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Hmong-Owned Small Businesses in Minnesota: Implications for Extension Educators and Program Developers

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The authors conducted an outreach research project designed to provide beneficial insight regarding Hmong-owned small businesses in Minnesota. Specifically, the objectives of the study were to (a) investigate characteristics of successful Hmong-owned small businesses, (b) identify unique problems encountered by Hmong entrepreneurs and small business owners, and (c) develop recommendations for Extension educators and program developers. The theoretical framework for understanding Hmong-owned small businesses was built on three interactive components: opportunity structures, group characteristics, and ethnic strategies. In-depth interviews were conducted to collect the data. A snowball sampling method was used, relying on referrals from a seed participant. A Hmong community organization located in the Twin Cities Area was used as a sampling frame. A total of three community leaders (one female and two males, age range 29 to 55) and seven business owners (five males and two females, age range 30 to 52) participated in the study. Eleven themes were identified from the data within the theoretical framework. Findings suggest that designing new programs or adapting existing programs to the Hmong community's needs and interests could be an excellent opportunity for both urban and rural Extension units to ensure that Hmong migrants build a stable community with their own needed ethnic small businesses.

Keywords: Hmong, small business, entrepreneurship, Extension, case study

Introduction

In 1975, the Hmong first arrived in Minnesota as political refugees fleeing from the destructive war that had ravaged their homeland in Laos (Minnesota Historical Society, n.d.). In those

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days, they were viewed as one of the most disadvantaged ethnic minority groups in Minnesota in that (a) they had large families containing many unemployable dependents, (b) most of them were illiterate in any language, (c) they had little prior occupational experience other than small-scale farming, and (d) they had rarely been exposed to American culture (Fass, 1986; Kaplan, 2015). These first-generation Hmong immigrants relied on their subsistence on public welfare as they faced considerable difficulty participating in the U.S. labor market (Humphrey, 1991).

Research conducted in the 1970s showed that most immigrants to the United States were able to equal or surpass income, employment, and occupational status characteristics of comparable Americans within 10 to 15 years of their arrival (see Fass, 1986). The Hmong also improved their economic status with increasing length of residence (Corrie & Radosevich, 2013), but their progress was slower. Compared to voluntary immigrants who chose to move to the United States on their own volition, the first generation of Hmong immigrants was at a relative disadvantage in terms of learning English, modifying their original skills, and finding out about where and how those skills could be used to increase their economic well-being (Cafferty, Chiswick, & Greeley, 1983).

Despite these impediments, the Hmong established their own ethnic economy employing co-ethnics and serving their own ethnic community during the 1980s (Kaplan, 2015). Further, building on their traditional culture that values economic independence, self-sufficiency, education, and hard work (Humphrey, 1991), the Hmong community in Minnesota significantly transformed the business landscape of a substantial part of the Twin Cities Area through small business ownership in the 1990s (e.g., grocery stores, automotive repair shops, car dealerships, financial services, restaurants, farming, health care; Yang, 2001).

In 2015, the Hmong, as a distinct ethnic minority group, celebrated the 40th anniversary of their immigration to Minnesota (Beckstrom, 2015). According to the U.S. Census Bureau (the most recent 2014 American Community Survey [ACS] as well as pooled 2010-2014 ACS data), there are more than 66,000 Hmong in Minnesota and the Twin Cities metropolitan area is known to be home to the largest concentration of Hmong in the United States. Just as any immigrant group, the Hmong community in Minnesota now operates small businesses that employ workers; pays local, state, and federal tax; and fuels growth through their cultural assets and ethnic networks (Corrie & Radosevich, 2013). Although detailed data on Hmong-owned small businesses in Minnesota are not available, a few sources highlight their growing contributions to the state economy. For example, it was reported that (a) there were 47,565 minority-owned businesses in Minnesota, and Asian-owned businesses represented 32.7% of them in 2012 (Vilsak, 2015); and (b) Hmong businesses in Minnesota generated an estimated \$100 million revenue in 2004 (The Minneapolis Foundation, 2004) and \$507 million revenue in 2007, making up a significant portion of Asian-owned businesses in Minnesota (Minnesota 2020, 2011).

