

The role of Sikh actor identity in business relationship development

Work in Process

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Introduction

Identity impacts how actors are perceived in business networks and is used to differentiate practices within different business relationships (Huemer et al., 2004). Identity and identification have been considered from an organizational behavioural perspective (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Hogg and Terry, 2000; Lindgren and Wåhlin, 2001; Garcia and Hardy, 2007; Hatch and Schultz, 2002) and a strategy change perspective (Dutton and Dukerich 1991; Backer, 2008; Czarniawska and Wolff, 1998; Alvesson and Empson, 2008). However, there has been relatively little work considering how an actor's identity affects business relationship development (Huemer, 2004). Yet, trust and identity are core issues in business relationships and require further research (Huemer, 2004).

Recent research into Asian business relationship development mostly focuses on Chinese or Chinese Diaspora (see Theingi, Purchase and Phungphol 2008). Business relationships developed by Sikh business people have been neglected within business research and only limited to sociology aspects of Sikh life (see Plüss, 2005; Lock and Detaramani, 2006 as examples). Globalised Sikh diaspora, have migrated to many countries and developed their own business enterprises. Limited research has been conducted on how they grow their businesses and their business relationship development. This research begins to overcome this gap by investigating how the unique Thai Sikh identity affects business relationship development.

Sikh migration began with the spread of the British Empire as the British army enlisted many Sikh people and posted them to British colonies. For example, the Sikh community in Hong Kong developed out of Sikh army personnel posted to Hong Kong (Plüss, 2005). Thai Sikh business networks are particularly interesting as there was a large global migration around 1947 after the annexing of northern Indian states to Pakistan. This migration resulted in a large globalised diaspora settling across a number of countries, including Thailand. Many of these migrants settled in Thailand as they already had family, friends or secondary relationships with people who had travelled between India and Thailand previously. This research extends our understanding of relationship building processes from an Asian perspective by considering business relationships of a minority ethnic group, that is, Sikh business people in Thailand.

Identity construction is a never ending process involving both self reflection and interaction within networks (Lindgren and Wåhlin, 2001). Identity evolves through the interactions individuals have with their wider networks and is built from their interaction history. Identity construction is an important component of business relationships, particularly as perceived identity plays an important role in the development of actor bonds and trust (Håkansson and Snehota, 1995). Such processes are subject to interpretation of identity by others, and involve defining oneself relative to other actors in one's network (Ashforth and Mael, 1989). Therefore, identity is continuously constructed and communicated to others through their business interactions. Understanding identity processes requires researchers to consider an actor's interaction history, the contextual situation and the games played by actors when developing their identity.

Religious belief plays a strong role in identity development. Identity can be expressed through symbolic objects and cultural self-expression (Hatch and Schultz, 2002). Religiosity has been shown to affect economic activity, particularly in SME's (Werner, 2008). Therefore, exploring an actor's belief and value systems is critical for developing an understanding of how actors express their identity and how this affects their business relationship development. How actors perceive each other's identity plays an important role in actor bond development and consequently trust and expectations of their business partners. Belief and value systems are often displayed visually. If these visual symbols are based on religious teachings then they are particularly important to the individual and network involved (Rentein, 2004). Sikh religious identity is linked to the five K's, which Sikh's

are required to follow, producing a number of visual symbols pertaining to their identity. They have to wear *Kesh* (unshorn hair), *Kachara* (breeches), *Kanga* (comb), *Kirpan* (sword) and *Kara* (steel bangle).

Given that there has been little research on how Sikh people develop their business relationships, this study will investigate how their identity influences business relationship development in Thailand.

Sikhism in Thailand

Sikhism developed in northern India and follows a pluralist path accepting different aspects from multiple religions. Mainstream Sikhism follows the teachings of 10 gurus who guide their spiritual faith. These teachings are originally written in Punjab (language) in the “holy scripture” which all devotees read. The teachings have been translated into other languages, but some Sikhs believe that reading the book in Punjab is important for developing a deeper understanding of the teachings. The main points of the Sikh religion that are pertinent to this research are the Sikh’s belief in a single God and that the teachings of the gurus help them practice principles to bring them closer to God. Sikhs are required to wear five symbols as a display of their devotion of their faith, these are commonly known as the five K’s (Sidhu, 1993).

