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Mapping Strategic Customer Networks In Traditional Silk Weaving Smes: A Descriptive Study Of The Pareto Sales Network

Marlia Rianti[1], Akhmad[2], Sri Mardiyati[3], Ratnawati Tahir[4], Irma Sribianti[5]

[1,2,3,4,5] Program Studi Doktor Agribisnis Program Pascasarjana Universitas Muhammadiyah Makassar

*Corresponding author: marliarianti@unimbone.ac.id

Abstract

Customer networks serve as a vital relational asset for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), particularly in the traditional silk-weaving industry, which relies heavily on relationships with regular customers, traders, resellers, and distribution partners. This study aims to map the Pareto Sales Network (PSN) within natural silk-weaving SMEs in South Sulawesi, based on three dimensions: customer loyalty, purchase volume, and the breadth of the customer network. A descriptive quantitative approach was employed, utilizing survey data collected from 142 SME operators in the Wajo and Bone regencies. The analysis focused on the mean values of the PSN dimensions and their respective indicators. The results indicate an overall mean PSN score of 4.22 on a 1–5 scale. The dimension concerning customers with extensive networks yielded the highest mean (4.32), followed by customers with high purchase volumes (4.24) and loyal customers (4.10). At the indicator level, the allocation of promotional efforts to maintain relationships with key partners—as well as the maintenance of partner networks in strategic shopping hubs—received the highest scores (4.41 each). Conversely, regular personal communication with large-scale buyers scored the lowest (3.66). These findings suggest that distribution networks and customer relationship maintenance should be managed as complementary components within a PSN strategy.

Keywords: Pareto Sales Network; strategic customer network; customer loyalty; natural silk weaving.

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INTRODUCTION

Market competition encourages small and medium industries (IKM) to not only develop products, but also manage customer and distribution partner relationships in a targeted manner. For SMEs that have limited resources, relationships with regular customers, traders, resellers and marketing partners can help maintain sales while expanding market access. In this way, customers are not only seen as buyers, but also as part of a relational network that has the potential to provide direct or indirect benefits for business sustainability.

This context is relevant for natural silk weaving SMEs in South Sulawesi. Traditional woven products have cultural values and distinctive characteristics, but the sustainability of their marketing also depends on the ability of business actors to reach buyers, maintain relationships with partners, and utilize distribution networks. The strategic value of customers can be reflected through repeat purchases, relatively large purchase values, or the ability of customers or partners to introduce products to consumers and other market areas.

Ferdinand & Killa (2014) developed the concept of the Pareto Sales Network (PSN) asset, positioning strategic customer networks as assets that provide "networked power" to a business. From this perspective, business success is determined not only by internal resources but also by the ability to access, maintain, and leverage external networks. A PSN can thus be understood as a portfolio of customers or accounts that hold strategic value due to their contributions to sales, the quality of business relationships, or access to market networks. While the Pareto concept helps businesses identify relatively important customers, the 80:20 ratio should not be viewed as a rigid mathematical proportion applicable to every enterprise. Customer contributions vary based on the type of business, product category, and the period under observation; therefore, management strategies must be grounded in specific customer characteristics and evidence tailored to the business context.

Literature on key account management emphasizes the importance of understanding the needs of strategic customers, communicating value, and building relationships that bolster sales performance (Hengstebeck et al., 2022); (Sandesh et al., 2023). However, strategic customers do not constitute a homogeneous group. Account management configurations may vary according to business situations (Spencer et al., 2022), and different buyer segments, characterized by distinct purchasing patterns can offer varying opportunities for brand growth (Tue et al., 2024). Consequently, managing a PSN requires more than just retaining current top-spending customers; it also necessitates identifying potential customers who could evolve into strategic partners in the future.

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In the context of SMEs, customer networks can provide benefits beyond direct transactions. (Farida & Nuryakin, 2021) show the relevance of network capability and relational capability to the performance of Indonesian manufacturing SMEs. Partner networks can open access to market information, new consumers, resellers, traders and distribution channels. At the same time, limited SMI resources require careful selection of customer priorities. (Puig-de-dou et al., 2022) discuss customer ranking to determine marketing actions, while (Ivens et al., 2024) emphasize that customer relationship management needs to be adapted to the configuration of organizational conditions. (Johan et al., 2023) also highlight the relevance of sales force strategy and network capabilities for business performance. The literature positions PSNs as relational assets that need to be selected, maintained, used and developed systematically.

