

Exploring the Challenges and Business Practices of Family-Owned Water Refilling Station

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family-owned businesses, water refilling stations, operational challenges, financial constraints, business resilience, customer-centered practices, rural entrepreneurship

Abstract. This study examined the operational and managerial challenges faced by family-owned water refilling stations in Guiuan, Eastern Samar, using a qualitative phenomenological design. This study focuses on exploring and understanding human experiences as they are perceived by individuals. In-depth interviews with experienced owners and managers revealed recurring issues such as limited financial resources, equipment breakdowns, lacked of local technical support, manpower shortages, and unstable electricity. These challenges were further intensified by high utility costs, taxes, and competitive pricing pressures. To address these difficulties, business owners adopted practical strategies including cost-cutting, purchasing equipment on installment, acquiring basic technical skills, and implementing customer-focused practices such as timely delivery, incentives, and strict quality control. The study highlighted the importance of resilience, financial discipline, technical adaptability, and strong customer relationships in sustaining operations. It also emphasized the need for supportive local policies, access to training, and financial assistance. Despite these challenges, family-owned businesses demonstrated resilience by adopting practical and adaptive strategies. These included financial discipline through cost control and budgeting, utilization of installation-based equipment acquisition, development of basic technical skills for maintenance, and implementation of energy-centered approaches such as prompt delivery, quality assurance, and offering incentives played a significant role in maintaining customer loyalty and sustaining business operations. The findings contribute valuable insights into the realities of small family-owned businesses in resource-constrained environments and offer guidance for entrepreneurs, policymakers, and future researchers aiming to support local business sustainability. This research emphasizes the importance of local government support, access to training program of workers, and financial support to strengthen and innovate small family-owned businesses in rural areas in Eastern Samar.

Introduction

Family-owned businesses are recognized globally as the dominant form of business organization, accounting for a significant share of enterprises across continents. These businesses range from small, local operations to large multinational corporations (Kelley, D. J., Gartner, W. B., & Allen, M. 2020). Their unique structure, where ownership and management are often intertwined within a family, presents both opportunities and challenges distinct from non-family enterprises. Issues such as succession, governance, and balancing family and business interests are central to their operation and sustainability (Salloum, C., Elie, B., & Georges, S. 2013).

Guiuan is an Eastern Samar municipality that has been creating a conducive atmosphere for doing business these recent years. Recovery from much destruction brought about by Super Typhoon Yolanda in 2013 saw local economies thriving,

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with the steady increase in the number of registered businesses, especially micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs). In 2017, 744 registered businesses were in Guiuan, which has been on a steady upward incline since 2014. The family-owned nature of many of these enterprises is a national trend and plays an important role in the local economy, especially in the sectors of fishing, tourism, and retail. Further, the municipality's effort to simplify business registration and encourage investments greatly aided this growth (Municipality of Guiuan, 2017).

While extensive research has been conducted on family-owned businesses at the national level, there is a notable gap in localized studies, particularly in smaller municipalities like Guiuan. There is always limited empirical research about business challenges and practices of family-owned businesses in rural or semi-urban settings, such as the local area of Guiuan. Issues like access to capital, adaptation to technological changes, and the impact of local socio-economic conditions on family business sustainability remain underexplored in this context (Garcia D. 2018).

This study aims to analyze the challenges and business practices of family-owned refilling water stations in Guiuan, Eastern Samar. By emphasizing this context, the research attempts to enumerate the unique set of challenges experienced by family-owned refilling water stations in Guiuan, involving matters such as operational, management issues, and external shocks, and to evaluate business practices employed by these businesses to sustain operations and growth. Give recommendations for local policymaking, support programs, and future research about family business sustainability and growth. The outcomes will provide insights into how family-owned refilling water stations operate in a disaster-ridden and rural environment, maneuver through their peculiar environment, which will form a gap in the literature, and provide additional contributions for our local development.

Methodology

The research used qualitative phenomenological research to discover the experiences of family-owned business owners in Guiuan, Eastern Samar. Phenomenology is a qualitative research approach that focuses on exploring and understanding human experiences as they are perceived by individuals. It seeks to uncover the essence of phenomena by examining how people experience and interpret events, situations, or concepts.

