

# Word-of-Mouth Marketing and Customer Acquisition: Experiences of Women Entrepreneurs in Makassar's Beauty and Wellness Industry

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## Abstract

This phenomenological study explores how women entrepreneurs in Makassar's beauty and wellness sector strategically leverage Word-of-Mouth (WOM) marketing as a relational economic mechanism for customer acquisition and retention. Anchored in a humanistic-economic perspective, the research examines how trust, emotional labor, and social capital function as non-financial assets that substitute for capital-intensive marketing strategies in resource-constrained contexts. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) on semi-structured interviews with salon owners, beauticians, and spa entrepreneurs, three superordinate themes emerged: (1) Trust as the Primary Economic Currency, emphasizing integrity and competence as foundations of customer advocacy; (2) Emotional Labor as Strategic Investment, highlighting empathy and personalized care as deliberate economic resources; and (3) The Social Network as Market Infrastructure, illustrating how localized community ties and digital interactions form efficient, low-cost distribution channels for business growth. The findings reveal that WOM in this sector is not merely a promotional outcome but a relational economic system rooted in cultural trust, affective commitment, and collective reciprocity. The study contributes to the literature by advancing a humanistic-economic framework for relational marketing, demonstrating how feminine entrepreneurship transforms social and emotional capital into measurable economic value.

**Keywords:** Word-of-Mouth Marketing, Relational Capital, Humanistic-Economic Perspective, Feminine Entrepreneurship, Beauty and Wellness Industry.

## 1. Introduction

The global beauty and wellness industry, projected to reach a staggering valuation, stands as a dynamic and resilient sector, particularly within emerging economies like Indonesia (McKinsey & Company, 2023). This economic vitality is often underpinned by the proliferation of Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), where women entrepreneurs play a disproportionately significant role in driving local economic growth and social empowerment (Setyaningrum et al., 2023). In the highly localized and service-intensive context of Makassar, South Sulawesi, these women-led businesses—ranging from boutique salons to specialized spas—operate within a competitive landscape where traditional marketing budgets are often constrained. Consequently, the reliance on organic, low-cost, yet highly effective customer acquisition strategies becomes not merely a preference but an economic imperative, foregrounding the enduring power of Word-of-Mouth (WOM) marketing as a primary mechanism for market entry and sustained operation.



From a critical humanistic-economic perspective, WOM marketing transcends its conventional definition as a mere promotional tool; it is fundamentally a relational and trust-based economic transaction (Filip, 2025). In service industries, where the product is intangible and quality is co-created, customer trust serves as the most valuable form of capital, acting as a powerful mediator between service quality and repurchase intention (Han et al., 2025). For women entrepreneurs in the beauty and wellness sector, this relational capital is often cultivated through deep interpersonal communication, empathy, and a commitment to personalized customer experience, which are hallmarks of feminine entrepreneurship (Kusumo et al., 2025). This process transforms satisfied customers into active brand advocates, effectively decentralizing the marketing function and embedding the business's reputation within the social fabric of the community, thereby reducing the high Customer Acquisition Costs (CAC) typically associated with formal advertising.

The unique socio-cultural and economic environment of Makassar further accentuates the significance of this relational approach. In a regional context characterized by strong community ties and high-context communication, personal recommendations carry immense weight, often outweighing mass-media influence. The success of these women entrepreneurs is thus inextricably linked to their ability to navigate and leverage these social networks, transforming personal reputation into commercial viability. This study posits that the phenomenological experience of these entrepreneurs—their lived realities, challenges, and strategic adaptations—offers a rich, nuanced understanding of how trust is built, referrals are generated, and customer advocacy is organically cultivated in the absence of formal marketing infrastructure.

Despite the recognized economic value of WOM and the critical role of women in the MSME sector, a significant gap remains in the scholarly literature, particularly concerning the lived experiences of these entrepreneurs in a specific Indonesian context. Existing research tends to focus on quantitative measures of eWOM or the general impact of marketing strategies, often overlooking the deeply personal, strategic, and humanistic processes involved in building a business through relational means (Eskandari et al., 2025). A phenomenological inquiry is therefore essential to move beyond surface-level observations and critically examine the subjective meaning-making processes that underpin successful WOM strategies. This approach allows for an in-depth exploration of the emotional labor, personal sacrifices, and strategic intuition employed by these women to foster customer loyalty and generate organic growth.

