Middlemen's Perceptions of Relationship Marketing Toward Main Suppliers and Main Customers in Tasikmalaya Regency

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Abstract:
This study aims to analyze coconut sugar middlemen's perceptions of their primary suppliers and key customers in Tonjongsari Village, Cikalong District, Tasikmalaya Regency, based on four dimensions of relationship marketing: trust, satisfaction, commitment, and communication. A descriptive quantitative approach was used, and the Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test was employed to assess perception differences across each dimension among 12 active middlemen. The results show no significant differences in the dimensions of trust (Z = -1.732; p = 0.083), commitment (Z = 0.000; p = 1.000), and satisfaction (Z = -1.414; p = 0.157). However, the communication dimension showed a near-significant value (Z = -1.890; p = 0.059), indicating a potential imbalance in perceptions. The fact that most business relationships have lasted more than 10 years and transaction volumes remain relatively stable suggests that long-term relationships have been established and play a vital role in maintaining the stability of coconut sugar distribution. This study highlights the importance of strengthening communication as a strategy to enhance the effectiveness of relationship marketing in the local coconut sugar supply chain.
Keywords: *relationship marketing, middlemen, supplier, customer.*

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia, as a country with an agriculture-based economy, demonstrates that the agricultural sector still plays a significant role in the national economy. One important part of the agricultural sector is the plantation sub-sector (Asih, 2021). Indonesia is the world leader in coconut production. Evidence of this is the largest coconut population in the world, with production reaching 17.3 million metric tons per year (Butron, 2021). Coconuts (Cocos Nucifera) are used as raw materials for cosmetics, white copra, handicrafts, shampoo, margarine, activated carbon, medicine, and others. Coconut also produces sap. One of the main products derived from processing coconut sap is coconut sugar. Coconut sugar has a long and significant history in Indonesian society. Since ancient times, coconut sugar has been an integral part of Indonesia's culture and traditions. Its use is not only limited to culinary needs, but also in traditional ceremonies where sugar is used as one of the offerings. The meaning of sugar in this context is to pray for abundant sustenance (Pramita et al., 2013). Its presence has become an inseparable part of the daily lives of Indonesian people. Coconut sugar is generally traded in solid form with various shapes depending on the molds used.

Tasikmalaya Regency, an autonomous region in West Java Province, has a southern coastline of Java Island with abundant coconut tree growth. In 2020, Tasikmalaya Regency ranked second in West Java Province after Ciamis Regency, with a coconut plantation area of 31,395 hectares, almost all of which were smallholder plantations (BPS Jabar, 2020). Cikalong District, a district in Tasikmalaya Regency, has a coastline and is the district with the largest coconut plantation area in Tasikmalaya Regency. Cikalong

District has a coconut plantation area of 9,954 hectares (BPS Kab. Tasikmalaya, 2022). Coconut trees grow in various villages, including Tonjongsari Village.

In Tonjongsari Village, some community members work as coconut sugar farmers. They are involved in every aspect of production, from planting coconut trees to harvesting the sap, which is the raw material for coconut sugar. These farmers are small-scale farmers with land that is either owned or rented. They possess extensive knowledge and skills in managing coconut trees and collecting sap. However, the farmers face limitations in marketing coconut sugar further and therefore require the presence of middlemen.

Middlemen are one of the key elements in the coconut sugar supply chain. Although often viewed as controversial, in reality, middlemen play a positive role. Middlemen have extensive social networks. These social networks are used as the basis for economic exchange. Middlemen play an important role in the agricultural marketing system because they possess wide-reaching social networks. Additionally, the social networks that middlemen have are not possessed by ordinary farmers, thus creating a relationship of dependency between them (Azizah, 2016). Although acting as intermediaries, middlemen also face a number of challenges. One of the main challenges they face is the fluctuation in raw material prices and unstable market demand. Furthermore, they may also struggle to obtain capital and resources needed to expand their businesses. However, several current challenges are faced by middlemen in Tonjongsari Village. These include fluctuations in production from suppliers/coconut sugar farmers influenced by natural conditions, price uncertainty in the market, fluctuating transactions without binding official contracts, and the complexity of relationships with suppliers and customers.

