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# BEYOND CONSUMPTION: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL INQUIRY INTO MORAL MEANING, SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY, AND CUSTOMER COMMITMENT TOWARDS SMALL FOOD ENTERPRISES

Reamuel R. Bañados and Daryl V. Panerio

**Author's Affiliation:**

Department of Business Administration and Management Accounting, St. Cecilias -College Cebu, Inc.

**Corresponding Author:**
reamuelbanados@gmail.com

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**Abstract.** This phenomenological study explored customers' lived experiences of moral meaning, perceived social responsibility, and commitment to Small Food Enterprises (SFEs) in Minglanilla, Cebu, Philippines. Data were gathered through a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) involving eight purposively selected customers with prior purchasing experience from Small Food Enterprises. The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed three major themes: (1) Moral Meaning Through Transparent and Honest Business Practices, (2) Perceived Social Responsibility Through Community Support and Local Employment, and (3) Customer Commitment Through Affordability, Quality, and Relational Trust. Participants associated moral meaning with transparency, fairness, and honesty in business transactions, viewing these practices as indicators of trustworthiness and ethical conduct. Participants perceived social responsibility through the provision of affordable food and employment opportunities that contribute to community welfare and local economic development. Customer commitment emerged from the combined influence of affordability, consistent product quality, and positive relational experiences with business owners and staff. The findings further suggest that customers' continued support for SFEs extends beyond economic considerations and reflects deeper moral values, social concerns, and community-oriented commitments. The study concludes that transparency, community contribution, affordability, quality, and relational trust collectively shape customers' lived experiences and strengthen their long-term support for Small Food Enterprises. These findings contribute to the growing discourse on ethical consumption and community-based entrepreneurship and offer insights that may help Small Food Enterprises strengthen customer relationships and sustain their role in local communities.

***Keywords:*** *customer commitment, moral meaning, phenomenological inquiry, small food enterprises, social responsibility*

## Introduction

Purchasing food from Small Food Enterprises (SFEs) is increasingly understood as more than a simple economic transaction. Contemporary consumers often view their purchasing decisions as expressions of personal values, ethical commitments, and social responsibility. As a result, SFEs are not merely perceived as profit-generating businesses but as socially embedded actors that contribute to local economic development, sustainability, and community well-being. Consumer engagement with these enterprises therefore extends beyond the functional acquisition



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of food and enters broader domains of moral meaning, social connectedness, and long-term commitment.

Recent scholarship on alternative food systems emphasizes that economic activities within local food networks are deeply embedded in social relationships and shared value systems. According to Plank et al. (2024), alternative food networks operate through value-based logics in which economic exchanges are intertwined with trust, reciprocity, and collective norms. Within these systems, consumers often associate food purchases with notions of "good food," ethical production, and community support. Similarly, findings reported in the *Journal of Rural Studies* (2025) indicate that small food enterprises deliberately integrate ethical, cultural, and community-oriented values into their business practices, fostering customer loyalty through relational and value-driven connections rather than purely transactional exchanges. In a related discussion, Tamaki (2024) argued that participation in community-based food systems reflects socially embedded consumption, wherein purchasing decisions become expressions of support for shared values and local development. Collectively, these studies suggest that consumers may attach deeper moral and social significance to their interactions with small food enterprises, transforming routine consumption into a meaningful social practice.

The importance of ethical and socially responsible business practices has also been widely recognized in studies on corporate social responsibility (CSR) and customer relationships. Existing literature consistently demonstrates that consumers are more likely to support organizations they perceive as socially responsible and value-driven. For example, Ali (2021) found that perceived CSR positively influences customer satisfaction, brand reputation, and customer loyalty. Similarly, Gimeno-Arias et al. (2021) reported that socially responsible initiatives improve organizational performance through enhanced customer satisfaction and more effective human resource practices. Beyond immediate business outcomes, CSR has likewise been associated with customer retention and long-term organizational sustainability (Le, 2023). Studies by Ubrežiová et al. (2022) and Siemiński et al. (2023) further reveal that organizational commitment to social responsibility is influenced by both financial capacity and managerial values, highlighting the strategic importance of socially responsible practices. Within small and medium-sized enterprises, CSR initiatives are often localized and community-centered, focusing on environmental stewardship, health promotion, and relationship-building activities that strengthen trust and customer engagement (Berniak-Woźny et al., 2023). Moreover, advances in digital communication have amplified these relationships, with social customer relationship management (CRM) systems enhancing customer loyalty through improved trust, engagement, and service quality (Gui et al., 2024). Nevertheless, consumers continue to express concerns regarding the transparency and authenticity of CSR initiatives, emphasizing the need for businesses to communicate their values and practices openly and credibly (Igarová et al., 2023).