The research has been carried out in Guiuan, Eastern Samar, a first-class municipality found on the southeastern tip of Samar Island in the Eastern Visayas region of the Philippines. According to the 2020 census, Guiuan is composed of 60 barangays and has a population of 53,361 residents. It is a coastal town known historically for fishing and trading; however, small-scale businesses that are often family-based take an increasingly important role in its local economy.

Participants in this study have been selected through purposive sampling to ensure that only those who meet the criteria—such as ownership of a family-run water refilling station operating for at least two years—are included, and there are about 24 businesses of water refilling stations in Guiuan. Data was collected through semi-structured, face-to-face interviews, guided by open-ended questions that allow for in-depth reflection and personal narrative. The primary research instrument was semi-structured interviews. The interviews were allowed for flexibility in exploring topics in greater depth and will be guided by a set of open-ended questions. The questions were focus on the following: (1) The specific challenges the family-owned businesses face; (2) The business practices they adopted to overcome these challenges; and (3) The perceived effectiveness of these practices and their impact on business sustainability.

The research employed thematic analysis to interpret qualitative data gathered from semi-structured interviews with family-owned water refilling station operators in Guiuan, Eastern Samar. Thematic analysis was selected for its flexibility and capacity to identify, analyze, and report patterns within qualitative data. The study followed the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), ensuring a systematic, rigorous, and transparent approach to data interpretation.

The research is committed to upholding the highest standards of ethical conduct throughout the research process. These include acts of honesty and transparency in the presentation of research findings and the admission of limitations or conflicts of interest; of accountability in respect to the treatment of data and safeguarding of intellectual property; of fairness in ensuring equal treatment for all participants without prejudice; and finally, beneficence and non-maleficence in ensuring the least possible harm to individuals and society in the process of obtaining the maximum good. Respect for persons also includes respect for the autonomy, privacy, and informed consent of research participants. By integrating these principles into every aspect of the research, from conception to execution to the application of findings, the study is manifestly dedicated to responsible scholarship and ethical and respectful treatment of all data collected.

Results and Discussion

This section presents the findings and the results of the retrieved data after being analyzed by the researchers. The participants of this study shared their experiences, thoughts, and narratives on exploring the challenges and business practices of family-owned businesses. After the coding, the researchers formulate themes that characterize the experiences of the participants. Themes are as follows:

Key operational and management challenges experienced by family-owned Water-refilling businesses.

This theme outlines the fundamental factors that consistently render family-owned water refilling stations vulnerable. Participants highlighted that their operations are susceptible to disruptions caused by resource limitations, financial constraints, and workforce difficulties. These challenges contribute to the vulnerability of their businesses, with survival frequently depending on their capacity to address these ongoing concerns.

Theme 1: Resource Limitations

The participants reported the issues related to machine malfunction, the lack of local technicians, and power interruption. These challenges resulted in extended production interruptions, delayed shipments, and dissatisfaction among customers. For instance, P3 reported that: "An kasira han amon main control han amon makina for 20 days waray kami nakapag serve hit amon mga customers ngan dako nga kuhaanon an among gin antos. Diri kami nakabenta ha sulod han 20 days ngan nagastos ako hin 26k para la ma ayos an makina." (*When the main control of our machine broke down for 20 days, it prevented us from being able to serve our customers, which caused us a huge loss. We could not sell for 20 days, and I spent ₱26,000 just to have the machine repaired.*) P4 shows concern about the assistant for repair service: "Ha Guiuan dire gud basta basta makakabiling hin technician, kundi kinahanglan pa tumawag ha Borongan o Tacloban nga amo na hinungdan nga nadedelay an pag-ayos han makina." (*In Guiuan, finding a technician is quite challenging. Often, we have to reach out to individuals from Borongan or Tacloban, which prolongs the repair process.*) P5 also shared the repercussions of an electricity interruption: "Kun mag brownout kami dire gud makakapagpadayon hin production ngan dire ma supplyan an amon mga customers nga nagiging rason hin ira reklamo." (*During a brownout, we halt operations. Customers express their dissatisfaction because they require water, but we are powerless without electricity.*) Family-owned water refilling stations relied heavily on machinery and stable utility services, and participants consistently reported that machine breakdowns, limited access to qualified technicians, and power interruptions had disrupted operations. These challenges resulted in service delays, reduced production output, and customer dissatisfaction.

The findings supported Sinha and Govindaraj (2020), who stated that small family businesses are highly susceptible to external disruptions due to limited redundancy in equipment and technical support. The geographical setting of Guiuan heightened this vulnerability, as repairs often required technicians from distant cities, causing prolonged operational downtime.

