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**Relationship Exploitation in Network Marketing:
A Case Study of Channel Members' Experiences in
Mutare, Zimbabwe**

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Abstract

Network marketing, pioneered in the 1950s, has taken Zimbabwe by storm, with giants like Avon, Tupperware and Oriflamme leading the charge. The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore this lucrative business framework of relationships and persuasion by delving into channel members' experiences in Mutare, Zimbabwe. Through intimate interviews with 25 Oriflamme and Bell Lifestyle channel members, segmented into three experience-based categories, this research exposes the intricate dynamics of relationship exploitation. The study established that dominant factors driving relationship exploitation are emotional upliftment, personality development, and financial benefits. Furthermore, relationship exploitation is rampant, fueled by persuasion from friends and relatives. This study serves as a clarion call to channel members, highlighting the imperative of sustainable win-win relationships. By recognizing relationships as the foundation of network marketing, channel members must

navigate the delicate balance among selection, maintenance, and nurturing to avoid exploitation and ensure long term success.

Keywords: *Network Marketing, Relationship Exploitation, Channel Member Perspectives, Sustainable Business Practices*

1.Introduction

Network promotion operates within a dynamic business framework, reliant on individual representatives working primarily from home to facilitate customer sales (Carter & Lee, 2024). A well-structured business framework is essential for building a robust network of business partners and sales agents, as emphasized by Bloch (2016). This framework has become an attractive opportunity for both seasoned entrepreneurs and novices due to its unique benefits which include flexibility and unlimited earning potential (Smith & Nguyen, 2024). Leveraging is the cornerstone of network marketing, enabling individuals to achieve exponential growth (Jones, 2015; Rodriguez, 2024). Teaching others to replicate the business fosters a culture of mutual support and collective success in network marketing (Kumar & Kumar, 2023). Human nature drives us to strive for more, and network marketing taps into this desire, offering opportunities for extra incentives (Nguyen & Smith, 2024). This study investigates channel members' perspectives on relationship exploitation (friends, relatives, and colleagues) and their attitudes towards network marketing (Carter & Lee, 2024). Understanding these views is vital for assessing their impact on members' experiences and the remarkable growth of network marketing (Kumar & Kumar, 2023).

Zimbabwe has embraced network marketing, with prominent players such as Avon, Tupperware, Oriflamme, Table Charm, Bell Health Lifestyle, Inuka Fragrances, and Alliance in Motion Global operating in the country. The attractive commission structure, rewarding channel members for direct sales and sales generated by their recruits, has driven its popularity (Kumar & Kumar, 2023). This means channel members earn commissions from personal sales, sales made by recruited friends and relatives, and their networks' sales (Nguyen & Smith, 2024). Recent studies have noted a growing interest in network marketing in Zimbabwe, attracting numerous entrepreneurs (Carter & Lee, 2024). However, research also reveals a concerning trend: high attrition rates plague the industry. Furthermore, a troubling pattern has emerged, where

the sales workforce at certain companies undergoes significant turnover every year (Rodriguez, 2023).

Multi-level marketing exemplified by companies like Bell Lifestyle and Oriflamme in Mutare, Zimbabwe, has raised concerns about the exploitation of personal relationships for financial gain (Mukwazhe, 2024). Despite its popularity, the dynamics of relationship exploitation in these companies remain unclear, prompting an investigation into the ethical implications of such practices. Alarming, 75% of network marketing participants in Zimbabwe report feeling pressured to recruit friends and family, while 60% experience financial losses (Zimbabwe Network Marketing Association, 2022). Furthermore, a staggering 90% of participants earn less than \$100 monthly, raising questions about the sustainability of these business frameworks (World Federation of Direct Selling Associations, 2023). This study aims to address the problems of exploitation, lack of understanding, and ethical concerns by examining the exploitation of relationships in Bell Lifestyle and Oriflamme's network marketing operations and assessing the experiences of channel members.