PSN is operationalized through three dimensions, namely customers with high loyalty, customers with high purchases, and customers with a wide network. Loyalty is related to the sustainability of relationships and is reflected in regular personal communication with large-scale buyers, fast and flexible returns services for main agents, as well as promotional allocations to maintain relationships with key partners. High purchasing dimensions include mapping the largest 20% customer groups, priority of the best silk fabric stock for large buyers, as well as special prices or wholesale discounts for main partners. The broad network dimension relates to access to strategic shopping centers, the use of resellers to enter new areas, and distribution networks that accelerate market reach. These three dimensions capture different forms of customer value, namely relationship sustainability, purchase value, and potential for expanding market access. Because the indicator is measured through a perception survey of business actors, the assessment reflects the practices perceived by respondents, not a verification of the actual turnover contribution of each customer.

This study aims to map the characteristics of Strategic Customer Networking (SCN) within small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the natural silk weaving industry in South Sulawesi by comparing the mean values of three dimensions and their nine corresponding indicators. The focus of this article is descriptive; it does not test the causal impact of SCN on marketing performance. Its contribution lies in providing an empirical overview of strategic customer networking practices within the context of the traditional weaving industry, while also formulating managerial implications consistent with the limitations of the survey data..

Method

This study employs a descriptive quantitative approach, utilizing secondary analysis of survey data from small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the natural

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silk weaving industry, who provided assessments of their strategic customer network management practices.

The dataset includes 142 SMEs engaged in natural silk weaving across the Wajo and Bone regencies in South Sulawesi. The strategic customer network (SCN) construct is measured through nine statements categorized into three dimensions: customers with high loyalty, customers with high purchase volume, and customers with extensive networks. Assessments were made using a 1–5 scale, where higher scores indicate greater agreement or a more positive evaluation of the practices described.

The interpretation of the results focuses on the respondents' assessments and the implications for management, rather than on making causal claims or calculating actual contributions to turnover.

Results

The Pareto Sales Network (for natural silk) is a marketing strategy that focuses on the group of customers who contribute most significantly to sales performance. This variable is measured across three dimensions. First, customers with high loyalty, reflected in regular personal communication with large-scale buyers, the provision of prompt and flexible product return guarantees for key agents, and the allocation of promotional budgets specifically toward maintaining strong relationships with business partners. Second, customers with high purchase volumes, evidenced by efforts to identify and provide preferential service to the top 20% of customers, prioritizing the allocation of the finest fabric stock for high-end collectors and luxury boutiques, and offering attractive wholesale pricing structures to key partners. Third, customers with extensive networks, measured by the ability of business partners to reach upscale consumers in major cities, the utilization of a widespread network of resellers, and the speed of product distribution across various regions via the partners' own networks. A detailed description of the statements and indicators for the Pareto Sales Network (natural silk) variable can be found in the following table:

Tabel 1.Description of Variables for the Natural Silk Sales Pareto Network

No.	Statement	Average	Mean
1	Communication with large-scale buyers is maintained regularly and personally by the owner/manager	3.66	4.10
2	We provide a fast and flexible product return guarantee, specifically for our key sales agents	4.24	
3	A significant portion of our promotional budget is allocated toward maintaining loyalty and strong relationships with key business partners	4.41	

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4	We identify and focus on providing excellent service to the top 20% of our customers, who account for the largest share of our turnover	4.21	4.24
5	Major buyers (collectors, luxury boutiques, institutions) are given first priority in accessing our best-quality silk fabric stock	4.28	
6	We offer a special pricing system (wholesale discounts) that is attractive to our key business partners	4.22	
7	Our key business partners possess networks in strategic shopping centers that reach high-end consumers across various major cities	4.41	4.32
8	We leverage a widespread network of resellers to effectively expand our marketing reach into new regions	4.21	
9	Our key business partners maintain extensive distribution networks, allowing our silk products to reach various regions rapidly	4.33	

DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the natural silk-weaving industry in South Sulawesi demonstrate a high level of perceived implementation of the Pareto Sales Network (PSN) strategy, as reflected in an overall mean score of 4.22. The results suggest that business owners recognize the strategic importance of managing customer relationships, prioritizing high-volume buyers, and leveraging business partners' networks to extend market reach. This pattern is consistent with (Killa, 2017) conceptualization of PSN as a strategic business network in which customer relationships and network positions can become valuable assets. From this perspective, customers are not merely recipients of products but also potential sources of recurring purchases, relational stability, and access to wider markets.

