

**EXAMINING DISTRIBUTORS SATISFACTION IN MULTI-LEVEL MARKETING
COMPANIES IN AFGHANISTAN****Hamed Mansouri**

Istanbul Aydin University

ORCID: 0000-0002-6624-9891

Assist. Prof. Dr. MURAT UNANOĞLU

Istanbul Aydin University

ORCID: 0000-0002-5186-885X

Abstract

This study looked into the elements that influence distributor satisfaction with multilevel marketing (MLM) companies in Afghanistan. Five factors were investigated: method to diffuse business opportunity, perceptions of products and services, perceived quality of training program, perceived quality of recruiting process, and up-line support. After collecting data with the use of survey questionnaires and analyzing these data using SPSS the result of multiple regression indicated the following outcomes: the first three parameters (Method to diffuse business opportunity, Perceptions of products and services, Perceived quality of training program) had a considerable impact on distributor satisfaction, according to the results of the multiple regression analysis. The other two factors which are Perceived quality of recruitment process and Up-line support had no significant relationship with distributors' satisfaction.

Keywords: Direct Selling, Multi-level Marketing, Network Marketing, Satisfaction, Afghanistan.

1. INTRODUCTION

Direct selling or network marketing is another name for multi-level marketing (MLM). Multi-level marketing is called the initiative and popular distribution channel of the century (Loi, 2015). Network marketing were among the most successful businesses in 1990's (Dyer, 2001). Multi-level marketing organizations recruit distributors not only to buy and sale their products but also recruit other distributors into the network. Distributors will earn commissions and markups not only from selling the products by themselves but also from sales of their down-line distributors (persons which they recruited) (Coughlan & Grayson, 1998). The reason why this type of direct selling called multi-level marketing is that the distributors earn money through multiple levels of down-lines (Koroth, 2013). There are two types of network marketing: Single-level Marketing and Multi-level Marketing. In single-level marketing recruitment is one-to-one and the profit is limited to the person that he/she has recruited directly. In multi-level marketing sharing session is non-stop and the profit is not just limited to the person that he/she directly recruited but also the person/persons that their down-line has been recruited (Loi, 2015). Generally, the person has to buy an initial package so that he/she can be an official distributor for the company. Distributors are not employees; therefore, they will not be paid fixed salaries (Keep & Vander Nat, 2014). In a network, when a distributor brings in another person as a distributor to the network, he/she will be the up-line while the new person will be her/his down-line (Lee & Loi, 2016). Network marketing differs from

traditional marketing because the distributors (intermediaries) are not necessarily having to be equipped with marketing knowledge and have experience in marketing field (Delgado, 2000).

The popular business model of MLM attracted corrupt companies who emulated it to build illegal pyramid schemes, namely Ponzi (refers to Charles Ponzi) and "get-rich-quick" schemes (Nga & Mun, 2011). The essence and the determination of pyramid schemes have developed over time, along with all other marketing terms defined by legal precedent (Nat & Keep, 2002). The selling of goods or commodities was not included in early schemes. A pyramid scheme rewarded the participants in the recruiting of others, unlike Ponzi, which depends on voluntary participation from new entrants in order to fund returning investments paid to previous participants (Securities and Exchange Commission, 2013). The schemes were considered illegal since the right to obtain cash benefits by recruiting others into the company was the primary (and sometimes, main) advantage to members.

According to FTC (Federal Trade Commission) if you see any of the following warning signs, most likely that business is a pyramid scheme:

- Extraordinary promises from the promoter of the company about income and profit of the business.
- Emphasize about recruiting new distributor as the real way to make money. (In real MLM companies you will earn money just for selling the products and services).
- Playing on your feelings and use high pressure sell tactics and stress on you and maybe warning you're going to miss the chance if you don't move now and discouraging you from having time to research the business.
- Buying products more than the amount of use and sell and just because of reward plans and bonuses and stay active in the company.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Satisfaction of Distributors in MLM Companies

As per definition of Merriam-Webster's dictionary, satisfaction is "fulfillment of a need or want" or "a source or means of enjoyment". Satisfaction of distributor relates to the distributor's willingness to continue his/her work in the multi-level marketing business. There are many explanations for the aim of the turn-over of a distributor, but dissatisfaction may be the top factor in the list (Delgado, 2000).