To deal with the complexity of relationships with suppliers/farmers and customers, middlemen strive to maintain good relationships. Building positive relationships with business actors involved in coconut sugar production is very important. Cooperation with suppliers and customers has a positive impact on the progress of the coconut sugar agro-industry. A problem faced by middlemen with suppliers is the presence of dishonest individuals who insert foreign objects into the coconut sugar to increase the weight. It is difficult to detect such acts because the coconut sugar is already in sacks when handed over to the middlemen. This can cause losses for the middlemen, as it may result in a loss of customer trust if discovered by main customers. Middlemen also sometimes face difficulties in finding loyal coconut sugar suppliers amidst intense competition. Middlemen may provide capital to coconut sugar suppliers/farmers in hopes of strengthening business relationships and securing a stable supply. However, some suppliers are not committed, as partnerships are still based on verbal agreements. Problems with customers include price fluctuations and competition. Customers also expect the coconut sugar they receive to be of good quality and free from stones or other foreign objects. Middlemen engage in relationship marketing with customers to identify, anticipate, and understand customer needs (Prasadana, 2022).

Relationship marketing is a business relationship that occurs through buying and selling transactions between sellers and buyers (Lestari, 2009). Several issues that occur indicate varying levels of relationship marketing quality between coconut sugar middlemen and their suppliers and customers. Agreements and commitments that have been mutually agreed upon are key, as they form the basis of a good relationship built on mutual trust, satisfaction, and dependency (Anton Agus Setyawan SE, 2023). Unlike traditional marketing, which tends to focus on one-time transactions, relationship marketing emphasizes the importance of creating emotional bonds and mutual trust to ensure sustainable business relationships. The main dimensions of relationship marketing include trust, commitment, satisfaction, and dependency. Trust reflects the belief that a business partner will behave as expected and maintain integrity in the relationship, while commitment indicates the level of dedication of each party to maintaining the collaboration. Satisfaction measures how well needs and expectations are met, and dependency assesses the extent to which one party relies on the other to fulfill its business needs. Satisfaction is the feeling of pleasure or disappointment someone experiences after comparing the expected performance (results) of a product to its actual performance. If performance falls below expectations, the customer is dissatisfied. If performance meets expectations, the customer is satisfied (Sasongko, 2021). In practice, relationship marketing aims to increase customer loyalty, reduce the cost of acquiring new customers, and create more stable and profitable long-term relationships. A successful company is one that can build long-term relationships with its customers. A long-term relationship means loyal customers whose needs and wants are fulfilled (Tjahyadi, 2006). By fostering strong and mutually beneficial relationships, companies can increase the value offered to customers while creating a

sustainable competitive advantage. These dimensions include trust, satisfaction, commitment, and communication.

The issue that arises is the unequal strength of relationships between middlemen and the two parties of their business partners. Often, the relationship with one party is stronger than with the other, which can affect distribution efficiency and partner loyalty. The hypothesis of this research is:
H0: There is no difference in middlemen's perceptions toward their main suppliers and main customers
H1: There is a difference in middlemen's perceptions toward their main suppliers and main customers

Through this research, an analysis will be conducted on the relationship marketing perceptions held by middlemen toward their main suppliers and main customers in Tonjongsari Village, Cikalong District, Tasikmalaya Regency, West Java. The analysis focuses on four main dimensions of relationship marketing: trust, satisfaction, commitment, and communication, and also describes the characteristics of business partners—suppliers and main customers—in terms of business relationship duration and transaction volume. It is expected that the results of this study will provide a more comprehensive picture of the strength and balance of middlemen's relationships with their business partners, which can ultimately be used as a basis for designing strategies to enhance distribution effectiveness and loyalty in the coconut sugar commodity marketing network.

RESEARCH METHOD
This research applies a descriptive quantitative approach. Quantitative research methods can be defined as philosophical research methods used to study specific populations or samples, involving data collection using research instruments and quantitative/statistical data analysis (Sugiyono, 2016). This study employs a non-parametric statistical analysis method, namely the Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test, which is designed to handle paired ordinal data. The Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test is a robust alternative to the paired t-test, particularly when the data are not normally distributed or are measured on an ordinal scale (Gibbons & Chakraborti, 2020). To perform a single test in SPSS, the dataset must contain two columns, each representing the two variables to be compared (The British Academy, 2010).

