely as they perceive them as threatening or come to exploit their resources (Cohn & Hastings, 2013). The diversity, education, income and other population factors influence economic conditions in rural areas. The depressed or stagnation of a rural economy negatively affects economic fortune and change, which can cause business failure that results in a loss of jobs. However, through strategic analysis, social interaction, and learning rural small business can have a better opportunity for success.

Rural Culture

Culture can be understood as a lens through which individuals perceive and understand the world they inhabit by providing structure for what is valued, what is not, and what shapes individual's experiences of their personal, emotional, social, physical, and metaphysical worlds (Farmer et al., 2012). Explaining culture can be difficult because it is inherently intangible through collectively shared knowledge, norms, behaviors, values, attitudes, and beliefs (Farmer et al., 2012). For rural residents, social engagement is important to be a part of place, identity, a sense of being, and inclusion in social patterns (Ilbery, 2014). Rural culture and society influence rural small businesses. Considering the size of rural communities, rural residents often form more of a tight-knit community in which they depend on each other for survival. Rural residents rely on

community and relationships such as friends, family, and church that often go back
generations (Cohn & Hastings, 2013). Rural residents rely heavily on social patterns to
identify with what is acceptable and how to become a part of the collective community.

Culture is not bound to observable phenomena and is not bound or static (Farmer
et al., 2012). Rural small businesses can cultivate and capitalize on social patterns to
enhance their business activities. The quality of social interaction is imperative as
relationships affect social capital, community identity, social processes, economic
outcomes, and business activities (Measham et al., 2012). Rural cultures are more reliant
on community values, a common coping mechanism, and social cohesion compared to
metropolitan areas (Farmer et al., 2012). Socially complex resources such as trust,
friendship, teamwork, culture, and reputation are not easily obtainable or imitable
(Thomason et al., 2013). Moyes (2012) provided evidence that the community social
landscape exerts a strong influence on both consumer patronage and firm behavior in
rural communities.

Litchter (2012) stated that the 2010 U.S. decennial census indicated that post-
2000 was the most accelerated rural racial and ethical periods of diversity. Migration to
rural communities affects ideas of quality of life and the nature of business development
(Herslund, 2012). Rural migration has created a more diverse rural culture and
community. Rural small business managers must evaluate the changing dynamics of rural
culture to strategize and successfully maintain their operations. New businesses or
outside firms may be more innovative but may not contribute as much to the local area as
they may not involve themselves in the community because they may not feel a

responsibility to the local area (Herslund, 2012). The entrance or migration of new

businesses may stimulate the local economy but not always the community. Incomer

businesses generate fewer jobs as the entrepreneurs are often self-employed (Herslund,

2012). However, individual rural migrants may offer new resources and skills that can

add positively to the community. Rural incomers may have the human capital and skills

conducive to rural change but often do not get the opportunity to utilize their skills

because there are limited opportunities (Herslund, 2012). Farmer et al. (2012) stated that

rural culture is the elephant in the room. Rural locations often have an association with

negative connotations and are not regularly included in conversation or scholarly works.

Rural Opportunities

Rural opportunities include niche markets and limited competition (Siemens,

2013). Rural enterprises could take advantage of niche markets and limited local

competition to survive. Siemens (2013) concluded that despite rurality business managers

traded off growth and profitability to remain in the rural location. Siemens (2013) found

that rural enterprises cannot accomplish long-term sustainment or take advantage of

opportunities on their own but must develop relationships with other groups such as the

chamber of commerce, government, community, other enterprises, or tourism

associations.

Alliances or collaboration offer new opportunities for rural small business that

were likely unavailable by standing alone. Alliances can help small businesses overcome

liabilities and offer exposure to new opportunities or resources (Bengtsson & Johansson,

2014). Through alliances and collaboration, rural small businesses can gain access to new

markets, technologies, marketing, and additional resources were not previously available. Positioning in the community and environment are important factors to success (Siemens, 2013). Frazier et al. (2013) revealed through multiple regression analysis that institutional norms supporting change and reflecting positive attitudes regarding residents' and business managers' actions in the task environments relate positively to community optimism about new firm survival. Community backed support can determine the success or failure of a rural small business. Rural enterprises cannot accomplish long-term sustainment and take advantage of opportunities on their own but must develop relationships with other groups such as the chamber of commerce, government, community, other enterprises, or tourism associations (Frazier et al., 2013). Researchers indicate there is a positive link between collaboration and community. Rural residents may be more inclined to show support or patronage to small businesses that support other small business, local governments, local agencies, or other members of the community. Collaboration is a joint effort to promote common strategies and networks of a shared vision to achieve shared goals (Komppula, 2014).

Collaborated relationships benefit small businesses by adding an element of credibility and enhance reputation (Nguyen, Newby, & Macaulay, 2015). Collaboration offers opportunities to enter new markets and access to additional resources that may not be available without collaboration (Blackburn et al., 2013). Collaboration relationships create marketing opportunities and can positively increase business activities of rural small businesses. Despite the opportunities of rural areas urban communities often offer a larger variety of options and opportunities. Urban areas may have a greater pool of

accessible resources, larger consumer base, potential growth opportunities, and better business environments compared to their rural counterparts. Larger communities such as metropolitan areas offer better networking, greater visibility, and better access to capital (Van Auken, 2015).

Small Business Failure

Chinomona (2013) stated that empirical observations found that 70% of 100 new small businesses do not succeed. The SBA (2011) indicated within the first two years 30% of new small business ventures go out of business and 50% in 5 years. There may not be a consensus among authors and government agencies on the exact failure rate or percentage, but there is a clear identification of a significant rate of failure of small businesses. Authors cannot agree to how or why small businesses fail, but the consensus among them is that most do indeed fail (Sarasvathy et al., 2013).

Sarasvathy et al. (2013) stated that firm entry is common but survival is not. New small businesses face many hazards and cannot acquire critical resources to hedge against failure (Cassar, 2014). New small businesses may face a larger risk than established organizations because of limited resources and capital. Entrance into markets, obtaining resources and building successful operations can be painstaking accomplishments in which many fail. Small businesses have limited access to capital; maintain a higher credit risk, and an increased possibility of default (Cole, 2013). Small businesses often do not have access to capital or have assets necessary to create leverage for survival. Small businesses usually do not have collateral, valuable resources or intangible resources as an exchange for financing. Small businesses often face dire financial burdens. Most small

businesses have a lack of capital and often use funds from personal savings or bootstrapping, as commercial financing is not available or desired (Van Auken, 2015). Small businesses with access to resources have an increased chance of survival and greater performance (Mas-Verdú, Ribeiro-Soriano, & Roig-Tierno, 2015). Small businesses in small communities are less familiar with sources of capital and often have limited access to funding (Van Auken, 2015). Rural small businesses often have fewer options for financing. Rural small business managers may also lack education on financial alternatives that can hinder their ability to sustain their operations. Slow growth businesses and firms that do not require a large amount of capital may position themselves in small communities (Van Auken, 2015). Rural areas are not prime locations for business growth opportunities. Rural small businesses often fight to maintain survival within their location and often do not consider expansion opportunities. Often expansion may not be a feasible option for small business managers as they lack the required resources or financing.

Small businesses' external relationships rather than internal resources buffer the small business from failure (Bengtsson, & Johansson, 2014). Small businesses can utilize outside resources while conserving their internal resources. A small business may have exposure to greater opportunities for building external relationships. Word of mouth and good standing in a rural community could be more valuable than marketing efforts. The development of business models, risk management, strategy, and emphasis on building leadership skills could reduce small business failure (Wu, Chen, & Olson, 2014) . Managers can hedge small business failure by strategizing and enhancing leadership

skills. Chinomona (2013) showed that a lack of management skills could lead to small business failure. Sarasvathy et al. (2013) stated that failure is a result of overconfidence in their venture or themselves. Thomason et al. (2013) attributed high mortality rates of small businesses to their inability to adapt to change. Many authors have offered a varying perspective of the leading causes of small business failure. Within professional literature, there is no indication of a sole cause of small business failure but rather factors that contribute to the failure. Ultimately, rural small business managers must consider the causes and factors that could induce failure for the specific business in order to strategize to overcome the obstacles.

Rural Challenges

Rural locations face a unique set of challenges compared to their urban counterparts including big-box retailers, lack of resources and technology, isolation, and limited networks. Unlike large firms, small businesses are unable to capitalize on economies of scale, offer lower prices, or attract more consumers (Thomas et al., 2013). Rural local businesses struggle to obtain enough customers to make their business a full-time activity (Herslund, 2012).

Big-box retailers. Big-box competition present challenges to small businesses especially those operating in a rural location (Frazier et al., 2013). Ficano (2013) stated that the entrance of big-box retailers increases the level of establishment deaths in the location of operation. Small businesses are experiencing displacement because of large retailers such as Walmart and Home Depot while online retailers such as Amazon and eBay create challenges for both small and large retailers (Thomason et al., 2013). Big-

box retailers threaten the survival of small businesses. The benefits of large big-box retailers include lower prices, convenience, and one stop shopping that is often appealing to many customers. The isolation of rural areas may have a negative relationship with rural consumers, as they are willing to travel to shop at a larger scale big-box stores to satisfy their needs as their location options are limited. Large retailers influence existing establishments by (a) drastically modifying the competitive nature of the market in which it operates to lower potential and actual profitability, (b) influences local social capital directly or by their effect on the number of small establishments, (c) pricing below competitors, and (d) generates additional agglomeration effects that eventually increases prices and profitability (Ficano, 2013). Often rural small businesses do not have the financial, or human capital means to compete with such large-scale operations. Wal-Mart alone attributes a 2-4% long-term decrease in retail employment, a 3.5% decrease in retail payroll after entry, and increase in poverty rates in counties with a new or existing Walmart story by .2 to .9% (Ficano, 2013).

