

SME Branding at the Bottom of the Pyramid: Lessons Learned from Applying Phenomenological Case Study in the Indian Himalayas

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Abstract

In this paper, the authors share and reflect critically on the experience of applying phenomenological case study approach in a doctoral study examining SME branding at the Bottom of the Pyramid environment. Data collection for this study necessitated 22 months of fieldwork, with visits spread out over 43 non-consecutive days within the rugged Indian Himalayas. Reflecting on our experiences, we discuss the insights gained in the application of the phenomenological case study approach, data collection and analysis processes, challenges associated with preconceived notions, and ensuring the trustworthiness of our findings. Our key findings offer six crucial considerations for researchers: selecting appropriate cases, foregrounding lived experiences, utilising reflexivity for informed decisions, acknowledging researcher positionality, and navigating the data analysis and interpretation in phenomenological case studies.

Keywords: Phenomenology, case study, branding, bottom of the pyramid

1. INTRODUCTION

The current state of research in branding employs a diverse range of methodologies, the most prevalent being qualitative inquiries, particularly within the realm of Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (SMEs) branding (Mazurek, 2014; Oh et al., 2020). While these approaches offer valuable insights, a persistent tension exists between capturing the subjective experiences of entrepreneurs within a smaller, resource-constrained environment and providing a rich, contextualised understanding of brand building within a specific SME's environment (Yessoufou et al., 2018). Among the various qualitative methodologies, phenomenology and case studies stand out for their ability to delve deeply into individual experiences and specific organisational contexts, respectively. Phenomenology, focusing on lived experiences, allows us to explore the subjective understanding and meaning-making processes driving SME branding decisions (Schacht, 1972). The case study approach, on the other hand, provides a focused context for this exploration, enabling us to delve into the intricacies of branding within a specific SME (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006; Yin, 2003). Merging the strengths of phenomenology and case studies offers a nuanced exploration of the "how" and "why" behind SME branding decisions. This combined approach not only addresses the limitations of singular methods and captures the essence of brand-building but also ideal for the in-depth exploration of specific brand experiences within a smaller, focused setting like an SME (Carù et al., 2014). Moreover, the branding strategies of SMEs operating in the BoP environment are not driven solely by market trends but also by the unique passions, histories, and challenges the entrepreneurs face. Thus, a phenomenological case study allows us to capture this intricate interplay, offering valuable insights for researchers and SME practitioners.

The complexity of the phenomenological case study approach may cause novice researchers to experience some anxiety at the beginning of their qualitative research inquiry (Caelli, 2001; De Felice & Janesick, 2015). While established guidelines exist, the paradigm's focus on evolving research design and subjective interpretation of lived experience often lacks a precise formula for moving forward (Mazurek, 2014; Schacht, 1972). This methodological paper bridges this research gap by reflecting on the collaborative journey of a novice researcher and their faculty mentor, highlighting challenges and insights gained during the doctoral study. Through a mentor-

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mentee pedagogical approach, we fostered a collaborative learning environment that supported the mentee's development of knowledge and critical thinking skills in methodology, research design, data analysis, and interpretation. Although the second author (faculty mentor) possessed experience in mixing qualitative methods, this was their first time mentoring a doctoral student using this specific research design. This article serves as a roadmap for researchers interested in investigating branding using case studies combined with focused phenomenology.

This article is divided into three parts. The first part briefly overviews the doctoral study, outlining its objectives. The second section offers a comprehensive review of the relevant literature. Here, we define the case study method and the phenomenological approach, exploring their applications, various perspectives, and associated advantages and disadvantages. Additionally, we outline the methodology we employed in our study and explain the rationale behind our decision to combine the phenomenological and case study approaches. Finally, the third part describes our experiences and learnings gained from applying this mixed methods approach.