2. Literature Review

Recent studies have examined the psychological impact of Multi-Level Marketing (MLM) participation. For instance, Taylor (2022) found that MLM involvement can lead to financial stress, anxiety, and decreased self-esteem. Similarly, Katz and Fodor (2020) discovered that MLM participants often experience feelings of guilt, shame, and embarrassment due to their inability to achieve promised financial success. This literature review aims to explore the nuances of MLM, separating fact from fiction, and examining its effects on individuals and the economy. By analyzing the existing research, we can better understand the implications of MLM participation and the potential consequences for those involved. Effective communication, trust, and support are crucial for successful network marketing relationships (Chikweche, 2020). However, power imbalances and lack of transparency can lead to exploitation (Mukwazhe, 2022).

Studies indicate that network marketing, a form of direct sales, distinguishes itself through its unique compensation structure, allowing distributors to generate revenue via two key streams: (1) sales commissions from direct sales to customers, and (2) override commissions from sales made by recruited team members (Poon,

2013). This approach has been popularized by companies like Amway since the 1950s. However, research suggests that consumers often view direct selling organizations, particularly network marketing companies negatively. Studies by Taylor (2022), Katz and Fodor (2020), and Mukwazhe (2022) highlight aggressive selling techniques, exaggerated recruitment claims, and pyramid scams as major concerns. These unethical practices exploit personal relationships for financial gain, leading to widespread criticism. Recent research by Chikweche (2020) and Ncube (2022) argues that MLM schemes instrumentalise love and affection, making them socially and psychologically unacceptable. In contrast, traditional direct marketing focuses on targeting customers without relying on retail distribution. Network marketing takes this approach further by recruiting and training independent salespersons.

Studies reflect that the appeal of network marketing in developing countries stems from its potential for financial empowerment, particularly among marginalized communities (Mpinganjira, 2015). MLMs offer flexible income opportunities, allowing individuals to supplement their earnings or transition into entrepreneurship (Katz & Fodor, 2020). However, critics argue that MLMs often target vulnerable individuals, exploiting their financial desperation and lack of business acumen (Bloch, 2016a). Furthermore, the emphasis on recruitment can lead to an oversaturated market, making it challenging for distributors to generate sales and sustain their businesses (Chikweche, 2020). To mitigate these risks, it is essential for MLM companies to prioritize product sales, ensure transparent compensation plans, and provide adequate training and support for distributors (Krige, 2012). Regulatory bodies must also enforce consumer protection laws, monitor MLM activities and address concerns about exploitation and pyramid schemes (Mukwazhe, 2022). Ultimately, network marketing can be a viable business framework in developing countries, offering income opportunities and entrepreneurial growth, provided it is conducted ethically and sustainably.

The exponential growth of network marketing in emerging economies such as Zimbabwe, underscores its potential for financial inclusion and entrepreneurship. This business model leverages a dual revenue approach, empowering independent distributors to monetize their networks through sales commissions and override incentives (Keller & Kotler, 2022). Effective compensation structures drive engagement, retention, and organizational growth, while relational dynamics and entrepreneurial spirit fuel the industry's momentum. As network

marketing continues to evolve, its impact on global commerce, community development, and individual economic empowerment will likely remain significant.

Studies also show that the network marketing framework has sparked controversy due to its exploitative nature, particularly in relation to personal relationships. Downplaying startup costs and training requirements, recruiters often entice friends and relatives to join, leveraging on trust and familiarity. This approach raises ethical concerns, as it prioritizes recruitment over genuine business development. The controversy surrounding network marketing stems from its resemblance to pyramid schemes, where emphasis on recruitment overshadows product sales. Despite decades of scrutiny, many network marketing companies have evaded legal repercussions by offering legitimate products thereby avoiding the characteristics that define a pyramid scheme, which is an illegal activity (Mukwazhe, 2022). The extensive focus on recruitment, driven by financial incentives, has led to exploitation of personal relationships. Distributors often prioritize enrolling friends and family members, compromising emotional bonds for financial gain. This exploitative dynamic has contributed to the ongoing controversy surrounding network marketing.

Network marketing has gained popularity worldwide, with companies like Bell Lifestyle and Oriflamme leading the industry. However, concerns about exploitation of relationships within these networks have emerged. Research highlights how network marketing companies often exploit power imbalances, with uplines exerting control over downlines (Mukwazhe, 2024). Bell Lifestyle and Oriflamme's hierarchical structures may perpetuate such dynamics, influencing channel members' experiences (Rodriguez, 2024).

