MARKET-BASED STRATEGY TO ANTICIPATE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN SMALLHOLDER RUBBER PLANTATIONS IN RIAU PROVINCE, INDONESIA

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ABSTRACT

The coronavirus pandemic had disrupted almost all businesses in various sectors, one of which is the plantation sector. Smallholder rubber plantations in Riau Province, Indonesia have faced the very tough challenges of the coronavirus pandemic. Efforts that could be made were marketing rubber products by implementing market-based strategies, namely market strategy, marketing mix strategy, customer value and marketing performance. This study aimed to analyze the effects of market strategy, marketing mix strategy, and customer value on marketing performance in smallholder rubber plantations in Riau Province during the Covid-19 pandemic. Data collection was carried out using 45 respondents as heads of smallholder rubber plantation farmer groups in Riau Province. Data analysis used structural equation modeling-partial least square (SEM-PLS). The results show that market strategy and marketing mix strategy had a significant direct effect on customer value. Customer value had a significant direct effect on the marketing performance of smallholder rubber plantation farmer groups in Riau, while the market and marketing mix strategies had an indirect effect.

Contribution/Originality: This study contributes to the existing literature on market-based strategy. It requires knowledge of appropriate market-based strategies to be implemented in order to attract as many consumers as possible. The study findings will be used to improve rubber marketing performance.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic has disrupted economies in many sectors around the world. Reduced demand will lead to a reduction in overall profit, particularly in less influential sectors (Guerrieri, Lorenzoni, Straub, & Werning, 2020) such as the rubber plantation sector.

Rubber plantations are the main global source of natural rubber production; natural rubber is as an important raw material in several high-level manufacturing sectors. Different rubber plantations around the world have different plant characteristics and quality of latex (Brenas, 2019) affecting the price of rubber. According to Su, Liu, Tao, and Lobonţ (2019), rubber prices can change over the long or short term. Short-term changes are usually influenced by world natural rubber production and changes in world rubber consumption, while long-term changes are influenced by changes in natural rubber stocks, production, and consumption.

The institutional existence of smallholder rubber plantations in Riau by implementing direct market-based marketing strategies is used as a solution to overcome farmers' low bargaining positions. This community rubber

plantation institution is the Kuantan Singingi Rubber Association (Apkarkusi), which consists of 45 farmer groups who conducts business activities that focus on selling products to other companies, not to individual consumers. This means that all farmer groups are Business to Business (B2B) companies. Das, Deshpande, Salvi, Goyal, and Bhirud (2018) suggest that B2B marketing focuses on meeting business needs rather than non-individual corporate consumers, which makes it a complex business system. A B2B business strategy involves a real business information campaign about a product or service.

Rubber farmer groups in Riau Province during the Covid-19 pandemic are facing marketing problems. In particular, the minimal application of market-based strategies is a major concern. The facts found in Riau reveal that although the auction system has been implemented in the marketing activities of farmer groups, some continue to do marketing through traditional mechanisms. The reason is that the farmer groups do not have a factory for processing rubber, which leads suppliers to employ services from collectors to distribute their products to factories. The location of the farmers' fields, which are far from the factory, causes both production and distribution costs. These problems can be overcome by implementing a market and marketing mix strategies. The application of the marketing mix strategy uses the new era 4v marketing theory (differentiation, functional, value-added, and resonance), which provides a reference for marketing agricultural products. Meanwhile, the application of market strategy is a formation strategy that includes customer involvement and technology leadership.

A market strategy is a plan for how the company will provide value to the target market and make profits by fulfilling a promise/demand. The strategy identifies target market customers, creates a value proposition for each customer groups, and identifies the optimal channel for successfully providing a product or service to the target market (Shimasaki, 2014). According to Brege and Kindström (2019), market strategy is used to refer to the company's strategy in creating and delivering customer value. A proactive producer will gain competitive advantage by having a superior understanding of the customer. Proactive, in the context of B2B marketing, refers to companies that are future-oriented, take initiative, and drive change (Grant & Ashford, 2008; Kindström, Ottosson, & Carlborg, 2018; Parker, Bindl, & Strauss, 2010).