Theme 2: Financial Constraints and Market Pressures

Another significant challenge that was uncovered is financial instability, which is further exacerbated by a market with competitive conditions. Participants noted having loans, high electricity costs, and substantial taxation. P1 stated: "Waray, Kay ine inutang ko man la ine han pagtindog hine." (*No, we acquired our business through a loan.*) Meanwhile, P8 addressed the issue of taxation: "Pinaka dako namon nga problema it baraydan hiton buwis ha munisipyo... iton sinusukot hiton BIR dako." (*The BIR presumes that owning a water station equates to substantial earnings.*) P4 highlighted the concern about the competitive pressures: "Pinaka main challenges talaga namon and pag war price, pahabubuy kami hit presyo. May na 15 may 20. An customer namon naagaw han iba." (*Our biggest is the price competition is tough. Some stations charge ₱15 per gallon, while others charge ₱20. If you cannot match these prices, you risk losing customers.*) Participants described financial pressure as a persistent challenge. High electricity and maintenance costs, loan repayments, and tax obligations contributed to reduced cash flow. At the same time, the increasing number of water refilling stations in Guiuan intensified price competition, with some businesses lowering prices to attract customers. This situation made it difficult for some owners to maintain profitability while still covering operational expenses.

This aligned with the findings of Thanasi-Boçe et al. (2024), who found that small family enterprises in developing areas often struggled with limited capital access and competitive markets. Spark (2023) also noted that maintaining positive cash flow remained a universal concern among family businesses.

Theme 3: Balance between discipline and employee retention

One of the occurring issues also shows in employee management. Business owners faced challenges with staff absenteeism, discipline, and retention. P1 articulated: "Oo permanenti, ig kukuan ta, ikaw usa ka na pasarawayon wawarningan ka hit time na di ak sumunod hit warning diretso ka gawas" (*Yes, definitely. I give a warning first, but if you do not follow the warning, then you are immediately fired.*) It has made the owners implement stringent measures. P1 continued: "... one time na tagan mo hiya hin chance tapos asya la gihapon, diretso na pinapaiwas ko." (*If I give them a chance once and they still do the same thing, I immediately fire them.*) However, others prioritized fairness and support. P10 shared that: "It akon advice haira is maging hands on dida hit ira business pati ngada hit iya mga tawo, mga employees tapos patience kay damu it imo pag aagihan hini... kinahanglan naton liwat hira buligan para mag stay hira ha aton." (*My advice to them is to be hands-on in their business, especially with their people and employees, and to have patience because you will go through many challenges in this. We also need to support them so that they will stay with us.*) The study found that workforce management was a recurring concern. Owners reported problems related to employee absenteeism, inconsistency in performance, and difficulty maintaining discipline. Some business owners responded by enforcing strict attendance rules, while others emphasized supportive leadership and hands-on involvement to encourage employee loyalty. These findings were consistent with Díaz-Fernández et al. (2018), who highlighted the significance of internal communication, trust, and clear expectations in ensuring positive work dynamics within family enterprises.

Business practices and strategies adopted by family-owned water-refilling businesses in sustaining their operations.

Despite encountering challenges, family-owned water refilling stations make innovative strategies to maintain their business. These adaptive strategies demonstrate the resilience and creativity of family businesses, primarily concentrating on operational adaptations and customer-centered practices.

Theme 4: Financial Discipline and Pricing Strategies

Financial discipline occurs as an efficient practice among the participants in managing their family-owned water refilling stations. Several of the owners shared the importance of avoiding unnecessary expenses and controlling costs to ensure business sustainability. One of the participants shared that he does not "exceed his limit," while P7 emphasized the need to set aside funds for machine repairs since breakdowns can disrupt operations and result in financial losses. This practice of cautious spending reflects a shared awareness of some incident for them to save their funds for their machine problems in case of an occurring malfunction of equipment. In terms of pricing strategies, they were crucial for competitiveness and survival. Participants mentioned the "price wars" in Guiuan, where some operators reduced their rates to attract more customers, creating pressure on others to follow suit. To cope, some businesses lowered prices strategically while leveraging their advantages, such as not paying rent or sourcing from a deep well, to maintain profitability. Some participants shared that they intentionally reduced prices to have more customers, while others offered small freebies to earn customers' trust and loyalty. Despite these competitive pressures, many participants stressed the importance of balancing affordability with quality and reliability. Some participants pointed out, consistently passing bacterial and chemical inspections ensures customer trust and supports long-term growth. In response to financial constraints, participants practiced cost-control methods to sustain their businesses. These strategies included limiting operational hours, setting aside reserve funds for equipment maintenance, minimizing unnecessary spending, and purchasing equipment on installment plans. Some business owners also adjusted pricing structures to remain competitive while ensuring that costs remained manageable.