1.1 Background to doctoral study

The promising plant-based products market in India presents a significant opportunity for grower entrepreneurs in the Indian Himalayan Region (IHR)(Cardello et al., 2022; Hansen et al., 2023). However, despite the national growth, IHR entrepreneurs face unique challenges due to limitations in infrastructure and established marketing channels specific to the bottom-of-the-pyramid environment (Sarkar, 2018). Though their products have unique potential, a lack of brand awareness makes it difficult to compete with more prominent national brands and to reach broader markets. Research suggests that brand building requires a strong understanding of consumer preferences and targeted marketing strategies tailored to specific regions (Oh et al., 2020; Spence & Hamzaoui Essoussi, 2010). However, existing studies on branding primarily focus on big brands' corporate stories (Krake, 2005; Merrilees, 2007). The theoretical understanding of SME branding, particularly for those operating in resource-constrained environments at the "bottom of the pyramid," remains underdeveloped (Merrilees, 2007; Oh et al., 2020). Unlike large corporations with ample capital, know-how, and human resources, SME branding in these contexts relies heavily on the ingenuity and resourcefulness of individual entrepreneurs (Renton et al., 2015). Thus, the research question for the doctoral study was: How do grower entrepreneurs in the Indian Himalayan region overcome unique challenges to market and build brands for their plant-based products? The research sought to explore the lived experiences of IHR grower entrepreneurs. By examining their specific marketing strategies and brand-building practices, the research aims to explore their challenges, understand how they overcame them, and gain insights into the entrepreneurial branding of products in the BoP environment. We recognised the need for a research approach that could capture the lived experiences of grower entrepreneurs while simultaneously illuminating the unique aspects of SME brand building within the BoP environment.

2. BACKGROUND LITERATURE

Generally, qualitative methods are mostly used to gain a detailed understanding of any specific phenomenon (Carù et al., 2014). Among these, phenomenology and case study approaches are particularly notable for their ability to provide deep insights into the "how" and "why" behind human behaviour within a business context. Phenomenology, with its focus on lived experiences, allows researchers to capture the rich, subjective meanings individuals attach to specific phenomena (Caelli, 2001). On the other hand, the case study approach provides a detailed examination of specific instances within their real-life contexts, allowing researchers to explore the unique circumstances and practices of individual cases (Baškarada, 2014; Yin, 2003). However, a single approach alone may not always be sufficient, depending upon the nature of the research inquiry (Carù et al., 2014).

Phenomenology, rooted in the philosophical traditions of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, aims to understand the essence of experiences as perceived by individuals (Caelli, 2001; Schacht, 1972). This method involves in-depth interviews and detailed analyses to capture the subjective meanings and interpretations that individuals attach to their experiences (Creswell, 2018). The primary strength of phenomenology lies in its ability to provide rich, detailed insights into the inner lives and perceptions of participants (Schacht, 1972). By focusing on lived experiences, phenomenological research can reveal the underlying essences and structures that shape these experiences, offering a nuanced understanding that is often overlooked by other methods (Van Manen, 1990). However, phenomenology also presents certain challenges. One significant difficulty is the requirement for researchers to engage in epoché or bracketing, which involves setting aside their own biases and preconceptions to fully understand the participants' perspectives (Moustakas, 1994). This process can be challenging, especially in deeply ingrained contexts. Additionally, phenomenological studies often involve small

sample sizes, which can limit the generalizability of the findings (Schacht, 1972). Despite these challenges, phenomenology remains a powerful tool for exploring complex, subjective experiences in depth.

The case study approach is a widely used qualitative research method that allows for an in-depth exploration of contemporary phenomena within their real-life contexts (Yin, 2003). This method is particularly advantageous for studying complex issues in business research, such as organisational processes, managerial practices, and strategic decision-making (Eisenhardt, 1989). Case studies enable researchers to use multiple data sources, including interviews, observations, and documents, which enhances the richness and validity of the findings (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006). One of the main strengths of the case study approach is its ability to provide a comprehensive examination of the contextual factors influencing the phenomenon under study (Yin, 2003). This holistic perspective is essential for understanding the dynamics and intricacies of real-life situations (Flyvbjerg, 2006). However, the case study method is not without its drawbacks. One primary criticism is the potential for researcher bias, as the researcher's interpretations can heavily influence the findings (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Additionally, case studies can be time-consuming and resource-intensive, often requiring extensive fieldwork and data collection (Yin, 2003). Another limitation is the challenge of achieving external validity, as findings from a single or a few case studies may not be easily generalisable to other settings (Eisenhardt, 1989). Despite these limitations, the case study method remains invaluable for gaining a deep understanding of complex phenomena within their specific contexts.