The main sales power of the MLM corporation is the distributor or direct seller or individual business owner. They are not a contracted worker, but in order to gain money, they are selling the products and hiring new members (Loi, 2015). Even if they cannot achieve the goal for selling the products, the company will not fire them because they are responsible for their down-lines in the network (Kiyosaki, 2010). Through their efforts to sell items and hire new distributors as down-lines, every distributor receives compensation who then sells the goods (Coughlan & Grayson, 1998).

The satisfaction of the distributor means that the distributor is still prepared to operate with the MLM business. Individuals are still searching for opportunities to increase their own interest (Adabgon, 2007). Thus, the persistent satisfaction with an issue further facilitates the

relationship that prolongs gratification. The determination and achievement of the company always underpin a distributor's turnover intention (Msweli-Mbanga, 2001).

Therefore, it is necessary to understand the factors that could motivate distributors to stay on the job. Although much literature exists for employee satisfaction, research on independent agents such as MLM distributors are rather limited. The factors affecting their satisfaction are likely to be different from regular salaried employees. Therefore, the major aim of this study is to examine the antecedents of MLM distributors' satisfaction. *The five antecedents which will be investigated are: up-line support, methods of diffusing business opportunity, perceived quality of recruiting process, perceived quality of training program and perception of products/services.*

3. Method of Diffusing Business Opportunity

MLM business most of the time stands as a part time and second job for individuals (Loi, 2015). It is a second source of income for individual beside their main source of income or permanent job. The multi-level marketing commission system stems from the purchase of goods or services and multiplies a certain action by adding more participants (Muncy, 2004).

Diffusing the right business opportunity is the key to clarify this issue in public and MLM companies should take this action (Aspfors, 2010). Diffusion pattern over time, social systems where diffusion take place, personal influence, adoption process, speed of diffusion and the role of marketing activities are the six elements which are existing in diffusion theory according to Delgado (2000). The pattern of diffusion applies to the mechanism by which the distributor makes the initial purchase which is focused on the data transformation paradigm, which can draw distributors' attention. Second, the spreading of market opportunities often takes place in the social system, as decisions are usually made by a group of individuals (Delgado, 2000). After that, within a group of people usually there is a person who influence the decisions (leader). Social activity is often implicated in the power of mutual benefit (Adabgon, 2007). As a continuation of gain rather than loss, this mutual recognition process will then become the protocol for future reference. The process of acceptance of market opportunity distribution is based on the learning and training program's cognitive process (Delgado, 2000). Additionally, in order to decide its relative advantage over the rival, it is important that the speed of diffusion takes place in a social system (Loi, 2015).

4. Perceived Quality of Recruitment Process

One of the important MLM practices that can quickly result in revenue is recruiting (Loi, 2015). For a distributor, it is very normal to switch from one MLM company to another; instead, when getting profits in this business to start considering other opportunities offered. Therefore, to fill this gap, recruitment process is very important in MLM companies (Koroth, 2013). Normally, the same distributors conduct the recruitment process of Network Marketing by communicating with family, relatives and colleagues (Delgado, 2000). In general, potential distributors are approached with a business program and then taken to routine (weekly or monthly) meetings of the specific network marketing program (Brown, 1992). The partnership with the sponsored 'up-line' and recruited 'down-line' has to be managed by a distributor (Koroth, 2013). Teamwork and socialization within the networks are the key for success and satisfaction of individual distributors (Sparks & Schenk, 2006). Generally, the leader of the MLM network would give the prospect several questions during the individual coaching

session (Loi, 2015). As well as his partner or down-lines, he might stimulate the hope and wish of the prospect (Miekina, 2012); (Pratt, 2000). After that, the next step is to illustrate the dream with the real financial factors: the cost and commitment to accomplish the target. During this process only some of distributors can reach the level to be a recruiter. To recruit and persuade the prospect, the corresponding recruiter must be qualified by the organization. In order to evaluate a good recruiting, study, interview method and interviewer performance are very important (Delgado, 2000).