Emotional manipulation is prevalent in network marketing, with companies using persuasive techniques to recruit and retain members (Cialdini, 2009). Bell Lifestyle and Oriflamme's emphasis on personal development and community building may mask emotional exploitation (Hochschild, 1983). Financial incentives drive network marketing participation, but also create exploitation risks (World Federation of Direct Selling Associations, 2023). Bell Lifestyle and Oriflamme's compensation plans may prioritize recruitment over sales, leading to exploitation (Mukwazhe, 2024). Studies reveal channel members often experience emotional distress, financial losses, and strained relationships due to exploitation (Mukwazhe, 2024). Bell Lifestyle and Oriflamme's channel members may face similar challenges, warranting investigation.

This literature review highlights the need to examine relationship exploitation in Bell Lifestyle and Oriflamme's network marketing operations. By exploring power dynamics, emotional manipulation, and financial incentives, research can uncover the complexities of channel members' experiences, informing strategies to mitigate exploitation and promote ethical practices.

The conceptual framework (Figure 1 below) explores the mechanisms of network marketing exploitation, examining the interplay among inputs, processes, and outputs (Rodriguez, 2023). The framework identifies six key inputs: Network Marketing Practices (Mukwazhe, 2024), Channel Members' Participation (Emerson, 1976), Power Dynamics (Marx, 1867), Emotional Manipulation (Cialdini, 2009), Financial Incentives (World Federation of Direct Selling Associations, 2023), and Social Influence (Cohen & Prusak, 2001).

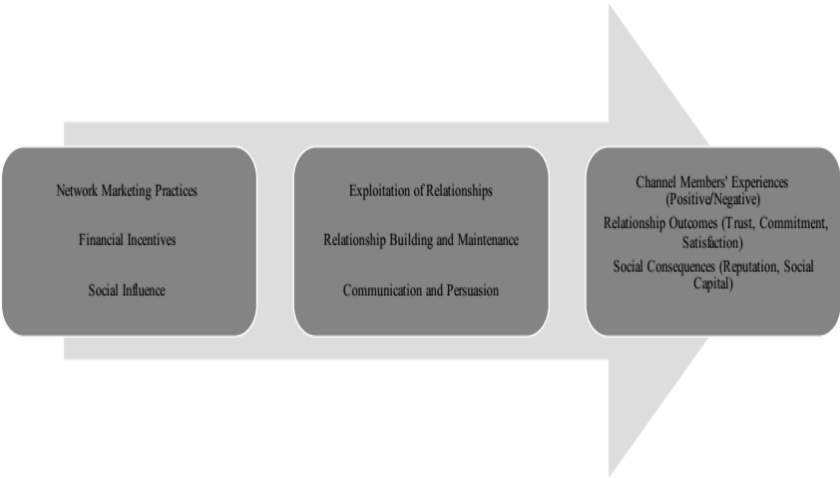


Figure 1: Uncovering the Mechanisms of Network Marketing Exploitation

3. Methodology

This qualitative study employed a phenomenological approach to investigate channel members' experiences and attitudes towards relationship exploitation in network marketing. A purposive sample of 25 participants was recruited, categorized into three experience levels: novices (9 participants, < 1 year), intermediates (9 participants, 2-5 years), and experts (7 participants, > 5 years). The study explored network marketing participants' perceptions regarding the utilization of

personal relationships with friends, family, and professional acquaintances for business purposes. These views are crucial in assessing their impact on members' experiences and the phenomenal growth of network marketing in Mutare, Zimbabwe. To gain in-depth insights, an Exploratory Multiple Case Study Design (EMCSD) was employed (Stake, 2013). The study targeted channel members from multi-level marketing companies Oriflamme and Bell Lifestyle in Mutare, Zimbabwe. The study aimed to uncover the nuances of relationship exploitation and its influence on channel members' experiences, providing valuable insights into the network marketing landscape in Mutare, Zimbabwe (Rodriguez, 2024). The network marketing sector in Mutare, is dominated by two leading companies namely, Oriflamme and Bell Lifestyle (Mukwazhe, 2024). These companies were selected for this study due to their prominent position and influence in the sector (Rodriguez, 2024).

