

GuanXi and Gender: Does it matter to marketing performance?

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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this paper is to propose a conceptual model in GuanXi and marketing performance linkage from the gender perspective. **Design/ Methodology/ Approach:** GuanXi is a concept of social networking that links personal to business relations to achieving personal or business gains. The paper proposes the conceptual framework based on an extensive review of literature on GuanXi and marketing performance from gender perspective. The discussion is on the construct and relational types of GuanXi as a cultural element, which are pertinent to Asian institutional settings. Since most of the previous research offers no explanation for GuanXi's distinct contribution to marketing outcome, this paper proposes the use of marketing performance metrics in order to capture precisely the GuanXi outcome. **Findings:** Previous research on GuanXi or relational based studies to performance outcome often focuses on the firm's overall performance evaluation. However, the findings are inconsistent and this could be due to the subjective characteristics of social capital being ignored. This paper conceptualizes the possible linkage of GuanXi construct and relational outcomes to marketing performance, subsequently contributing to the overall firm's performance through the gender lens. **Practical Implications:** Based on the model that has been developed, the linkage between GuanXi-marketing performance relations would be able to assist the industry manager in identifying their marketing efforts in relation to the marketing performance outcomes. In addition, the managers can take the gender variance into consideration when formulating the marketing strategies for effective relationship marketing to their business counterparts. **Originality/ Value:** This paper is original in its attempts in proposing the linkage between GuanXi to marketing performance outcome from the gender perspective.

Keywords: *GuanXi, Gender, Marketing Performance, Malaysia.*

1. Introduction

The labour market is structurally gendered and this is a worldwide phenomenon of sex-role socialization and sex-stereotyping women with non-traditional roles. There is equal opportunity for employment, but not for career advancement. This statement from Koshal, Gupta, & Koshal, (1998) seems befitting to explain today's labour workforce condition in Malaysia. Based on the statistics in Malaysia, by average, women contribute approximately 46 per cent of Malaysia's labour workforce in 2009, however women in management positions remain low. For example, the estimation of women in senior management positions in Malaysia

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is only at 5.4 per cent in 2006 (Economic Planning Unit., 2015; Elias, 2011 & Ismail & Ibrahim, 2008).

Given that women have participated in the workforce for quite a period, the career progression obstacles for women in the workplace still seems challenging (Ismail & Ibrahim, 2008). In the recent *The Global Gender Gap Report 2015*, Malaysia was placed in an overall ranking of 111 over 145 countries which is the lowest rank among Southeast Asia countries compared to Brunei (88), Cambodia (109), Indonesia (92), Philippines (7), Singapore (54), Thailand (60) and Vietnam (83). The report also points out that Malaysia is lagging far behind regionally with the ratio of 0.59 females over 1.00 male labour force participation. Whereas, women in legislators, senior officials and manager positions also report a low ratio with only 0.28 females over 1.00 males (World Economic Forum, 2015).

In the case of GuanXi, it can be defined as individual ties with another individual, subsequently extended to that particular individual's network relationship. Some of the GuanXi relationships in business are intrinsic, and it can be obtained through the experience shared with others (Bedford & Hwang, 2013). Luo, Huang, & Wang, (2011) refer to GuanXi as social networking that is embedded in China business relations. This informal practice is commonly used to link the personal and business relations to increase the organizational performance. Nevertheless, this term is often reviewed in Confucianism perspectives in Confucian ideal relations on men-to-men network-relations where the masculine perspective tends to be perceived as the society's benchmarking (Ahl's, 2006; Chen, Chen, & Huang, 2013), which in turn may cause the fact of think-manager-think-male situation (Othman & Jaafar, 2013). Bedford & Hwang, (2013) described this term as a gender concept if following the historical precedent.

Although many literatures referred to GuanXi as Chinese version of relationship marketing, though, the literatures on GuanXi-marketing performance/ relationship marketing-marketing performance, this possible linkage is scarce, even without adding gender into the picture. Researchers give less attention in measuring the marketing efforts and performance, especially intangible assets which will bring wealth and value creation to the organization in a long run (O'Sullivan, Abela, & Hutchinson, 2009). In addition, most of the research offers no explanation for the outcome distinctions between GuanXi to different types of marketing performance outcome, rather being studied in a general context. There is a high possibility GuanXi will distinctly affect different marketing performance outcomes.