Reflecting such dramatic transformation, we conducted an outreach research project designed to provide beneficial insight regarding Hmong-owned small businesses in Minnesota. Specifically, the objectives of our study were to (1) investigate characteristics of successful Hmong-owned small businesses, (2) identify unique problems encountered by Hmong entrepreneurs and small business owners, and (3) develop recommendations for Extension educators and program developers.

Theoretical Framework for Understanding Hmong-Owned Small Businesses

Our framework for understanding Hmong-owned small businesses is built on three interactive components proposed by Waldinger, Aldrich, and Ward (1990): opportunity structures, group characteristics, and ethnic strategies. This framework is useful for comprehensive understanding of market parameters and the ethnic group characteristics that either foster or hinder immigrant ethnic entrepreneurs' business development in the U.S. Opportunity structures involve market conditions that favor small-scale businesses, such as different degrees of demand for Hmong small businesses (e.g., immigrant community only vs. nonethnic populations), and access to ownership or the ease/difficulty with which access to business opportunities is obtained (e.g., start-up financing and capital, business vacancies; Aldrich & Waldinger, 1990). Group characteristics involve predisposing factors embedded in Hmong culture that can address the issue of whether the Hmong are entrepreneurial enough to strategically adopt small business ownership in their quest for socioeconomic mobility (Zhou, 2004). Ethnic strategies emerge from the interaction of opportunities and group characteristics, as the Hmong adapt to their environments. Hmong business owners' ethnic strategies are related to how they confront and cope with a number of problems in founding and operating their businesses: acquiring the training and skills needed to run a small business; recruiting and managing efficient, honest, and cheap workers; managing relations with customers and suppliers; surviving strenuous business competition; and protecting themselves from political attacks (Aldrich & Waldinger, 1990).

Methods

First, Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained from the University of Minnesota. Next, to achieve our research objectives, we conducted a series of in-depth interviews with Hmong community leaders and small business owners over a one-year period for a case study. Case study is a type of qualitative research wherein the researcher explores a case over time through detailed and in-depth interviews (Yin, 1984). A Hmong community organization in the Twin Cities Area was used as a sampling frame. A snowball sampling method was used, relying on referrals from a seed participant who was a "Housing, Economic and Community Development" manager in the Hmong community organization chosen for the study. The seed participant's role at the organization involved providing Hmong small business owners with accurate regularly updated market data and guiding them to further define the size and attributes

of an important market opportunity in the Twin Cities Area. We asked her to recommend “successful” small business owners that could substantially contribute to and well represent the Hmong economy. She provided a list of 17 Hmong small business owners from her clients and professional connections (5 restaurants, 3 tax or real estate services, 4 apparel design businesses, 3 health services, 2 farmers markets). A total of seven business owners from the list agreed to participate in the study. In addition to the seed participant, other community leaders were recruited from the advisory board of the Hmong community organization. Two board members agreed to participate in the study. One was a respected college professor specialized in Hmong Studies, and the other was a well-known entrepreneur and philanthropist who often represents the first generation of Hmong immigrants in Minnesota. We also asked the participants to recommend other people who might be interested in our study as an attempt to expand the participant pool. This sampling method is appropriate to access a hard-to-reach population (Shaghghi, Bhopal, & Sheikh, 2011), although the resulting sample is not meant to be representative of Hmong small business owners in Minnesota.

Following recommendations for finding valid and reliable results in qualitative research (Brink, 1993), two kinds of data sources (i.e., community leaders and business owners) were recruited for data triangulation. Three community leaders (one female and two males, age range 29 to 55) and seven business owners (five males and two females, age range 30 to 52) participated in the study. The community leaders also served as experts to assist in problem identification, issue clarification relevant to Hmong-owned small businesses, and evaluation of the community support system. The business owners had between one and 20 years of work experience. Most of them had four-year college degrees. Their businesses represented restaurants, bookstores, online ethnic fashion retailers, car repair shops, farmers market co-op operations, and home healthcare services.