Given the distinct strengths and limitations of both phenomenology and case study approaches, combining these methods can provide a more comprehensive understanding of research phenomena (Carù et al., 2014; Martiny et al., 2021). Phenomenology's focus on subjective experiences can complement the case study's emphasis on contextual factors, offering a richer, more nuanced perspective (Moustakas, 1994). For example, in our study on SME branding, phenomenology can reveal how entrepreneurs perceive and experience branding, while case studies can explore how organisational and environmental contexts influence these perceptions. Creswell (2018) emphasises the synergy between the two methodologies. Phenomenology allows for a deep exploration of the lived experiences within a case study, uncovering the "what" and "how" of participants' encounters with the phenomenon. This resonates with Chesser-Smyth (2005), who utilised a combined approach to understand the lived experience of stress among nurses. Their research yielded not just the objective stressors but also the subjective meanings and emotional responses nurses attributed to those stressors. Martiny et al. (2021) advocate for phenomenological mixed methods. They argue that case studies can ground phenomenological inquiry in a specific context, ensuring that findings are not overly abstract. Through in-depth case studies, researchers can explore the "lived experience" of a phenomenon for specific individuals or groups. (O'Mahony, 2001) employed a phenomenological case study to explore the lived experiences of women with breast cancer. This approach allowed them to capture the essence of these experiences while also gaining insights specific to the women's individual health journeys.

The integration of these approaches allows researchers to mitigate the limitations inherent in each method when used independently. The phenomenological emphasis on bracketing can counterbalance potential researcher bias in case studies, while the case study's multiple data sources can enhance the validity and robustness of phenomenological insights (Creswell, 2021; Wilson, 2012). Additionally, this mixed-methods approach can enhance the generalizability of findings by providing both deep, context-specific insights and broader patterns and themes (Creswell, 2021; Hancock & Algozzine, 2006; Yin, 2003). However, combining these approaches requires careful consideration (De Felice & Janesick, 2015). Some argue that the focus on a single case in a case study might limit the generalizability of phenomenological findings (Caelli, 2001; Ivey, 2023). Merleau-Ponty & Smith (1962) emphasised the importance of considering multiple perspectives and experiences within the phenomenological approach. Therefore, researchers should be transparent about the limitations of a single case while ensuring that the chosen case offers deep insights into the phenomenon of interest (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Research by Carù et al., (2014) Creswell (2018) and Moustakas (1994) demonstrate the potential of this approach. While limitations exist, careful planning and a nuanced understanding of both methodologies can lead to rich and meaningful research findings.

3. METHODOLOGY: MIXING QUALITATIVE METHODS

The doctoral study employed an exploratory research design with multiple case studies, utilising a phenomenological approach. Based on our literature review, we determined that a contextual focus on the brand-building experiences of entrepreneurs was crucial for a holistic understanding of SME branding at BoP (Abimbola & Vallaster, 2007; Oh et al., 2020; Spence & Hamzaoui Essoussi, 2010). Consequently, we adopted a Heideggerian approach to interpretive phenomenology for our research (Pham, 2022). We selected respondents

using the criterion-sampling method in accordance with the phenomenological approach (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). The question of participant selection in phenomenological studies is a complex process (Caelli, 2001). While some advocate for larger samples, we opted for a more focused group of six entrepreneurs belonging to six different ventures (Tutar et al., 2024). This aligns with the perspective of Cohen et al. (2000) who suggest that a smaller, carefully chosen group allows for a deeper exploration of lived experiences and richer data necessary to answer our research questions.

We adopted pre-arranged criteria for selecting the entrepreneurs within the Himalayas, wherein they must be actively running a plant-based product manufacturing unit with a minimum operational experience of five years in business. To ensure a range of brand development experiences, we selected entrepreneurs based on their brand development stage, including those with established, recognisable brands (name, logo, consistent messaging) and those in earlier stages of defining their brand identity and exploring marketing strategies. We collected data by employing both semi-structured interviews and a multi-source approach for case studies (interviews, documents, observations), which facilitated triangulation during analysis. Data collection for this study necessitated 22 months of fieldwork, with visits spread out over 43 non-consecutive days within the rugged Indian Himalayas. Interviews ranged from 70 minutes to 2.5 hours, complemented by at least 120 hours of observation (with a minimum of 20 hours spent observing the complete operation at each participating venture).

Data analysis was done by examining themes and patterns across the data sets, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of how individual and contextual factors shape SME branding in the Indian Himalayas. We followed an iterative and inductive approach to data analysis (Creswell, 2018). We began with open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to explore how founders launched and achieved success in their ventures. Using NVivo software, we categorised and compared interview segments and other data sources to identify initial codes. Following a cyclical process, we iteratively re-coded and re-read the data, refining the codes into data-driven insights (first-order codes) (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). These first-order codes ultimately formed the foundation for broader, second-order themes. Finally, we compared and contrasted these second-order themes across both cases to identify overarching dimensions and patterns. Through this inductive approach, we ultimately identified six key dimensions related to SME brand building in the BoP environment.