A proactive formation strategy refers to a company's strategy to affect customers, suppliers, and other market players in order to strengthen their own ability to provide superior customer value and reduce the ability of their competitors, thereby gaining competitive advantage (Elg, Deligonul, Ghauri, Danis, & Tarnovskaya, 2012; Kindström et al., 2018; Storbacka & Nenonen, 2015). The strength of a market formation strategy comes from a combination of proactive activities aimed at changing market structure and customer-focused activities that provide companies with in-depth insights into current and potential customer needs (Brege and Kindström (2019)). Exploring market strategies and related activities is important, because proactivity has the potential to increase the B2B performance (Kindström et al., 2018; Narver, Slater, & MacLachlan, 2004).

The marketing mix has gradually changed from the original manufacturer-oriented 4p theory (product, price, place, and promotion) to the 4v theory, which focuses on customer satisfaction. In recent years, the marketing mix has once again evolved into a 4v theory centered on customer loyalty. The agricultural product marketing mix is an agricultural product marketing strategy that flexibly uses the 4v combination theory, which can play a positive role in the development of agricultural products.

Deng, He, Fu, Liu, and Hu (2019) developed the 4v combination theory into the marketing of agricultural products and studied the impact of the 4v marketing mix on the perceived value of agricultural products. This provides new ideas and strategic support for marketing agricultural products in China. The four elements of the 4v marketing theory, namely differentiation, functional flexibility, added value, and resonance to the perceived value.

The application of marketing strategy theory is important in influencing consumers to purchase a product or service, and is often referred to as the marketing mix (Kotler & Armstrong, 2018). Market strategy refers to the company's strategy in creating and delivering customer value. Proactive, in the context of B2B marketing, refers to companies that are future-oriented, take initiative, and drive change (Brege & Kindström, 2019). Therefore, it requires knowledge of appropriate market-based strategies to be implemented in order to attract as many consumers as possible, so that farmer groups will become proactive producers and have a superior understanding of customers so as to obtain maximum profit. This research aimed to analyze the applicability of market-based strategies on smallholder rubber plantations in Riau Province facing the Covid-19 pandemic effects, by analyzing the influence of market strategies, marketing mix strategies, and customer value on marketing performance.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The method used was the verification method: namely, measuring and testing the causal relationships between the variables of customer value, market strategy, and marketing mix strategy. The unit of research analysis was farmer groups in Riau Province, Indonesia. The sampling technique was the saturated sampling technique. The research observation unit was the head of the farmer group. Data analysis used structural equation modeling-partial least square (SEM-PLS). SEM-PLS analysis consists of two models, the structural model/inner model (Figure 1) and the measurement model/outer model (Table 1).
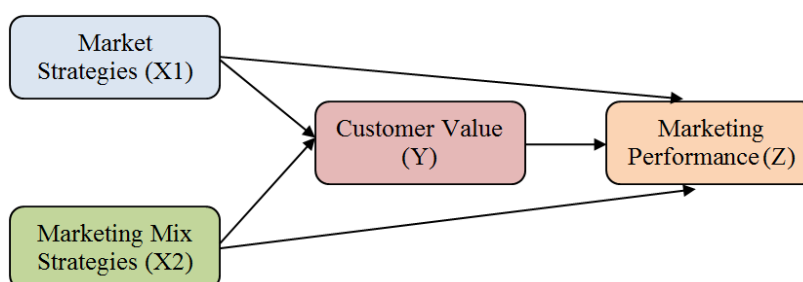
Figure-1. Structural model.

Table-1. Measurement model.