Data were collected through questionnaires structured around the four dimensions of relationship marketing: trust, satisfaction, commitment, and communication. Each dimension consisted of five statements using a 3-point Likert scale (1 = Disagree, 2 = Neutral, 3 = Agree). The population of the study comprised coconut sugar middlemen in Tonjongsari Village, Cikalong District, Tasikmalaya Regency. The sample was purposively selected, consisting of 12 active middlemen who have both main suppliers and main customers.

The data were analyzed using the Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test to determine the differences in perception scores between suppliers and customers across each dimension (Sugiyono, 2009).

Through this test, the researcher can determine whether there are significant differences in the relationship marketing dimensions being examined. This test not only provides the ability to observe overall differences but also assists in exploring significant differences between two directly related groups (Fields, 2013).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION
Based on the results of a non-parametric statistical analysis using the Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test, a test was conducted to examine the differences in perceptions between customers and suppliers regarding four dimensions of business relationships: trust, commitment, satisfaction, and communication. This test was applied because the data were derived from paired respondents (middlemen), and it aimed to determine whether there were significant differences in the median scores between the two parties for each observed dimension, as presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Results of the Statistical Test

Test Statistics[a]

	Trust_Cust- Trust_Sup	Commit_Cust- Commit_Sup	Sat_Cust- Sat_Sup	Comm_Cust- Comm_Sup
Z	-1.732[b]	.000[c]	-1.414[b]	-1.890[b]
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.083	1.000	.157	.059

a. Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test
b. Based on negative ranks.
c. The sum of negative ranks equals the sum of positive ranks.

Source: Primary data analysis (2025)

The analysis results show that most paired variables do not exhibit statistically significant differences at the 0.05 significance level. In the trust dimension, the Z-value of -1.732 with a significance level of p = .083 indicates that there is no significant difference between customer and supplier perceptions regarding the trust built in their relationship. This means that both customers and suppliers tend to share similar perceptions of integrity, reliability, and mutual trust underlying their business interactions.

A similar pattern is observed in the commitment dimension, where the Z-value is .000 with p = 1.000, indicating no perceptual difference between the two parties. Both groups of respondents provided identical assessments regarding the extent of their commitment to maintaining long-term business relationships. This finding illustrates that, in terms of commitment, the established relationship has reached a high level of perceptual balance and reflects relational stability.

In the satisfaction dimension, the Z-value of -1.414 with p = .157 also shows a non-significant result, although the negative direction of the Z-score suggests that customers tend to rate their satisfaction levels slightly higher than suppliers. However, this difference is not statistically strong. Overall, this suggests that both parties generally feel satisfied with the benefits and quality of the established relationship.

The only dimension that shows a more noticeable indication of perceptual difference is communication. For the variable pair Comm_Cust - Comm_Sup, a Z-value of -1.890 with p = .059 was obtained. Although this does not cross the conventional significance threshold of .05, it approaches the critical limit and signals a potential imbalance in perceptions between customers and suppliers in terms of communication. This means that one party may feel that the communication is less effective or less transparent than expected, compared to the other party.

To complement the interpretation of these statistical results, a further analysis of the rank distributions from the Wilcoxon test is presented in the following table:

Table 2. Frequency and Direction of Perceptual Differences Between Both Parties

Dimension	Negatif (N)	Positif (N)	Ties (N)	Z	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	Information
Trust	0	3	9	-1.732	0.083	Insignificant
Commitment	3	3	6	0.000	1.000	Insignificant
Satisfaction	0	2	10	-1.414	0.157	Insignificant
Communication	1	6	5	-1.890	0.059	Almost significant

Source: Primary data analysis (2025)

As shown in Table 2, most respondents provided the same rating (ties) for customers and suppliers in three of the four dimensions—trust, commitment, and satisfaction. This reinforces the previous statistical findings, indicating that perceptions between both parties are relatively similar. Specifically, in the trust dimension, although there were 3 positive ranks and 9 ties, no respondents rated suppliers higher, indicating a tendency toward more favorable perceptions of customers. However, this difference was not large enough to be statistically significant.