Due to the history of Buddha’s birth and enlightenment in India, when Indians first came to Thailand, Thai people regarded Indians as those who came from holy places with great respect and called them “*Khek*” which means guests. However, over the years Thai people have had both good experiences and bad experiences with Indians with the result that some feel that Indians are miserly and describe them as distasteful personalities (Mani, 1993). Hence, later they used the term, “*Khek*” as a way to look down on Indians, resulting in the dual meaning of “*Khek*” depending on the context. Sikh business people are often stereotyped as Indian and therefore have to work at relationship development to overcome some of these stereotypes.

Being aware of the situation, Sikh business people make a special effort to improve their perceived identity by gaining a good reputation in business and contributing to a large number of charity projects. It was noted that Sikhs in Thailand are more Sikh than those in India (Mani, 1993) indicating their strong desire to establish and maintain their cultural identity. Therefore, it is important that they are known as Sikhs within their business relationships rather than generalised to Indian people.

With the increasing number of Sikh population and their rising prosperity, Sikhs have established 19 *Gurudwaras* in Thailand. *Gurudwaras* became the centre for the Sikh devotees and interaction places within their communities. Sikhism teaches that each person should give at least 10% of earnings to charity. Thai Sikhs following this teaching have made significant contributions to Thai society. Many Thai Sikhs mentioned that they wanted to give back to Thai society to show their gratitude. Sikhs in Thailand initiate charitable giving through three main avenues: *Gurudwara*, various organizations and personal initiatives. Their various donations and social activities improve their image and reputation in Thai society. In 2005, Sikhism was officially recognized as one of the five religions in Thailand and supported every year by the King of Thailand and Royal Thai government.

In summary, Sikh’s display a strong cultural identity and many wish to maintain good relationships within Thai society. This also includes maintaining a good business reputation and to be known as honest trustworthy business partners. Sikh business people have put emphasis on maintaining a unique business identity based on their values.

Business Relationships and Identity

Business relationships develop through the interaction process between two or more actors. Central to the development of business relationships is how actors perceive the identity of those with whom they are interacting (Huemer, 2004). Identity links to actor bonds (Håkansson and Snehota, 1995), trust (Huemer, 2004) and is important in the interaction process (Ford et al., 2008). Developing an attractive identity is critical to ensure that other business network actors are prepared to develop strategic relationships. For Sikh business entrepreneurs developing an identity that is attractive, distinctive and enduring is important to ensure their strategic position within their network.

Organisation identity is developed through the interaction process and therefore depends on how individual actors behaviour within their relationships and with whom they have relationships within the network (Huemer et al., 2004). In other words, an entrepreneur's identity depends on their network position, their business behaviour – as interpreted by other network actors and the history of previous interactions. Therefore, identity is relative to the perceived identities of the other actors to which they are connected. These web-like phenomena of identity as relative to other objects are examples of 'panrelationalism' and highlight how all concepts/ symbols can only be identified in linguistic relation to other concepts/ symbols (Rorty, 1999). Therefore, the idea of identity is a difficult concept as it is relative to other's perceptions and has aspects of both stability and variety (Huemer 2004).

Identity is a dynamic process involving both the interaction of projections and the reflections of images (Hatch & Schultz, 1997; Hatch, 2002) and is not a static 'thing'. Hatch and Schultz (2002) outline an organisational identity dynamics model combining the above processes to show how 'me' and 'I' develop through interpretation of organizational culture and images of other actors. A balanced and healthy identity emerges when neither the 'me' nor the 'I' are emphasized over the other. In other words, the inside identity is very similar to the outside identity ie they are both following the same plots with 'I' being the internal image of identity and 'me' being the external image of identity. Sikh entrepreneurs also need to balance their 'I' and 'me' identities. A balanced entrepreneur will balance their value systems in both their Sikh teachings and the pragmatic requirements of operating successful businesses. Therefore, their business reputation is interlinked with their core Sikh values.

