



“Exploring Phenomenological in Relationship Marketing Practices of Sarawak Women Entrepreneurs”

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ABSTRACT

Building and maintaining a long-term relationship with others are an important aspect of women entrepreneurs in operating their businesses. The interpersonal relationship has been acknowledged as the main factor to define relationship marketing. Despite the recognition of the interpersonal relationship as an important skill, there are still limited exploratory qualitative studies to comprehend and help understand the nature of the interpersonal relationship of women entrepreneurs within the context of relationship marketing. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to understand the meaning and practices of relationship marketing concept by women entrepreneurs within the context of relationship marketing. This study adopts qualitative phenomenological method using in-depth interviews to extract and identify the relationship marketing common practices of the lived interpersonal relationships experiences of 10 women entrepreneurs from Kuching, Sarawak, Malaysia. The study follows Creswell's (2013) data analysis and representation for phenomenological approach and generate five emergent themes: 1) Social Bonding Leading to Long-term Friendship; 2) Coalition with Rivals; 3) Empathetic Towards Customers' Needs; 4) Uprightness is Key to Good Reputation and Image; and 5) Network of Relationship. While the finding may not be generalised to other studies and therefore becomes the limitation of this study. Nevertheless, the findings may encourage researchers to look beyond the studies of personal traits and characteristics of women entrepreneurs.

Keywords: Interpersonal relationships; Relationship Marketing; Women Entrepreneurs; Qualitative Research

1. INTRODUCTION

Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) play a pivotal role in almost all economies of the world. Even though small in nature, they are, however, acknowledged and recognised as the engine of economic growth in job creation, revenue generation, poverty alleviation and provide communities such as women to acquire wealth (Kelly, Brush, Greene, & Litovsky, 2010). Entrepreneurship is significantly important as it allows women to have a better work-life balance, be self-sufficient and the autonomy to manage their life and the livelihood of their families (Huq, 2012).

Evidence has shown that women-owned companies are found to have 50 percent less capital compared to men-owned firms, while as small as three percent of new firms received venture capital funding have women CEOs in 2014 (Aidis, Weeks, & Anocker, 2015). Due to this, women entrepreneurs tend to run small businesses (Tambunan, 2009) where their normal routine would be to leverage on creating close relationships with their customers, suppliers, and employees (Brush, 1992). The core of relationship marketing is the relations, building and maintaining of relations between businesses and the actors in the marketing environment (Gronroos, 1994). Whilst there is this understanding that women entrepreneur are known to leverage on close relationships and on the other hand, relationship marketing lean towards the importance of relationships, therefore, it brings to mind the question of how does these two phenomenon be understood from the perspective of women entrepreneurs? Insofar, there are limited studies on women entrepreneur practice of relationship marketing (RM) demonstrating their interpersonal relationships skills and ability. As such, the primary focus of this study is to investigate to what extend does women entrepreneurs uses interpersonal relationship and how it interweave into relationship marketing practices.

Also, the study is interested in exploring into women entrepreneurs from other communities in Malaysia, especially those from Sarawak, East Malaysia that had received scant attention. As such, this study will bring forth the importance to explore in-depth the significant lived experiences of women entrepreneurs operating businesses in Sarawak. Therefore, the corresponding research questions are: How do women entrepreneurs use interpersonal relationship and interweave this with relationship marketing practices? Do interpersonal relationships play a major role in their RM practices?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Women Entrepreneurs and Interpersonal Relationships

Buttner and Moore (1997) defined “Female Entrepreneur” or woman entrepreneur as a woman who has initiated a business, runs and manages the business, owns at least 50 percent of the firm, and the business has been in operation for at least a year. Women’s primary concern was always about combining

responsibility of work and family (Kargwell, 2012), and being entrepreneurs provide the flexibility to balance family and work. Women entrepreneurs view their business as only one part of a wider structure which includes family, community and friends.

The personal traits commonly highlighted is that women are particularly good at cultivating interpersonal relationships (Idris, 2008). Women entrepreneurs often derive results by being people-oriented and prefer teamwork rather than working alone (Alam, Jani, & Omar, 2011). Intrinsically, women entrepreneurs seek to develop inclusive, reciprocal, collaborative, social relationships through their networking activities, an evidence of gender effects that drove them to be entrepreneurially ambitious (Hampton, Cooper, & McGowan, 2009). It is crucial to women entrepreneurs as interpersonal skills and relationships are important for women entrepreneurs to succeed (Brush, 1992; Gundry & Welsch, 2001). According to Manolova, Brush, Edelman, and Shaver (2012), female entrepreneurs tend to expand their businesses to achieve personal goals by using their strong interpersonal skills.