Within the Philippine context, Small Food Enterprises play a significant role in promoting food accessibility, community development, and local economic sustainability. These enterprises often provide accessible, affordable, and culturally relevant food while creating livelihood opportunities for residents. Through their daily operations, SFEs contribute to food security, support local producers, and strengthen community-based economic systems. Their functions also align with several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and



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Production), and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals). By making food more accessible and creating local employment opportunities, SFEs contribute not only to economic activity but also to broader social and community well-being.

As food consumption increasingly reflects ethical considerations and social values, customer commitment can no longer be explained solely by traditional factors such as price, convenience, or product quality. Consumers may remain loyal to businesses because they perceive them as trustworthy, socially responsible, and aligned with their personal values. Despite the growing literature on ethical consumption, corporate social responsibility, customer engagement, and relationship marketing, limited attention has been given to how customers experience and interpret the moral and social significance of supporting Small Food Enterprises. Much of the existing literature focuses on organizational practices and consumer behavior outcomes, with relatively little exploration of the lived experiences that shape customer commitment beyond consumption. Consequently, research still needs to examine how customers construct meaning from their interactions with Small Food Enterprises and how these experiences shape their perceptions of social responsibility and long-term support.

To address this gap, the present study uses a phenomenological approach to explore customers' lived experiences of moral meaning, perceived social responsibility, and customer commitment toward Small Food Enterprises. By examining how customers interpret transparency, community support, affordability, product quality, and relational trust within their interactions with SFEs, the study seeks to uncover the deeper meanings underlying customer support and continued patronage. Ultimately, the findings aim to contribute to the growing discourse on ethical consumption and community-based enterprises while providing insights that may help Small Food Enterprises strengthen customer relationships and sustain their role within local communities.

**Research Questions:**

This study aims to investigate how customers of Small Food Enterprises understand moral meaning, perceive social responsibility, and develop customer commitment beyond mere food consumption. By examining customers' lived experiences, the study seeks to provide insights that may help small food enterprises strengthen customer relationships and sustain their roles within the community.

Thus, the study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do customers experience and construct moral meaning through their interactions with Small Food Enterprises?
2. How do customers perceive and experience the social responsibility of Small Food Enterprises within their communities?
3. How do customers develop commitment toward Small Food Enterprises through affordability, product quality, and relational trust?
4. What is the essence of customers' lived experiences regarding moral meaning, social responsibility, and customer commitment toward Small Food Enterprises?



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# Methodology

## Design

This study employed a phenomenological qualitative research design to explore and understand customers' lived experiences regarding moral meaning, perceived social responsibility, and customer commitment toward Small Food Enterprises (SFEs). Phenomenology was considered appropriate because the study sought to uncover how customers make sense of their experiences and attach meaning to their continued support for SFEs beyond the functional act of food consumption. Rather than measuring predetermined variables, the study aimed to capture the essence of participants' experiences and understand how transparency, community-oriented practices, affordability, product quality, and relational trust shape their perceptions and commitment.

The phenomenological approach enabled the researchers to examine participants' subjective realities and explore how these experiences shape their understanding of ethical business practices, social responsibility, and sustained patronage. Through this approach, the study generated rich descriptions that reveal the deeper meanings customers associate with supporting Small Food Enterprises in their communities.