Sikh business identity is drawn upon their religious language and symbols, their current business environment of Thailand, their northern Indian roots, and their interactions with globalised trading partners. Therefore, Sikh business people are connected through their relationships to other business and personal networks where the web of interactions plays an important role in the process of network identity development. Each member of the network negotiates their identities with other actors, who through the interaction process re-shape their identity. Such social construction of identity is contingent on the interactions not just between the actors but the interactions with their contextual environment (Berger & Luckman, 1979). This argument for the social construction of network identity is supported by Nohria and Eccles (1992) who also suggest that identity is built through membership, process and collective action.

Methodology

This study shows how business relationships and identity are considered primarily through the narratives told by Sikh business entrepreneurs in Thailand. Czarniawska (2004, p. 13) highlights that 'narrative is the main form of social life because it is the main device for making sense of social action'. Using narrative allows interviewees to describe the processes used within their business communities to develop their business relationships. Following the narratives, data collection was conducted by in-depth interviews with Sikh business people in Thailand.

The initial interview questions focused on how their current business networks evolved their current business practices. In particular, the focus was on network and relationship development since the early migration of Sikh people from India to Thailand. As the interviews progressed the interviewees tended to focus on how their business approaches differentiated from those of other Thai business people (ie Chinese Diaspora as well as national Thai business people). Therefore, the interviewers allowed the interview to flow freely, letting the Sikh business people discuss how they perceive themselves. Examples of questions include: Can you describe how your business was set-up in Thailand?; What is important to you in doing business in Thailand?; Are there any challenges to assimilate into the Thai society – in doing business?;

The data was collected through tape-recorded interviews that each time lasted from 1.5 hours to 3 hours and carried out between late February and early April 2008 in Pattaya and Bangkok where 75% of Sikhs in Thailand reside (Mani, 1993). The snowball sampling was applied among the Sikh business community by requesting the first few interviewees to suggest potential respondents who were again asked to recommend potential respondents. Since all interviewees have had experience through operating their own business and spoke English, all interviews were conducted in English and later transcribed. Table 1 gives the descriptive characteristics of the interviewees who represent the different age group and shows most of them are in textile trading and tailoring businesses reflecting the majority of Thai Sikh businesses.

Table 1. Descriptive characteristics of interviewees

Interviewee No.	Birth Country	Gender	Age	Education Level	Business/ Industry
1.	India	Male	70-80	Non- formal	Trading/ Brokering Textile – Retail Real Estate Investment
2.	Thailand	Male	30-40	Degree	Trade/ Brokering
3.	Thailand	Male	60-70	Degree	Textile - Retail
4.	Thailand	Male	20-30	Degree	Tailoring - Retail
5.	India	Male	40-50	Degree	Trading/ Brokering Plastics Manufacture
6.	India	Male	60-70	Non- formal	Textile Manufacture Textile Wholesale
7.	Thailand	Male	30-40	Degree	Textile Manufacture Textile Wholesale
8.	India	Male	70-80	Non- formal	Religious Leader/former business owner- tailoring
9.	Thailand	Female	30-40	degree	Trading/ Brokering Plastics Manufacture

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was conducted based on the interview transcriptions. The interviews were carried out at *Gurudwara* (Sikh temple), their homes and workplaces, allowing us an opportunity to observe their business location, business activities, interaction with their family members, customers and employees and activities of *Gurudwara* and community. In particular, interviewees were asked to

describe themselves and how they interact within their business network both domestically and internationally. Their discussion focused on how they believed they were perceived by their business partners and customers ie the images they imagined of themselves. Due to the lack of previous research on Sikh business relationships, the data analysis was inductively based concentrating on the main areas discussed by the interviewees. Data was analysed along themes of what they considered important to their business relationships in Thailand.

The findings relate to how Sikh business people see their businesses or working life operating in Thailand. Through thematic analysis conducted on the interview transcription, three groupings of themes emerged from the data: religious themes; family themes and entrepreneurial themes.

Findings

Religious Themes

Although this paper focuses on how Sikh's develop their business relationships and networks, many of the interviewees discussed the closeness of their faith and their business principles, particularly when it comes to developing relationships. The connection between faith, identity and business practice was a strong discussion thread to emerge during the interviews.

Four sub-themes emerged commonly highlighting connections between business practice, identity and religion. These sub-themes are:

- Physical symbolic form of Sikhism and its effect on how others perceive their business practice;
- Perceived connection between business opportunities and blessings given by God;
- Community building and acceptance of Sikhism in society and through the Gurudwara (temple) in Bangkok and
- The connection between Sikhism, business reputation and credibility.