An interview protocol guide was created to ensure interview questions aligned with the study’s research questions and promoted an inquiry-based conversation (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). The open-ended questions included (a) characteristics of the Hmong community in Minnesota, (b) participants’ personal characteristics as successful Hmong small business owners, (c) participants’ business and marketing practices, (d) obstacles and strategies, and (e) recommendations or suggestions for other Hmong small business owners. Although an interview protocol guide was used during the interviews, the interviews generally flowed as a semistructured conversation between the research team (2–3 interviewers) and the participant.

The interviewers were faculty and graduate students and were all female and Asian. Using multiple interviewers was chosen as an attempt to increase confidence in the findings through “researcher triangulation” (Thurmond, 2001). We included multiple researcher perspectives so that the findings were not based solely on a single researcher’s interpretations of events and themes, which was an important way to reduce bias in interpretation. The involvement of

multiple researchers in data collection allowed verification of findings from multiple perspectives. Similarly, graduate students of the research team contributed to the thematic analysis of the data. Including participation in data collection and interpretation from multiple researchers ensured that a variety of perspectives were taken into account.

Each interview lasted approximately one hour. The interviews were conducted at the participants' business sites or a conference room at the university depending on participant preferences. A digital voice recorder was used to generate audio data from each interview. After the interview, the audio data were transcribed to text data.

Data Analysis

Interview data were analyzed through a two-step analysis procedure. To reduce researcher subjectivity and personal bias, two graduate students independently analyzed the interview data first using QSR NVivo qualitative analysis software version 10 (Richards, 2005). NVivo is a widely used qualitative data analysis software because it can help researchers to see the data accurately and transparently (Welsh, 2002), and it contributes to the robustness of qualitative research (Bergin, 2011). At this stage, frequency count was used as a way to figure out repeated words or phrases in the data to capture important and significant themes as they repeatedly appear in the interviews (Namey, Guest, Thairu, & Johnson, 2008; Ryan & Bernard, 2000). From the two sets of analyses, a total of 12 repeated themes emerged. We only included those repeated themes observed from at least three participants' responses. These two sets of initial results were compared and reviewed by the two faculty researchers to further contextualize and enrich the data interpretations. The initial themes commonly identified from the narrative text are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Initial Frequency Count Analysis

Category	Theme Identified	Frequency	Relative Frequency (#/Total)
<i>Characteristics of Successful Hmong-owned Small Businesses</i>	Targeting not only Hmong but also other ethnic groups	9	.90
	Strong influence and support from family	9	.90
	Effective use of Word of Mouth and/or Social Media marketing	6	.60
	Strong motivation and passion for the work	6	.60
	Being adaptive to the changing environment	4	.40
<i>Unique Problems Encountered by Hmong-owned Small Businesses</i>	Lack of capital/financing	5	.50
	Lack of collective ethnic strategies	3	.30
	Lack of acculturation	3	.30

Next, further analysis of the interview data was conducted using an iterative reading strategy following the general procedures of content analysis as previous research recommended (Esterberg, 2002). The first stage of the coding, termed open coding, involved breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing the data. Each “open code” was inspected to identify how it could be linked to other open codes. This process is used to discover relationships and patterns that exist in the data (Hawker & Kerr, 2007; Payne, 2007). During this process, the researchers related the open codes to three interactive components from the theoretical framework, opportunity structures, group characteristics, and ethnic strategies. Next, “selective coding” was performed (Esterberg, 2002). The goal of this process was “selecting” a set of core themes, systematically relating it to the themes generated from the data and validating those relationships based on the theoretical framework.