Lack of resources and technology. Unlike urban areas, many rural locations did not participate in the technological revolution and did not gain from the economic boom of the 1990s (Vernon-Feagans & Cox, 2013). The lack of technological advancements may put some rural small business at a disadvantage or behind the times. Moyes (2012) stated that a defining challenge of small rural firms is a limited resource base. Isolation, specifically, does not allow rural small businesses access to resources and technology. The distance to travel or ship resources is expensive. Rural businesses and residents most likely experience an inability to access internet services, financing, capital, and other

technologies (Frazier et al., 2013). Rural areas are the most excluded from broadband availability and developments (Townsend et al., 2013). Lu and Jacobs (2013) argued that a lack of a modern telecommunications network further reduce rural areas' ability to attract industry. Access to broadband attributes to technological and economic barriers of remote rural locations, however, even when technology is available rural area adoption remains low (Townsend et al., 2013). Sometimes rural communities may be resistant to change, cannot afford the cost of new technologies, or foresee no need to obtain new technologies. The lack of resources and technology in rural areas not only makes it difficult for existing small businesses to survive but also is unappealing to potential entrepreneurs and managers. Lu and Jacobs (2013) stated that rural resources are scarce by identifying the need for public water system improvements, soil and water conservation, and waste disposal.

Isolation. Rural remoteness often results in economic and social disadvantages (Townsend et. al, 2013). Rural residents are physically and socially isolated as they experience extended travel times to reach services, work, education, and leisure (Townsend et al., 2013). Coupled with economic factors many residents may not have access to transportation and those that do may have difficulties affording the expenses of traveling to reach resources. Rural residents commute longer distances to services, work, and school as only 40% have access to public transportation (Vernon-Feagans & Cox, 2013). Siemens (2013) stated that geography alone affects the long-term survival of rural businesses. Remoteness contributes to the reduction in the number of local consumers. Frazier et al. (2013) supported the effects of isolation by indicating the challenges of

isolation limits the supply chain access to small businesses. Isolation produces diseconomies of scale that lead to higher costs, both for providing social services to rural residents and for running private business enterprises (Lu & Jacobs, 2013). Isolation forces small businesses to acquire higher costs for supplies, services, and shipping that in turn pushes consumer prices higher.

Online shopping, out of town shopping, or visiting neighboring cities for services or products create adverse effects and challenges for rural small businesses, rural economies, and rural small business managers (Hart, Stachow, & Cadogan, 2013). Cohn and Hastings (2013) stated that 14% of rural residents travel for professional services. Those that do not travel for services may forsake these services or view them as discretionary. When rural consumers face isolation, they can turn to online shopping or visit neighboring cities to find variety, cheaper items, or convenience. Rural areas that are within commuting distance to a city have increased development opportunities compared to peripheral rural locations (Herslund, 2012). Areas that are less isolated have the opportunity to travel to neighboring cities or towns to obtain resources or services.

Limited networks. Professional literature demonstrated a concern for the extent of rural development as it depends more on local networks than outside world networks (Herslund, 2012). Creating a dependency on local networks can put a cap on the abilities, opportunities, and networks of rural communities, which can be damaging to rural small business survival. Ficano (2013) acknowledged that a large number of smaller businesses in a community provided more opportunities for information sharing, cooperation among managers including joint marketing. The greater number of businesses in a given area

increases the opportunity for networking. Word of mouth, purchasing cooperatives, information business consulting enhance efficiency, reduce input and transactions costs, and decreases entrepreneurial risk leading to a higher level of business activity (Ficano, 2013).

The lack of networks negatively affects small and micro business advertising and marketing (Herslund, 2012). Networked businesses can sponsor each other and offer opportunities to market or advertise at their location to garner community support. Local networks are crucial for rural economic development, and regional networks are essential for rural small business success (Herslund, 2012). The limited number of businesses within a rural area decreases the small business managers' access to network opportunities. Therefore, rural small business managers must create strategies to combat the adverse effects of limited networks.

Rural change attributes to the interplay of individual skills, regional settings, location specific qualities, and local networks (Herslund, 2012). Networks appear to have a link to rural change and business success. Beyond marketing and advertising, networking can offer opportunities for advice, strategy, and knowledge sharing. Herslund (2012) indicated that many rural managers had little experience with private business and individuals that migrated from urban areas had no or limited contacts and networks. Rural incomers often do not have preexisting contacts within the rural community or networks. Considering the acceptance and resistance to rural incomers, it can prove challenging to build networks within a rural community as an outsider.

Transition

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore effective strategies for long-term sustainment of rural small businesses in Kirksville, Missouri. The exploration of small business failure attempts to identify key concepts and patterns in rural small business strategy. The main subjects of the literature review include the purpose of the study, conceptual framework, rural small business, environmental factors, rural culture, rural opportunities, small business failure, and rural challenges.

In Section 2, I cover participation, ethical considerations, research method and design, data collection procedures, and data analysis. In Section 3, I conclude with the (a) application to professional practice, (b) implications for social change, (c) recommendations for action, (d) recommendations for future research, (e) reflections, and (g) conclusion.

Section 2: The Project

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative exploratory case study was to explore effective strategies that managers of MSEs in rural areas have used to successfully sustain small businesses in a rural community. The target population was managers that own, operate or have operated small businesses in Kirksville, Missouri. Rural MSE entrepreneurs could use the findings from this study to develop effective strategies to achieve sustainable businesses. This study may contribute to social change by enabling more rural MSEs to remain within the economic cycle of the U.S. economy, and offer a more stable employment outlook, hence supporting more families in rural areas.

Role of the Researcher

As a researcher, I was attentive, calculated, and informed. My duty was to obtain facts that establish an ethical, just, fair, and unbiased role in this study. I was aware of my ethical obligations as a researcher, and I fulfilled those to the absolute highest standard as designated by Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB). I remained conscious of my role and document my position throughout the research process to limit researcher influence or bias. The role of the researcher includes conducting quality research and protecting participants (Yin, 2014). The researcher selects the best theory for the research and uses it to frame the research process (Ezzy, 2013). My role as a researcher included choosing the best methods, theory, and design of the research to align with my research question to conduct quality research and to keep participants from harm.

In qualitative research, the principle tool of data collection is the researcher (Wallace & Sheldon, 2015). During the research process, I remained neutral, avoided bias, conducted the data collection process ethically, and documented the course of this process. The researcher must recognize and reflect on their role in the process and how it has influenced the data and findings (Collins & Cooper, 2014). I used a journal to document the research process and my experiences as a researcher as it was imperative to remain conscious of my potential influence on the data to protect against bias. I eliminated issues that could negatively affect the research process as they arose.

I live in the area of which I conducted research. I have a close relationship with the topic as I have first-hand experience in the life cycles of small rural businesses and failures as a consumer. Considering the size of the geographical location, it is probable that I may have met or seen the participants in the community. I utilized considerable efforts to reduce the potential bias of the research situation.

Through the duration of this study, I respected the privacy of the participants and data. All data collected was handled ethically, housed properly, and adhered to the ethical guidelines set forth by Walden University. I did conduct all research, specifically, interviews in an ethical manner. As a student and researcher, interviews must follow the ethical guidelines of Walden University. The entire research process must adhere to the ethical standards of the university and my personal moral values to protect the participants and researcher.

The Belmont Report describes four fundamental principles of ethical community-engaged research as embodying ethical action, respecting participants, generalizing

beneficence, and negotiating justice (Belmont Report, 1979). Experimental research should maximize benefits and reduce risks to subjects as much as possible, individuals should participate voluntarily, and risks and benefits to potential research subjects should be fairly distributed (Bromley, Mikesell, Jones, & Khodvakov, 2015). My role, as it related to the Belmont Report, was to respect the rights of the study participants and protect them from any form of harm associated with this study.

The researcher must reflect on potential sources of bias and report these alongside the detail of the study (Malone, Nicholl, & Tracey, 2014). Maintaining a neutral stance was necessary to recognize my role in being active within the community. Remaining neutral decreased potentially negative influences especially researcher emotions and opinions. The researcher must prepare for different personality types during interviews and not send out negative non-verbal or body language (Collins & Cooper, 2014). I did recognize and reduced potential bias, neutrally approached the phenomena, and did not let my position in the community influence my research. The researcher must not approach the research with preconceived notions of the phenomenon or the individuals under investigation (Berger, 2015). I did not assume that I had an inclination to the phenomenon because I live in the area of the occurrences.

Researchers use interview protocol as a guide through the interview process (Doody & Doody, 2015). Following interview protocol supports positive ethical conduct and accuracy of data collection during interviews by providing a step-by-step guide to ensure I conducted each interview in the same manner. The interview protocol was necessary to adhere to the university's guidelines and expectations (see Appendix D).

Interview protocol is essential to acquiring the best information from participant

interviews and making good connections with participants (Farrell, 2015). Utilizing

proper interview protocol can gain respectability as a researcher and build trust.

Participants

Participant selection was based on the following criteria: (a) the rural small

business (RSB) managers must operate or have previously operated a micro or small

business enterprise (MSE) within the past five years prior to the date of the interview, (b)

all MSE must be geographically located in and operate with an address in Kirksville,

Missouri, (c) the participant RSBs represent successful MSEs that have operated without

disruption or closing during the past five years, and (d) the RSBs must have less than

twenty-five employees. The participants were not industry specific but were specific

regarding the participant selection criteria. A qualitative researcher explores what

naturally occurs among people regularly within the phenomenon and does not sample for

an experiment (Neuman, 2014). Listing participant criteria is important to detail their

characteristics to help transferability of the results, and the researcher must believe that

replication of the findings could be the same or similar participants in the same context

(Elo et al., 2014).