5. Perceived Quality of Training Program

The development and success of the individual networks that make up the whole company for both members and the organization will lead to success of the network marketing channel. Training also plays an important role in MLM as all members (including distributors) need to know how to continue hiring additional participants and to help them be successful at their work (Delgado, 2000). In order to encourage newbies to enter the industry, distributors are also expected to be more knowledgeable in their sales capacity (Nga & Mun, 2011). Good selling skills and knowledge about products and services of the company will help distributors to give confidence to consumers and also other distributors (Loi, 2015). As the operating climate of today's enterprise is quickly and continuously evolving, training is a critical consideration for the marketing role of every organization (Estrada, 1995). In effort to enhance the distributor's success rate, adequate training and sales meetings are required (Bacon, 2009; Delgado, 2000; Dyer, 2001). Social relations between participants may be strengthened by sufficient training, seminars, motivational events and marketing materials (Sparks et al., 2006; Chen et al. n.d.). This collaboration is known as a socialized exchange that leads to more stability and successful corporate citizenship (Loi, 2015).

6. Up-line Support

In an MLM network, the person who recruit a new person to join the network is called up-line. The person who has been recruited by up-line is called down-line. The non-monetary source of incentives in the MLM industry is usually derived from the relation between buyer and seller (up-line and down-line). A strong relationship would enable stronger ties between the two in the network to progress towards networks goals (Loi, 2015). In order to obtain the future attractive financial rewards, Up-line should regularly offer guidelines and assistance to down-line (Sparks & Schenk, 2006). The distributor should always provide his client with moral encouragement, knowledge sharing, social interaction initiative and realistic assistance as well as down-line (Zhang, Chen, & Su, 2014). The measures and advancements needed to be done by up-line to assist down-line to reach the required results (Zhang, Chen, & Su, 2014). In order to support the development of the down-line, Up-line should also ensure continuity of the actions and proper training (Loi, 2015).

7. Perception of products and services

Perception, according to Merriam Webster's dictionary, is "awareness of the elements of environment through physical sensation". In other words, a series of processes by which a person becomes conscious of and interprets knowledge about the environment is called perception (Agyekum, Haifeng, & Agyeiwaa, 2015). If everybody sees it all the way, life will be a bit easier, of course, the opposite is correct. In addition, people mistakenly think that truth is empirical, that we all perceive the same situations in the same way (Brodie, et al., 2004).

The company's product and service reflect corporate image and prestige (Osei & Katsner, 2014). The perception of the organization is influenced by the image, customer interface and quality of company's product. The value-for-money product, from a reliable source and with adequate information, is perceived better in the consumer's mind (Joshi, 2014). In addition to the features of the product, the image of the brand, the knowledge and experience of the distributor and the large variety of products and services result in customer satisfaction (Loi, 2015). The emphasis of MLM is no longer on its iconic picture, but on the more realistic concern of inventing more creative and high-quality products. Instead of concentrating on the profit strategy, distributors would find it much easier to persuade prospects with product creativity (Chen & Cheng, 1999).

8. Research Hypotheses

The researcher started filling it with the following leading hypotheses for study based on the gaps in the study literature. The aim is to achieve a broad goal.

H1: There is a significant association between the method of diffusing business opportunity and distributor satisfaction in multi-level marketing company.

H2: There is a significant association between perceived quality of training program and distributor satisfaction in multi-level marketing company.

H3: There is a significant association between perceived quality of recruiting process and distributor satisfaction in multi-level marketing company.