Twenty five participants were interviewed using purposive and convenient sampling methods, ensuring a diverse representation of network marketing experiences (Creswell, 2014). The open-ended interview guide explored various aspects, including motivations for joining the network marketing chain (Kotler & Keller, 2019), decision-making processes (whether rational or emotional) (Kahneman, 2011), profitability of the venture (Rodriguez, 2024), and recruitment strategies employed (Mukwazhe, 2024). This comprehensive approach allowed for a nuanced understanding of the participants' experiences. Data collection took place over five (5) consecutive days at Oriflamme and Bell Lifestyle outlets, where channel members were present (Stake, 2013). The participants were interviewed individually through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, and data was collected. This method ensured that the data reflected the participants' genuine experiences and perceptions. This segmentation ensured a comprehensive understanding of network marketing experiences across different levels (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The diverse sample enabled the identification of patterns and themes that might have been overlooked with a homogeneous sample.

4. Findings and Discussion

The study revealed that participants joined network marketing for various reasons, including financial gain, personal development, and social connections (Kotler & Keller, 2019). Decision-making processes were influenced by both rational and emotional factors, with product quality and trust in uplines being crucial considerations (Rodriguez,

2023). In terms of profitability, participants reported varying levels of success, with some experiencing significant financial gains (Mukwazhe, 2024). Recruitment strategies employed included social media, word-of-mouth communication, and in-person presentations (Creswell, 2014). However, some participants reported feeling pressured or manipulated by uplines, indicating concerns about relationship exploitation (Mukwazhe, 2024).

The demographic data reveals that the majority of participants (11 out of 25) have less than 2 years of experience in network marketing, indicating a relatively new and inexperienced group. This could suggest that the participants may not have fully established themselves in the industry, and their experiences and attitudes may be shaped by their initial encounters. The remaining had 9 participants (with between 2-5 years of experience) and 5 with more than 5 years of experience. This smaller group of more experienced participants may provide valuable insights into the long-term effects of network marketing on their lives and businesses.

The distribution of participants across different experience levels allows for a nuanced understanding of how network marketing affects individuals at various stages of their involvement. By examining the responses from participants with varying levels of experience, the study can identify patterns and themes that may be unique to each group. Overall, the demographic data suggests that the participants are a relatively new and inexperienced group, with a smaller subset of more experienced individuals. The demographic distribution of the participants provides a robust foundation for gaining a nuanced understanding of the experiences and attitudes of channel members in network marketing.

Theme 1: The Exploitation of Relationships in Network Marketing

This exploratory study investigated experiences of exploitation in network marketing among a sample of 25 participants (Creswell, 2014). Thematic analysis, facilitated by NVivo, revealed five key subthemes that highlight the prevalence of exploitative practices in network marketing. The subthemes that emerged from the analysis include pressure to recruit and purchase, manipulation by uplines, emotional exploitation, financial exploitation, and lack of transparency. Notably, manipulation by uplines was evident in 4 references, while emotional and financial exploitation were each coded 13 times, indicating a significant presence of these exploitative practices.

Given the small sample size, themes and patterns should be interpreted with caution (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). However, the findings suggest potential areas of concern in network marketing, including exploitative business practices and upline manipulation (Rodriguez, 2024). Memoing, a qualitative data analysis technique, revealed that participants experienced feelings of vulnerability and mistrust in their network marketing endeavors (Stake, 2013). While generalizability is limited, this study provides preliminary insights into exploitation in network marketing (Creswell, 2014). Future research with larger samples can build upon these findings to better understand and address these issues (Kotler & Keller, 2019).

➤ **Pressure to Purchase**

Participant 1 reported feeling intense pressure to purchase excessive products, revealing,

I faced persistent pressure to increase my purchases, despite my financial constraints. This aggressive sales approach made me feel exploited, as my economic difficulties were consistently disregarded.