The findings also relate to the key account management literature, which emphasizes the need to differentiate strategically important customers and organize relationship-management activities around their needs (Hengstebeck et al., 2022); (Sandesh et al., 2023); (Spencer et al., 2022). In the context of traditional silk-weaving SMEs, such differentiation is particularly relevant because business resources are often limited. Prioritizing customers and partners can help business owners allocate promotional expenditure, product inventory, pricing incentives, and distribution efforts more selectively. Nevertheless, the overall mean should be interpreted as evidence of respondents' perceived practices rather than direct proof that a specific proportion of

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sales comes from the top 20% of customers. The findings therefore indicate alignment with the strategic logic of PSN, rather than empirical confirmation of a universal 80:20 sales distribution.

a. Customer loyalty and relationship maintenance

The customer-loyalty dimension obtained a mean score of 4.10, indicating that respondents generally place considerable emphasis on maintaining long-term relationships with their principal customers. The highest-scoring indicator within this dimension was the allocation of promotional budgets to maintain relationships with key business partners, with a mean of 4.41. This result suggests that respondents perceive relationship maintenance as an important investment rather than merely an incidental activity. In relationship-oriented selling, promotional resources can support repeated interactions, reinforce partner engagement, and help sustain business relationships over time. This interpretation is consistent with (Hengstebeck et al., 2022), who examine the drivers of sales performance in key account management, and (Sandesh et al., 2023), whose review highlights the importance of structured key account management in business-to-business relationships.

The relatively high mean score of 4.24 for providing fast and flexible product-return arrangements to main sales agents further illustrates how SMEs attempt to maintain trust through service responsiveness. Such arrangements may reduce partners' perceived transaction risks and demonstrate a willingness to accommodate their operational needs. This practice is particularly relevant in traditional textile markets, where products may be sold through intermediaries who have direct contact with buyers and therefore influence how products are presented and distributed. The result is also compatible with the broader argument that relational capabilities contribute to SME performance by helping firms maintain and use external business relationships (Farida & Nuryakin, 2021).

However, the indicator concerning regular personal communication with large-scale buyers recorded a mean of 3.66, the lowest score among the nine PSN indicators. Although this score remains within the relatively positive range of the reported results, it points to a potential gap between providing relationship-related benefits and maintaining active interpersonal communication. Promotional budgets and flexible return policies are tangible forms of support, but they may not be sufficient to ensure that business owners consistently understand changes in customers' preferences, purchasing plans, and expectations. (Spencer et al., 2022) emphasize that key account management takes different configurations depending on the characteristics and needs of the customer relationship. Accordingly, the results suggest that silk-weaving SMEs could complement their existing retention practices with more systematic communication, such as scheduled discussions with major buyers, regular feedback collection, and follow-up after transactions.

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This finding should not, however, be interpreted as proof that customer relationships are weak. Rather, it identifies personal communication as a relative area for improvement compared with other practices in the same dimension. Future research using customer interviews or transaction-level records could examine whether the frequency and quality of communication are associated with repeat purchases, customer retention, or relationship continuity.

b. High-volume customers and strategic customer prioritization

The high-volume customer dimension recorded a mean score of 4.24, indicating that respondents generally report prioritizing customers who purchase larger quantities of silk-woven products. The highest-rated indicator within this dimension was the prioritization of the best silk fabric stock for major buyers, with a mean of 4.28. The other indicators, mapping the top 20% of customers (4.21) and offering special prices or wholesale discounts to key partners (4.22) also received high mean scores. Together, these findings suggest that customer prioritization is reflected in several operational practices, including inventory allocation, customer identification, and pricing arrangements.

These practices are consistent with the strategic logic of Pareto Sales Network, which emphasizes the importance of identifying customers who provide substantial business value and managing relationships with them deliberately Ferdinand & Killa (2014). In resource-constrained SMEs, preferential inventory access and differentiated pricing may help retain large buyers and support recurring transactions. For natural silk-weaving businesses, this may be especially relevant when production capacity, raw-material availability, and product characteristics limit the ability to serve all customers in the same way. Giving priority to major buyers can therefore be understood as an approach to coordinating scarce resources with perceived customer importance.