The sub-themes are interconnected for example: the physical symbolic form of Sikhism is a display of faith and brings a devotee closer to God to receive his blessings. Physical symbols of religion are important for indicating expectations of an individual's identity which often result in the reification of the symbol (Rentein, 2004). Sikhism requires the devotee to follow the symbolic form of Sikhism which is displayed in the five K's. One of the five K's that interviewees most commonly discussed is the belief that Sikhs should stay in their natural form and therefore, not cut their hair. This belief is particularly visual for males as they are usually wearing a turban and a hair net to keep their beard tidy. This visual representation presents a strong symbol of identification resulting in a number of behavioural expectations and also a number of inaccuracies during the initial stereotyping of their identity. The physical form can also indicate they are strong devotees, who are more likely to be following the principles of Sikhism. They tend to behave according to the teachings, therefore, expectations are created as to how these people will behave in their business relationships. Therefore, their outward physical appearance is used as an indicator of likely business practices. Three interviewees discussed the connections among the faith in religion, maintaining physical identity and characters of people. Example quotations include:

Interviewee[1] "You must live with the pure life... you must fulfil true path.. don't cheat anyone, don't misbehave anyone, help anyone and must be true and honest...make customer happy...never tell a lie and cheat anyone"

Pure life and true path are indicators that the interviewee follows the guru's teachings to have a true path towards God. To do this they must follow certain business practices, as outlined in the quotation. The interviewee then goes on to say how customers respect his organization and this is reflected in their reputation. This interviewee has kept his complete physical form.

There is tension in this theme as others mention that this is not always the case and that the physical form does not necessarily indicate they follow the same principles in business:

Interviewee[2]” Sikh who remains in full form are more trustworthy but not guaranteed ..chances are much more...there is no fear factor, you could do anything...basically the whole world is changed and money has become king...so I feel that you can’t trust anybody.. yes, there are some families that would stand out...you can’t generalize”

This interviewee highlights that behaving according to the teaching this is not always the case and especially with changes in business philosophy. This is highlighted with “money has become king” placing money above that of religious belief. “No fear factor” also indicates that they no longer fear if they don’t always follow the “true path” with retribution not likely to occur. The interviewee also indicates that “some families stand out” such that familial ties through keeping to their religious belief are used when assessing business partners. In many cases the reflection of the physical appearance and the strength of conviction to apply “teachings” (honesty, never cheat etc) to business practice was a recurring theme. Moreover, the same interviewee was pessimistic about the sustainability of Sikh identity.

Interviewee[2] “The importance of religion has gone down. The character has gone down.. the young sikh..they trim their beards they don’t wear turban..very visible.....when the form disappeared, the philosophy disappeared. the character disappeared. ...step by step.. but people don’t see the connection with form”

Another repertoire relating to faith is that business opportunities are coming from God’s blessing and was mentioned frequently, by numerous interviewees.

Interviewee [3] “This is a service business, nothing is in your hand...it’s all in the hands of lord’s blessing...I mean the creator...I don’t mean only my prophet...I get a lot of good people who talk about it... get my son into conversation... he listens a little bit and he knows success comes from the blessing”

Interviewee [2] “opportunity ...it was in God’s hand”

Both interviewees highlight that the business opportunities that came their way are given by their God. Interviewee [3], a member of older generation, in particular made many comments through the one interview on how God has blessed his business. “It was in God’s hand” could indicate that God pointed out the path or helped them in direction. Not all interviewees followed this line of thought. A more moderate interviewee [5] highlighted that:

“God gives everyone once in a lifetime opportunity...the opportunity is given to everyone and that is what our religion believes. Luck also is very important and combination of luck and opportunity, you can make a fortune”

The same interviewee [5], who does not keep full physical form [trims beard] indicated:

“I don’t believe in that, but I am definitely lucky to turn my efforts and hard work into tangible result...at the end of the day life is a big challenge and one has to work very hard to achieve... you have to make your own opportunity...nobody will give you anything, you cannot expect that you can sit and get good way to eat... if you talk to my mother, she will talk differently regarding this matter”

These quotations highlight the tension in whether business opportunities and God’s blessing are connected. Interviewee [5] was tertiary educated and did not believe that God sent his opportunities, while his wife [9] did believe. Whether this difference of belief is due to differences in religious belief or differences in education is unclear. But it does indicate that even within the single family unit there was tension regarding whether God blessed them with opportunities. Note also the husband indicated that his mother would also believe in the connection between business opportunities and blessing, highlighting a generational change in thinking.