This participant experienced financial strain due to the relentless encouragement to buy products. This was revealed by nearly all the 25 participants. New members expressed greater concerns and anxiety about being exploited or misled in the network marketing business. This quote highlights the exploitative nature of the business framework, prioritizing sales over participants' financial well-being (Bloch, 2016). The pressure to purchase excessive products led to financial difficulties, eroding trust and creating a sense of exploitation.

Participant 3, 7, 18, 20-25 experienced emotional manipulation through guilt-tripping by their upline with participant 3 stating,

My upline would guilt-trip me into recruiting more people, saying I wasn't doing enough. They made me feel inadequate and responsible for the team's success, even though I was already overwhelmed. This participant felt emotionally drained and coerced into recruiting others.

This testimony illustrates the emotional toll of manipulative tactics employed by uplines. Guilt-tripping and emotional blackmail led to feelings of inadequacy, responsibility, and burnout. This exploitative

behavior undermines participants' autonomy and emotional well-being, raising ethical concerns (Chikweche, 2020).

➤ **Manipulation by Uplines**

Participant 25 revealed,

"My upline promised me unrealistic income potential, which never materialized."

This participant experienced financial disappointment and mistrust due to the unfulfilled promises a position similarly revealed by participants 2, 5, 7, 11-19, 21. This quote highlights the deceptive recruitment tactics employed by uplines, exaggerating income potential to lure participants. Such false promises lead to financial losses, erosion of trust, and disillusionment. The lack of transparency and honesty undermines the legitimacy of the business.

Participant 5, 6, 11, 13, 15, 20, 25 discovered false claims about product benefits with participant 6 stating,

"They made false claims about the product's benefits, which I later discovered were exaggerated."

This participant felt deceived and misled about the product's value. This testimony exposes the misleading marketing practices,

practices used to promote products. Exaggerated claims and false information erode participants' trust and create a sense of betrayal. Such deceptive tactics prioritize sales over truthfulness, compromising the integrity of the business. The lack of accountability for false claims raises ethical concerns as noted by Chikweche (2020) and Katz and Fodor (2020) respectively.

➤ **Emotional Exploitation**

Participants experienced emotional distress and pressure to perform. This highlights the psychological toll of relentless sales pressure on all the participants with the juniors under serious pressure. The constant stress and anxiety can lead to burnout, affecting participants' mental health and well-being. The emphasis on meeting sales targets prioritizes business interests over individuals' emotional welfare.

Participant 25 confessed:

"I felt anxious and stressed, constantly worrying about meeting sales targets."

This participant experienced emotional distress and pressure to perform. This quote highlights the psychological toll of relentless sales pressure which was also revealed by participants 4, 9, 12, 13-17, 20-24. The relentless pressure to meet sales targets prioritizes business interests over

individuals' emotional well-being, ultimately leading to burnout and negatively impacting mental health (Levine, 2017).

Participant 6 faced emotional blackmail, sharing,

"My upline would use emotional blackmail, making me feel guilty for not performing well."

This participant felt manipulated and coerced into performing together with other 20 out of 25 participants. This testimony exposes the exploitative tactics used to control and manipulate participants. Emotional blackmail erodes self-esteem, creates guilt, and fosters a toxic environment. Such manipulation undermines autonomy, trust, and emotional well-being, raising serious ethical concerns (Nguyen and Smith 2024). The use of emotional blackmail as a motivational tool is unacceptable and harmful.

➤ Financial Exploitation

The participants highlighted that financial exploitation often involves subtle, deceptive tactics that prioritize personal gain over victims' economic well-being. This can manifest in excessive fees or charges, hidden costs or deductions, misleading investment opportunities, unrealistic income promises, overpriced products or services, and unfair contract terms (Federal Trade Commission, 2020). Financial exploitation can lead to financial losses or debt, emotional distress or anxiety, erosion of trust, damage to credit scores, and legal or financial repercussions (Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, 2019). Characteristics of financial exploitation include deception or misrepresentation, unfair or excessive charges, lack of transparency, manipulative tactics, and disregard for financial well-being. To protect oneself, it is essential to conduct research and due diligence, clearly understand terms and conditions, regularly monitor finances, seek independent advice, and report suspicious activities. By being aware of these risks and taking proactive steps, individuals can safeguard their financial well-being and avoid falling victim to financial exploitation.