H4: There is a significant association between up-line support and distributor satisfaction in multi-level marketing company.

H5: There is a significant relationship between perception of products/services and distributor satisfaction in multi-level marketing company.

9. Conceptual Framework

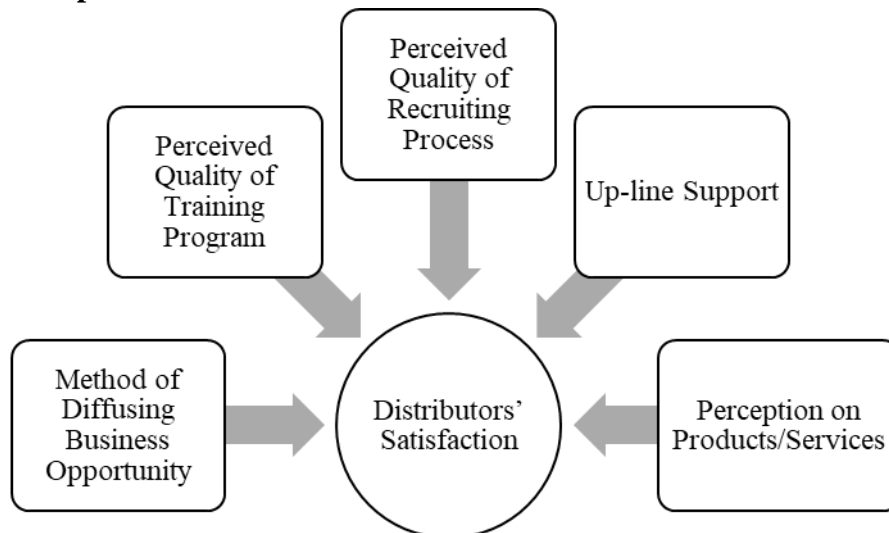


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

10. METHODOLOGY

Quantitative research will be the research method in this research and it will be used to measure the variables which affect distributor's satisfaction in MLM companies in Afghanistan. In the other hand, this method will be used to determine the relationship between

distributor's satisfaction and it is determinants. Data from the survey has been collected between March and April 2021. Unit of analysis in this research is individual distributor in MLM companies. The sample size for respondents was then determined to be 384 with a margin of error of 5 and confidence level 95 using Cochran's sample size calculation formula, taking into account the large population of MLM business distributors in Afghanistan. In this research close-ended questions and scale-response questions will be used, in which respondents are asked to choose from the choices or points of scale that are available to choose. The five-point Likert scales query was adopted in this segment, varying from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Based on his satisfaction with each factor that applies to the attribute, the respondent is expected to answer each question. In this section, 34 questions are provided to measure the variables.

11. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In this study, after the questionnaire type was coded into the application, SPSS 25.0 software was used to perform statistical analysis. By percentage and frequency, the descriptive statistical analysis approach was performed to classify respondents with demographic-related details, such as (gender, age, level of education, status, and work experience). In order to forecast a given result, multiple regression is used to calculate the collection of variables (Pallant, 2005). In this research, the relation between dependent variable and independent variables is calculated by multiple regression analysis.

12. Descriptive Analysis

Demographic analysis of the respondents showed that there are a total of 283 males and 101 females were participated in this survey. The age of the 384 respondents were from 18-50 years old: 25 respondents are from age 18-20, 116 respondents from age 21-25, 142 respondents from age 26-30, 75 respondents from age 31-35, 10 respondents from age 36-40 and 16 respondents from age 41-50. There were 141 respondents who have married and 243 were with single status in this survey. In terms of education level, majority of the respondents (190 person) were holding an undergraduate degree.