Several methods were adopted to ensure the validity and trustworthiness of our findings. The entire research team engaged in the thematic analysis of the data. Having multiple researchers participate in data collection and interpretation ensured that a variety of perspectives were taken into account and the findings are validated through researcher triangulation. Furthermore, following the analysis guideline (Johnson, 1997), the themes that emerged during selective coding were cross-checked multiple times by the research team, and the newly coded themes were constantly checked against the ones that had been already coded. Respondent validation was performed for verification and insight (Long & Johnson, 2000; Noble & Smith, 2015). We solicited feedback on the data interpretations from one of the community leader participants. Additionally, one nonparticipant community leader specialized in Hmong Studies reviewed the data interpretations. Also, through a conference presentation, a preliminary analysis was reviewed by “disinterested peer researchers,” who were not involved in this study, to improve the overall quality of the data interpretations (Johnson, 1997). No major concern or question regarding the data analysis was raised by the audience at the conference.

Results

The analysis resulted in a total of 11 themes: (1) moving beyond the ethnic enclaves, (2) intergenerational occupational inheritance, (3) co-ethnic employment, (4) entrepreneurial spirit/passion/aspiration, (5) word-of-mouth marketing, (6) informal business apprenticeship, (7) adapting to the changing environment, (8) lack of capital and use of informal financing sources, (9) sectoral and geographical concentration, (10) limited English proficiency, and (11) lack of strategic planning. These themes were grouped based on the research objectives, then further categorized into one of the three interactive components (see Table 2).

Table 2. Themes and Sample Statements

Research Objective	Interactive Components	Theme and Sample Statement
<i>Characteristics of Successful Hmong-owned Small Businesses</i>	Opportunity Structures	<p><u>Moving beyond the ethnic enclaves¹</u></p> <p><i>For our farming business, the majority of our customers are not Hmong, they're actually Caucasian, maybe Latino also . . . that's the reason why you could make a lot of money . . . if you're depending on just them (the Hmong) . . . the products that they buy are very concise, and then their income is not as high as other groups of people. So, if you're expecting people to purchase more from you and purchase a different variety of products, then you have to go to the other groups of people or races to do business.</i></p>
	Group Characteristics	<p><u>Intergenerational occupational inheritance</u></p> <p><i>My parents used to have a restaurant back in France (as immigrants) when they were younger. . . . We grew up there and we came to the U.S. and we also came into the Chinese restaurant industry in Michigan. And that industry had grown up and we all had grown up, of course, too. And we decided to, me and my brother decided to pursue our restaurant dreams.</i></p>
		<p><u>Co-ethnic employment</u></p> <p><i>Most of them are my immediate relatives, aunts, uncles, cousins. (Interviewer: Are there non-Hmong employees?) No <laughs>. They're all Hmong. Yeah.</i></p>
	<p><u>Entrepreneurial spirit/passion/aspiration</u></p> <p><i>In any business you do, there will be a problem, there will be bumps on the road and sometimes there will be a war, not just problems. There will be wars like there's no way out and when you come to that point or that position only if you have passion, only if you have a vision, only if you know what you're doing, then you stick to your vision and your passion and then somehow there will be a small hole through the wall and just open up, you know, magical. . . . So, to really get something like this going, you really need to have the passion. You really need to know what you're doing and have a vision. If you don't have those then I'd say don't even touch it.</i></p>	

¹ The term, "ethnic enclaves" refers to immigrant groups which concentrate in a distinct spatial location and organize a variety of small businesses primarily serving their own ethnic market (Portes, 1981). The largest concentrations of Hmong households and businesses are located in the Payne-Phalen and Thomas-Dale neighborhoods in St. Paul and along the Penn Avenue North corridor in Minneapolis.