In the communication dimension, 6 respondents rated customers as having better communication, only 1 respondent rated the supplier higher, and the remaining 5 gave equal ratings. This imbalance helps explain why the Z-value was relatively higher and the p-value approached significance. In the context of business relationships, an imbalance in communication perception may indicate discrepancies in how information is conveyed, the frequency of interactions, or the level of openness between parties.

Overall, these findings suggest that the examined business relationships exhibit a good degree of perceptual alignment in the dimensions of trust, commitment, and satisfaction. However, special attention should be directed to the communication dimension, which shows signs of more noticeable perceptual differences. This can serve as a basis for recommending improvements in both internal and external communication mechanisms within inter-organizational relationships, to foster greater transparency, effectiveness, and mutual understanding.

Characteristics of Middlemen's Business Relationship Duration
The business relationships established between middlemen and their main suppliers and customers exhibit diversity. This is illustrated in Figure 1.
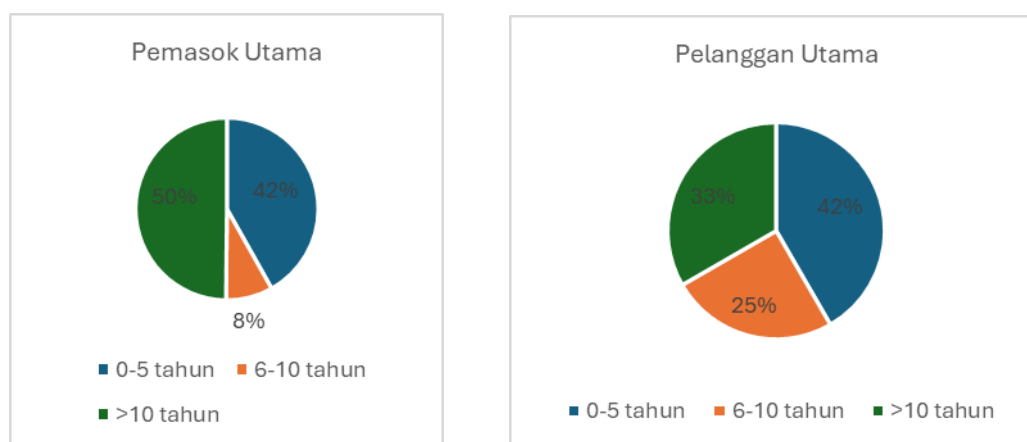

Figure 1. Duration of Middlemen's Business Relationships
Source: Primary Data Analysis (2025)

Based on the descriptive analysis, the duration of business relationships between coconut sugar middlemen and their business partners—both main suppliers and main customers—shows a strong tendency toward long-term relationships. In relationships with main suppliers, 50% of respondents reported having worked together for more than 10 years, while 42% fell into the 0–5 years category, and 8% reported a duration between 6–10 years. On the other hand, in relationships with main customers, 42% of middlemen had relationships lasting 0–5 years, 25% for 6–10 years, and 33% had maintained business ties for more than 10 years.

These findings indicate that relationships between middlemen and their key partners in the coconut sugar supply chain tend to develop over extended periods, with a significant proportion having sustained relationships for more than a decade. Within the framework of relationship marketing, the length of a business relationship serves as a key indicator of success in building ongoing trust, commitment, and satisfaction. Long-term relationships allow for the accumulation of positive experiences, strengthened mutual understanding, and increased efficiency in transactions and coordination.

Although the Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test results showed no statistically significant differences in the dimensions of trust, commitment, and satisfaction between relationships with main suppliers and customers, the duration data reinforces the notion that both parties have contributed to business stability and continuity for the middlemen. The fact that 50% of respondents reported relationships lasting more than 10 years with main suppliers and 33% with main customers reflects the successful implementation of long-term relationship marketing strategies.

On the other hand, the presence of a proportion of relationships within the 0–5 year category—both with suppliers and main customers—also indicates the dynamic nature of business relations. This may reflect generational shifts within the supply chain, market changes, or reassessments of business partners. In this context, strengthening relationship marketing strategies remains relevant to improve loyalty, enhance two-way communication, and promote greater efficiency in future trade relations.

Thus, the duration of the relationship is not merely a passive indicator of continued cooperation, but also a reflection of the relationship quality built through mechanisms of trust, satisfaction, commitment, and communication—all of which collectively support the success of trade relationships within local agricultural systems such as coconut sugar commerce.