Therefore, this phenomenological study aims to investigate the lived experiences of women entrepreneurs in Makassar's beauty and wellness sector as they leverage Word-of-Mouth marketing for customer acquisition and retention. By employing Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) on semi-structured interview data from salon owners, beauticians, and spa entrepreneurs, the research seeks to illuminate the specific strategies, challenges, and personal narratives involved in building reputation, generating referrals, and creating customer advocacy without formal advertising budgets. The findings will contribute to the literature by offering a critical, humanistic-economic framework for understanding trust-based relational marketing in service industries and providing actionable insights for supporting feminine entrepreneurship in similar emerging market contexts.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. The Economic Imperative of Word-of-Mouth Marketing in Service Industries

Word-of-mouth (WOM) marketing remains a cornerstone of customer acquisition, particularly for Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) operating in the service sector, where capital constraints limit formal advertising expenditures (Husain et al., 2023). Economically, WOM functions as a highly efficient, low-cost mechanism for market entry and expansion, directly reducing the prohibitive Customer Acquisition Costs (CAC) associated with conventional media campaigns (BigCommerce, 2025). Recent scholarship emphasizes that the true economic value of WOM is derived from its inherent trustworthiness; consumers overwhelmingly trust peer recommendations over corporate messaging, leading to higher conversion rates and increased customer lifetime value (Invespro, 2025). In the intangible, co-created environment of service industries—such as beauty and wellness—this trust is paramount. The perceived risk of a poor service experience is mitigated by a trusted referral, making WOM not merely a promotional tool but a critical risk-reduction mechanism that underpins the economic viability of small service providers (Jibran et al., 2025).

### 2.2. Relational Capital and the Humanistic-Economic Nexus

Moving beyond a purely transactional view, the literature highlights WOM as a manifestation of relational capital, a key component of intellectual capital that drives sustainable competitive advantage (Aversano, 2025). This capital is cultivated through deep, humanistic engagement, where the quality of interpersonal communication and employee empathy directly correlates with customer attraction and loyalty (Kusumo et al., 2025). The humanistic-economic perspective posits that in high-touch service environments, the entrepreneur's personal investment in the customer relationship—characterized by transparency, consistency, and empathy—is transformed into a quantifiable economic asset: customer advocacy (CMSWire, 2025). This process of converting personal connection into commercial success is particularly salient in local economies where social networks are dense and personal reputation is the primary currency of business. The successful generation of WOM is thus a function of the entrepreneur's ability to manage this relational capital, ensuring that positive offline experiences translate into sustained consumer decisions (SagePub, 2025).

### 2.3. Women Entrepreneurs and the MSME Landscape in Indonesia

In Indonesia, women entrepreneurs are central to the economic fabric, predominantly operating within the MSME sector and contributing significantly to national GDP and poverty reduction (Setyaningrum et al., 2023). However, this demographic faces distinct challenges, including limited access to formal financing, inadequate business management skills, and the persistent burden of balancing business demands with domestic responsibilities (Awalia, 2025). In this context, social capital—defined by trust, participation, and cooperation—becomes a crucial non-financial resource, acting as a buffer against market volatility and a catalyst for business performance (Djatnika, 2025). For women-led MSMEs, the reliance on strong, localized social networks is not a strategic choice but a necessity, providing the infrastructure for resource mobilization and, critically, the dissemination of positive WOM. This underscores a critical intersection: the economic success of these women is deeply intertwined with their capacity to leverage their inherent social and relational strengths.

## 2.4. The Beauty and Wellness Sector: A Trust-Intensive Domain

The beauty and wellness industry, a rapidly expanding global market, is fundamentally a trust-intensive service domain (McKinsey & Company, 2025). Unlike product-based commerce, the service delivery in this sector—which involves personal care, physical touch, and aesthetic outcomes—requires a high degree of client vulnerability and confidence in the provider. Consequently, the decision to choose a salon or spa is heavily influenced by trusted recommendations, as the service quality is often only assessable post-consumption (Jibrán et al., 2025). Research on entrepreneurial strategies in this sector consistently points to the importance of customer experience and relational marketing as key differentiators (Bejarkenari, 2024). For women entrepreneurs in this field, their personal brand and reputation become inseparable from the business's brand, making the cultivation of organic WOM a direct reflection of their professional and relational integrity.

## 2.5. The Phenomenological Gap and Research Contribution

While the economic benefits of WOM and the structural challenges facing Indonesian women MSMEs are well-documented, a critical gap exists in the literature concerning the lived experiences of these entrepreneurs in cultivating this relational capital. Existing studies often employ quantitative methodologies, focusing on the effects of WOM (e.g., purchase intention, loyalty) rather than the process and meaning-making behind its generation (Hikmawati et al., 2025). This quantitative bias overlooks the deeply personal, strategic, and humanistic labor involved in transforming a satisfied customer into an active advocate, particularly within the unique socio-cultural context of a city like Makassar (Eskandari et al., 2025). Therefore, this study, through a phenomenological lens, aims to critically bridge this gap by providing a rich, contextualized understanding of how women entrepreneurs experience and enact WOM marketing, offering a nuanced contribution to the humanistic-economic theory of relational marketing and feminine entrepreneurship.