Researchers must choose participants that have experienced or are experiencing a

phenomenon, as they will provide the best data (Bernard, 2013). Researchers utilize

interviews, which assist in collecting data to explore the phenomena, can capture the

lived experiences of the participants. Interviews are the primary data source for case

studies (Marshall, Cardon, Poddar, & Fontenot, 2013). Contacting potential participants

began after obtaining approval from the Walden University IRB. The first point of contact was the Kirksville Area Chamber of Commerce. The Chamber of Commerce actively works with many small businesses in the area and was able to assist in gaining access to participants. The Chamber of Commerce offered workshops and events to become active in the community to meet individuals and gain access to participants. I utilized the Kirksville Regional Economic Development, Inc. to gain access to potential participants and The Northeast Missouri Mark Twain telephone book to acquire their phone numbers. To gain interest, I contacted participants by telephone to identify the researcher and the purpose of the study. Upon gaining interest, the participants received the *Participant Consent Form* by email (see Appendix B). The participants that choose to participate in this study replied by electronic signature stating; *I consent*. For the participants that do not have e-mail access or are unable to respond via e-mail, a hard copy of the Participant Consent Form is available for handwritten signatures. Participant interview scheduling began after obtaining consent.

To establish a working relationship with participants, I used a telephone conference to explain the research and process. During this time, participants had the opportunity to ask questions. Before the interview, the participants received a copy of the interview questions by e-mail. Each participant received a hard copy of the ethical considerations of participation in this study. Being forthcoming and taking the time to get to know the participants did help to establish a working relationship. To align the participants with the overarching research question all participants meet the participant

criteria. Participants agreed to voluntarily share information relevant to criteria for participation.

Research Method and Design

Research Method

Qualitative research was the method for this study on the basis of the following criteria (i) the ability to utilize open-ended questions, (ii) the opportunity to ask how and why questions, and (iii) to capture rich content from lived experiences. Researchers use qualitative methods to explore the how, who and why of individual and collective organized action as it unfolds over time in context (Yin, 2014). Researchers use qualitative methods to explore the influence of actions and effectiveness (Trautrims et al., 2012).

Researchers use quantitative methods to test hypotheses and use closed-ended questionnaires to gather, analyze and interpret numerical data (McCusker & Gunaydin, 2015). Quantitative methods do not cater to the collection of descriptive, rich data or firsthand accounts to capture the necessary data required for this study. Considering the collection and analysis of numerical data are not appropriate for this study, a quantitative method was not applicable. Mixed methods research combines quantitative and qualitative research methods in the same research inquiry (Landrum & Garza, 2015). Combining methodologies can take away from the historical, epistemological, and theoretical aspects of the research (Makrakis & Kostoulas-Makrakis, 2016). Considering the collection of numerical data is not relevant to this study, a mixed method was not applicable.

Research Design

A case study was the design for this study. The five approaches to the qualitative inquiry are (a) narrative, (b) phenomenology, (c) grounded theory, (d) ethnography, and (e) case studies (Tetnowski, 2015). Narrative methods contrast to longitudinal methods often used in medical studies that focus on individual narratives to capture critical moments or processes involved in the change through storytelling and autobiographies (Kuronen, 2014; Raeburn et al., 2015; Von Contzen & Alders, 2015). Considering this study did not have a medical basis or was longitudinal, a narrative was not applicable. Researchers use phenomenology to examine psychological phenomena to investigate the lived experiences of individuals to understand the essence of the cognitive processes of similar experiences (Percy et al., 2015). Considering there was no intention to examine psychological phenomena in this study, a phenomenology was not applicable. Characteristics of grounded theory include continuous collection and analysis of data to generate a theory that grounds in empirical phenomena (Robson & McCartan, 2016). Considering there was no intention to create a new theory from this study, grounded theory was not applicable. Researchers use ethnography to describe a group or culture and how they live in the world through long-term researcher participation in the culture (Wall, 2015). Considering this study did not explore the cultural existence of the participants solely, ethnography was not applicable.

A case study is an empirical research design that uses contextually rich data from natural context and real-world settings to investigate a focused phenomenon without controls (Vohra, 2014). Researchers use case studies in professional, individual, teaching,

history, healthcare, social, and management settings (Simons, 2014). In a case study, the researcher tries to understand the current subject or phenomena without intervening except by data collection (Kim, Price, & Lau, 2013). Researchers exploring a phenomenon aim to capture, describe, document, and conceptualize the details of the phenomena (Stanimirovic & Vintar, 2015). Case studies provide a research framework for observation or analysis of behavior to as related to structure, and so mechanisms can be constructed (Klonoski, 2013). Important factors of a case study include credibility, dependability, and transferability (Houghton, Casey, Shaw, & Murphy, 2013). Utilization of documentation and procedure ensured the credibility, dependability, and transferability of this study. The collection of detailed data assisted to explore the strategy mechanism that results in sustainment of rural small businesses.

Data saturation is indicated by the ability to replicate or reaching a redundancy when the researcher has nothing new to add (Marshall et al., 2013). Data saturation is the point where the researcher collects enough data that no new data or patterns emerge (O'Reilly & Parker, 2013). To achieve data saturation, a researcher brings new participants into the study until the data set is complete by no longer generating new themes or patterns. An adequate population and sample size is imperative to obtain and ensure data saturation. In assumption the population and sample size of this study was correct. Eight participant interviews satisfied the participant criteria. This sample size ensured data saturation for this study.

Population and Sampling

Researchers must use the proper population as variations can lead to an inaccurate reflection of the actual population (Barratt, Ferris, & Lenton, 2015). The research population often needs to be geographically clustered (Guo, Lu, Wu, & Zhang, 2015). The population for this study included a purposeful selection of eight rural small businesses in Kirksville, Missouri. Purposeful sampling allows an in-depth examination of information rich cases to reach data saturation (Suri, 2013). Qualitative researchers often avoid the randomization sampling procedure because the results often cannot be generalizable to a larger population (Ishak & Abu Bakar, 2014).

The challenges I faced included choosing the appropriate target population, aligning the population with the design, and how to select participants. To determine the appropriate target population, the research question, purpose statement, participant criteria, and population aligned to ensure that they all coincide. Aligning each section helped to secure the selection of the relevant population. The participant selection included eight successful rural small businesses that have been continuously operating for the past five years. The selection of eight successful businesses satisfied the criteria to explore successful strategies for rural small businesses through success. The collection and analysis of data from the eight successful businesses offered insight into the strategy that may lead to long-term rural sustainment. The distinct geographically boundaries, common traits, and specific qualities did determine the eligibility of participants for this study.

Ethical Research

I conducted this study after receiving approval number 09-01-16-0477227 from the Walden University IRB. To protect participants from harm researchers conduct ethical research by maintaining their confidentiality and obtaining informed consent from each participant (Yin, 2014). During the research process, an ethical researcher will protect study participants from harm and impropriety while gaining trust and ensuring research integrity (Rowley, 2012). The ethical guidelines of research involving human participants follows the standards designated by the Belmont Report to include (a) the principles of respect for humans, (b) beneficence, and (c) justice (Belmont Report, 1979). I received certification from the National Institute of Health Office of Extramural Research to conduct research involving human participants (see Appendix A).

The participants received an invitation to participate in the study by e-mail. The e-mail included the Participant Consent Form (see Appendix B). The Participant Consent form included the following: (a) introduction and purpose of the study, (b) institution overseeing the study, (c) voluntary nature of the study, (d) sample interview questions and (e) contact information for the researcher and institution. The participants were aware that participation in this study was voluntary, and the participants had the right to withdraw at any time without penalty. To withdraw from the study, the participants could have given oral or written notice. If a participant withdrew, destruction of all documents, data, and participant information relating to the participant ensued. The Participant Consent Form clarified that there was no incentives or compensation for participation in this study. The participants that chose to participate in the study responded by return e-

mail electronically signing; *I consent*. Participants had access to the study results and

finding. Each participant received a 1-2 page summary of the results and findings by

email. The participants did not include any individuals under the age of 18; any

individuals made to be disadvantaged, or vulnerable by this study.

To protect the participants, labels of Participant 1 through Participant 8 masked

each participant's identity. An HP Stream laptop stored electronic data, and Toshiba

backup hard drive stored electronic data in a password-protected file. There was a locked

key cabinet to store the paper documents and a Toshiba backup drive for electronic files.

I am the only individual with access to electronic and paper files. After 5 years, I will

shred all paper documents stored in the locked cabinet and erase all password secured

electronic files from the HP Stream and Toshiba backup drive.

Data Collection Instruments

In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection

in semi-structured or unstructured qualitative interviews (Chan, Fung, & Chien, 2013;

Peredaryenko, & Krauss, 2013). As the researcher, I am the data collection instrument for

this qualitative case study. Data collection processes include (a) interviews, (b) focus

groups, (c) documents, (d) observations, and (e) artifacts (Boblin et al., 2013). In

qualitative research studies, interviews are a valuable tool to collect data (Denzin, 2013).

Collection of data from participants in this study requires interviews with semi-structured

questions.

This study did not include a pilot study or pilot study of the interview questions.

At the participant discretion, semi-structured interviews were conducted in a private

setting of their choice. The interviews included eight semi-structured, open-ended

questions (see Appendix C). A Hewlett Packard (HP) Stream laptop and Etekcity digital

voice recorder were used to audio record the interviews. Recording audio provides ease

of access such as playback and digital retrieval to ensure accuracy during transcription

(Bouges, 2013). During the interview process, a pen and paper were used to take notes.

After the interviews were complete, transcription of the full data of the interview began.

Validity pertains to whether the assessment of the research captures the competence and

performance that it intends to evaluate (Morse, 2015). Transcription review is a process

to ensure validity and reliability. Researchers use transcription review to allow the

participant to review their interview transcripts for accuracy (Peredaryenko & Krauss,

2013). After transcription, the participants reviewed the transcripts. Utilization of

member checking allowed the participants to check for accuracy and approve their

interview.