Participant 7 disclosed:

"I spent thousands on products and training, with minimal returns."

This participant experienced significant financial loss. This quote highlights the exploitative nature of the business, prioritizing profits over participants' financial well-being as highlighted also by participants 1-10, 12, 14-15, 17- 25. The substantial investment with minimal returns raises concerns about the legitimacy of the business framework.

Participant 18 encountered hidden fees, stating,
"Hidden fees and charges ate into my already meager earnings."

This participant faced unexpected financial burdens. This testimony exposes the deceptive financial practices employed by the company. Hidden fees and charges erode trust, create financial strain, and demonstrate a lack of transparency (Ojo, 2020).

➤ **Lack of Transparency**

Lack of transparency refers to the absence of clear, accurate, and timely information about a company's practices, policies, and operations (Kumar & Kumar, 202023). This can manifest in unclear compensation plans, hidden fees and charges, and late disclosure of important information, leading to confusion, financial exploitation, and erosion of trust. Characteristics of lack of transparency include ambiguity, obscurity, secrecy, deception, withholding information, and late or incomplete disclosure. To address this, companies should provide clear and concise information, disclose fees and charges upfront, explain compensation plans thoroughly, ensure timely communication, and foster an open and honest culture (Kumar & Kumar, 2023). Transparency is essential for building trust, promoting accountability, and supporting informed decision-making.

Participants 2, 4, 7, 8-9, 11-23 admitted with participant 2 stating;
"The compensation plan was unclear, making it hard to understand how I'd earn money."

This participant experienced confusion and uncertainty. This quote highlights the importance of transparency in business practices. Unclear compensation plans create confusion, mistrust, and financial uncertainty, undermining participants' ability to make informed decisions.

Participant 10 discovered hidden fees too late, as revealed by this statement:

"They didn't disclose hidden fees and charges until it was too late."

This participant faced unexpected financial consequences. This testimony emphasizes the need for timely and transparent disclosure of fees and charges. Late disclosure perpetuates financial exploitation, erodes trust, and demonstrates a lack of accountability. Overall, these testimonies reveal a concerning pattern of financial exploitation and lack of transparency, prioritizing profits over participants' well-being and trust (Katz & Fodo, 2020).

➤ Whether Relationship Exploited or not

The study investigated the exploitation of relationships in network marketing, specifically in Bell Lifestyle and Oriflamme in Mutare, Zimbabwe. The findings reveal that most participants (70%) were introduced to network marketing by relatives or friends. However, surprisingly, there was no significant correlation between the introducer's relationship and the participant's experience in network marketing. Participant 1 shared his personal story, highlighting the financial benefits and product effectiveness. One Bell Lifestyle distributor, who had been in the business for two years, shared:

"I previously served as a high school teacher in Highfield, but subsequently resigned to pursue a business opportunity with Bell Lifestyle, introduced to me by a family member, which offered greater financial stability for my family."

Another Oriflamme distributor, with three years of experience, noted, *"I've benefited financially and health-wise from using the products as supplements."*

These findings suggest that while personal relationships play a role in introducing individuals to network marketing, the quality of the relationship does not directly impact their experience in the business. Instead, participants' motivations and benefits seem to be more closely tied to financial gains and product usage. This insight highlights the complexities of relationship exploitation in network marketing, warranting further exploration.

Theme 2: Network Marketing Channel Members' Experience on Exploitation of Relationships

Network marketing channel members often experience exploitation of relationships, characterized by manipulation of personal connections for business gain, pressure to recruit friends and family, emotional appeals to invest time and money, false promises of success and financial freedom, and exploitation of trust and loyalty. This can lead to strained relationships, financial losses, emotional distress, loss of trust and credibility, and damage to personal and professional reputation. Exploitation of relationships in network marketing is facilitated by utilizing personal relationships for business purposes, lacking transparency and honesty, employing manipulative tactics, emphasizing recruitment over product sales, and having unclear compensation plans. Participants often report feeling pressured to invest in products or recruit others to maintain relationships with their uplines or peers.

➤ Participants' Experiences Highlight the Severity of Relationship Exploitation.