Latent variables	Dimensions	Manifest variables	Symbol
Market strategies (X1)	Market formation	The ability of farmer groups to increase the number of rubber customers	X1.01
		Rules for the number of processed rubber materials sold to customers	X1.02
		The farmer group knows the price of rubber before it is sold to customers	X1.03
		Target sales volume for processed rubber materials of farmers	X1.04
		The rate of each processed rubber materials sales volume increases	X1.05
		Determinant factors of supplier–customer agreements	X1.08
		The farmer sells the processed rubber materials according to the existing agreement	X1.09
		Process the rubber materials and use the sap vinegar according to the provisions	X1.12
		Technological knowledge of farmers in the rubber business	X1.13
		Discussion of new technology between farmer-land owners	X1.15
	Customer engagement	Ability to build farmer–customer relationships	X1.16
		Providing services to customers	X1.17
		The tendency of customers to buy processed rubber materials from farmers	X1.18
		How many times customers have subscribed	X1.19
		Involvement of family members in the rubber business	X1.20
		The grade of processed rubber materials	X1.21
		Rules for the duties of suppliers in the family/village/hamlet	X1.22
		The motivation of farmers to do rubber business	X1.24
		The level of maintaining the rubber business	X1.27
		The decision to do rubber business	X1.28
		The decision to sell rubber products to customers	X1.29
		The ability of farmer groups to continue to innovate due to customer involvement	X1.30
	Technology leadership	Determine the use of technology	X1.31
		Adopting new things in business	X1.32
		Who is adopting new things?	X1.33
		Have attended extension	X1.35
		New ways/methods in the rubber business	X1.36
		New ways of saving production costs	X1.37
		Special tools for notching	X1.38
		Mobile phone/social media for communication with customers	X1.39
		Using the internet to determine the price of rubber	X1.40
		Benefits of guidance/extension from related offices	X1.41
		Benefits of technology in the business and buying and selling of rubber	X1.44
Marketing mix strategies (X2)	Differentiation of agricultural products	Performance of farmer groups is already good in producing rubber materials	X2.01
		The quality of the processed rubber materials is in	X2.03

Latent variables	Dimensions	Manifest variables	Symbol
		accordance with the national standard quality	
		The resulting rubber form lump/latex	X2.04
		Processing rubber latex, before being marketed	X2.05
		Processed rubber materials can last before being processed by customers	X2.06
		The quality of the processed rubber materials is as promised	X2.07
		Ability to produce processed rubber materials	X2.09
		The resistance level of the processed rubber materials	X2.10
		The peculiarities of natural/rubber products are difficult to imitate or replace	X2.12
		The shape and quality of the processed rubber materials product are easy to improve	X2.14
		Time to improve the quality of processed rubber materials in the old factory	X2.15
	Agricultural product elasticity	The function of rubber products according to the needs of the target market	X2.16
		Customers are easy to get processed rubber materials products	X2.17
		Affordability of rubber prices by customers	X2.19
	Value-added	The process of extraction of rubber latex is hereditary	X2.20
		Prices increase due to the use of technology to process processed rubber materials	X2.21
		The target market is achieved by means of a marketing channel	X2.22
		The price of the processed rubber materials goes up with a special price service	X2.23
Customer Value (Y)	Resonance	The frequency of extraction of rubber latex	X2.24
		Time to collect processed rubber materials	X2.25
		Good relationship/trust/communication	X2.26
		How farmers deliver processed rubber materials to customers	X2.27
	Emotional value	Farmers are satisfied in selling to customers	Y.01
		Farmers believe in selling to customers	Y.02
	Social value	Reasons for selling processed rubber materials to customers	Y.03
		Farmers have relationships with customers	Y.04
	Quality value	Processed rubber materials quality performance conditions	Y.05
		Farmers are able to provide services quickly	Y.07
	Cost/price value	The selling price of the processed rubber materials is as expected	Y.08
		When do prices go up and down?	Y.09
		Prices are appropriate to meet customer needs	Y.11
		Prices are set by farmers/suppliers	Y.12
		Prices according to meet needs	Y.13
Marketing performance (Z)	Sales value	Sales value increases every year	Z.01
		Sales value is always achieved	Z.02
		Sales volume targets are always achieved	Z.04
	Customer growth	The number of consumers is fixed at each harvest	Z.05
		The target number of customers has always been achieved	Z.06
	Productivity growth	Total sales of all products with total product sales increased	Z.07
		Profits increase with each sale	Z.08

From the Smart-PLS output we can show the effect between one latent variable and another by looking at the P value: if $P \leq 0.05$, the latent variable had a significant effect on other latent variables. Conversely, if $P > 0.05$, the latent variable did not have a significant effect on other latent variables (Saptutyningsih & Esty, 2020). The magnitude of the effect can be seen from the coefficient value.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Direct Effect of Market and Marketing Mix Strategies on Customer Value

The direct effect of market and marketing mix strategies on customer value is shown in Table 2.

Table-2. Direct effect of market and marketing mix strategies on customer value.