2.2 Characteristics of Relationship Marketing (RM)

Gronroos (1994) described “Relationship Marketing” or RM as mutually benefitting and valuable long-term relationships with customers. Harker and Egan (2006) postulate that the definition presented by Gronroos (1994) is the best as its coverage of the underlying conceptualizations of RM. The definition encompasses the overall definition of RM as it identifies and establishes, maintains, and enhances relationships with customers at a profit, at the same time meeting company’s objectives through mutual exchange and fulfilment of promises. Hunt, Arnett, and Madhavaram (2006) conceptualise RM competence as a firm’s ability to identify, develop, and manage cooperative relationships with customers through trust, relationship commitment, and communication. Callaghan and Shaw (2001) defined RM as centralise on the creation and maintenance of the relationship between two parties of exchange possessing emphatic, reciprocal, trusting and to form bonds. A successful adoption of RM results from cooperative relationships, network and interaction (Gummesson, 1994) that characterise successful relational exchange (Hunt, 1997; Hunt et al., 2006). RM is applicable if customers who are highly involved in goods and services which include the element of personal interaction are willing to engage in relationship building activities as stated by O'Malley and Tynan (2000). RM’s main objectives are to achieve customer satisfaction, customer delight, customer retention and customer loyalty (Lindgreen, 2001).

The relationship marketing models developed by Callaghan and Shaw (2001) discussed trust, empathy, reciprocity and bonding, while Lindgreen (2001) construct almost similar factors such as dependence, trust, commitment, cooperation and equity. Abdullah and Kanyan (2013) suggested

communication, trust, empathy and commitment as essential ingredients in customer-firm relationships in the foodservice industry. Sin et al. (2005) hypothesise that relationship marketing is a one-dimensional construct consisting of six components such as trust, bonding, communication, shared value, empathy and reciprocity. Lastly, reciprocity is the component of a business relationship that causes either party to provide favours or return for similar favours at a later date (Callaghan et al., 1995).

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Method

The strategy of inquiry adopted by this qualitative study was phenomenology. Therefore, the philosophical assumptions that guide this study come from three main assumptions. These are epistemological, ontological and axiological assumptions. Also, taking from an epistemological interpretive position, the study seeks to explain the phenomenon from the perspective of the women entrepreneurs (Creswell, 2013). From the perspective of ontological assumptions, the researcher must decide that reality is subjective and multiple as seen by participants in the study (Creswell, 2013). It is axiological as it deals with the role of researcher's values and ethics in the study process (Creswell, 2013).

An interview protocol containing a series of open-ended questions guided the interviews to gain an understanding of the participants' interpersonal relationships experiences in the context of relationship marketing practices. The phenomenon under this study is Sarawak women entrepreneurs in running own businesses. Additionally, all participants were operating their businesses at the time of the study. Given the research questions and the research paradigms, this methodology is appropriate where a phenomenological study aims to extract from different participants the common meaning of the lived experiences of a concept or phenomena (Creswell, 2013). With the use of phenomenological experiences, this study would provide a wealth of a "life-worlds," intensely personal perspectives (Moustakas, 1994), especially with limited literature on women entrepreneurs in Sarawak. The researcher takes on an inductive perspective to describe as accurately as possible the phenomenon, without any pre-conceived framework focusing on the actual truth of the subject involved.

3.2 The Participants

Purposeful and criterion sampling (Patton, 1990) was adopted to this study as it is a strategy in which a particular setting, persons or events are deliberately selected for the relevant information that could provide that cannot be gotten elsewhere (Maxwell, 2008). It also aims to include wide across a section of different ethnic backgrounds as possible. The sample size for this study follows several authors'

procedures. Suggestion by Polkinghorne (1989) recommended researcher to interview 5 – 25 individuals who experienced a similar phenomenon as cited in Creswell (2013), while Morse (1994) suggested at least six interviews. The focus of small sample size in qualitative research should be based more on factors such as depth and the duration of the interview and what is feasible for a single interviewer (Britten, 1995). Furthermore, there is a gap in the literature identifying women entrepreneurs practising relationship marketing using their interpersonal relationships abilities. Since the purpose of describing the phenomena with in-depth where the unit of analysis is a small group of ten women entrepreneurs located in one geographical area in the capital city of Kuching, Sarawak, Malaysia, therefore, this study finds it appropriate to adopt the phenomenology qualitative method.