The findings also relate to customer segmentation and key account management. (Spencer et al., 2022) explain the importance of different key account management configurations, while (Hengstebeck et al., 2022) examine factors associated with sales performance in key account management. These perspectives support the view that important customers may require differentiated service and relationship-management approaches rather than uniform treatment. Similarly, (Tue et al., 2024) examine buyer groups in relation to brand growth potential, suggesting the importance of looking beyond customer categories as static groups. For silk-weaving SMEs, this means that high-volume customers should be recognized as important, but smaller customers with growth potential should not automatically be overlooked.

The mean score of 4.21 for mapping the top 20% of customers is particularly relevant to this distinction. It suggests that respondents report using customer prioritization practices consistent with the Pareto principle. However, the survey results

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do not establish that precisely 20% of customers generate 80% of sales for the participating businesses. Demonstrating that distribution would require customer-level transaction data and an analysis of each customer's actual contribution to sales over a specified period. Therefore, the results support the reported adoption of a Pareto-oriented management approach, rather than a statistical verification of the 80:20 ratio.

The relatively high score for special pricing arrangements (4.22) also indicates that respondents perceive differentiated pricing as part of their strategy for maintaining relationships with key partners. Although wholesale discounts may encourage larger purchases and continued cooperation, they should be managed carefully. Discounts that are not linked to purchase volume, payment reliability, service costs, or relationship value may reduce profit margins without generating sufficient additional sales. Consequently, customer prioritization should ideally consider profitability and long-term potential alongside purchase volume. This would enable SMEs to distinguish between customers who purchase large quantities and customers who generate sustainable business value.

c. Customers with extensive networks and market expansion

The customer-network dimension recorded the highest mean score among the three PSN dimensions, at 4.32. The indicators concerning partners' access to strategic shopping centers in different cities and the ability of broad distribution networks to reach customers beyond the production area obtained mean scores of 4.41 and 4.33, respectively. The use of reseller networks to enter other regions recorded a mean of 4.21. Collectively, these findings indicate that respondents place considerable importance on business partners' capacity to connect their products with markets beyond their immediate geographical area.

This result extends the interpretation of PSN beyond customer loyalty and purchasing volume. Customers and business partners may create value not only through their direct transactions but also through their access to other buyers, resellers, shopping centers, and distribution channels. (Killa, 2017) provide a network-based perspective on PSN, emphasizing the strategic significance of relationships and positions within business networks. In this context, the value of a customer may therefore include both the immediate value of purchases and the potential to facilitate access to additional market participants.

The findings are also consistent with (Farida & Nuryakin, 2021), who examine the relevance of network capability and relational capability to the performance of Indonesian manufacturing SMEs. Network capability concerns the ability to develop and use relationships with external actors, while relational capability concerns the management of those relationships. Applied to the natural silk-weaving industry, these capabilities may help SMEs reach customers outside their production areas without having to establish every sales channel independently. Resellers and partners with access to other cities can

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provide market connections that would otherwise require additional resources, time, and commercial experience.

The relatively high mean score of 4.41 for partners' access to strategic shopping centers suggests that respondents particularly value relationships that provide access to established market locations. Meanwhile, the mean score of 4.21 for reseller networks indicates that resellers are also perceived as a useful mechanism for reaching other regions. These results imply that external relationships constitute an important component of the marketing approach used by the participating SMEs. Rather than relying exclusively on direct selling, business owners report using existing commercial relationships to support the distribution and promotion of their products.

Nevertheless, the results should not be interpreted as evidence that the SMEs already possess extensive national distribution networks. The survey measures respondents' perceptions of their network-related practices; it does not establish the geographical coverage, number of active distributors, volume of sales outside South Sulawesi, or effectiveness of each partner relationship. The more defensible interpretation is that the participating SMEs perceive their business partners as providing opportunities for gradual market expansion beyond their immediate production areas.

This distinction is important because dependence on intermediaries can create both opportunities and vulnerabilities. Partner networks may facilitate access to new buyers, but excessive reliance on a limited number of intermediaries may also restrict SMEs' direct contact with final customers and weaken their bargaining position. Research on silk-weaving enterprises in Wajo has highlighted the dual role of social networks in providing market access while potentially reinforcing dependence on collectors (Yusaerah et al., 2023). This related evidence suggests that network expansion should be accompanied by efforts to strengthen the business owners' own market knowledge, negotiating capacity, and ability to maintain direct customer relationships. Because the present survey does not directly measure intermediary dependence or bargaining power, these issues should be treated as relevant managerial considerations rather than established findings of this study.

d. Integrating the three dimensions of Pareto Sales Network

Taken together, the results show a consistent pattern across the three dimensions of PSN. Customers with extensive networks obtained the highest mean score (4.32), followed by high-volume customers (4.24) and customer loyalty (4.10). The differences are descriptive: they indicate the relative strength of respondents' reported practices, but do not establish statistically significant differences between dimensions because no inferential comparison is reported here.