Data Collection Technique

Within qualitative research, researchers collect and analyze data based on

observation, documents, artifacts, and interviews (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2013).

The advantage of observation is that it connects the researcher to the most fundamental

human experiences through immersion and participation (Yin, 2016). The disadvantages

of observations are cost, time consumption, and actions perceived differently because of

observation (Yin, 2014). The advantages of documentation are that the modern world

communicates through writing, documentation, and it provides insightful content in a

social setting (Owen, 2014). The disadvantages of documentation are difficulties in

retrieving documents, access, and reporting bias of the paper's author (Yin, 2014). Researchers use artifacts to provide a mechanism for building shared understanding across knowledge boundaries and can include such things as risk maps, online planning tools, or strategy reports (Comi, Bischof, & Eppler, 2014). Disadvantages of artifacts are selectivity and availability (Yin, 2014). Researchers use qualitative interviews to provide in-depth, contextualized, open-ended responses from research participants about their views, opinions, feelings, knowledge, and experiences (Mikene, Gaizauskaite, & Valaviciene, 2013). The disadvantages of interviews include bias, inaccuracies from the poor recall, or the interviewees giving the interview what they want to hear (Yin, 2014).

The data collection technique for this study was semi-structured face-to-face interviews. Interviews are a valuable tool for understanding human behavior and phenomenon (Dimond, Fiesler, DiSalvo, Pelc, & Bruckman, 2012). Researchers can use interviews to reveal the past; uncover event's effects on people's thoughts and feelings, as well as obtain information about social settings that are otherwise unreachable (Mikene et al., 2013). Interviews were the best technique to answer the research question of this study. Researchers utilize face-to-face interviews as a distinct advantage in providing social cues such as voice, intonation, and body language (Irvine, Drew, & Sainsbury, 2013). Researchers use semi-structured interviews to be flexible with open-ended questions for the chance to explore issues with additional questions (Doody & Noonan, 2013). Researchers use semi-structured interviews to enable individuals to think and speak about their predicaments, needs, expectations, experiences, and understandings (Stuckey, 2014).

Semi-structured interviews are composed of predetermined questions (Doody & Noonan, 2013). Before conducting interviews, the participants received the interview questions by e-mail (see Appendix C). Researchers require evidence through interpretation in transcription before any aspect of analysis can be accepted (Döös & Wilhelmson, 2014). Interpretation or analysis did not begin until the interview transcription was complete. Researchers use member checking to present data to participants to check for accuracy but can be difficult with field notes that may already have a layer of interpretation (Carroll & Huxtable, 2014). The researcher will interpret data, but the participant's description, as given in their account, is seen as crucial (Ritchie et al., 2013). After the interviews, the participants were given a copy of the interview transcripts. Before analysis, the participants had the opportunity to amend their responses. The participants returned signed letters of approval for use of the final transcripts after completing the transcript review.

Data Organization Technique

The Windows media recorder on the HP Stream laptop and a handheld Etekcity digital voice recorder were used to record participant interviews. Transcription of the recordings began after each interview was complete. Field notes are likely to be the most common component of the database and can be in the form of handwritten, audiotaped, or electronic files (Yin, 2014). A pen and paper was used to record field notes during each interview to capture activity such as gestures or body language that cannot be audio recorded. A personal journal was used to record the research process to document the researcher's experiences. Researchers use codes, tags, or labels to assign units of

meaning to the descriptive or inferential information collected during a study (Gläser & Laudel, 2013). The review of the interview data began after transcription. The interview data was coded and indexed for ease of retrieval. Examination of the codes identified emerging themes and patterns. The use of Microsoft Excel assisted to document the coding and patterns. Researchers use computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software such as NVivo 11 to manage and document the research process adequately to analyze qualitative text by coding and aggregating themes (Castleberry, 2014).

A locked key cabinet was used to store the personal research journal. Data organization and storage adheres to the Walden University IRB requirements outlined by Walden University's research ethics and compliance stating that the researcher will not store data over 5 years. An HP Stream laptop stored electronic data, and Toshiba backup hard drive was a secondary storage device. Each electronic file was password protected. A locked cabinet stores the hard copy data and Toshiba backup hard drive. The data is not available for any purpose outside of research for this study, and is not accessible by any other parties. After 5 years of this study, I will erase electronic data and shred hardcopy data.

Data Analysis

Before data analysis, the review and transcribe the participant interviews began. To allow participants the opportunity to ask for clarity of interview questions, there was not a pilot study. The most important part of the research process is defining the research question for a systemic review (Borrego, Foster, & Froyd, 2014). The interview questions addressed the central research question to determine effective strategies for rural small

business sustainment in Kirksville, Missouri. The central research question was: What

effective strategies are used by entrepreneurs of MSEs in rural areas to successfully

sustain a small business?

A systematic approach to data collection and analysis is crucial to ensuring the

methodological integrity of case study (Lalor et al., 2013). After the interviews and

transcription, the participants received the transcripts by e-mail for review. The

participants approved and returned a signed letter of acceptance.

Researchers use triangulation to confirm findings and determine the completeness

of data (Heale & Forbes, 2013). In a case study, methodological triangulation improves

the validity (Yin, 2016). The objective of triangulation is to increase confidence in the

findings by using more than one approach to the research question (Heale & Forbes,

2013). When reviewing the transcribed interviews, a pen and paper was used to document

themes. The themes were input to indexed codes in Microsoft Excel. Significant data was

color coded as red, and the participant's names changed to participant 1 through 8. The

volume of data required computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software in which

NVivo 11 analyzed the data. After analysis, the results from NVivo 11 was compared to

the conceptual framework to determine if the findings reflect the components of

institutional theory. Researchers use a conceptual framework to interpret and understand

the research evidence (Borrego et al., 2014). Institutional theory was the foundation for

the conceptual theory of this study. The findings were compared to institutional theory to

explore how rural small businesses create effective strategies within their environment.

Reliability and Validity

Reliability and Validity

For reliability and validity influence the practical relevance of research by providing measures of assurance that actions derive from conclusions based on valid science and not in biased, anecdotal, or idiosyncratic observations (Bernard, 2013). The concept of reliability and validity are used in both quantitative and qualitative studies (Elo et al., 2014). An important factor for supporting validity is reporting how the results were created as the readers should be able to follow precisely the analysis and resulting conclusions (Elo et al., 2014). Methodological triangulation improves the validity of a case study (Yin, 2014). Thoroughness of validity refers to the adequacy of the data, sampling, and data saturation (Fusch & Ness, 2015). A criterion for reliability in qualitative research includes (a) credibility, (b) dependability, (c) confirmability and (d) transferability (Kaczynski, Salmona, & Smith, 2014). Conducting a transcription review ensured the reliability of this study. Data saturation occurs when the researcher no longer discovers any new information from the data (Adom, Amakye, Doh, & Anku, 2015). Purposefully selecting eight participants to reach the point where no new data, patterns, or themes emerged from the interviews ensured data saturation.

Credibility

Reliability, validity, authenticity, neutrality, and audibility indicate credibility to portray disciplined, rigorous inquiry that is a valuable contribution to the knowledge (Morse, 2015). Researchers utilize credibility to evaluate the fit between the researcher's interpretation and the original data source (Munn, Porritt, Lockwood, Aromataris, &

Pearson, 2014). Credibility is the truth-value assessed to the degree that the participants

of the study trust or believe the findings (Cope, 2014). Researchers use transcription

reviews as member checking to validate the data collected through participant interviews.

Dependability

Dependability is the concept of the stability of the data (Houghton et al., 2013).

Dependability implies trackable, logical, clearly documented variability through the use

of proper methods and sources referenced by the researcher within the work (Munn et al.,

2014). Researchers use dependability to provide consistency to the extent, which others

could repeat the study and the variations understood (Anney, 2014). Utilization of

member checking and journaling supported the dependability of this study. After the

interview transcription, the participants received a copy of their interview transcription by

e-mail. The participants reviewed, approved, and returned a signature of approval. A

journal was used to document the research process.

Confirmability

Confirmability is an alternative method of rigor in qualitative research.

Confirmability implies an adequate distance between the researcher and participants

along with their values to minimize the possibility of researcher influence (Watkins,

2012). Researchers use confirmability to indicate a clear link between the research

findings and data interpretation (Anney, 2014). The degree that researchers can confirm

or corroborate the results is confirmability (Venkatesh et al., 2013). A journal was

available to document research bias and conduct member checking to ensure

confirmability of this study.

Transferability

The degree in which researchers can create generalization or transferability of

qualitative research to other context and settings is transferability (Venkatesh et al.,

2013). Transferability refers to whether the findings of the study can be transferred to

another similar context or situation while still preserving the meaning and inferences of

the study (Houghton et al., 2013). Researchers require thick descriptions of settings,

context, people, action, and events to gain transferability (Yilmaz, 2013). The rich detail

of the research process and findings supported the transferability of this study. The

participant interview questions are in an attachment for readers to view (see Appendix C).

Utilization of generalizability within this study allowed for future use in similar research.

Transition and Summary

As a researcher, I identified my role in this study and how I planned to document

the research process. For the purpose of this study, I created participant criteria in which I

selected study participants. An exploratory case study explored effective strategies of

rural small businesses in Kirksville, Missouri. This study had a purposeful sample of

eight small business managers in Kirksville, Missouri.

I applied for Walden IRB approval to protect all participants from harm including

their privacy. Semi-structured interviews collected data from participants at the location

of their discretion. I used NVivo 11 to analyze the data to identify themes and patterns in

which I discuss further in section 3.

Section 3, is a discussion of the findings and interpretations of this study. There

is a discussion of the themes and patterns that emerged from the collected data. The final

section examines the findings for the participant interviews, relates the findings to the

conceptual framework and overarching research question and identifies the implications.