This paper intends to fill this gap by examining the cultural elements – GuanXi which are pertinent to the Asian institutional setting. As Malaysia is viewed as a collectivism and high power distance society, under this institutional setting, the managers tend to prioritize establishing relationships to maintain quality network (Fernando, Ho, Algunaid, & Zailani, 2013; Rasdi, Garavan, & Ismail, 2013). Thus, the purpose of this paper is twofold, 1) To propose a conceptual model between the GuanXi - marketing performance linkage, and 2) To discourse the gender variance in GuanXi - marketing performance relationship.

2. Literature Review

2.1 *Marketing Performance*

The notion of measuring the performance is believed to begin since 1910 where the basic management methods started being practiced (Neely, 1999). Throughout the years, a considerable amount of research has manifested the performance outcome as the most significant outcome variable. Nonetheless, marketing performance measurement only infiltrated the attention in academia around the 1960's (Mariussen, 2012). The development of marketing performance measurement based on chronology can be categorized into three phases according to Mariussen (2012). In early 1960 to 1970 (Phase one), marketing performance is perceived in productivity terms, in search of the alternative to increase the engineering optimization techniques efficiency and reduce the cost of automation, such as units produced per employee and output per man-hour. In the second phase (approximately 1980), the using of accounting metrics solely in marketing performance assessment is no longer pertinent. The focus progressively shifted from financial metric to non-financial metric (e.g., market share, income and consumer good-will). Lastly, the final phase (around 1990), the recognition and establishment of non-financial metrics are generally accepted. The direction of the practice measurement has changed from products to customers. This has resulted in the introduction of customer-related metrics, for instance, customer satisfaction, loyalty and retention.

There are only very few businesses that actually carry out marketing assessment, although there are increasing concerns on how to measure the firm's marketing effort over the years (Ambler, 2000; Ambler, Kokkinaki, & Puntoni, 2004). Generally, the marketing practitioners and academics face difficulty in defining and measuring the firm's marketing performance due to the salient issue of marketing's tangible and intangible output characteristics. Previous research have stated the incapability of the marketing manager to measure and address the

functional contribution to a firm’s overall performance will lead to the loss of status in the firm (Hacioglu & Gök, 2013; O’Sullivan & Abela, 2007). Nath & Mahajan (2008) argued that marketing is often perceived as a cost centre instead of an investment, where many strategically crucial components of marketing have been overtaken by other divisions.

One of the most frequently cited definition in explaining performance measurement as, “*where measurement is the process of quantification and action leads to performance*” (Neely, Gregory, & Platts, 2005). This unification of the measurement is varied depending on the disciplinary background and subject matters. Therefore, in order to capture the different aspect outcomes, various measurements are required to this multi-dimensional concept (Wu, 2003). However, based on the literature, the most widely applied in assessing the marketing performance metric is the classification of financial and non-financial metric (Llonch, Eusebio, & Ambler, 2002). In Table 1, by adopting the marketing performance assessment (MPA) dimension constructed by previous literature, the authors classified the metric based on the dimension characteristic into intangible and tangible metrics. This classification will assist the managers to identify which types of marketing effort will be prone to achieving a greater impact on which type of marketing performance outcome.

Table 1: Marketing performance assessment (MPA) dimensional construct by the authors.

MARKETING PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT DIMENSIONS			
Intangible	Remarks	Tangible	Remarks
Consumer behaviour	- Number of new customers - Loyalty/ retention - Conversions	Innovation	- Number of new products - Revenue of new products - Margin of new products
Consumer attitudes	- Perceived quality - Consumer satisfaction - Relevance to consumer - Number of customer complaints	Financial performance	- Sales - Gross margins - Profitability
Market position	- Relative price - Penetration - Share of voice	Long-term firm value	- Customer lifetime value - Economic value added - Return on investment
Trade customer	- Trade customer satisfaction - Number of customer complaints		
Brand equity	- Awareness - Perceived differentiation - Brand/ product knowledge - Purchase intention - Relative customer satisfaction - Relative perceived quality		
Channel activity ³	- Distribution/ availability - Percentage of discount - Marketing spends		

Note. Adopted from Ambler, Kokkinaki, & Puntoni, (2004); Frösén, Tikkanen, Jaakkola, & Vassinen, (2013), Hacıoglu & Gök, (2013).

2.2 *GuanXi*

GuanXi, this term can be referred to the Chinese cultural elements that is commonly practice in China business environment. If following China's historical precedent, the main channel of social mobility for intellectuals is through the civil service exam in the past. However, the bureaucratic norms require them to leverage the relationship networks for advocacy and patronage which will lead to personal career advancement (Bedford & Hwang, 2013). GuanXi firstly appeared in the Chinese newspaper for discussion around 1978. The attention from academia only begin to emerged since 1980s in the west (Fan, 2002). Over the past three decades, the growing numbers of literature indicate that GuanXi is recognized as one of the most vital factor in business practice in China (Chen et al., 2013).