The pattern nevertheless offers a useful managerial interpretation. First, respondents appear to place relatively strong emphasis on leveraging external

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relationships to extend market reach. Second, they report established practices for identifying and serving high-volume buyers. Third, although loyalty-related practices are generally rated positively, regular personal communication with major buyers appears less developed relative to the other indicators. This suggests that the three dimensions may be mutually complementary: network access can create opportunities to reach new markets, customer prioritization can help allocate limited resources, and relationship maintenance can support continuity in commercial partnerships.

This integrated interpretation is consistent with the PSN perspective of (Ferdinand & Killa, 2014) and with the key account management literature, which emphasizes differentiated approaches to strategically important customers (Yuswono & Rahmadhani, 2021); (Tae & Felipus, 2018); (Rianti et al., 2023) . It also reflects the relevance of network and relational capabilities to SMEs' use of external business relationships (Farida & Nuryakin, 2021). However, the present study does not test whether one dimension causes improvements in another or whether PSN directly increases marketing performance. Such conclusions would require a different analytical design.

For managerial practice, the findings suggest three priorities. First, SMEs could strengthen regular communication with major buyers to complement existing promotional support and return arrangements. Second, they could formalize customer mapping by reviewing purchase frequency, transaction value, profitability, and future growth potential rather than relying on purchase volume alone. Third, they could develop partner networks while gradually improving direct access to end customers and market information. Together, these measures would help business owners move from relationship practices that are perceived as important toward more systematic customer and network management.

Limitations and implications for future research

The findings should be interpreted in light of the study's descriptive design and reliance on survey responses from business owners. The mean scores indicate perceived levels of PSN-related practices, not independently verified customer behavior, actual sales concentration, or objective distribution-network performance. In particular, the high scores for customer mapping and network reach cannot confirm that the Pareto 80:20 ratio applies to the sampled businesses or that partner networks have generated measurable sales growth.

Future research could combine survey data with customer-level sales records, customer retention measures, and information on distribution coverage. Such data would help establish whether customers identified as strategically important actually account for a disproportionate share of sales and whether broad partner networks are associated with expansion into new markets. Interviews with business owners, major buyers, and

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resellers could also clarify how trust, communication, service flexibility, and bargaining relationships shape the development of PSN in traditional silk-weaving SMEs.

Overall, the results portray PSN as a practically relevant approach to customer and network management among the surveyed natural silk-weaving SMEs in South Sulawesi. The strongest reported dimension is the use of customers' and partners' networks, while regular personal communication with major buyers emerges as a relative area for improvement. These findings provide a descriptive basis for refining customer prioritization and relationship management, while further transaction-level and longitudinal research is needed to assess the strategy's actual commercial outcomes.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that small and medium-sized enterprises in the natural silk-weaving industry in South Sulawesi demonstrate a strong orientation toward implementing the Pareto Sales Network strategy. This approach is reflected in their efforts to maintain relationships with loyal customers, prioritize buyers with high purchasing volumes, and utilize business partners' networks to expand market access.

The use of promotional support, flexible product-return arrangements, priority access to product stock, differentiated pricing, and reseller networks illustrates how business owners seek to maintain important commercial relationships and reach customers beyond their immediate production areas. Among these practices, leveraging partners' networks emerges as a prominent strength. However, regular personal communication with major customers remains an area that could be improved to strengthen relationship continuity and better understand changing customer needs.

Managerially, SMEs should integrate customer prioritization with more systematic communication, evaluate customers based not only on purchase volume but also on profitability and growth potential, and develop broader market connections while maintaining direct relationships with end customers. These efforts can support more structured customer and network management.

Nevertheless, the findings reflect business owners' reported practices and do not establish the actual distribution of sales among customers or demonstrate a direct effect on marketing performance. Future research should incorporate customer transaction records and evidence of market reach to assess the extent to which the Pareto Sales Network strategy contributes to business sustainability and market development..

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