3.3 Interview Process

An in-depth interview with ten women entrepreneurs employed the format suggested by Seidman's (1991) "phenomenological based interviewing" as the method for gathering data (p.9). The interviews were conducted in English, and each participant was notified the right to withdraw from the study at any time. Permission was requested to audio-taped the conversation. The interviews lasted between 45 – 90 minutes and were then transcribed verbatim and saved into Microsoft Word documents for safe-keeping.

3.4 Data Analysis

The data gathered from all the ten interviews were summarised focusing on the participants' interpersonal relationships experiences and the relationship marketing practices. The texts of all ten interviews were analysed and findings organised thematically to allow themes that were essential to the formation of lived experiences of the participants as women entrepreneurs (Creswell, 2013). Verbatim was applied to illustrate support for the themes (Moustakas, 1994).

The data coding process used Atlas.ti7 program by creating primary documents from the transcripts. According to Seidel (1998), there involved three components of noticing, collecting and thinking about the data as core elements common to data analysis. In comparison to other qualitative practices, phenomenology provides a clear-cut method of analysis as advanced by Moustakas (1994). Before making any attempt to code, the researcher must first spend a period of "digesting and reflecting" on the data (Clarke, 2005, p.84) by reading the transcribed data line by line and sort the data into meaningful analytical units before coding them. Table 3.2 provides a summary of the data analysis and representation procedure illustrated by Creswell (2013) and adopted by the researcher.

Table 1 Data Analysis and Representation

<i>Data Analysis and Representation</i>	<i>Phenomenology Approach</i>	<i>Procedures</i>
<i>Data organisation</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Create and organise files for data.</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 10 interviews were transcribed using Atlas.ti7 qualitative data analysis program software. • Each interview took 2 – 3 days to transcribe. • Upon completion, the transcripts were sent through email for participants to review and comment.
<i>Reading, memoing</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Read through text, make margin notes, form initial codes</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Researcher immerses into the data to gain detailed insights into the phenomena being explored.</i> • <i>Initial noting yielding descriptive, linguistic and conceptual comments</i>
<i>Describing the data into codes and themes</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Describe personal experiences through epoche</i> • <i>Describe the essence of the phenomenon</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Researcher described personal experiences and recognised the limitation of separation from the study</i> • <i>Uses line by line coding as initial coding or open coding</i> • <i>Initial coding yielded early descriptive codes</i>
<i>Classifying the data into codes and themes</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Develop significant statements</i> • <i>Group statements into meaning units</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development of initial themes from descriptive codes • Further category development leading to final themes • <i>Pattern coding was adopted to assist in assembling the codes into meaningful patterns</i>
<i>Interpreting the data</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Develop a textural description “what happened”</i> • <i>Develop a structural description, “how” the phenomenon was experienced</i> • <i>Develop “essence”</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Wrote long paragraph to provide narrative description of what participants experience (Textural description) and how participants experienced it (structural description).</i> • <i>Combined these two descriptions into a longer description that communicates the essence of the experience.</i>
<i>Representing, visualising the data</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Present narration of the “essence” of the experience</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Presentations in the forms of tables, figures and discussion.</i>

(Source: Creswell, 2013)

3.5 Trustworthiness

To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, transcriptions of the interviews were sent to participants for member validation (Seale, 1999) or member check (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Stake, 2010) to avoid misinterpretation of the actual meaning participants say and do. Upon ‘validity check’ with the individual participants, there were some minor modifications made to ensure the essence of the interview were corrected and at the same time, certain sensitive responses were deleted from the transcripts at the request of the interviewees. Peer review was employed after the completion of the first round of coding to validate

the selection of codes from the interview data and additional review of the descriptive codes to defend the grouping of codes.

4. RESULTS

The results of this qualitative phenomenological study is further elaborated. A series of perspectives were established concerning the phenomenon of interpersonal relationship and relationship marketing practices of women entrepreneurs. To maintain confidentiality, the participants represented in this study are referred to as WE1, WE2, WE3, WE4, WE5, WE6, WE7, WE8, WE9 and WE10.

4.1 Demographic Characteristics of the Participants

A complete demographic profile of the participants is presented in Table 4.1.