Family Themes

Conflicting tensions emerged when the interviewees were discussing the role of family within their business operations. Previous research has shown that family plays an important role in business development for Thai business owned by Thai or Chinese Diaspora (Theingi, Purchase & Yokfar 2008). Here, the role of family in Sikh business networks seems to vary according to the stage at which the business is growing and the type of business operations. Three sub-themes seemed to be highlighted:

- Identity of their familial position and its importance for the business
- Role of family as a source of growth
- Attitudinal changes occurring for the upcoming generation

The context of the broader family connections played an important role in considering the tension between the ideas. The inclusion of family within the business seems to be paradoxical. The context of the broader family connections played an important role in considering the tension between the ideas. There are two main Sikh business patterns among family businesses: 1) father and grown-up siblings (mostly sons) working together in harmony under the same umbrella with own responsibilities to create their strength in manpower, thereby, dividing their wealth among growing family members 2) grown-up siblings branch out into their business but they remain in the same types of business, hence, sharing the market within their own family. A typical example of a tailoring business: the original business was begun by the grandfather (now deceased) and his sons worked within this business. As the family grew and became more prosperous the businesses were separated with each of the sons taking over different aspects. One company now consists of son, grandson and grand-daughter-in-law. The son and grandson operate the retail store together, while the grand-daughter-in-law works as customer liaison on the online retail site. Yet this business was also previously separated with the separated business operating in another niche market segment and owned by another grandson. Also within close proximity is a retail outlet operated by the son's nephew which began after the original separation of the businesses by the grandfather.

The first sub-theme highlights that family plays an integral role in growing the different businesses and developing their retail outlets. Interviews indicated that families were important sources of human capital during the early growth phases to ensure that cash flowed through the business. The use of family and family connections to ensure continued growth of the business was important in building a base from which other family businesses could diversify. In later years, financial capital also flowed through the family business networks to fund new ventures. Interesting aspects of the case above is that new ventures did not tend to go into direct competition with existing operations, although they stayed within the same industry.

In the example above, the role of family has been essential in developing a businesses reputation for world class quality. They have kept the retail and sewing facilities in family hands by passing the organization down through the generations. Therefore, passing down the business to upcoming generations has been influential in generating a reputation of world renowned quality. One interviewee described the strategy for maintaining quality is through generational relationships, with both customers and suppliers. This tailoring shop has been dealing with the same suppliers for the past 40 years, both textile supplier and retail outlet businesses have passed down from one generation to the next. The tailoring retail outlet is three generational with grandfather (now deceased), father and son working in the same retail outlet. When interviewing the son he credited the long customer relationships to the continuity of familial recognition. "People come to us want to meet me or my father generally...to be able to go on with relationships and connection...unless I train my son to do it [4]" This quotation highlights the importance of family being there to meet customers and the interviewee also expressed the desire for his son to carry on the business. But at the same time it did indicate that such a decision was in his son's hands and as long as his son is happy he would accept his decision.

However, during the interview the son and grandson indicated that family did not currently play a role in business development. For example the son discussed the role of family:

Interviewee [4] “I don’t know whether my cousins use the same brokers. We don’t actually interfere each other business...I talk with my cousins but we don’t really talk about business at all...I’m just doing my business...I’m so busy and I don’t have time to think about what others are doing...business only leads to conflict of interest.. so we don’t talk about business at all...avoiding conflict is important for us.. family is very important...money is not everything...you earn money but at the end of day you are not going to take it with you...plus we live in the small community and we don’t want to create conflict”

The lowering of family involvement in the business processes may have emerged with the stability and growth of operational businesses no longer requiring the support of family human capital. These changes occurring over generations are happening quickly due to the growing prosperity of the Sikh community in Thailand. On the other hand, their non-interference attitude toward extended family business could lead to ignorance of business information that could be promptly and easily accessible and limits their ability to establish a large business network. The finding contradicts the study of entrepreneurs in Greece by Piperopoulos and Ikonomu (2007) who reported that ethnic entrepreneurs made use of extensive networks of identity, family and community resources to acquire business information and inside knowledge of market opportunities.