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

Introduction

The content of Section 3 includes (a) an overview of the study, (b) the

presentation of the findings, (c) applications to professional practice, (d) implications for

social change, and (e) recommendations for action. Additionally, Section 3 includes

recommendations for further studies, reflections, summary, and conclusion. In Section 3,

I provide the findings of the study on the strategies rural small business managers use to

sustain business beyond 5 years.

The purpose of this qualitative exploratory case study was to explore effective

strategies that managers of MSEs in rural areas have used to successfully sustain small

businesses in a rural community over 5 years. The problem was rural small business fail

at a higher rate than their urban counterparts. The data was collected by semi-structured

interviews from eight rural small business managers that have successfully sustained a

business in Kirksville, Missouri beyond 5 years. The findings showed strategies that

rural small business managers used to sustain business beyond five years.

Presentation of the Findings

To ensure confidentiality, I changed participants names to P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6,

P7, and P8. The participants were not industry specific but were chosen based on the

criteria of being geographically located in Kirksville, Missouri, having less than 20

employees, and have been successfully operating longer than 5 years. I collected data

from face-to-face semi-structured interviews with each participant. During participant

interviews, I took notes to document participant behavior and body language. Nivio11

was used to code the participant interviews. I reached data saturation by the eighth

interview. The data I collected answered the research question: What effective strategies

are used by managers of MSEs in rural areas to successfully sustain a small business?

Data analysis included transcription, review of themes, coding, and synthesis. I

transcribed the eight interviews by hand through numerous sessions. During the process, I

documented themes by pen and paper then entered the data into NVivo11 Pro. Three

main themes emerged: (a) cusomter satisfaction, (b) advertising, and (c) location. The

sub-themes included customer relationships, repeat customers, Facebook, word of mouth,

and education and experience. I compared the themes and sub-themes against the

conceptual framework and literature review of this study. I also used new literature since

approval of this study for comparison.

Emergent theme 1: Customer Satisfaction

Orel and Kara (2014) stated that customer satisfaction is the overall contentment

with a product or service which positively relates to customer loyalty. Customer service

is positively related to value, quality, and the number of repeat customers. Customer

satisfaction is satisfying customer's needs and exceeding expectations that provides a

sense of quality which helps produce a superior value of the product or service (Goetsch

& Davis, 2014).

I asked interview question 2 to determine elements of success for a rural small

business. Categories of topics discovered in question 2 under theme 1 including number

and percentage of participant responses appear in Table 1.

Table 1

Factors that Define and Measure Rural Small Business Success

Factors	No. of participants	%
Numbers (money)	5	62.5
Customer satisfaction/service	4	50
Repeat customers	2	25

Note. Some participants used one or more factors within their response.
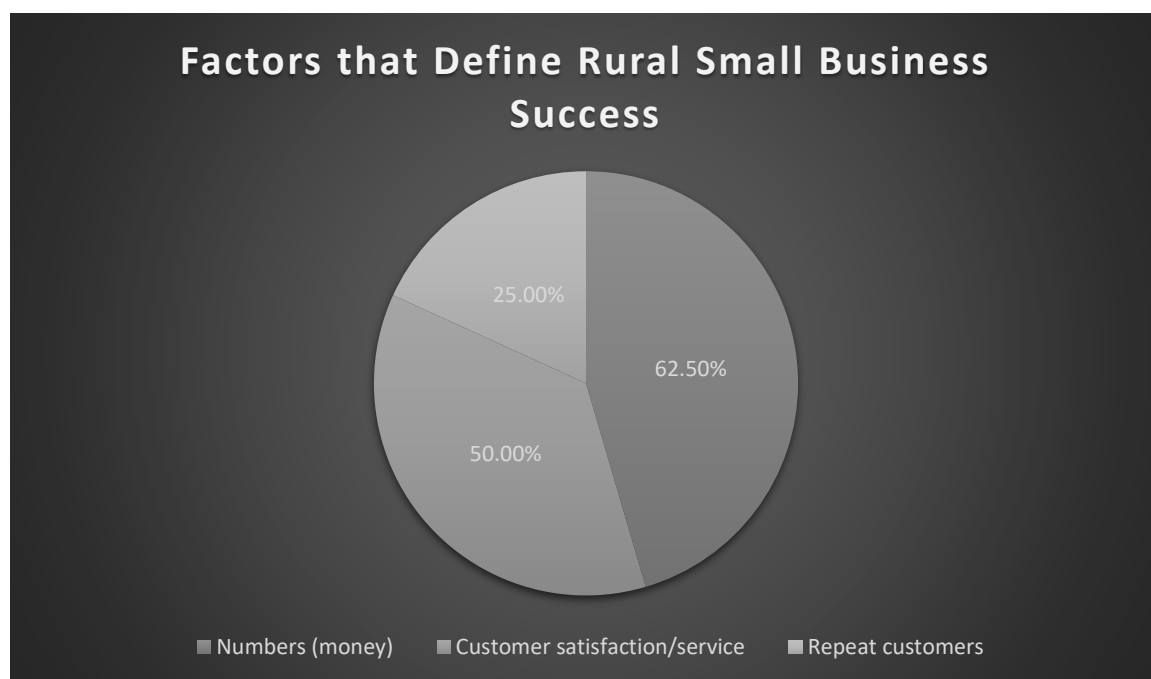
Figure 1. Factors that Define and Measure Rural Small Business Success

The defining factors of non-financial measures of small business success is customer satisfaction, personal development and personal realization (Saleem, 2017). Participants indicated that profit was not the only factor of success for a rural small business. P4 stated, "Probably the most or for me anyway would be customer satisfaction. I mean if people are satisfied, they are going to come back and spread the word that you

do good work." P5 stated, "The numbers. The daily numbers and the repeat customers." The two main consequences of high customer service are reputation and competitive advantage (Saeidi, Sofian, Saeidi, Saeidi, & Saaeidi, 2015). For every percentage increase in customer satisfaction, there is an average increase of 2.37% of return on investment (Milner & Furnham, 2017). Customer satisfaction can lead to an increase in profit. Often repeat business from satisfied customers may be easier and more profitable to obtain compared to acquiring new customers. P6 stated, "I think it is good customer service again. I sound like a broken record, but you have to keep customers happy. If you don't have happy customers, you don't have a business."

Customer Relationships. Poor customer relationships can put a business at financial risk (Mullins, Ahearne, Lam, Hall, & Boichuk, 2014). P2 stated, "Having a relationship. It all boils down to that having a relationship with the people who are your customers." P5 mentioned, "I worked with customers, and I think customer service is key to any business." Building customer relationships are the path to customer loyalty (Hollensen, 2015). Strong customer relationships can greatly enhance customer loyalty and satisfaction. Building customer relationships in rural communities can positively influence word of mouth, reputation, and create a repeat customer base.

Capturing customer feedback can help quickly react and improve the quality of services and products (Hu, Parsa, Chen, & Hu, 2016). P8 stated, "You have to know your customers for one thing, and what to keep in store." P5 included, "Just listening to our customer's feedback and adapting where we need to as it happens." Identifying the customer base of a rural community can increase the manager's ability to adequately

meet demand, provide services and products. It is critical for managers in rural areas to consider the population size to create relationships with customers to become more sustainable.

Business managers can use communication as means to foster institutional maintenance or change (Cornelissen, Durand, Fiss, Lammers, & Vaara, 2015). Communication is one of the most important tools to identify with, reach, and engage customers. Communication in the form of dialogue and speech as well as written is a significant link to creating change especially through capturing customer feedback and opinions. By inviting communication with customers, small rural managers gain an advantage to create institutional change within their business or sector. Rural small business managers can capitalize on this to create competitive advantage, gain customer loyalty, and to move ahead in emerging markets.

Repeat customers. Survival of any store depends on customer loyalty and repeat purchasing (Chiu, Wang, Fang, & Huang, 2014). P8 stated, "That seems to be it you can grow every year with new customers and new people that come to the area, but your sustainability is your return customers." Rural small business managers may be at a disadvantage because of the decreased population size. To hedge against limited customer populations rural small business managers may rely on their repeat customers for survival.

Repeat customers are the main source of profit for retail businesses (Hsu, Chang, & Chuang, 2015). Acquiring new customers in a limited population area may be less feasible than maintaining current customers and securing repeat customers. P5 defined

and measured success by, "The daily numbers and repeat customers." P1 stated that one of their goals was to obtain repeat business. Repeat customers correlate to customer relationships and satisfaction. Supporting successful customer relationships can create satisfaction and result in customer loyalty. A study conducted by Ramukumba (2014) showed that repeat customers and product performance are critical success factors that lead to the sustainability of SMEs. Ultimately, to obtain sustainability, it may be more beneficial for rural small business managers to gear towards nurturing long-term relationships with repeat or potential repeat customers rather than mainly focusing on other avenues to obtain new customers.

Emergent theme 2: Advertising

Advertising can increase small business visibility and awareness to identify and attract new customers (Taneja & Toombs, 2014).

> P7 stated, "I have watched a lot of people come in and be like this is what it's worth and whatever and we are going to advertise like we are in the big city. I do not even advertise. It is rural. They are going to go spread the word, word of mouth. Facebook, which is word of mouth and its free. It is not cutting into your profits. How many people are even listening to the radio anymore. They are not. They are streaming their pod casts. Billboards are $500 a month. Why. I would be delighted if I took home $500 in a month. Delighted. I live in rural America. Putting up a billboard in St. Louis, how many thousands of people are going to see that per hour. Putting up a billboard in Kirksville, twenty people might have seen that in an hour."

I asked interview question 6 to determine elements of success for a rural small business. Categories of topics discovered in question 6 under theme 2 including number and percentage of participant responses appear in Table 2.