## Locale

The study was conducted in Minglanilla, Cebu, Philippines, a municipality with numerous Small Food Enterprises serving the local community. The locale was selected because small food businesses are increasingly visible and accessible in the area, making it an appropriate setting for exploring customer experiences and perceptions. Furthermore, the locality provided access to individuals with direct purchasing experiences with SFEs who could meaningfully reflect on their interactions with these enterprises.

The setting was deemed suitable because it provided a context where customers regularly engage with small food businesses, offering rich insights into the moral, social, and relational dimensions of customer support and loyalty.

## Participants

The study involved eight (8) customers of Small Food Enterprises who participated in a Focus Group Discussion (FGD). Participants were selected using purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique commonly used in qualitative research to identify information-rich cases that can provide relevant and meaningful insights into the phenomenon under investigation.

To qualify for participation, individuals had to have prior purchasing experience with Small Food Enterprises and be willing to share their experiences, perceptions, and reflections openly. The selected participants had firsthand knowledge of SFE practices and operations, enabling them to provide in-depth accounts of the moral meanings, perceptions of social responsibility, and factors influencing their commitment to these businesses.

The number of participants was considered appropriate for a phenomenological inquiry because the primary objective was not statistical generalization but obtaining rich, detailed narratives that facilitate a deeper understanding of the phenomenon being studied.



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## Instrument

The primary research instrument used in this study was a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) Guide consisting of open-ended questions designed to elicit participants' lived experiences and personal interpretations regarding Small Food Enterprises. The guide was developed from the study's objectives and research questions and structured to facilitate meaningful discussions while allowing participants to express their viewpoints freely.

The discussion guide contained four major components: opening questions, introductory questions, key exploratory questions, and concluding questions. The key questions focused on participants' experiences and perceptions related to moral meaning, social responsibility, customer commitment, and continued patronage of Small Food Enterprises. Open-ended questions enabled participants to narrate their experiences in their own words, allowing the researchers to capture rich, nuanced descriptions of the phenomenon.

Before data collection, the guide was reviewed and refined to ensure the questions were clear, relevant, and capable of generating meaningful discussions aligned with the study's objectives.

## Data Gathering Procedure

The data gathering process was conducted in three stages: pre-data gathering, actual data gathering, and post-data gathering.

During the pre-data gathering stage, the researchers secured the necessary approvals and ensured compliance with ethical research standards. The researchers identified prospective participants based on the established inclusion criteria and invited individuals who met the study requirements. The researchers also prepared and validated the FGD guide to ensure it was suitable for generating meaningful qualitative data.

During the data-gathering stage, the researchers conducted a Focus Group Discussion at a venue convenient and comfortable for the participants. Before the discussion began, the researchers explained the study objectives, the nature of participation, and participants' rights. The researchers obtained informed consent from all participants before the discussion. The researchers facilitated the FGD using the prepared discussion guide, allowing participants to share their experiences, perspectives, and interpretations regarding their support for Small Food Enterprises. The discussion lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes and was audio-recorded, with participants' permission, to ensure accurate documentation of the dialogue.

During the post-data gathering stage, the audio recordings were transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were reviewed for accuracy and completeness before undergoing analysis. The researchers organized, coded, and prepared all collected data for thematic analysis.

## Data Analysis

The study utilized thematic analysis to examine and interpret the qualitative data gathered from the Focus Group Discussion. Thematic analysis was deemed appropriate because it allows researchers to identify, analyze, and interpret recurring patterns of meaning across participants' narratives.



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The analysis began with familiarization, in which the researchers repeatedly read the transcripts to gain a comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences. Significant statements relevant to the research questions were then identified and coded. The researchers grouped similar codes into categories, from which broader themes emerged. The researchers continuously reviewed and refined the themes to ensure that they accurately represented the participants' lived experiences. Finally, the researchers interpreted the themes in relation to the study's objectives and relevant literature to deepen understanding of customers' perceptions of moral meaning, social responsibility, and customer commitment toward Small Food Enterprises.

### Ethical Considerations

The study strictly adhered to established ethical principles governing research involving human participants. Prior to data collection, participants were informed of the nature, objectives, procedures, potential benefits, and minimal risks associated with the study. Participation was voluntary, and researchers obtained informed consent from all participants before they took part in the Focus Group Discussion.