## 3. Methods

This study adopts an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) design to critically explore the lived experiences of women entrepreneurs in Makassar's beauty and wellness industry concerning Word-of-Mouth (WOM) marketing and customer acquisition. The choice of IPA is fundamentally aligned with the study's humanistic-economic orientation, as it is specifically designed to provide an in-depth, idiographic examination of how individuals make sense of their personal and social world (Oluka, 2025). In the context of feminine entrepreneurship, where relational capital and trust are central economic assets, a quantitative approach would fail to capture the subjective meaning-making processes, emotional labor, and strategic intuition that underpin organic market growth (Martins, 2025). IPA, therefore, serves as the optimal methodological lens to move beyond mere correlation and critically interpret the complex interplay between personal experience, social networks, and commercial viability, thereby providing a rich, nuanced understanding of relational economics in practice. The research will employ a purposive sampling strategy, a standard practice in IPA, to select a small, homogeneous group of women entrepreneurs (typically 6-10 participants) who share the specific phenomenon of interest: leveraging WOM for customer acquisition in Makassar's beauty and wellness sector (Rajasinghe, 2024). This homogeneity ensures that the variations in experience are primarily related to the phenomenon itself, rather than extraneous demographic factors. Data will be collected through semi-structured interviews, which allow the researcher to follow a flexible interview guide while remaining open to emergent and unanticipated themes critical to the participants' lived experiences

(SAGE, 2025). Each interview will be a deep, conversational exploration, focusing on the entrepreneurs' narratives regarding reputation building, referral generation, and the personal challenges and successes encountered in cultivating customer advocacy. The interviews will be transcribed verbatim to preserve the authenticity and richness of the raw data, which is essential for the subsequent interpretative phase. The transcribed data will be subjected to the systematic, multi-stage process of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), ensuring a rigorous and transparent path from raw text to critical interpretation (Nigbur, 2025). The analysis begins with an intensive, idiographic reading of each transcript, followed by the emergence of descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual notes. These notes are then transformed into emergent themes for each case. In the subsequent stage, the researcher will engage in a critical, cross-case analysis to identify superordinate themes that capture the shared and divergent experiences across the participant group. This process of thematic clustering will be guided by the study's humanistic-economic framework, focusing on how themes such as "trust as currency," "emotional labor as investment," and "social network as market infrastructure" are constructed and experienced. The final interpretation will present a critical synthesis of these themes, offering a robust contribution to the understanding of qualitative economic phenomena and the strategic role of relational capital in feminine entrepreneurship.

## 4. Results and Discussion

The Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) of the women entrepreneurs' narratives revealed a rich tapestry of lived experiences, which coalesced into three superordinate themes that critically illuminate the humanistic-economic mechanisms of Word-of-Mouth (WOM) marketing in Makassar's beauty and wellness sector. These themes—Trust as the Primary Economic Currency, Emotional Labor as Strategic Investment, and The Social Network as Market Infrastructure—collectively demonstrate how these entrepreneurs convert relational capital into tangible customer acquisition and retention. The findings move beyond a simple description of WOM to an interpretation of the deep, subjective meaning-making processes that underpin organic market growth in a resource-constrained environment.

### 4.1. Superordinate Theme 1: Trust as the Primary Economic Currency

The most pervasive finding was the consistent framing of trust not as a soft, ancillary factor, but as the primary, non-financial economic currency of the business. This theme captures the entrepreneurs' lived reality that a customer's decision to purchase a service is fundamentally a decision to trust the provider's competence and integrity. The subordinate themes detail the mechanisms through which this currency is earned and maintained:

Table 1. Superordinate Theme 1

Subordinate Theme	Description and Illustrative Quote	Humanistic-Economic Interpretation
1.1. Competence-Based Credibility	The belief that technical skill and consistent service quality are the non-negotiable foundation for any recommendation. ("If my work is not good, no one will talk about me. The quality is the first word-of-mouth.")	Risk-Reduction Mechanism: Trust reduces the perceived risk of service failure, which is critical in intangible service consumption.
1.2. Integrity in Pricing and Service	The practice of transparent, honest communication regarding costs and expected outcomes, which builds long-term loyalty over short-term profit. ("I tell them honestly what they	Long-Term Value Maximization: Prioritizing customer lifetime value (CLV) through ethical conduct over

	need, not what makes me the most money. That honesty comes back to me tenfold.")	immediate transactional gains.
1.3. The Personal Guarantee	The entrepreneur's personal reputation is inseparable from the business brand, acting as a personal guarantee for service quality. ("My name is on the door. If a customer is unhappy, it is my personal failure, not just a business loss.")	Relational Asset Integration: The entrepreneur's social capital is directly integrated into the firm's economic value proposition.