Although previous examples highlight the importance of family in growing and developing the businesses reputation, many interviewees have highlighted that their children, currently still at school, have not shown interest in their businesses and are unlikely to continue the family business. Therefore, is the role of family in developing and maintaining the business’s reputation going to continue on with the next generation? Interviewee [4] highlighted that “some young children do not want to do family business and they do not want to be sent away from family”. This quotation highlights the changing focus on the role of the family in continuing the business.

Yet, some interviewees did not want their children to continue the family business due to the forces of globalization and the increasing dominating role of China in the textile market squeezing their profits. One interviewee’s advice for upcoming generations of Sikh’s is to educate themselves, every asset should be flexible to liquidate if necessary, assets need to be movable, only work in safe currencies and have total diversification. If up and coming generations of Sikh children follow this advice then there will be structural changes in the typical industries Sikh business people currently operate and their business networks would need to dramatically change in the diversification process. Therefore, the change process on current Sikh practice of passing down the business to sons and building reputation through family control over quality and service may change as the younger generations educate themselves to a higher level of qualifications than their parents due to the requirement of working in the family business becoming obsolete.

Entrepreneurial Themes

The first Sikh who came to Thailand happened to be a textile merchant and those who follow him took up the same trade (Cheang, 1985) because for new Sikh migrants, a textile business is not too hard to start on a small scale and helping hands from the early migrants to the new comers made them highly involved in textile business. Later, they did manage to succeed in making sufficient money to start their own small retail and wholesale textile shops attaining a dominant position in the textile market in Thailand.

Apart from the retailing and wholesaling businesses in textiles industry, tailoring is another business many Sikhs engaged in due to their English language advantage. It is believed that about 500 tailor shops in Thailand are owned by Sikhs (Sidhu, 1993). However, the tailoring business also faces a shortage of skilled workers who have been working in the same business for generations. To cope with the changing market environment, many Sikh businessmen are cautiously diversifying their businesses by centring in real estate such as hotels and service condominiums with friends or

relatives. Within a small community, the success of earlier Sikh real estate diversifiers' calls for followers, hence repeating the earlier textile business trend. The reasons for diversifying into the real estate business are: 1) there is uncertainty in the current textile business, 2) Thailand is now a centre of tourism and there is a potential market for hotels and service condominiums, 3) Sikhs have accumulated enough wealth to start real estate business, 4) the current generation of Sikhs, as Thai citizens by birth, are eligible to buy real estate (Mani, 1993).

Three sub-themes are emerged from the evolvement of Sikh business in Thailand:

- The importance of English language skills
- Reputation for honesty and commitment
- Choosing professional career over family business

Sikh business people developed a reputation for trading due to their English language skills. Sikh schooled during the 1970's and early 1980's were set to school in India and studied under the British system.

Interviewee [2]; "gradually the Sikhs got into the export business... we had an edge for our language... the easiest market to start exporting is middle-east.. at that time in Dubai the population is 1 million.. I think 70% were Indian.. so it is easy to trade".

Their language skills allowed them to be the middlemen in trade between the middle-east and Southeast Asia. Therefore, they built a reputation for trading and exporting in the textile industry. This language advantage also was an advantage during the Vietnam war as the US used Thailand as a base and the Sikh business people were often arbitraging between Thai sellers and US buyers through their use of English. The language advantage was short lived as the English language skills of other ethnic groups in south-east Asia has improved gradually and that particular advantage no longer exists. Yet, the reputation as textile traders between Southeast Asia and other countries has continued.

Interviewees felt they were stereotyped as "Indian" for keeping the physical form, even though many of them have lived in Thailand all their life. Hence, they made a special effort to make themselves different from "Indian" and to be recognized in their Sikh identity.