Research Objective (continued)	Interactive Components	Theme and Sample Statement
	Ethnic Strategies	<p><u>Word-of-mouth marketing</u></p> <p><i>Marketing mostly in this place is just word-of-mouth, and when we first started we used to do a lot of sponsorship, (donating) some food to some schools or PTA meetings, and we gave out (food) like our (business) card, and when they have a meeting, we give them our egg rolls. They taste our food, they will come back. So I know if my 20 egg rolls go out, and 20 people will come back, and we try to keep these people, yeah.</i></p> <hr/> <p><u>Informal business apprenticeship</u></p> <p><i>A lot of people don't realize that, but your job (as an employee) is something that's going to teach you about the business . . . from my perspective, Asian people, we do that, we learn the business inside and out, from the bottom up, and then we copycat. . . . So that's one of the things that Hmong people do, that's why we have moved very progressively since we got here.</i></p> <hr/> <p><u>Adapting to the changing environment</u></p> <p><i>You have to really, really be on top of what's going on because the homecare business, like I said, rules and regulations change every year, sometimes every month. And you really, really have to be on top of that. If you're not, then you can get into trouble for it. You can get your license taken away. So, you definitely want to keep aware and be on top of all of the new information that's coming out there. . . . So, that's pretty much it. You just kind of have to know what's changing around you, and keep up with the changes.</i></p>
Problems Encountered by Hmong-owned Small Businesses	Opportunity Structures	<p><u>Lack of capital and use of informal financing sources</u></p> <p><i>I think in the very first phase of Hmong starting business here, I think the lack of money and the lack of knowledge of writing a business plan to get money from the bank.</i></p> <p><i>Yeah. I asked my parents for the startup money and then we just went from there.</i></p> <hr/> <p><u>Sectoral and geographical concentration</u></p> <p><i>When they think about business, they think about a restaurant, they think about a grocery store, they think about opening an agency, being a real estate agent or an insurance agent. . . . We have a Hmong Town and Hmong village in town here, which is very popular, but the problem is we only serve the Hmong community, the Asian community and not a whole lot of Asian community.</i></p>

Research Objective (continued)	Interactive Components	Theme and Sample Statement
	Group Characteristics	<p><u>Limited English proficiency</u></p> <p><i>In my co-op, I'm the only English speaking, so I have to translate to these ladies that don't know how to speak English. . . . Yeah, there's still a language barrier.</i></p>
	Ethnic Strategies	<p><u>Lack of strategic planning</u></p> <p><i>The Hmong small business most needs right now is . . . how do you prepare your financial statement, how do you get your business plan done? If you want to go to the bank and borrow some money, how do you put together your package so it will be an attractive package?</i></p>

Discussion

Overall, the participants of this study tend to view that the market condition is favorable to Hmong entrepreneurs. Our data imply one notable trend, that once Hmong small businesses achieve a certain level of success, they tend to move beyond their own ethnic market and sell their products and services to the general population. These entrepreneurs strategically explored a wider market, because if they remain limited to the Hmong market, their potential for growth will be circumscribed. They perceive that the Hmong market itself can support only a restricted number of businesses because (a) the market size is quantitatively small and (b) the Hmong are still too impoverished to generate sufficient buying power to fuel their business growth. According to the Minnesota Hmong Chamber of Commerce, the Hmong show the highest rate of poverty among Asian-Americans, and their buying power is estimated approximately at \$615 million (Xaykaothao, 2016). This phenomenon is especially salient in two retail sectors: farmers market co-op operations and restaurants.

Our data also suggest that Hmong small businesses share the ethnic group characteristics delineated by Waldinger et al. (1990). Hmong business owners in Minnesota largely use family labor and less expensive co-ethnic labor from the Hmong community. However, young business owners are gradually turning to other ethnic minority groups (e.g., Latino) as their additional source of labor, even though jobs of trust and supervisory responsibilities are still in the hands of their own families or co-ethnics. This is consistent with the description of ethnic group characteristics such as building close ties between co-ethnics, labor recruitment and management patterns, and use of ethnic social networks observed in other ethnic communities.