Table 2 Demographic Profile of the Women Entrepreneurs

Participants	Years in Businesses	Working Experiences	Age	Marital Status	Child Dependent	Elderly Dependent	Nature of Business	Ethnicity	Religion
WE1	4	YES	47	Single	-	YES	Event Management Services	Iban	Christian
WE2	10	YES	51	Married	YES	-	Bookstore and Health Supplement**	Chinese	Buddhist
WE3	9	YES	49	Married	YES	-	SPA Management & Modern Handicrafts **	Orang Ulu	Muslim
WE4	7	YES	47	Divorced	NO	-	Handicraft Retail Outlet	Sikh	Hindu
WE5	15	YES	62	Married	NO	-	Fashion Boutique & Homestay **	Eurasian Malay	Muslim
WE6	10	YES	51	Married	YES	-	Corporate Gifts & Restaurant **	Bidayuh	Christian
WE7	3	YES	33	Single	YES	YES	Graphic Design and Multimedia & Fitness Centre **	Iban	Christian
WE8	7	YES	50	Married	YES	-	Perfume Boutique	Chinese	Christian
WE9	23	YES	54	Married	NO	-	Construction & Homestay **	Bidayuh	Christian
WE10	23	YES	63	Married	NO	YES	Food Restaurant	Indian	Hindu

*Note: ** Women Entrepreneurs who own two types of businesses (Source: Author's compilation, 2016)*

4.2 Phenomenological Description of Lived Experiences

The findings from the interviewed women entrepreneurs revealed similar factors and repeated emphasis on how the participants use interpersonal relationships and interweave this with relationship

marketing practices. contributing to the understanding of relationship marketing practices. Five themes emerged and are categorised as 1) Social Bonding Leading to Long-term Friendship; 2) Coalition with Rivals; 3) Empathetic Towards Customers Needs; 4) Uprightness is Key to Good Reputation and Image; and 5) Network of Relationship.

4.2.1 Social Bonding Leading to Long-term Friendship

Bonding is an essential element of relationship marketing. It is strong ties that had been established between two parties to create a long-term relationship (Sin et al., 2005). The significance of the meaning of interpersonal relationship and the RM practices stood out as an interpretation of business and customers are not merely monetary value, but also about having a humanistic interaction which requires humanistic “talents” to offer products successfully to customers. Interpersonal relationship is about keeping in touch regularly, communicate, mixing with different levels of people to form an understanding, personal touch when dealing with customers, being friendly with others and prefers personal, humanistic touch. The interview data highlighted that each participant makes time and effort to establish a long-term relationship with their customers.

The participants had a preference in initiating friendly and personal relationships when with customers for the first time. They confessed to feeling uncomfortable discussing business for the first time and rather create friendship and built rapport at the early stage of the relationship. According to Wilson (1995), having strong interpersonal relationships will ensure both parties to be committed in maintaining the relationship. In this respect, the humanistic ties created by the women entrepreneurs with their customers turned them into friends and treated them more like a family rather than as customers:

“I interact with my customers. Most of my customers know me very well...personally. And, what happened...when there is function or family gathering, during Deepavali I do invite them to my home. So, it's a win win situation...continue the relationship. And then...that is my customers.” (WE10)

As mentioned by one of the participants who is confident about her relationships with her customers said “I think, along the way, first, my asset is I am friendly to my customer. That is to me is an asset”. (WE6).

4.2.2 Coalition with Rivals

The second theme that emerged is teamwork with competitors as an integral aspect of playing complementary roles sharing expertise and resources leading to “win-win” situation. The phenomenon behind this theme illustrates the recognition of the resource and expertise limitation women entrepreneurs

faced. Also, frequent cooperation reduced potential problems with both customers and competitors and therefore the need to create a complementary relationship.

Working in close cooperation (Morgan & Hunt, 1994) with their supplier, staff, non-governmental organisations and other women entrepreneurs is also crucial because they believe in future ventures that might need their collaboration. According to Abosag and Naude (2014), those parties that rendered special attention to the cooperative relationship will place special personal relationship to exist between them. WE1 believed that sabotaging competitors are never a good idea as she could foresee that they could be her collaborators in future ventures.