The GuanXi characteristics are often related to cultural and institutional settings, there are growing numbers in literature comparing GuanXi in Chinese terms to Wa from Japanese, Inhwa from Korean (Chen et al., 2013), Blat from Russian (Puffer, McCarthy, & Boisot, 2010) and Et-moone for Saudi Arabian (Abosag & Naudé, 2014). Although these concepts have distinctive characteristics, they do share some features such as specific behaviours required in the particular institutional setting.

In addition, the authors also sorted the literatures based on GuanXi construct, see Table 2. Based on the sorting result, the highest discussion frequency in GuanXi literatures are trust, followed by favour-exchange/reciprocity, face, obligations, affection, social status/ reputation, bonding, and lastly empathy. Therefore, it can be concluded that the main traits for GuanXi construct are trust, favour-exchange, face and obligations.

Table 2: Literature review on guanxi construct by the author.

Note. Those GuanXi aspects only appear once in the literature are not on the list. For instance, ³ability, sincerity, feeling, ⁴flexibility; ⁸affect investment; ¹²shared value; ¹⁷intangibility and longevity, utility, transferability, ¹⁹loyalty, power.

Source: ¹Hwang, (1987); ²Arias, (1998); ³Chen & Chen, (2004); ⁴Wong, Leung, Hung, & Ngai, (2007); ⁵Barnes, Yen, & Zhou, (2011); ⁶Huang, Davison, & Gu, (2011); ⁷Luo, (2011); ⁸Shou, Guo, Zhang, & Su, (2011); ⁹Song, Cadsby, & Bi, (2011); ¹⁰Gao, Knight, & Ballantyne, (2012); ¹¹Bedford & Hwang, (2013); ¹²Fernando, Ho, Algunaid, & Zailani, (2013); ¹³Lau & Young, (2013); ¹⁴Qi, (2013); ¹⁵Shaalán, Reast, Johnson, & Tourky, (2013); ¹⁶Abosag & Naudé, (2014); ¹⁷Chang, Guo, Zolin & Yang, (2014); ¹⁸Jia & Zsidisin, (2014); ¹⁹Wee, (2014); ²⁰Xu & Li, (2014); ²¹Chua & Morris, (2015).

Source	Trust	Face	Favour-exchange/ Reciprocity	Social Status/ Reputation	Obligation	Bonding	Affection	Empathy
1.		X	X		X			
2.	X							
3.	X				X		X	
4.		X	X					
5.	X		X				X	
6.	X	X						
7.	X							
8.	X	X						
9.	X		X					
10.	X	X	X					X
11.		X	X					
12.	X					X		
13.			X		X			
14.	X	X	X		X			
15.	X	X	X			X	X	X
16.	X		X	X				
17.	X		X		X			
18.	X	X	X		X		X	
19.		X	X	X	X			
20.		X			X			
21.	X							

Trust, is one of the most crucial elements in relationship marketing. To establish the trust relations in the business place requires a lot of effort, which is complicated and time consuming. As Luo, (2011) highlighted that the Chinese tend to conduct complex transactions when there is trust with a person, most of the time only with friends and family. Perhaps this is one of the rationales that Chinese firms are less involved in forming modern corporations in the large and complex transaction. Likewise, Chinese tend to investigate an individual's

“trustworthiness” through various ways before they commit into a long-term exchange relationship. This relationship can remain in the long term once it is successfully established, but is also very hard to re-establish once broken (Yau, 1988).

Favour-Exchange/ Reciprocity. In GuanXi literatures, the term favour-exchange and reciprocity are used interchangeably. Favour is also recognized as Renqing in Chinese term. Favour in Chinese context can refer to gift giving, social support, business assistants, social visit where sometimes it can be considered inappropriate in the Western context (Abosag & Naudé, 2014). One individual should feel indebted after receiving favour, and it is expected that the individual needs to reciprocate someday. As a matter of fact, the reciprocating is an indicator of favour-exchange to sustain the GuanXi. For those who did not return the favour, they are deemed to have a bad social image as an untrustworthy person by causing others to lose face and this is socially unacceptable (Qi, 2013; Wong, Leung, Hung & Ngai, 2007).