A classic pattern of intergenerational occupational inheritance exists in the Hmong small business community. That is, the second generation starts small businesses similar to those of their parents who have applied their cultural traditions of working hard, delaying material gratification, and sacrificing for the next generation to their business practices (Humphrey, 1991). However, it is unclear whether the Hmong adopt small business ownership as a strategy for social mobility to ensure their descendants' high socioeconomic status. While immigrants commonly adopt small business ownership as an instrument to overcome discrimination in the labor market and disadvantages associated with their ethnic minority status, there are cross-cultural differences in terms of intergenerational occupational inheritance. For example, while Korean-Americans often consider small business ownership as a strategy to cope with problems associated with their immigrant status (e.g., poor English proficiency, the depreciation of human capital), they do not want their children to take over their businesses (Zhou, 2004).

Although it is too early to determine whether this will become a major trend in the near future, our data suggest that there is a group of aspirational entrepreneurs in the Hmong small business community. These Hmong entrepreneurs emerged from ethnic cultural contexts (e.g., Hmong-inspired fashion retailers targeting Hmong consumers all over the world through the Internet), embracing and leveraging their ethnic identity to find their niches. Our data suggest that those Hmong entrepreneurs not only are breaking new ground in business formats (e.g., e-commerce, one participant), strategies (i.e., social media marketing, three participants), and/or product categories (e.g., upscale fashion, one participant), but they are also more likely to identify themselves with the Hmong identity than traditional owners who simply replicate and reproduce old business formats.

A few insights on ethnic strategies of Hmong entrepreneurs were found. Interestingly, our data suggest that the training and skills needed to run a small business are typically acquired on the job, when the potential owner is an employee in a co-ethnic or family member's business. Informal training systems are formed through close contacts between owners and co-ethnic employees in Hmong-owned small businesses, enabling prospective entrepreneurs to eventually start out on their own. This finding is in line with prior research highlighting that the presence of co-ethnic entrepreneurs tends to encourage informal business apprenticeships, which has positive social effects (Bailey & Waldinger, 1991). Thus, successful Hmong small businesses not only foster an entrepreneurial spirit and become role models but also intentionally or unintentionally train prospective entrepreneurs in the Hmong community. Other ethnic strategies frequently identified included "word-of-mouth marketing" in managing relationships with customers and suppliers and "adapting to the changing environment" as a survival strategy from intense business competition and negative consequences from noncompliance with regulations and legal requirements.

Hmong small business owners heavily rely on gifts/investments from parents and relatives rather than external loans from formal financial institutions to raise capital. Also, a large portion of Hmong small businesses are still concentrated in a few retail sectors such as grocers and restaurants. They typically operate businesses in Hmong or other immigrant neighborhoods rather than affluent urban neighborhoods or middle-class suburbs (Yang, 2001). In the layman's eye, they often carry images of petty traders, merchants, dealers, shopkeepers, or even peddlers and hucksters, who engage in such industries or businesses as restaurants, greengrocers, farmers market vendors, and so on (Zhou, 2004). During the interviews, community leaders identified this sectoral and geographical concentration as a major problem. It was viewed as an indication that the Hmong community is not proactively creating new opportunities involving "innovation" and "risk-taking" that can be tied to the mainstream economy. Other frequently identified problems include limited English proficiency and the lack of strategic planning.

Implications for Extension Educators

After each interview, a short survey was conducted to assess each Hmong small business owner's interest in Extension programs. While the participants' awareness of Extension and its full range of Extension programs and services was low, all participants showed a great interest in the following Extension programs: (a) Market Area Profiles using data to compile a comprehensive description of who visits and shops in a community and to identify retail trade gaps; (b) eMarketing training in how businesses and communities can take advantage of the Internet and social media to advertise goods and services, reach potential customers through cell phones and other mobile devices, and boost their visibility from Google search results; and (c) Business Retention & Expansion program where Extension works with communities to interview businesses, compile research about local business needs and responses, and facilitate community discussions about actions that can help existing businesses stay and grow. Given that these Extension programs are currently available, actively seeking to provide training to Hmong entrepreneurs would address their lack of strategic planning ability.