Table 2

Strategies to Implement in the Future

Strategies	No. of participants	%
Advertising	4	50
Advertising-Facebook specific	2	25
Expansion	3	37.5
Listen to customer feedback	1	12.5

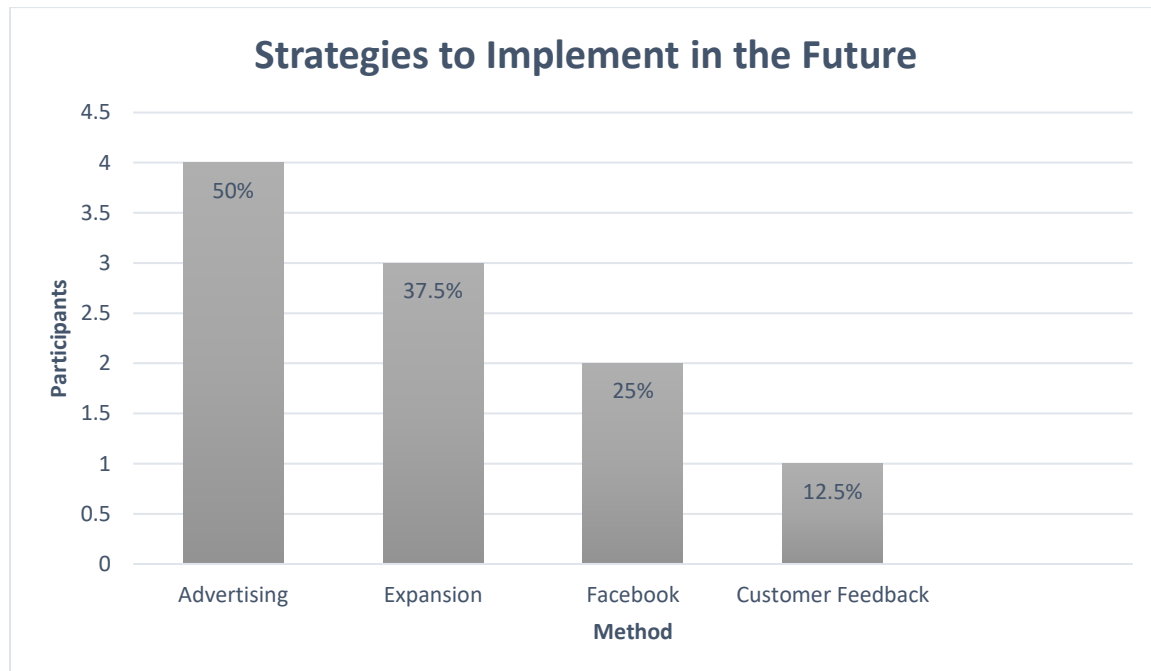Note. Some participants included multiple answers.

Figure 2. Strategies to Implement in the Future

The participants of this study shared information on methods of advertising that was successful and what had failed. P3 included, "I learned that fliers for jewelry does not work in this area." P1 stated, "In the rural areas we have people ask us why we aren't advertising near us like Unionville and southeast Iowa. We are doing basketball games, we are advertising on the radio. So, it is very hard in this area, it is a very close-minded town. If we could get, see I would like to buy some advertising on some of the billboards. The billboards cost a lot, but that is something we did for a while. We are trying a new radio advertising. We are trying to get some marketing fliers." P6 added, "Advertising is probably the way you would overcome the obstacle by being known. Google and the internet are really great." P3 added, "I know some people do more advertising like TV, which is pretty expensive which I have done a little bit, but I really go more after the customer referrals. That seems to work really good." The results of the interview questions showed that billboard advertising was not affordable and efficient, fliers do not work for specific industries, television is not affordable, radio is used to reach outlying communities, and internet platforms such as Google or social media are affordable and efficient. Participants suggested that they chose to advertise by price and reach.

Facebook. Facebook is a social media platform for information sharing and community engagement (Dai, Dai, He, He, Tian, Tian, & Gu, 2017). P3 stated:

 "I grew up here, so I kind of knew what, it use to be more agricultural though when I first got into business so I did more advertising on the radio for more ag shows but agricultural is not as big as it used to be 30 years ago, so I don't do

that. It is trended more towards the Facebook and probably Twitter and those

other accounts which I haven't tried any of those yet."

Facebook's user population has grown from 200 million in 2009 to 1.35 billion in

2014 in which more than 60% used the platform daily (Coleman, Cote, Gu, & Chandler,

2015).

Small business advertising has taken a shift from traditional methods of radio and

television to an online platform such as social media and online websites. Social media

marketing promotes businesses to gain visibility, viability, and sustainability to remain

competitive (Taneja & Toombs, 2014). With the increase of cell phone, computer, and

internet usage more customers have shifted towards gathering information online and

shopping on the internet. P3 stated, "I don't know if it is just a rural community because

it is now online sales. Amazon is really pushing; they are going after online business. I

think that is a big strategy that would lead to going to online sales eventually because it is

so easy to just sit at your computer than going out and braving the elements and all those

shoppers." The internet and online availability has created a market of convenience for

many consumers. Rural small businesses are susceptible to online competition as

compared to their urban counterparts. However, rural small businesses may be at an

increased disadvantage because of the limited goods and resources of the physical area

which may push consumers to shop more online.

Social media can be used to engage customers and enhance customer

relationships to increase customer satisfaction (Trainor, Andzulis, Rapp, & Agnihotri,

2014). Small rural business managers may utilize social media such as Facebook to

advertise and reach more customers. Baseline Facebook services are free which may be a more favorable option for rural small businesses operating on a restricted budget. Using Facebook allows businesses to create brand communities without the effort of building or owning online platforms or promoting independent websites (Coleman et al., 2015). Facebook may become a useful tool for businesses in small areas to spread the word about their business and services. Internet options may have a further reach compared to billboards, fliers, radio, and television in rural areas.

Word of Mouth. Researchers define word of mouth as any positive or negative statement made by potential, current, or former customers about a product or company which is made available to multiple please or institutions including through the internet (King, Racherla, & Bush, 2014). P3 stated, "Let's see. Important factors. Well, I think it is having a good reputation and the word of mouth. That's really it because I have so many customers that say oh my friend recommended you." P4 added, "Around here, it is a smaller community, so you know you have to treat people fair or bad word will spread and that will affect your business a lot." P1 included, "I'd say word of mouth is important. The only thing that we have had that had any success at all seems to be word of mouth and Google on the computer. People are finding us on the computer."

In a rural community positive word of mouth advertising may be as useful as other methods of advertising. Within a small community reputation and social standing could prove to be more important than other social factors. Participants of this study indicated that positive word of mouth resulted in more customer referrals and positive feedback. Negative word of mouth may be damaging to customer loyalty, customer

satisfaction, gaining new customers, and profit. Attribute-oriented advertising wears out faster than emotion-oriented advertising such as word of mouth (Gopinath, Thomas, & Krishnamurthi, 2014).

Education and Experience. Authors of previous literature have identified a negative correlation between the lack of education and rural small business success. Macro-socioeconomic stressors such as limited education, unemployment, and poverty put a strain on individuals and businesses in rural communities (Kerstetter, Green, & Phillips, 2014). Limited education and economic opportunities contribute to a decreasing population in rural areas, which makes it difficult for local small businesses to remain in operation (Kerstetter et al., 2014). Rural communities have few employment and postsecondary opportunities which increases the implications of poor performance (Hill & Turney, 2016). Education of small business managers is not a guarantee for the success of any small business but does improve the likelihood of long-term sustainability. P7 stated:

> "I think admitting that we are rural is the biggest problem. A lot of people get their knowledge from a book or college course. Those things can be helpful, but they are only helpful. Really you are not going to learn very much. Admitting that you are a rural area, admitting that the rules do not apply here because they do not. Admitting that people do not have the money like they do in the city."

I asked interview question 9 to determine elements of success for a rural small business. Categories of topics discovered in question 9 under theme 1 including number and percentage of participant responses appear in Table 3.

Table 3

Participant Education

Education	No. of participants	%
High school	4	50
College level	4	50
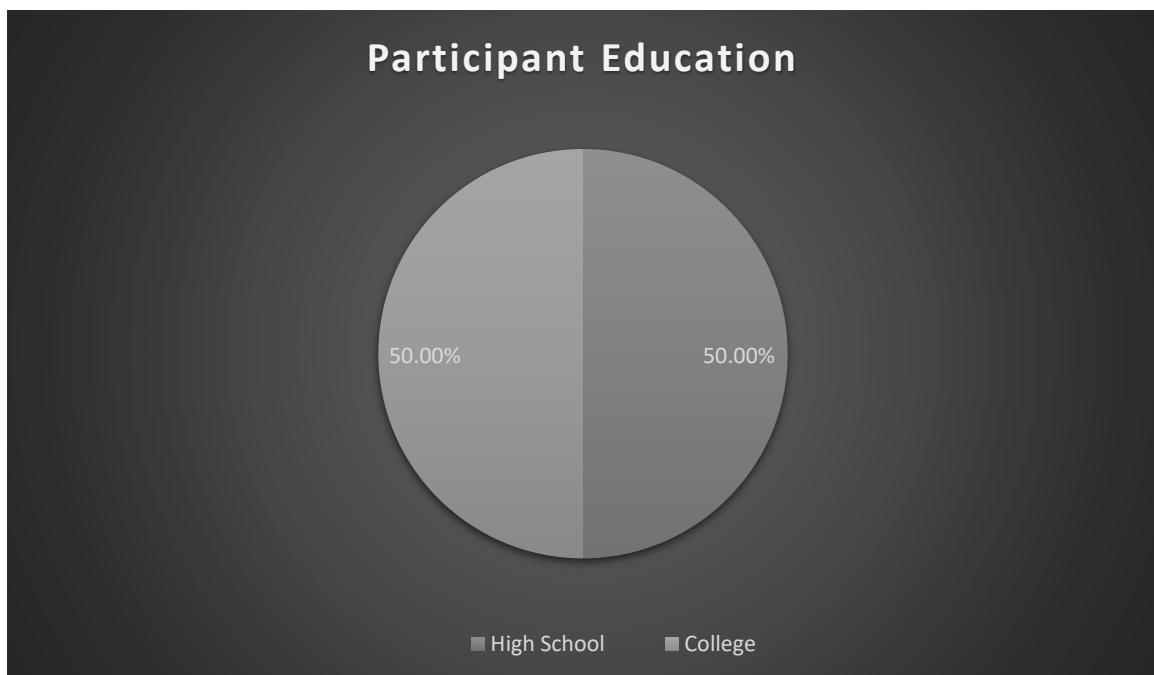
Figure 3. Participant Education

Education has a positive effect on business success, but people with more

education are not necessarily more entrepreneurial (Saleem, 2017). Education can help

rural small business managers and entrepreneurs acquire skills to better operate within

their business environment. However, education does not guarantee business success,

especially within a rural community. Higher education enabled business people to

understand the business world, but due to lack of business background, they could not

understand business world technically (Saleem, 2017). The experience of the

entrepreneur is a factor that affects business success (Saleem, 2017). A combination of

education and experience may create an advantage for rural small business managers to

remain sustainable within their community.