4. SOME LESSONS FROM THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL CASE STUDY APPROACH

4.1 Case selection and building rapport

In a phenomenological case study, selecting the right case and establishing rapport with the participant are not merely initial steps but rather the very foundation upon which the entire investigation rests (Caelli, 2001). It acts as the researcher's gateway to the lived experience, enabling an unparalleled depth of understanding regarding the critical issues under investigation (Moustakas, 1994). One of the critical challenges we faced at the outset of the study was selecting the right case. What defines a "right" case, and how do we go about selecting and accessing them? Here, we discuss the key considerations and strategies that we used in our study for case selection and access.

We first operationalised the "single unit case" by predefined criteria to qualify to serve as a case in accordance with our research question and objective (see methodology section for criteria details). We took great care to ensure the sample was representative, providing rich information and valuable variation on the theoretical dimensions. We conducted a pilot study by choosing a sole proprietorship to test our research design. This initial phase allowed us to refine our data collection methods and ensure that our approach effectively captured the lived experiences of the entrepreneur. This pilot study provided valuable insights into the effectiveness of our interview questions, the depth of information obtained, and the rapport-building process.

Building rapport with participants is essential to gain their trust and elicit authentic, in-depth narratives. This involves demonstrating empathy, maintaining ethical standards, and ensuring confidentiality. Researchers must be mindful of cultural sensitivities and power dynamics that could affect participants' willingness to share openly. Establishing a genuine connection can be particularly challenging in diverse settings, such as rural Himalayan communities, where researchers may be viewed as outsiders.

4.2 Reflexivity and researcher positionality

Reflexivity plays a critical role in ensuring the richness and trustworthiness of findings in phenomenological case studies. Our preconceived notions and beliefs can significantly influence the study's process and outcomes. For

instance, in the pilot data collection stage of this study, as the first author, I held a preconceived belief that SME entrepreneurs are primarily driven by survival needs rather than innovation. However, during the first interview process, discussions with my faculty mentor (Second author) challenged this assumption. We recognised the potential for this bias to influence the data collection and interpretation. To overcome this, we implemented a two-pronged approach. First, we maintained a reflexive journal to document our thoughts and biases throughout the research process. Regularly reviewing these entries allowed us to identify and address potential influences on our work. This self-reflection ensured that subsequent interviews remained focused on uncovering the lived experiences of the entrepreneurs, allowing their motivations for innovation to emerge organically.

As Tomkins & Eatough (2010) argue, "Reflexivity is not a luxury but a necessity" in IPA, as it allows researchers to "unbracket" their own biases and achieve a deeper level of empathy with the participant's world. Through this ongoing critical self-reflection, we were able to navigate the complexities of interpretation and deliver a more nuanced representation of the entrepreneurial experience within SMEs. Second, after each interview and transcription process, we engaged in debriefing sessions to discuss the findings and interpretations. This collaborative approach helped to challenge our assumptions and offer alternative perspectives, thereby reducing bias. Additionally, we shared our interpretations with the entrepreneurs whenever possible for validation. Researchers' background and positionality influence their approach to participants (Tomkins & Eatough, 2010). Positionality acknowledges that researchers are not detached observers but are instead intertwined with the research context (Day, 2012). We suggest that a researcher's phenomenological case studies should be flexible; instead of rigidly sticking to one perspective, they should adopt different stances (outsider, insider) based on the research goals and specific context.

4.3 Uncovering the "What" and "How" of lived experiences

As novice researchers, the biggest dilemma we faced in applying the combined phenomenological case study approach was choosing which method of phenomenology to proceed with Husserlian phenomenology or Heideggerian phenomenology. Given the radical differences between these methods, the choice is critically important, especially for beginner researchers. While Husserlian phenomenology seeks to describe and understand the essence of experiences from a first-person perspective, Heideggerian phenomenology delves into the interpretation of these experiences within their broader contexts, considering the influence of the social, cultural, and historical milieu (Schacht, 1972). Over the cross-literature examination and thorough discussions, we stick to Heideggerian phenomenology, as it follows an interpretive phenomenological approach and is helpful for exploring the research question of how BoP entrepreneurs build brands for their products at the resource constraint environments. By emphasising the influence of being in the world, Heideggerian phenomenology can uncover the nuanced ways in which local contexts shape entrepreneurial practices and branding strategies.