The researchers ensured confidentiality and anonymity throughout the research process. Personal identifiers were excluded from transcripts and reports, and pseudonyms were used whenever necessary to protect participants' identities. All audio recordings, transcripts, and research documents were securely stored and made accessible only to the researchers. The collected information was used solely for academic purposes and reported in aggregate and anonymized forms.

Furthermore, the study upheld the ethical principles of respect for persons, beneficence, and justice by safeguarding participants' rights, minimizing potential harm, and ensuring fair treatment throughout the research. The researchers also complied with applicable data privacy and confidentiality standards in collecting, storing, and managing research data.

## Results and Discussion

### Theme 1: Moral Meaning Through Transparent and Honest Business Practices

Participants described their commitment to Small Food Enterprises (SFEs) as rooted in experiences of transparency, honesty, and personal recognition. Rather than seeing themselves as ordinary consumers, participants described a connection with the people running these businesses.

This relational recognition fostered trust and strengthened their willingness to continue supporting local enterprises. One participant shared, *"I experience my commitment to Small Food Enterprises because I feel seen and valued every time I purchase from Small Food Enterprises."* Another participant remarked, *"I prefer to buy food from SFE's because they are honest to their customers like us because they sell their food at the exact price and they do not overprice it just to gain profit."* These accounts suggest that participants attached moral significance to transparency because it signaled fairness, sincerity, and respect toward customers.

From a phenomenological perspective, transparency was experienced not merely as information disclosure but as an ethical practice that affirmed customers' worth and strengthened mutual respect. Participants appeared to interpret honest pricing, openness regarding products, and



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straightforward business dealings as indicators of moral integrity. As a result, purchasing from small food enterprises became more than a commercial transaction; it evolved into a conscious expression of support for businesses perceived as trustworthy and ethical. This lived experience of transparency helped customers feel included in the business process, reinforcing the belief that their patronage helped sustain honest enterprises in the community.

The findings also suggest that transparency forms the foundation for long-term customer relationships. Customers who perceive businesses as honest and accountable are more likely to trust their products and services, strengthening commitment and continued patronage. This trust-based relationship is particularly important for small food enterprises, which often rely on reputation and customer loyalty to remain competitive.

These findings support Nguyen and Nguyen (2026), who found that transparency and traceability strengthen consumer trust and positively influence purchasing behavior. Similarly, Kraft et al. (2022) emphasized that supply chain visibility and transparent communication enhance consumer confidence and support purchasing decisions for socially responsible products. Consistent with these studies, the participants in the present inquiry viewed honesty and openness not simply as business strategies but as meaningful indicators of ethical conduct that shaped their trust and commitment toward small food enterprises.

**Theme 2: Perceived Social Responsibility Through Community Support and Local Employment**

Participants perceived small food enterprises as socially responsible organizations because they provide affordable food and generate livelihood opportunities within the community.

Several participants emphasized that local businesses contribute positively to community welfare by hiring residents and making food accessible to individuals with limited financial resources. One participant stated, *"I have encountered SFE; their workers were locals, and they also offer affordable foods."* Although some participants acknowledged that not all workers were residents, they nevertheless viewed the businesses as contributing to community development and economic sustainability.

The lived experience of social responsibility was closely associated with the perception that small food enterprises genuinely care about the welfare of ordinary people. Participants interpreted providing affordable food as an act of inclusivity that enables broader segments of the community to meet their food needs. Likewise, participants viewed creating employment opportunities as a meaningful contribution to local economic well-being. Rather than evaluating businesses solely on product offerings, participants assessed them according to the positive social impact they generated within their communities.

These findings suggest that customers value businesses that demonstrate concern for the community's collective welfare. Social responsibility was therefore experienced not as a formal corporate initiative but as a visible commitment to supporting livelihoods and improving accessibility to essential goods. These perceptions encouraged participants to view their patronage as community support, reinforcing stronger emotional and moral connections with the enterprise.