Table 1: Demographic Profile

n=384	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	283	73.7
Male	101	26.3
Female		
Age		
18-20	25	6.5
21-25	116	30.2
26-30	142	37.0
31-35	75	19.5
36-40	10	2.6
41-50	16	4.2
Status		
Single	243	63.3
Married	141	36.7
Total	384	100.0
Educational Background		
Secondary/vocational	50	13.0
Undergraduate	190	49.5
Graduate	139	36.2

13. Reliability Analysis

Cronbach's alpha is a simple measure used to examine internal consistency or reliability, and it is within the permissible range as shown in Table below. According to the usual rule of thumb for Cronbach's alpha, the study instrument is accurate.

Table 2: Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized		
Cronbach's Alpha	Items	N of Items
.923	.924	6

Cronbach's Alpha for the six variables in this study was .923, according to table 2. If Cronbach's Alpha is greater than .7, it is considered dependable (Pallant, 2005). As a result, this scale has a high level of internal consistency. Table 3 also shows the reliability for all variables separately.

Table 3: Result of Reliability Analysis

	No of Items	Corrected Item- Total Correlation
Satisfaction	5	.871
Recruitment	5	.783
Training	7	.793
Opportunity	3	.869
Upline	3	.571
Product	5	.811

14. Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis testing is a statistical method for making statistical decisions based on experimental data. Multiple Linear Regression analysis was used in this study to test hypotheses H1, H2, H3, H4, and H5.

Table 4: Coefficients^a of Independent Variables

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	
	B	Std. Error	Beta			
	(Constant)	.006	.083		.070	.944
1	Recruitment	.045	.045	.039	1.011	.313
	Training	.157	.047	.136	3.366	.001
	Opportunity	.535	.049	.479	10.950	.000
	Upline	.053	.031	.049	1.683	.093
	Product	.285	.039	.289	7.346	.000

a. Dependent Variable: Satisfaction

Hypothesis H1, H2, H3, H4 and H5 has been tested according to results of the table 4 as follows:

H1: There is a significant association between the method of diffusing business opportunity and distributor satisfaction in companies using multi-level marketing in Afghanistan.

Table 4 tells the hypothesis accepted or rejected and if the Sig < 0.05 is accepted as in the table shows the Sig=0.000 for method of diffusing business opportunity it means our hypothesis is accepted.

H2: There is a significant association between perceived quality of training program and distributor satisfaction in companies using multi-level marketing in Afghanistan.

The Sig value for the perceived quality of training program as shown in the table 4 is Sig=0.001 therefore as it is not greater than Sig = 0.05 this hypothesis is accepted.

H3: There is a significant association between perceived quality of recruiting process and distributor satisfaction in companies using multi-level marketing in Afghanistan.

According to table 4 the value of Sig for the perceived quality of recruitment process is Sig=0.313. As the value is greater than Sig=0.05 therefore this hypothesis is rejected.

H4: There is a significant association between up-line support and distributor satisfaction in companies using multi-level marketing in Afghanistan.

For the up-line support the value of Sig in the table 4 is Sig=0.093 which is greater than Sig=0.05 therefore this hypothesis is rejected.

H5: There is a significant relationship between perception of products/services and distributor satisfaction in companies using multi-level marketing in Afghanistan.

As it shown in table 4, the value of Sig for perception of products and services is Sig=0.000. This hypothesis is accepted as the value of Sig is not greater than Sig=0.05.

Additionally, according to table 4, the value of standardized Beta for method of diffusing business opportunity (beta=.479), perception of product/service (beta=.289), and perceived quality of training program is (beta=.136) indicated that method of diffusing business opportunity is the most important factor that explains MLM distributors' satisfaction and the following factors are perception of products and services and perceived quality of training program.