Face, can be defined as “*the respect, pride and dignity of an individual as a consequence of his/her social achievement and the practice of it*” (Leung & Chan, 2003). This definition takes into account the cultivation and management of an individual image, in turn to obtain societal recognition and acceptance, Qi, (2013) described this as self-looking glass. Generally, people are more prone to giving face to an individual who possess high social status with power and authority or moral reputation (Wong et al., 2007). Under certain circumstances, if the benefactor can gain face when helping the receiver, returning favour will not be necessary (Xu & Li, 2014). Chinese tend to spend a substantial investment and effort to maintain their face. Since the Chinese have a strong consciousness towards face, causing other people to lose face is considered an invasive act. They will protect their face from being ruined as losing face will cause big embarrassment. Therefore, saving one’s face is an essential social skill in Chinese society as a lubricant to smoothen the GuanXi establishment and maintenance (Abosag & Naudé, 2014; Huang, Davison, & Gu, 2011).

Obligations. As mentioned in the earlier section (favour-exchange/ reciprocity), the favour that was given out is expected to be returned – this is a Chinese community norm where mutual and relational obligations are required from social interactions. In Chinese context, trust is not only referring to faith, instead it comprises the continual exchanges between actor and agent to establish mutual confidence. This obligation is morally infused as a dynamic force to keep the collective social capital insure, and this GuanXi can be maintained in long run (Lau & Young, 2013; Qi, 2013). This context is implicitly embedded within the network mutually and became

part of the most important foundation of GuanXi. This entails that an individual is bounded and obligated to offer assistance to those within the network (Luo et al., 2011; Qi, 2013).

3. Findings and Discussion

3.1 Propositions Development

Marketing Performance and GuanXi. The relationship between GuanXi-performance outcomes are long documented, however, it has been fragmented. Even though Luo et al, (2011) recognized the business relations as a prominent social capital in facilitating firm performance, the relationship of GuanXi to marketing performance still remains vague. The previous study findings in GuanXi have shown mixed results, nevertheless, most of the findings recognized the significant relationship of GuanXi to business practice/ firm performance, ranging from positive, inverted U-shape and negative (Bedford & Hwang, 2013; Chang, 2011). The possibility in previous research disregards the subjectivity characteristic of social capital, where most of the studies focus on the firm's overall performance evaluation instead of distinguishing the outcome performance based on the nature of the social capital in marketing effort. Hence, the authors propose the proposition as below:

P1: The correlation between GuanXi and marketing performance is likely to have a significant positive relationship, subsequently influencing the firm performance.

Gender. Gender often used as moderating variables in business studies. Most research, particularly in qualitative studies in GuanXi and gender research discovered that women tend to hold negative perceptions when practicing GuanXi. One of the rationale behind this phenomenon, perhaps, is the social norms on gender role expectation. In the process of developing and maintaining GuanXi, to some extent, social events interaction is needed. As women are projected to behave with feminine characteristics, when women actively engage in social events, the incongruity of social norms can result in conflict and stereotyping (Bedford & Hwang, 2013; Diekman & Schneider, 2010; Malach-Pines & Kaspi-Baruch, 2008; Xu & Li, 2014).

Furthermore, it will also affect the high transaction cost incurred during payback favour in order to maintain the GuanXi (Luo et al., 2011). For instance, it is possible that the female employees will be more reluctant in cultivating GuanXi as this term is often linked to bribery

issues since women are generally more likely to make ethical choices than man (Glover, Bumpus, Sharp, & Munchus, 2002). As the role of women in the workplace has also drastically changed, the gender issue in this area of research is still relatively low and there remains an enormous margin of research in this area. Therefore, the proposition is constructed as below:

P2: There will be a significant gender variance in GuanXi-marketing performance relationship.

3. Conclusion

This platform is designed as a means to probe the relationship between GuanXi to marketing performance through gender perspectives in Malaysia. The social benchmarking in workplace for gender role expectation may lead to different perspectives and practise behaviour in the workplace for men and women. By understanding the gender ideology in GuanXi practise, the managers can take it into the consideration when formulating the marketing strategies for effective relationship marketing to their business counterparts.

Previous research has recognized the significant relationship between GuanXi to firm performance, though, with inconsistent results. Despite many interpretations that have been done in explaining the inconsistent findings, the authors are proposing to assess the GuanXi outcome based on marketing performance metric, rather than to evaluate it as a whole. The missing linkage in assessing the GuanXi outcome to a focus metric may provide the answer for the inconsistent results. The understanding of the linkage between marketing efforts to marketing outcomes must be able to comprehend the capability in identifying the intermediate outcomes that will lead to the changes in financial performance (Frösén, Tikkanen, Jaakkola, & Vassinen, 2013). It is believed that by integrating the relationship constructs to the business counterparts, it will affect the firm's market share and lead to profitability improvement.

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