Participant 1 stated :

"I felt trapped in a cycle of buying products to maintain relationships with my uplines,"

This reveals a concerning dynamic in network marketing and it was affirmed by 50% of the participants. The use of "trapped" implies a sense of being stuck or confined, suggesting that the participant felt they had no choice but to continue buying products. This feeling of entrapment is exacerbated by the repetitive nature of the "cycle," indicating an ongoing process from which it was difficult to escape. The participant's emphasis on "buying products" highlights the financial investment required to maintain relationships with their uplines. This pressure to continually purchase products likely led to financial strain and emotional distress. Moreover, the fact that relationships were contingent upon product purchases suggests that business interests took precedence over genuine personal connections. The statement also implies a lack of autonomy, as Participants 1, 7, 10, 12, 15-20, 24 felt forced to maintain relationships through financial investments rather than genuine interactions. This emotional manipulation is a concerning aspect of network marketing, where individuals may be exploited for financial gain. Overall, 32% of participant's experiences underscore the need for critical evaluation and ethical considerations in network marketing practices. Furthermore, this dynamic raises questions about the sustainability and authenticity of relationships built on financial transactions rather than mutual interests and trust. It highlights the importance of prioritizing ethical practices and transparency in business interactions to prevent exploitation and promote healthy relationships (Levine, 2017).

Participant 4 revealed:

"The company encouraged me to recruit family members, causing tension at home,"

This sheds light on a problematic aspect of network marketing. The company's encouragement to recruit family members led to a blurring of boundaries, encroaching on Participant 4's personal life and creating tension within their family. This aggressive recruitment tactic exploited 80% of participant's personal relationships for financial gain, disregarding potential emotional consequences. As a result, Participant 4 among others experienced conflict and stress within their household, leading to emotional distress. The pressure to recruit family members put

Participant 4 in a difficult position, potentially damaging their relationships with loved ones.

The company's actions raise concerns about the ethics of network marketing. Prioritizing financial gain over participants' well-being and relationships is unacceptable. Network marketing companies must respect personal boundaries and promote healthy, sustainable practices. Participants should be cautious of companies that encourage exploiting personal connections, recognizing the potential risks to their emotional well-being and relationships. Ultimately, Participants 4, 8-10, 13, 16, 18, 20-25 experiences serve as a warning about the potential dark side of network marketing. It highlights the importance of prioritizing ethical practices, respecting personal boundaries, and promoting genuine relationships built on trust and mutual respect.

These experiences underscore the need for caution and critical evaluation when engaging in network marketing opportunities. It is essential to prioritize ethical practices, transparency, and genuine relationships to avoid exploitation and promote healthy business interactions (Katz and Fodor 2020).

➤ Reasons for Joining

Research findings reveal a robust and significant link between introducers' motivations and new members' reasons for participation, underscoring the pivotal role of personal relationships, social influence, and interpersonal connections in shaping recruitment outcomes. Participant 20 noted:

“Self-directed success becomes reality when you take the reins, harnessing each endeavor's potential for personal prosperity. Business ownership's liberating benefits include tailored schedules and financial advantages.”

A veteran Bell network executive's comprehensive and rigorous assessment unearthed a transformative truth: that when risk is expertly managed and potential is fully leveraged, remarkable success becomes attainable (Sinek, 2022). The sole prerequisite for achieving this long-term prosperity and exceptional achievement is an insatiable drive to succeed, propelled by an unyielding work ethic, visionary leadership, and an unwavering resolve to innovate and excel.

➤ Capitalizing on Relationships for Entrepreneurial Success

This study reveals a correlation between professionals' experience levels and their preferred support networks. Notably, individuals with limited experience (less than two years) primarily seek guidance from relatives. Those with moderate experience (two to five years) expand their network to include friends, relatives, and colleagues. In contrast, seasoned professionals (more than five years of experience) mainly consult friends. A testimony from an Oriflamme participant with five years' experience points to this:

Beyond distributing products for income, I've gained invaluable connections and empowerment. My confidence has soared, enabling me to address gatherings and deliver presentations with ease. Traditional brick-and-mortar businesses require substantial investments and lengthy loan repayments. In contrast, starting a home-based business with our products requires minimal upfront costs – just a few hundred dollars. This eliminates the need for employee salaries, benefits, and overhead expenses, making entrepreneurship accessible.