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The findings align with Muder et al. (2024), who noted that food-related enterprises contribute to food accessibility and local food security. Likewise, Jones (2025) observed that small-scale food enterprises support household livelihoods and self-employment opportunities. Similarly, Mekonnen and De Brauw (2026) highlighted the important role of food-related MSMEs in providing employment and affordable access to food products. Furthermore, Mizik et al. (2025) emphasized the broader socio-economic significance of employment within agri-food sectors, particularly in supporting community sustainability and economic development. Consistent with these studies, participants regarded small food enterprises as socially responsible actors that contribute to both economic and community well-being.

**Theme 3: Customer Commitment Through Affordability, Quality, and Relational Trust**

Participants described their continued support for Small Food Enterprises (SFEs) as strongly influenced by affordable pricing, consistent product quality, and positive relationships with business owners and staff.

Many participants expressed that their loyalty stemmed from receiving quality food at prices they considered fair and accessible. One participant shared, *"I always buy from them because their food is affordable but still tastes good compared to other food stores."* Another participant remarked, *"Even if there are other options, I still return because I know that the food is worth the price and the quality is always consistent."* Several participants also emphasized that their commitment was not solely based on food quality or affordability but on the relationships they had developed with the business. As one participant explained, *"I keep supporting them because they know their customers and they treat us well every time we buy."* These experiences reveal that commitment develops through a combination of economic value and meaningful interpersonal interactions.

From a phenomenological perspective, affordability and product quality were not experienced simply as product attributes but as manifestations of the enterprise's concern for customers' welfare and satisfaction. Participants interpreted affordable pricing as an expression of understanding and sensitivity to consumers' financial realities, while consistent product quality reflected the business's dedication to meeting customer expectations. These experiences generated trust, appreciation, and confidence in the enterprise. Consequently, purchasing from SFEs became more than a routine transaction; it evolved into a continuing relationship grounded in reliability, mutual respect, and perceived value.

The findings further suggest that both tangible and relational factors shape customer commitment. While affordable pricing and high-quality products initially attract customers, sustained commitment emerges when positive interpersonal experiences accompany these benefits. Participants demonstrated a willingness to repeatedly support businesses that consistently delivered value while maintaining genuine customer relationships. This suggests that customer commitment goes beyond repeated purchasing and reflects a deeper sense of attachment, trust, and satisfaction with the enterprise.



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These findings align with Oktavian and Wahyudi (2022), who found that price and product quality significantly influence purchasing decisions. Similarly, Datu and Sitepu (2026) reported that service quality, food quality, pricing, and the physical environment positively contribute to customer satisfaction, which subsequently enhances customer loyalty. Ahmed et al. (2023) reported similar findings, showing that service quality, price, and customer satisfaction are important determinants of customer loyalty. Furthermore, Almuayyat and Sutanto (2026) revealed that both product quality and price significantly influence purchasing decisions and customer loyalty, with price often serving as a dominant factor. Consistent with these studies, the present findings suggest that customer commitment to SFEs strengthens when businesses successfully balance affordability, quality, and relational trust. Beyond economic value, participants remained committed because they perceived these enterprises as establishments that genuinely care about their customers' needs, thereby fostering enduring relationships characterized by trust, satisfaction, and long-term support.

## Conclusion

The study found that small food businesses can succeed only if they have a "triad of value": transparency, relational recognition, social responsibility, and economic accessibility. People did not see "low cost" as only a financial choice; they saw it as including everyone. People see these businesses as more than just businesses because they provide affordable food and local job opportunities. In this case, customer loyalty is not just a habit; it is a two-way relationship in which customers reward the business for keeping prices low and being honest. Ultimately, the study shows that a business becomes more than a place to buy things when it aligns its operational goals with its customers' economic realities and social needs.

Finally, this shift makes the company more than a seller; it becomes a pillar of the community, with profit as a byproduct of social benefit rather than the main goal. Small food businesses that are "customer-centric and transparent" create a strong micro-economy that can adapt to market changes. Customer loyalty becomes civic involvement when customers support the business not only for the food, but also to keep a place that reflects their beliefs and economic situation open for a long time. In this view, the store's profits and the community's health are closely related.

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