"Never....ever sabotage them. One day you might need them. Like what....yes...we have a few competitors...but we work with them. We even sub-contract some of the event....the services that we know we cannot do. So, we sub-contract it to them. And they will assist us in doing the things we can't do." (WE1)

4.2.3 Empathetic Towards Customers Needs

Empathy was highlighted as factors integral to understand the needs and wants of customers (Callaghan et al., 1995; Sin et al., 2005; Firdaus et al., 2014). Some of the women entrepreneurs reiterated that relying on each other and not let others down is a factor in building long-term relationships. This reflects the feeling of empathy they possessed towards their customers. As mentioned by WE8, building relationship is to "empathise" to the needs of individual customer and not generalise that all customers are the same:

"I will only do this. When you sell to a student for example, you sell it differently, you know their needs. They need something or they want something but they don't have the money for it. So, a lot of salespeople, they will actually push product that is expensive because they want to achieve their goals. While's for my staff, I will tell them...look you got to know...the....what the customer needs, rather than what you want to achieve by the end of the day. So, for example, students enter our shop, we know they lacked money. They don't have money to spend, especially in perfumes. But what we do have is probably, instead of going for branded they can go for something that is non branded. Give them quality products but not exorbitant price." (WE8)

4.2.4 Uprightness is Key to Good Reputation and Image

Integrity, honesty and respecting others are examples of uprightness highlighted during several of the interviews. The ability to keep personal and confidential information about the clients is factors in building customer trust (Abosag & Naude, 2014). Some believe that integrity and honesty are part of the daily work standard when running their business.

"You know, I have clients who are the ministers' wives.... you know the ministers. You know I massage them right? So, I also have to understand, you know? They are, people like us....they are....we have less stress. But they are stressful people....you know, they don't get along with each other but....(exclaimed) she also your client ba! What can I do? I cannot do anything. I only can say, trust me, I told them. Trust me. Whatever you said will not go out from this room." (WE3)

Also, the women entrepreneurs mentioned that it is important to be “yourself” as an illustration that being honest with themselves as a person, need to know the difference between doing right and wrong and intolerant to those who are dishonest. Take, for example WE10 was not very pleased when her supplier cheated her and charged a higher bill. She made a decision to stop purchasing supplies from him. As such uprightness is important as this leads to building good reputation and image for the participants.

4.2.5 Network of Relationship

The third theme demonstrated is that there exists a personal connection between the participants and the customers. Evidently, almost all of the participants in this study developed a range of different networks not only in their business circles, but also with the community and society at large with the belief that doing business involves knowing the right people.

“That’s why to me, networking also is very important. Because some of the...the six business, four of them is from my.....you know....ex-colleague from my previous company. You know....They are the one who recommended even if it is with a small amount also it’s something you know...” (WE1)

As described by the participants, being in the “inside” circle or having the right “cable” assist the business tremendously in obtaining preferential treatments (Odekerken-Schroder, De Wulf & Schumacher, 2003). Additionally, creating close relationships include being confident, familiar, friendly, the feelings of acceptance, social interactivity and trust. Maintaining a good relationship is the best way to enhance the relationship (Abosag & Naude, 2014). From the responses of the participants, for the relationships to work, there is a general understanding between the participants with the network of contacts which was built on the trustworthiness of the person or business. According to WE3, the relationships created is not simply for businesses, but also between individuals at a personal level, and this always includes being ready to offer service or favours, treats customers fairly, be dependable, reliable and keeping promises. For the women entrepreneurs, the relationship is an on-going process leading to lifelong relationships and friendships.

This study asserts that interpersonal relationship provides important new insight into the women entrepreneurs’ formulation of their relationship marketing practices. From the analysis of the transcript data, it brings to light, that the women entrepreneurs were subconsciously practising relationship marketing. It was further reiterated that without interpersonal relationship, the participants admittedly would not go far in the business world. Arrogance, mistrust, miscommunication, lack of integrity are some factors which are detrimental to interpersonal relationship, the foundation of relationship marketing practices. According to the participants, good interpersonal relationship brings about more customers and business continues to grow.

From the methodological point of view, the narratives of these women entrepreneurs allow researchers to understand how women make sense of their lived experiences to construct the interpersonal relationship values and the practice of relationship marketing in dealing with their clients and stakeholders. This study provides new insights into Sarawak women entrepreneurs' formulation of the interpersonal relationship as an intrinsic value which existed within their feminine makeup. More attention should be given to understanding interpersonal relationships as a foundation to strengthen relationship marketing practices as it has demonstrated to be appropriate for small firm practices (Day, Dean & Reynolds, 1998). Also, this study of women entrepreneurs of Sarawak, Malaysia supports the findings of women in the United States that favoured relationship marketing tactics (Gordon, McKeage & Fox, 1998).

However, this finding may not be generalised to other studies and therefore, becomes the limitation of this study. Nevertheless, the findings may encourage researchers to look beyond the studies of personal traits and characteristics of women entrepreneurs.

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