Importantly, the finding of the current study highlights that some Hmong entrepreneurs began to identify niche markets with their ethnic identity while actively adopting innovative business strategies. When such cases of innovation succeed, the Hmong community can expand and integrate into the mainstream markets beyond the traditional ethnic boundary. However, because these small business owners are taking risks to pioneer new business strategies and formats, and because their skills and training mostly come from their prior jobs with co-ethnic business owners, they may not have sufficient skills to be successful. Thus, Extension programs and educators are advised to actively locate these aspiring Hmong entrepreneurs and provide support for their new business formats by offering the needed education opportunities.

As noted in our findings, language barriers may deter Hmong small business owners from accessing Extension programs and services offered in English. Also, the problems identified in the opportunity structures and ethnic strategies may also prevent ethnic minorities from seeking services from Extension. Due to these barriers, it is important to develop and implement the engagement strategies of Extension programs that are culturally appropriate and responsive to the needs of the Hmong community. For example, Extension organizations can invest in hiring bilingual/bicultural personnel, providing professional development opportunities, and developing bilingual/bicultural educational resources. Extension educators can learn about the Hmong culture by effectively interacting with their Hmong audiences and engaging key community leaders and organizations as collaborators. In addition, Extension educators can identify individuals who are successfully working in the small business sector and engage them as advisors in how to best cultivate Hmong entrepreneurship and small business ownership. Efforts of this nature will also help Extension organizations conduct thorough needs and assets assessments in the Hmong community (Kim, Johnson, Kang, & Lee, 2014).

This research should be considered with some limitations in mind. This study is exploratory and descriptive as it adopted the case study method with a small number of Hmong community leaders and small business owners. We also used a snowball sampling approach, a nonprobability sampling method. The sample for the current study was Hmong small business owners conducting business in an urban area where there is a concentrated Hmong population to support the business. Therefore, it is not feasible to generalize the findings to all Hmong small business owners in Minnesota. While the current study findings are limited to the urban area, an interesting future research question can be investigating if the findings of the current study can be extended to Hmong and/or other ethnic minority groups in rural areas. Population change in the U.S. brought an influx of diverse ethnicities to rural communities over the years (Van Hook & Lee, 2017). According to one report on race and ethnicity in rural America (Housing Assistance Council, 2012), Hispanics account for 9.3% of the rural population. Although the proportion of ethnic minority population in rural areas is still smaller than in urban communities, such a trend in demographics suggests a need to understand similar questions in rural towns.

Although theoretical saturation was reached with the data, there is still a need to examine whether subpopulations exist and findings vary across those different subpopulations. For example, as the data were collected in the metropolitan area where Hmong businesses are concentrated, the practical implications of our study are largely relevant to urban Extension programs and outreach efforts. Future research conducted in rural areas may further strengthen the findings of this study. Also, while using multiple interviewers has some advantages in terms of “researcher triangulation,” we admit that there could be concerns about the respondents’ feelings of intimidation experienced while interacting with multiple interviewers.

To date, Hmong small business ownership has been essentially an urban phenomenon because most Hmong-owned small businesses are oriented toward a co-ethnic clientele and thus require a critical mass of Hmong population to survive. This may explain why Hmong-owned small businesses have not been actively considered in the domain of rural extension. Given that, in rural areas with a sizable group of Hmong residents, future researchers may want to delve into the issue of how Extension can nurture Hmong entrepreneurship to cultivate more diverse and culturally dynamic communities. The presence of Hmong-owned small businesses, including grocery stores and restaurants, may help attract Hmong migrators to rural areas and their permanent and stable settlement. These retailers can create a familiar “cultural space” and help newcomers easily buy their accustomed ethnic goods and services (Zarrugh, 2007). When such goods and services are not locally available, people may travel considerable distances to find what they need and want. The unavailability of these ethnic goods and services may even cause people to leave the area to find the ethnic products and services they need and want. Thus, designing new programs or adapting existing programs to the Hmong community’s needs and interests could be an excellent opportunity for rural Extension to ensure that Hmong migrators build a stable community with their own needed ethnic small businesses.

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