Participants suggested that outside of education and experience their success was

built by the process of trial and error. P4 stated, "Well, I, myself I went to Indian Hills

Community College, so they kind of teach that a little bit through their program. And

then you know just kind of trial and error." P1 included, "Trial and error. You try and

your best and if it doesn't work go on to something else. The problem with that method

is that you can't always afford trial and error. It is costly." Operating a small business in

a rural area has a different set of challenges compared to urban areas. Rural small

business managers may need to experience trial and error to discover the best business

methods, advertising, products, and services for that specific area.

Emergent theme 3: Location

Location is a significant variable of success (Saleem, 2017). P1 stated, "Our

location is hurting us. A better location could help. I just don't have it, but the biggest

portion is more of the location which is hurting us." P5 added that was important when

creating a business strategy, "Location. We wanted to be within walking distance of all

the campuses. So that was the number priority." Location hinders rural small business by

having decreased access to resources. Opposed to urban locations businesses in rural

areas struggle to obtain supplies, access markets, recruit skilled and experience labor

(Curran & Storey, 2016). Often the cost to obtain supplies and access to markets is higher than that of metropolitan counterparts.

Curran and Storey (2016) reviewed a study of Townroe and Mallalieu in which 29% of rural entrepreneur respondents indicated no advantages of being in a rural location. The participants of this study identified benefits and deficits of operating a small business in a rural location. Some identified benefits included being a part of a tight-knit community, a friendly atmosphere, and knowing the community. Some identified deficits included advertising to reach customers, identifying trends that work in a rural area, location, and operating to make a profit. However, P4 stated, "Out here some it is location. We get a lot of farmers out here because we are out in the middle of nowhere. It's not just cars basically here, and I mean in a rural area we have to work on tractors some and some farm equipment such as that to try and keep up." P4 utilized the rural location of the business and adapted the strategy to service farm equipment to stay competitive and sustainable. Not all rural small businesses can adapt to fit the needs of agricultural customers or rural necessities but if the changes can occur it may be beneficial to the enterprise.

Summary of Themes

The participants in this study discussed customer satisfaction. Each participant mentioned practices for good customer relationships or how relationships form within a rural community. Participants emphasized the importance of reputation, friendliness, and customer service. Six participants (P1, P2, P3, P4, P6, & P8) discussed the impact of treating customers fairly and providing excellent customer service and how these factors

positively impacted their businesses. Participants 3 and 5 went further to include that the

outcome included customer referrals. The sub-themes that emerged from theme 1

included customer relationships and repeat customers.

All the participants mentioned their current advertising and future plans for

advertisements. Participants 2, 3, and 7 stated that they would soon be utilizing Facebook

to reach more customers and to advertise on the internet. Participants 1, 4, 5, 6, and 8 are

already on using Facebook. The participants shared stories of what advertising methods

they have previously used, what worked, and what did not. The sub-themes that emerged

from theme 2 included Facebook, word of mouth, and education and experience.

All participants discussed location and the implications of operating in a rural

area. Physical location within the community appeared to have a significant impact on the

small operations as business has shifted from the downtown to the main highway,

Baltimore. Participant 3, specifically mentioned that their business plan was based on

location to be within walking distance of the college campus. Participants 5 and 7 stated

there was a correlation between location and pricing suggesting that prices are lower in

rural areas compared to metropolitan areas.

Institutional Theory

The results of this study align with the conceptual framework of institutional

theory. In comparison to the conceptual framework of this study, rural small businesses

must utilize means to acquire customer satisfaction to remain successful, competitive,

and sustainable within in their rural environment. Researchers use the pillars of

Institutional theory to explain the social norms and values that identify businesses within

the community and the process of making sense of reality within the rural environment (Brundin & Vigren-Kristoferson, 2013). Identifying with the community and forming relationships with customers may increase rural small business sustainability. The focus of the normative pillar is less on the institution's interests and more towards the institution's social obligations (Brundin & Vigren-Kristoferson, 2013). Rural areas with a smaller population may have more of a tight-knit community. Building relationships with customers and the community can help to strengthen business, build a reputation, and create a competitive advantage. Social constructs have been a main focus of institutional theory for three decades and continue to have a significant impact on business practices (Greenwood, Oliver, Lawrence, & Meyer, 2017).

Prevailing intuitional theory perspectives portray organizations as agentic actors that respond to situational circumstances (Greenwood et al.,2017). Participants 1, 2, 5, and 7 suggested that rural communities are unique as standards and rules are not necessarily congruent with societal norms. Within institution theory, managers steer organizations by interpreting contexts and taking appropriate actions (Greenwood et al., 2017). Participants 1, 2, and 5 specifically stated that they have experienced or continue to use trial and error to determine what methods work or what products and services are in demand. Participant 3 stated that new products are used on a trial basis to determine demand. Creating business plans and learning from trial and error could positively impact the success rate of rural small businesses.

Insights gained through institutional theory are crucial for understanding sustainability which is conceptualized through radical, long-term, socio-technical

transformations of the organization (Fuenfschilling & Truffer, 2014). Change is necessary especially for small businesses to remain competitive and sustainable. The socio-technical configuration includes finding a niche that might replace the old system (Fuenfschilling & Truffer, 2014). Participants 1, 3, 5, and 7 stated that they searched for and created a niche within their community. Within institutional theory actors purposefully shape their institutional environment and contribute to change (Fuenfschilling & Truffer, 2014). Rural small business managers must shape and adapt their business plan to fit their rural community.

All the participants of this study discussed methods and ideas to pursue change or expansion. The participants used their experience within the community to formulate strategies to remain successful and plan for long-term sustainability. The data collected in interviews support the findings of factors that are significant to long-term rural small business success. The findings correlate to the constructs of institutional theory and align with actor-environment relationships.

Applications to Professional Practice

The results of this study may prove valuable to current rural small business owners and future rural entrepreneurs. Rural small business owners may increase the likelihood of long-term sustainability by utilizing the knowledge from this study especially when creating and implementing their business plan. The findings of this study include three themes: (a) customer satisfaction, (b) advertising, and (c) location. The findings may help rural small business managers increase the chance of long-term sustainability beyond 5 years by providing important factors to consider when creating a

business strategy and operating within a rural community. Considering the impact of customer satisfaction, advertising, and location may improve the chance of survival within a rural location.

Implications for Social Change

The results of this study may help to provide strategies for rural small business to be successful beyond 5 years. Applying the knowledge cultivated from the research of this study rural small business managers may better utilize resources, create more efficient strategies, and create rural sustainability. Better allocation of resources and creation of efficient strategies may increase the chance of survival for rural small businesses. The findings of this study may allow rural small business to remain in the economic cycle longer. By remaining sustainable within the rural community and economic cycle, a rural small business may provide long-term employment opportunism. This may contribute to social change by creating jobs, reducing poverty, stimulation of the local economy, and increase the value of life in rural communities which would positively support families of rural communities.

Providing effective strategies to remain sustainable within a rural community may give entrepreneurs incentive to operate small businesses in rural areas. Increasing entrepreneurial interest could increase rural population, decrease deficits in local resources, and increase interest in rural living. Creating long-term rural small business sustainability could result in increasing long-term customer loyalty, internal growth, and create opportunities for expansion.

Recommendations for Action

      All rural small business managers and potential rural entrepreneurs should pay attention to the findings of this study. They can benefit from awareness and utilizing the strategies that rural small businesses in Kirksville have used to remain successful for over 5 years. Based on the analysis of the data collected in this case study, I recommend action from the Kirksville Small Business Development Center. I will provide the Kirksville Small Business Development Center with a copy of the findings from this study. The Kirksville, Small Business Development Center, should consider access to the results of this study for consideration for rural entrepreneurs or current rural small business managers.

      In addition, I recommend utilizing the opportunities and small business incubators provided through the Kirksville Small Business Development Center. Rural entrepreneurs may especially find this useful to discover the best methods to find a niche and approach customers within the community. The use of an incubator could also increase the likelihood of long-term sustainability, survival, and may increase revenue opportunities. Start-ups in a rural community may be particularly challenging and by utilizing resource opportunities within the local community will help support business survival.