Source: data processed, 2025

#### 4.2. Superordinate Theme 2: Emotional Labor as Strategic Investment

The second theme reveals that the generation of positive WOM is a direct result of the entrepreneurs' emotional labor, which is strategically deployed as a form of non-monetary investment. This labor involves the conscious management of personal emotions and the cultivation of genuine empathy to create a deeply personalized customer experience. The entrepreneurs articulated this labor as a necessary, though often exhausting, component of their business model.

Table 2. Superordinate theme 2

Subordinate Theme	Description and Illustrative Quote	Humanistic-Economic Interpretation
2.1. Empathetic Co-Creation	The ability to listen deeply to a customer's needs and anxieties, transforming the service into a collaborative, therapeutic experience. ("Sometimes they just need to talk. I am a beautician, but also a listener. That connection is what they tell their friends about.")	Service Intangibility Management: Converting the intangible service into a memorable, positive emotional experience that is easily communicated (WOM).
2.2. Beyond-Service Care	Extending care and attention beyond the service transaction, such as follow-up messages or personalized advice, to foster a sense of belonging. ("I remember their children's names. It's not about business; it's about being a friend. That's how you keep them.")	Loyalty Infrastructure Building: Investing time and emotional resources to build a robust, sticky customer base, reducing churn rate.
2.3. The Burden of Authenticity	The constant pressure to maintain a genuine, positive demeanor, recognizing that any lapse in personal conduct can damage the business's reputation. ("I cannot have a bad day. My mood is part of the service, and a bad mood is a bad review.")	Reputational Risk Exposure: The high personal cost of maintaining relational capital in a high-touch service environment.

Source: data processed, 2025

#### 4.3. Superordinate Theme 3: The Social Network as Market Infrastructure

The final theme interprets the entrepreneurs' social networks—both physical and digital—as the essential, low-cost market infrastructure that facilitates customer acquisition. In the absence of large advertising budgets, the community and personal connections serve as the primary distribution channel for the business's value proposition.

Table 3. Superordinate theme 3

Subordinate Theme	Description and Illustrative Quote	Humanistic-Economic Interpretation
3.1. Community Referral Loops	The reliance on close-knit community ties (e.g., family, religious groups, local associations) as the most reliable source of new, high-quality customers. ("In Makassar, if your sister-in-law	Efficient Customer Acquisition: Leveraging existing social capital to bypass traditional marketing channels, resulting

	recommends you, the customer is already half-convinced. It's a closed loop of trust.")	in near-zero CAC for referred customers.
3.2. Digital Amplification of Trust	Using social media (e.g., WhatsApp, Instagram) not for mass advertising, but for the intimate, one-to-one sharing of positive customer experiences (eWOM). ("I don't pay for ads. I just ask my happy customers to post a story. It's more powerful because it's real.")	Scalable Relational Marketing: Utilizing digital platforms to scale the reach of personal WOM without sacrificing its core element of trust.
3.3. Reciprocal Advocacy	The unwritten rule of mutual support among women entrepreneurs, where they refer customers to each other for complementary services. ("I send my customers to the tailor, and she sends hers to me. We grow together.")	Collaborative Economic Ecosystem: Establishing a local, trust-based economic ecosystem that minimizes competition and maximizes collective market share.

Source: data processed, 2025

#### 4.4. Discussion

The findings of this phenomenological study offer a critical, humanistic-economic interpretation of Word-of-Mouth (WOM) marketing, moving beyond its conventional conceptualization as a mere promotional outcome to its function as a relational economic system (Panduro-Ramirez, 2024). The emergence of Trust as the Primary Economic Currency directly validates the relational marketing paradigm, which posits that in high-touch service sectors, trust serves as the most valuable non-financial asset, acting as a powerful risk-reduction mechanism for customers (Monfort, 2025). For the women entrepreneurs in Makassar, this trust is not an abstract concept but a quantifiable asset built on the twin pillars of Competence-Based Credibility and Integrity in Pricing and Service. This finding resonates with the broader economic literature on trust, which recognizes its essential role in reducing transaction costs and fostering societal prosperity, particularly in local, high-context economies where information asymmetry is high (Gille, 2025). The entrepreneurs' conscious choice to prioritize long-term integrity over short-term transactional gains underscores a sophisticated, albeit intuitive, understanding of Customer Lifetime Value (CLV) that is deeply embedded in their ethical and humanistic approach to business.