Interviewee [2] highlights: "if I start to meet a client, they will not instantly know whether I am Indian-Indian or Thai-Indian, as we talk more and more and show our capabilities while talking to those managers and so on, we can show what we can do"

Interviewees also emphasised the importance of being Thai with a number of interviewees highlighting how they "love the King"[6] and others saying "I have to say my face in Indian but my heart is Thai"[5]. The use of the word heart can indicate that being Thai and their love for Thailand is strong. They often mentioned their connection to Thailand as important for indicating their Thai identity (Sidhu, 1993). Hence, it is common for Sikhs in Thailand to have both Thai and Sikh names.

Furthermore, the interviewee [2] highlights that his identity as a Thai person only begins to be understood as the business relationship develops. Keeping their Thai identity is important to the interviewees as this helps in developing their business relationships and allows them to feel connected to their country. Some feel that Indians (rather than Sikh) do not have as good business reputation in Thailand as other cultures, such as Japanese or western people, and they have to overcome these visual barriers. These barriers make their initial interactions harder and therefore first impressions of being Indian can affect how their business relationships develop. Overcoming such negative perceptions has resulted in Sikh businessmen emphasising their reputation for honesty, commitment and service and working hard to maintain their business reputation. This reputation is important to business people as they feel that the only advantage they offer over their competitors is service, quality and commitment.

Interviewee [1] highlights “we are faithful and sincere to our customers.. I buy any amount.. they gave me credit and pay them a month later.. they trust me ... what I have promise is promise”.

Developing the reputation takes time and many businesses rely on word-of-mouth within their network for their reputation to become known.

In some cases the physical form has led to discrimination in employment opportunities resulting in a perception that most Sikh's need to be entrepreneurial and own their own business. Otherwise they will find it hard to maintain physical form and achieve promotion in professional business practices. An example of this perception is discussed in the following quotation:

Interviewee [2] “you won't see many professional business.. your appearance do not suit and they have no choice... they have to own.. they have to be owner of business”

The result of discrimination due to the adherence to keeping the physical form has developed an entrepreneurial flair amongst the Sikh network. Most interviewees owned their own business or worked within family enterprises. This entrepreneurial focus has tended to be in the real estate and textile trading industries, though other industries such as hotel ownership are becoming more popular as their businesses expand and diversify.

Younger interviewees felt that many of the identity aspects of the Thai Sikh business networks were changing, in that many young people are now no longer keeping their ‘visual form’ or are choosing different career paths than older generations (Sidhu, 1993). In particular, they highlight how their young Sikh people are choosing to educate themselves to a much higher level and follow professional careers (engineering, medical etc) rather than continuing within the textile industry. Interviewee [2] in particular, emphasised the requirement for the Sikh business community to further diversify their skill base if the community wants to prosper. In particular, he highlighted that Chinese competition in the textile industry is becoming more competitive and that competitive advantages that the Sikh business network enjoyed no longer exist. Therefore, Sikh business network identity is changing with globalization and the increased education levels of upcoming Sikh business people.

Academic Implications

As stated earlier, three main themes emerged relative to the Sikh business identity in Thailand: religion, family and entrepreneurship. This section will discuss how our results add to the body of knowledge and integrate into previous research.

Religious beliefs play a key role in the development of how Sikh business people perceive themselves within their business networks. Following Sikhism plays an important role in how they approach their business practice and develop their business relationships. Although there has been no previous research on Sikhism and the development of business relationships, Werner (2008) has shown that religious belief (Christianity) plays an important role in SME business behaviour in both the UK and Germany. Thai Sikh's also integrated their religious beliefs into their business practices. Yet, the data does indicate that some Sikh's do not necessarily keep full physical appearance, but adapt to suit their business conditions. So in conclusion, religion plays a role in how Sikh entrepreneurs development their business relationships, even if they don't always follow the visual form.

Tan and Vogel (2008) show that Canadians with higher levels of religiosity are more likely to trust and be trusted in their relationships. Our research also shows that Sikh business people considered themselves to be extremely trustworthy, particularly those who exhibit strong religious beliefs and keep their full physical form. The research also indicated that this link is not necessarily universal

with some Sikh entrepreneurs highlighting that keeping the full physical form does not always indicate that you can trust them to be honest, not cheat and be committed in their relationships. Thus, their business relationships, as seen by them, contain high trust, reputation and honesty. The importance of trust, reputation and honesty is also found in literature relating to western business relationships (Morgan and Hunt 1994; Backhaus & Büschken, 1997) and Thai relationships (Theingi et al., 2008). Overall, though there is very little research discussing how religion impacts trust development behaviours within business network literature. This research looks at this gap and highlights the importance of religion in the development of trust in Sikh business relationships.