Transaction Volume of Middlemen
Middlemen have varying monthly transaction volumes with their main suppliers and main customers. Transactions with main suppliers are measured in kilograms, as the suppliers are individual coconut sugar farmers. In contrast, transactions with main customers are measured in quintals, since these customers are large-scale business owners. This distribution is presented in Figure 2.
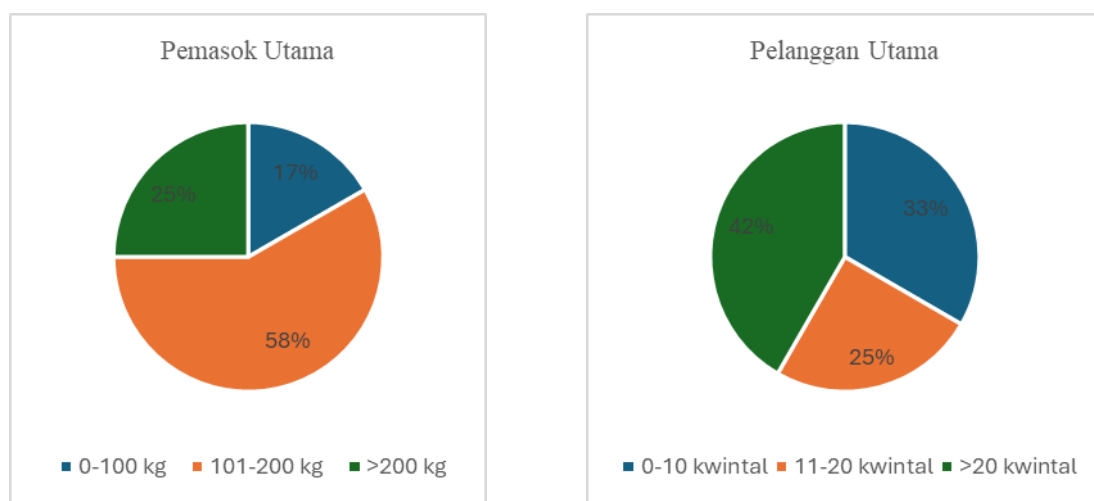

Figure 2. Monthly Transaction Volume of Middlemen
Source: Primary Data Analysis (2025)

Descriptive analysis results reveal variations in transaction volumes between middlemen and their business partners. In relationships with main suppliers, 58% of middlemen receive between 101–200 kg of coconut sugar per month. Meanwhile, 25% receive more than 200 kg, and the remaining 17% receive only 0–100 kg. Conversely, in relationships with main customers, no middleman reported selling less than 100 kg (0%). The majority fall into the >20 quintals category (42%), followed by 0–10 quintals (33%), and 11–20 quintals (25%).

When compared, the volume of supply from main suppliers tends to be lower and more limited than the volume sold to main customers, which is relatively larger and more widespread. This imbalance is supported by the Wilcoxon test results, which show a significant difference in transaction volumes between the two parties (p = 0.025). This indicates that most middlemen receive supplies in smaller volumes than they sell to main customers.

Within the relationship marketing framework, transaction volume reflects not only the intensity of the business relationship but also the level of dependency and economic contribution from each party. The smaller supply volumes from suppliers suggest that middlemen may have multiple, varied sources or make purchases from different suppliers. On the other hand, larger sales volumes to main customers may indicate more strategic, intensive, and possibly exclusive relationships.

These findings support the interpretation that, in the context of coconut sugar trade, middlemen tend to have a higher degree of volume-based dependency on their main customers, even though the relational

aspects (trust, commitment, satisfaction) appear relatively balanced between suppliers and customers. Therefore, strengthening relationship marketing toward main customers becomes highly relevant to ensure business sustainability—particularly through intensive communication and long-term loyalty management.

CONCLUSION

The relationships between middlemen and both suppliers and customers show balance in the dimensions of trust, commitment, and satisfaction. Communication with customers tends to be rated more positively compared to that with suppliers. The majority of middlemen have maintained long-term relationships—over five years—with their business partners and engage in transactions of varying volumes. This reflects the practice of relationship marketing, although differences in communication perceptions still require attention in order to strengthen partner loyalty and maintain the stability of the coconut sugar distribution network.

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