      Current rural small business managers and potential rural entrepreneurs should learn the importance of customer satisfaction, advertising, and location when creating a business strategy and how it relates to long-term rural sustainment. By acquiring this knowledge, they can adapt their strategies to fit their rural environment. Changes made to strategies can result in an increased chance of rural small business survival, and better

help small businesses remain competitive within their community. The participants of this study proved that strategies must be flexible and open to alterations. Strategies should specifically be shaped to fit customer satisfaction, advertising, and location. Small rural business managers should listen to the feedback of their customers and their needs to better maintain a sustainable position within their business environment.

Also, I intend to elaborate further on this study to explore industry-specific strategies that result in the success of rural small businesses. I plan to continue rural research specifically on the topics of reducing poverty, business success, and rural culture. I also plan to participate in a collaborative study in another rural area to compare these factors in different states in an attempt to discover correlations and shared factors small business success or lack of.

Recommendations for Further Research

The purpose of this qualitative exploratory case study was to explore effective strategies that managers of MSEs in rural areas have used to successfully sustain small businesses in a rural community over 5 years. In this study, the limitations were the number of participants, geographical location, and the participants were not industry specific. Further research should include expanding the geographical location, increasing the number of participants, or exploring industry-specific rural small businesses. Further research may include a similar study that compares and contrast cultural factors of the future research area and Kirksville, Missouri.

Reflections

As a novice researcher, the journey through the doctoral study process was challenging. Understanding the process and going through each step was daunting. The most challenging part of the research process was finding participants that were willing to provide the time for an interview without compensation and setting up interview times. Approaching potential participants was uneasy as most did not want to participate in interviews with the possibility of lasting up to an hour. Finding the time to conduct the interviews was nearly as difficult. Overcoming these obstacles was the most time-consuming part of the process.

Considering I live in the area of research I felt as if I could have experienced bias or preconceived ideas of participant responses. I followed the protocol and stayed objective to hedge against these concerns. After conducting all of the participant interviews, I realized any previous ideas or bias had been eliminated. The participants of this study were not influenced or affected by these concerns. After completing this study, I developed a deep respect for research and dedication to the process. Regardless of previous concerns and entering as a novice, I overcame the challenges and developed an interest in future research.

Conclusion

The participants of this study are small rural business managers. Each participant has shown dedication to maintaining their success and planning for long-term sustainment. Finding a niche and learning from trial and error have proven to lead to rural small business success. The participants showed that hard work and dedication despite

long hours and failures opposed to giving up will result in success. Each participant

fought through obstacles and pushed towards success despite the challenges of being in a

small rural area.

The research question of this study was: What effective strategies are used by

managers of MSEs in rural areas to successfully sustain a small business? The

participants of this study relied on their experiences, skills, and education to understand

their community and remain sustainable. The participants expressed that it is not just

education or the numbers that equal success. Often success comes in the form of

customer satisfaction and serving the local community. Learning to understand, support,

and become a positive part of a rural community can provide great benefits for rural

small business managers.

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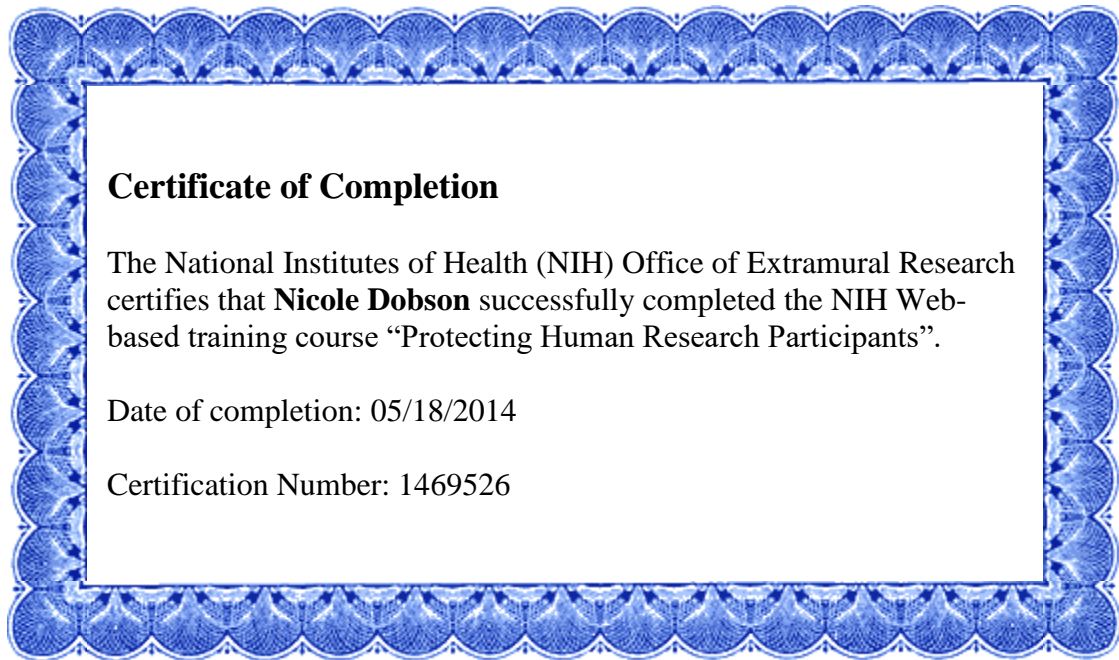
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Appendix A: Certificate of Ethical Research Compliance

Certificate of Completion

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) Office of Extramural Research certifies that **Nicole Dobson** successfully completed the NIH Web-based training course "Protecting Human Research Participants".

Date of completion: 05/18/2014

Certification Number: 1469526

Appendix B: Informed Consent

Date

Dear Business Manager,

You are invited to participate in a research study on effective strategy for rural small businesses in Kirksville, Missouri. The title of this study is "Effective Strategies to Sustain Small Businesses in Rural Areas". The researcher is inviting small business managers that have sustained business operations over the past five years and small business managers that experienced failed business operations within the past five years in Kirksville, Missouri. This form is part of a process called "informed consent" to offer you all details of the study before deciding whether to participate.

A researcher named Nicole Dobson, a student in the Doctorate of Business Administration program at Walden University is conducting this study.

Background Information:
The purpose of this study is to explore common elements that contribute to effective strategies for the long-term sustainment of rural small businesses.

Procedures:
If you agree to participate in this study you will be asked to:
- Participate in one 45-60 minute face to face interview that is audio recorded and transcribed.
- Conduct member checking. A process where the researcher will interpret your perspective, present findings, and ensure that it matches with your intentions before writing the final results.

Sample interview questions include:
- What strategies have been utilized in the past 12 months to improve the sustainability of your business?

- How do you define and measure the success of your business?

- What managerial skills are necessary to operate a successful business in your area?
- How have you adapted, changed, or altered your business strategies to fit your rural environment/culture? And why?

Voluntary Nature of this Study:
Participation in this study is voluntary. There will be no discourse if you decline or decide to remove yourself from this study at any time. If you no longer wish to participate after consenting there will be no penalty and your information and data will be destroyed.

Risks and Benefits of Participating in this Study:
Participating in this study would not pose a risk to your health or safety. Potential benefits of this study may include offering new insights into effective strategies for rural small businesses and being a part of rural social change to increase jobs and population retention.

Payment:
There are no monetary compensations or gifts for participating in this study.

Privacy:
Any information that you provide will be kept confidential including your name or name of the business. Participants will be identified as P1-P8 to protect the identity of all participants. All information collected through interviews will not be used for any purpose outside of this research study. All written information and data will be kept in a locked key cabinet. All electronic data will be kept on a password secured hard drive. Information and data collected during this study will be held for 5 years and then destroyed.

Contacts and Questions:
If you have any general questions or concerns regarding this study contact Nicole Dobson by telephone (660) 349-0405 or e-mail nicole.dobson@waldenu.edu. If you want to discuss privately your rights, you can contact Dr. Leilani Endicott, Walden University representative, by telephone (612) 312-1210. The Walden University approval number for this study is 09-01-16-0477227, and it expires on September 5, 2018.

Statement of Consent:
I have read the above information and understand the study well enough to make a decision of my involvement. <u>By replying, "I consent" to this e-mail, you are confirming that you agree to the terms of this study and wish to participate.</u>

Appendix C: Semi-structed Interview Questions

1. What strategies have been utilized in the past 12 months to improve the sustainability of your business?

2. How do you define and measure the success of your business?

3. What managerial skills are necessary to operate a successful business in your area?

4. How have you adapted, changed, or altered your business strategies to fit your rural environment/culture? And why?

5. What do you feel are the most important factors of a business strategy for long-term rural success?

6. What differentiates your business strategy from other competitive small businesses in the area?

7. What strategies will you implement in the future to ensure the sustainability of your business?

8. What are the main obstacles or challenges of creating and implementing a successful business strategy in a rural community? And how do you overcome these challenges?

9. What are the most important factors you considered when creating your business plan or strategy?

10. What education and experience do you have that has contributed to your managerial success?

11. What impact if any does rural culture have on your business?

12. Which is more important to your success managerial skills, education, or understanding the community? And why?

13. What gives your business a competitive advantage to remain open and sustainable?

14. What qualities make a successful rural small business manager?

Appendix D: Interview Protocol

Date _____   Time _____

Location _____   Participant_____

Interviewer _____   Participant Identifier _____

I.   Introduce researcher and review the purpose of the study.

II.   Review the informed consent form elaborating on the voluntary nature of this study and that the participant can retract at any time. Give the participant a copy of the informed consent form.

III.   Ask participant if they have any questions. Answer any questions.

IV.   Ask participant for permission to begin recording. Turn on audio devices.

V.   Introduce the participant by their assigned code include time and date.

VI.   Begin interview starting with question #1 and ending with question #8.

VII.   Ask follow up questions.

VIII.   Take researcher notes.

IX.   End the interview. Discuss the interview transcription and member checking process with the participant.

X.   Provide contact information for the researcher and thank participant for their participation in the study.

XI.   End the protocol and turn off the audio device.