Therefore, based on our experience, novice researchers should prioritise the nature of their research question and the significance of context when selecting a phenomenological method. Husserlian phenomenology excels at uncovering the essential structures of lived experiences, making it ideal for research questions focused on universal experiences or shared meanings (Schacht, 1972). Conversely, Heideggerian phenomenology delves into the existential and situated nature of being, proving invaluable for exploring how individuals grapple with unique experiences within their specific contexts (Pham, 2022). Furthermore, researchers should consider their own philosophical comfort level. Husserl offers a more structured approach, while Heideggerian inquiry demands a strong foundation in existential philosophy and a tolerance for ambiguity (Schacht, 1972).

Additionally, if the study aims to explore the interpretative aspects of experiences within a specific setting, this approach is suitable. Researchers should also be prepared to engage deeply with participants' narratives, interpret the data within its broader context, and reflect on their own preconceptions throughout the research process. Thus, a major hurdle we faced was interpreting the often-ambiguous narratives that emerge from data. Here, careful attention to metaphors and the deeper layers of language used by participants becomes crucial. Additionally, the researcher's own preconceptions can influence the interpretation. To navigate this, bracketing, a technique where researchers suspend their assumptions, allows for a more open exploration of the experiences themselves (Cohen et al., 2000). Through these, Heideggerian phenomenology allows researchers to understand not only the "what" (content) of lived experiences but also the "how" (meaning and significance) within the context of the participants' world.

4.4 Linking description to interpretation

Another major tension in phenomenological case study research arises during data analysis. Novice researchers may become overly focused on the mechanics of coding and theme development or engrossed in the participant's

individual narrative, potentially neglecting the core phenomenon under investigation (Caelli, 2001). We began our data analysis by transcribing the data and adopted a combined coding procedure of phenomenology and case study approach.

The first step was familiarisation, which involved thoroughly reading and re-reading interview transcripts, observation notes, and collected documents to immerse ourselves in the data. Through this immersion, we identified significant statements that captured the essence of the entrepreneurs' experiences. Next, we employed phenomenological horizontalization by grouping these statements into clusters of meaning. This resulted in themes like "*challenges in branding at bop*". A textural description was then developed to articulate the entrepreneurs' lived experiences. For example, "Struggling to make ends meet, facing limited staff, and constantly battling the clock, entrepreneurs reported that budget constraints, human resource limitations, and time pressures significantly hindered their brand-building efforts".

The analysis then moved beyond individual experiences to consider the case context. We explored how the specific challenges faced by these SME enterprises promoting plant-based products in low-income communities were exacerbated by factors like limited resources and consumer awareness. This resulted in a structural description, such as, 'The case context of SMEs promoting plant-based products in low-income communities exacerbated these challenges due to limited resources and consumer awareness'. Finally, we integrated the phenomenological themes with the case study patterns. For example, the theme of "*challenges in consumer engagement*" aligned with the case-specific category of "*market penetration strategies and barriers*." We identified a pattern across these categories, such as, "The lack of integrated marketing channels contributed to difficulties in consumer engagement". The final synthesis integrates both phenomenological themes and case study patterns. In our case, it revealed that the interplay between individual challenges in consumer engagement and market penetration barriers underscores the need for innovative, cost-effective marketing strategies to enhance brand recognition and adoption of plant-based products among low-income consumers.

Therefore, based on our experience, we believe that attaining an exhaustive analysis is not the principal aim of a phenomenological case study approach. The goal is not to achieve a definitively "perfect" or "right" analysis but rather to capture and illuminate a meaningful aspect of the lived experience under investigation. Ideally, the analysis should acknowledge the inherent complexity, contradictory elements, and uncertainties that are often present within these experiences. Researchers should strive to capture these nuances, recognising that a complete understanding may always remain elusive.

5. CONCLUSION

Building brands in the bottom of the pyramid (BoP) market presents a unique challenge due to its dynamic and complex nature. Understanding the specific efforts of entrepreneurs within the cultural context is crucial for successful research. This article aims to guide fellow researchers interested in exploring the use of case studies with a phenomenological approach to investigate cultural contexts within BoP settings. By sharing our experiences with this methodology, we hope to assist researchers in considering this design in their methodological journey.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to the entrepreneurs and people of Uttarkashi, Uttarakhand, for their invaluable input and support during the data collection phase.

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