To see if the five independent variables contributed to the dependent variable, distributor satisfaction, the t-statistic was used. When the t-value of an independent variable is significant at the 0.05 level, the variable is included in the model for this investigation. Table 4 shows that in the regression model, three out of the five independent variables are significant (p<05). The following is a representation of the model:

$$Y = 0.006 + 0.157X_1 + 0.535X_2 + 0.285X_3$$

In this model:

Y = Distributor Satisfaction

X1 = Perceived quality of training program

X2 = Method of diffusing business opportunity

X3 = Perception of product and services

15. Discussions

The method of diffusing business opportunity has a substantial association with distributor satisfaction, according to this study. The method of diffusing business opportunity refers to how the opportunity's information is sent to the target individuals; how is the target influenced and adopts the message (Delgado, 2000). In light of the competitive market, the entire procedure takes into account the speed with which the message is sent as well as the innovative marketing effort. This study discovered a link between the method of diffusing

business opportunity and distributor satisfaction. In the model, the method of diffusing business opportunity is crucial. As a result, the opportunity to own a firm also provides a foundation for achieving financial independence. It is also emphasized that the MLM company's pay plan must be viewed as 'really gratifying' to the distributor (Coughlan et al., 1998). Distributor efforts are motivated by the reward system's incentives and bonuses.

There is also a considerable correlation between perceived training program quality and distributor satisfaction, according to this study. Sharing business prospects, motivation, and knowledge-based training are among the themes covered in the training program. The organization should put a premium on the training program's quality. To boost distributors' competitiveness, they must receive adequate training and aggressively disseminate knowledge. A successful distributor will be a role model for his colleagues.

According to this study, there is no link between perceived quality of the recruiting process and distributors' satisfaction. In this study, recruitment refers to two different scenarios in which a distributor acts as an up-line of another distributor and as a down-line of his up-line. The approach occurs when an up-line recruits a downline; and the downline's view of the up-line distributor who approached them. It also raises concerns about the tactics utilized during the recruitment process. According to Delgado (2000), the pre-interview is required to determine the ideal position for the prospect based on their talents and potential.

According to this study, the support of up-line has no significant relationship with distributor satisfaction. It was proposed in that report that the up-line should focus more on the affairs and performance of the down-line. It focused on the ability of up-line members to support down-line members when they are in need. However, the results of this study revealed that there is no significant link between up-line support and distributor satisfaction.

The perception of the MLM company's product/service is significantly related to distributor satisfaction, according to this study. The after-sale care and customer service problem-solving skills are always a source of concern. As a result, if MLM firms can maximize company resources to deliver the finest support service to distributors, the distributors would be more satisfied.

16. CONCLUSION

The five criteria that impact distributor satisfaction in multi-level marketing companies were examined in this study. Two of the five factors were discovered to have no meaningful link with distributor satisfaction. There is no significant association between perceived quality of recruiting process and up-line support to the dependent variable. Distributor satisfaction is positively associated with the method of diffusing business opportunities, perceived quality of the training program, and product/service perception.

The method of diffusing business opportunity has the most substantial association with distributor satisfaction, according to this study. As a result, the distributor must leverage on the company's strengths and persuade the prospect of its current and future prospects. It will increase the prospect's self-assurance. Because of the unlawful activities of a few bad apples in the industry, some people may be wary of being approached to join an MLM firm. The problems associated with pyramid schemes and Ponzi schemes have yet to be resolved. People were turned away because of the overstated income claim and declaration.

Also, according to this study, there is a strong link between perceived training program quality and distributor satisfaction. The training program includes topics such as sharing business opportunities, motivation, and knowledge-based training. Adequate training and actively providing the information is essential to improve distributors competitiveness. A successful distributor will set an example for his team.

The perception of the MLM company's product/service is significantly related to distributor satisfaction, according to this study. The focus of the study was on distributor satisfaction with product/service information and customer service channel. The after-sale support and customer service problem-solving skills are always a source of concern. As a result, if MLM firms can maximize company resources to deliver the finest support service to distributors, the distributors would be more satisfied. The organization should concentrate on product development. A topic is usually initiated by a distributor using a product, whether it's a product sharing or a testimonial. It's unlikely that the distributor will begin the sales pitch by describing the incentive program or profit plan. This is to avoid scaring the prospect away with a negative picture. As a result, product development and sourcing are crucial in an MLM organization. It's a strategy for attracting customers and keeping them loyal to the brand.

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