These practices demonstrated the financial prudence emphasized by Bermejo (2020), who identified disciplined resource allocation as critical to the long-term continuity of family businesses.

Theme 5: operational efficiency and technical adaptation

In reducing the financial constraints and reliance on technology, business owners implemented strategies including cost-saving initiatives, installment purchases, and skill development. P2 elaborated on their approach to lowering electricity expenses: "Consumption, sa halip na 24 hours pinapagana, sa umaga lang pinapagana." (*We only operate during the daytime to save on electricity.*) P6 shared their financing approach: "Mayada man namon nakuhaan hin machine na tinugot hin installment salit waray namon problema hadto." (*We were also able to purchase a machine through an installment plan, so we didn't have any problems at that time.*) Several participants highlighted the importance of training and self-sufficiency. P3 commented, "Kay san o ka mag himo hini mag se seminar ka anay, Kay Ako nag seminar Ako hini ha UP. Kay di man la bast basta it pag tatayo hini." (*Before you start this, you should first attend a seminar, because I attended a seminar about this at UP. Starting this business is not something you can do just like that.*) To reduce downtime and reliance on external service providers, several owners invested in developing their own technical skills through training, seminars, and self-study.

Routine equipment maintenance procedures were also implemented to prevent serious damage and ensure uninterrupted production.

This echoed Davis (2022), who emphasized the importance of agility and adaptive capability in helping family businesses thrive under uncertain operating conditions.

Theme 6: Customer-Centered Practices

Through this study, it revealed that reliable service and quality products with small incentives increased customer satisfaction, becomes an area of focus, along with building customer loyalty. P4 stated that: "Para ha akon, pag text ha amon it customer, deliviran agad. Kay hi customer pag diri mo deliberan makuha ha iba." (*For me, when a customer texts us, we deliver immediately. If you delay, the customer will get it from somewhere else.*) P8 also shared: "Adi kami hiton amon mga customer, nag hahatag nla kami hin mga pahalipay para ba dri Hera herayo, makadi ghap ha amon." (*We prioritize our customers and give them small freebies so that even if they are from far away, they will still come to us.*) P7 highlighted maintaining water quality: "Una may routine ka paghamis hit filter... Dapat ma maintain iton, kay diri ngani kada month bacteria test hit tubig igbabagsak ka." (*First, you need to have a routine for cleaning the filter. It must be properly maintained because if the monthly bacteria test of the water fails, you will not pass the inspection.*) Despite competitive pressures, many businesses retained their customer base through reliable service, strict quality control, free delivery, and small customer incentives. Maintaining compliance with sanitation and quality standards was viewed as essential for customer trust and long-term survival. This finding supported IMD (2025), which noted that customer satisfaction and consistent service delivery are critical competitive advantages for family-owned enterprises.

Overall, the results indicated that resilience, operational flexibility, financial discipline, and customer-centered practices played key roles in sustaining family-owned water refilling stations amid structural and economic challenges.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The researchers concluded that family-owned water refilling stations in Guiuan, Eastern Samar, face significant challenges in operations, finance, and workforce management, including machine breakdowns, unstable electricity supply, lack of technicians, high costs of electricity and taxation, loan repayments, market saturation, and employee discipline and retention issues. Despite these vulnerabilities, the businesses show resilience by adaptive business practices such as financial discipline, cautious spending, emergency fund distribution, and competitive pricing; operational efficiency through cost-saving measures, installment-based financing, and technical self-training; and customer-centered practices that ensure water quality, timely delivery, and customer loyalty. To sum it all up, the survival and sustainability of these family-owned enterprises rely on their ability to combine financial prudence, operational adaptability, and customer-focused strategies, allowing them to withstand the pressures of a resource-constrained and competitive environment.

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Competing Interests Statement

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this article.

Data Availability Statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study; all data used were obtained from previously published sources as cited in the reference list.

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Appendices

No appendices are attached to this study.