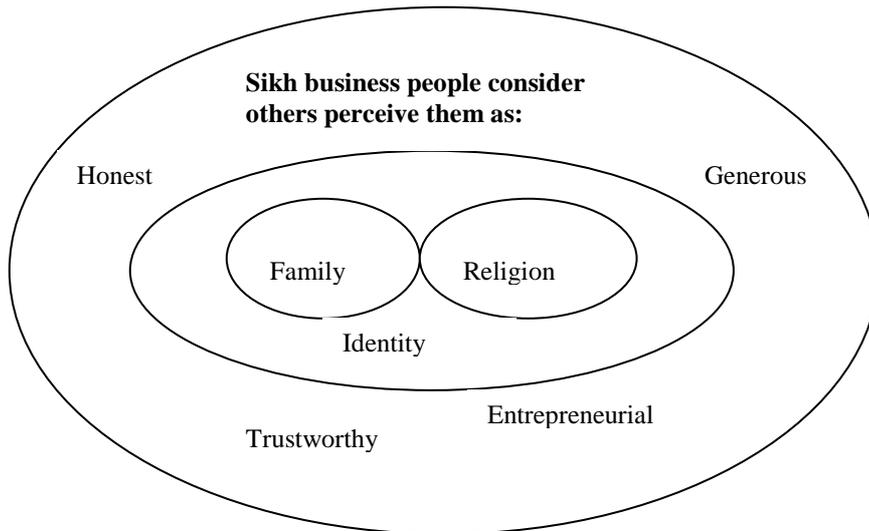
The use of family as human capital to grow their business is similar to Chinese business where family played a strong role in business development (Hamilton, 1996). Yet, once the business is established and prosperous the use of family within the Sikh business's tends to wane while in Chinese businesses the use of family remains strong. The change in the use of family for business development could also be connected to the affluence of the family, in that they can now afford to hire labour and allow their children to strive for higher levels of education.

One interviewee did highlight how the family financed a new venture in a very different industry after they had finished their higher education and achieved a level of work experience. The use of family to finance new ventures is similar to that of other Asian SME's where the use of family to finance diversification rather than institutional finance is common (Bjerke, 2000).

Figure 1, highlights the initial thinking on how the aspects from each theme might emerge. Core to the Sikh business identity is the idea of family and religion, though the family aspects are in a fairly dynamic state due to the changes in the attitudes of the next generation towards the family business. Their commitment to maintain their religious identity and to visually show this through the full physical form of the 5K's is an important aspect of how they consider themselves. Those interviewees who kept their full physical form have a higher probability of showing stronger commitment within their business relationships to ensure they maintain their religious values.

Therefore, Sikh business people wanted to be perceived as trustworthy, honest, entrepreneurial and generous. Generous in this context is their commitment to charitable work within Thai society and their 'giving back' to the society that has accepted them. One important point for this acceptance was the recognition of Sikhism as a national religion in Thailand.

Figure 1 Sikh Business Identity in Thailand



Conclusion

This paper describes the forces driving the development of the Sikh business identity in Thailand. One of the limitations of the study is the interviewees are belonged to only main stream Sikhs and further study could include the interviewees from *Namdhari* who are a minor breakaway Sikh from main stream Sikhism. However, we clearly observe that Sikh business network identity is gradually changing with its effects visible in new generation.

- The new generation is now diversifying into real estate and hotel business due to fierce competition and globalization.
- Highly educated part of new generation pursued professional occupation such as medical doctors and engineers as they are not interested in business. They are more individualistic thereby weakening their network identity.
- Sikh business network is confined to a couple of business activities. There rarely is an expansion of the network even though intensity and increased activity could be possible.

As the paper analyses the identity of Sikh business networks in the light of threats more than opportunities, Sikh as individuals as well as communities could realize their status leading to the preparedness for sustainability of their business in Thailand.

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