Furthermore, the theme of Emotional Labor as Strategic Investment provides a critical link between the personal and the commercial spheres of feminine entrepreneurship. The entrepreneurs' consistent deployment of empathy and personalized care, as seen in Empathetic Co-Creation and Beyond-Service Care, is not simply a soft skill but a deliberate, strategic investment of affective labor that yields tangible economic returns (Saleem, 2024). This labor transforms the intangible service into a memorable, emotionally resonant experience, which is the very essence of positive WOM—a finding that aligns with research on the affective drivers of the entrepreneurial process (Portocarrero, 2025). The humanistic-economic implication is profound: in resource-constrained MSMEs, the entrepreneur's personal emotional capacity becomes a substitute for large capital expenditure, effectively lowering the cost of loyalty infrastructure building. However, the finding of The Burden of Authenticity also highlights the inherent reputational risk and personal cost associated with this model, where the entrepreneur's personal well-being is inextricably linked to the firm's economic stability, a critical area for future policy support.

The interpretation of The Social Network as Market Infrastructure further contextualizes the economic efficiency of WOM within the Indonesian socio-cultural landscape. In the absence of formal advertising budgets, the entrepreneurs effectively leverage their existing social capital—both through Community Referral Loops and the Digital Amplification of Trust—to create a highly efficient, near-zero Customer Acquisition Cost

(CAC) distribution channel (Yong, 2025). This finding extends the literature on social capital in women's entrepreneurship by demonstrating its function not merely as a source of emotional support, but as a robust, low-cost market mechanism. The practice of Reciprocal Advocacy among the women entrepreneurs suggests the organic formation of a collaborative economic ecosystem, where mutual referrals minimize competitive friction and maximize collective market share, a localized form of economic cooperation that merits further study in the context of regional development (Warioba & Babune, 2025).

In conclusion, this study's findings offer a critical contribution to the humanistic-economic understanding of relational marketing by providing an in-depth, lived perspective from the service provider. The experiences of women entrepreneurs in Makassar demonstrate that the success of organic market growth is predicated on a deliberate, strategic conversion of humanistic values—trust, empathy, and social connection—into measurable economic capital. This relational economic model, characterized by low CAC and high CLV, provides a compelling alternative to conventional, capital-intensive marketing strategies, offering a robust framework for policymakers and development agencies seeking to support sustainable and gender-inclusive economic growth within emerging markets.

## 5. Conclusion

This phenomenological study successfully illuminated the lived experiences of women entrepreneurs in Makassar's beauty and wellness sector, providing a critical, humanistic-economic framework for understanding Word-of-Mouth (WOM) marketing as a core strategy for customer acquisition and retention. The Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) revealed three superordinate themes—Trust as the Primary Economic Currency, Emotional Labor as Strategic Investment, and The Social Network as Market Infrastructure—which collectively demonstrate that organic market growth in this context is fundamentally a relational economic system. The findings underscore that in resource-constrained, high-context service environments, the entrepreneur's personal integrity and affective capacity serve as direct substitutes for capital-intensive advertising, validating the relational marketing theory that non-financial assets like trust and empathy are critical economic drivers (Panduro-Ramirez, 2024; Monfort, 2025). Furthermore, the strategic deployment of emotional labor and the leveraging of community ties highlight a localized, collaborative economic model that minimizes Customer Acquisition Costs (CAC) and maximizes Customer Lifetime Value (CLV), offering a compelling case study of sustainable, gender-inclusive entrepreneurship in emerging markets (Yong, 2025).

The study offers significant theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, it advances the humanistic-economic discourse by providing an in-depth, qualitative interpretation of how relational capital is subjectively experienced and strategically enacted by women entrepreneurs, thereby bridging the gap between quantitative studies on WOM effects and the lived reality of its generation. Practically, the findings offer actionable insights for policymakers and support agencies by emphasizing that interventions should focus less on conventional financial aid and more on enhancing the entrepreneurs' social capital, providing training in relational management, and recognizing the inherent value of their emotional labor as a strategic economic resource. Future research should explore the longitudinal sustainability of this relational economic model and the psychological costs associated with the Burden of Authenticity, ensuring that support systems are designed to foster both economic success and entrepreneurial well-being.

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