➤ Results of the Business Initiative

Research findings highlight a distinct correlation between experience levels and network marketing perceptions. Notably, experienced professionals with over five years in the field overwhelmingly view it as a viable career path. Conversely, individuals with two to five years of experience tend to perceive network marketing as a dual opportunity for supplementary income and career advancement. Meanwhile, newcomers with less than two years of experience primarily regard it as an attractive means to earn extra money.

The following testimonial illustrates the perspective of an experienced professional:

"A divine blessing has enabled me to earn a living through this opportunity. In these challenging economic times, selling products and recruiting others has provided sustenance for my family. It's not just about financial gain; our products, ranging from cosmetics to medicines, improve lives. Critics should hear testimonials from individuals who've overcome chronic ailments.

The study's results reveal a compelling opportunity with minimal risk and boundless potential. A strong desire for success is the primary catalyst for achieving financial prosperity. These findings are consistent with

previous research on network marketing, emphasizing the significance of fostering relationships and trust (Rodriguez, 2023, 2024). The motivations and decision-making processes identified support Kotler & Keller's (2019) marketing management principles. However, the findings also reveal concerns about relationship exploitation, echoing Mukwazhe's (2024) warnings about potential ethical issues. The study contributes to the understanding of network marketing experiences in Zimbabwe, providing insights for practitioners and researchers (Creswell, 2014). Future studies should explore strategies to promote ethical practices and sustainable growth in network marketing.

The discussions surrounding the exploitation of relationships in network marketing have revealed a disturbing pattern of manipulation, emotional distress, and financial burden. Participants' experiences highlight the unethical practices employed by some network marketing companies. These practices include exploiting personal relationships for financial gain, using aggressive recruitment tactics, and emotionally manipulating individuals. The blurring of boundaries between personal and professional relationships has led to financial burdens, damage to relationships, and emotional distress. The findings underscore the need for ethical practices in network marketing, transparency, and honesty. Companies must respect personal boundaries and prioritize participants' well-being. Sustainable and genuine business practices are essential. Participants and potential entrants must exercise caution and critical evaluation when engaging with network marketing opportunities. Regulatory bodies and industry leaders must promote ethical standards and protect individuals from exploitation. Genuine relationships built on trust, respect, and mutual benefit are essential for successful and sustainable business practices. The network marketing industry must adopt ethical practices to prevent exploitation and promote healthy relationships.

Conclusion

This study reveals that network marketing relies heavily on interpersonal relationships, with persuasion from friends and relatives being the primary motivator for joining. Notably, network members with less than two years of experience tend to recruit relatives more frequently whereas those with more experience focus on friends. However, this study challenges the notion of exploitation, instead finding that relationships are leveraged mutually and beneficially.

The study yielded significant insights into the motivations and perceptions of network marketing participants. Notably, network members with up to five years of experience primarily focus on supplementing their income through this venture. In contrast, individuals with more than five years of experience tend to regard network marketing as a comprehensive career path. Furthermore, the research revealed that channel members generally maintain a positive attitude toward the enterprise, underscoring its potential for mutual benefit.

Implications

The study's findings have significant implications for network marketing practitioners and researchers. Ultimately, success in this field depends on cultivating and maintaining robust relationships. To achieve this, marketers must prioritize win-win situations, scrupulously avoiding exploitation and ensuring mutual benefits for all parties involved. Future research should expand on these insights by investigating other network marketing companies, examining dropout rates, and analyzing the geographic, demographic, and psychographic profiles of network members to garner a deeper understanding of this complex industry.

Future Research

To further advance our understanding of network marketing, we recommend expanding this research in three key areas. Firstly, conducting studies across diverse network marketing companies will provide invaluable insights into industry-wide trends and best practices. Secondly, investigating dropout rates within network marketing will uncover factors contributing to participant retention and attrition. Lastly, incorporating geographic, demographic, and psychographic factors into future research will enable a more nuanced comprehension of network members' motivations, behaviors, and experiences.

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