Hypothesis	Path coefficient	Standard deviation	t-statistic	P value	r²
Market strategy -> customer value	0.424	0.122	3.480	0.001	0.577
Marketing mix strategy -> customer value	0.389	0.126	3.083	0.002	

3.2. Direct Effect of Market Strategy on Customer Value

Table 2 shows that the *P* value of market strategy was lower than alpha 5% (0.001 < 0.05), which means that market strategy had a significant effect on customer value. The path coefficient value was positive, namely 0.424, which means that each increase in market strategy by one point would increase customer value by 0.424 units and vice versa, assuming other variables remain constant. The more relevant the market strategy used, the better the benefits that will be obtained from the products of the farmer group, namely processed rubber materials that must be paid for by customers. The research shows that the better or the higher the market strategy in the process level of the processed rubber materials price agreement, the higher the customer value. Based on the indicator of the level of the processed rubber materials price agreement process from the market formation dimension, the price formation rules were based on the condition of the dollar exchange rate, SICOM rubber, and the condition of the quality/quality of the processed rubber materials in the field, which could also affect the price offered. These rules or conditions have been approved by the company of the buyer who wants to join by making a statement letter that they were willing to follow the provisions related to the mechanism to be determined in the marketing of the processed rubber materials auction. That way the level of trust between farmers and customers became stronger. This research also shows that in the marketing of the auction system of the customer (factory) that offered the highest price would get all the farmer groups' processed rubber materials. This provides a higher profit compared to selling to collector traders and guarantees that all of the farmers' rubber products were sold if they met the standard. According to Bhanot, Kathuria, and Das (2020), choosing to sell through alternative marketing channels helped farmers to minimize losses and avoid difficulties in sales. Islam, Hollebeek, Rahman, Khan, and Rasool (2019) stated that service quality had a positive effect on customer involvement. The customer involvement strategy was one of the dimensions of market strategy related to customer value, because it focused on activities aimed at providing higher customer value through a superior understanding of their needs, including latent needs, and developing offerings to meet those needs.

3.3. Direct Effect of Marketing Mix Strategy on Customer Value

Table 2 shows that the *P* value of the marketing mix strategy was smaller than 5% alpha (0.002 < 0.05), meaning that the marketing mix strategy had a significant effect on customer value. The path coefficient value (0.389) was positive, meaning that each 1-point increase in the marketing mix strategy would increase the customer value by 0.389 units and vice versa, assuming other variables remain constant. The higher the marketing mix strategy in the form of rubber produced (lump/latex), the higher the customer value. Based on the indicators of the form of rubber produced (lump/latex) from the dimensions of agricultural product differentiation, all rubber produced by farmers was in lump form so that it was in accordance with customer/factory demand. According to Purohit, Paul, and Mishra (2021), product is a major concern and it is important to acknowledge the customer's perspective when developing it. The results show that the shape of the processed rubber materials produced by lump/latex methods contributed to increasing the marketing mix strategy, because the shape of the processed rubber materials produced was in accordance with consumer demands.

Based on the indicator of the affordability of the location by customers from the elasticity dimension of agricultural products, the reach of the location of rubber products by customers would lead to a sense of satisfaction so that customer value increased. Purohit et al. (2021) argued that companies must be careful when deciding on distribution channels to ensure that a product or service is available. According to Ranta, Keränen, and Aarikka-Stenroos (2019), services that allowed products and materials to maintain value for longer increase the value creation potential of a single product.

Based on the indicators of hereditary rubber sap extraction process from the added value dimension, hereditary extraction could improve the marketing mix strategy to support added value and increase customer value. Kwok, Tang, and Yu (2020) suggest that marketing mix is a dominant factor in identifying market developments and trends, and was the main tool in achieving the company's business goals. Marketing activities consisted of elements of the marketing mix that reflected customer expectations and involved all factors used by companies to affect consumer perceptions of their products and services.

3.4. Effect of Market and Marketing Mix Strategies and Customer Value on Marketing Performance

The direct effect of market and marketing mix strategies and customer value on marketing performance is shown in Table 3.

Table-3. Direct effect of market and marketing mix strategies and customer value on marketing performance.

Hypothesis	Path coefficient	Standard deviation	*t*-statistic	*P* value	r^2
Market strategy -> marketing performance	0.304	0.165	1.838	0.067	
Marketing mix strategy -> marketing performance	0.161	0.129	0.304	0.215	0.749
Customer value -> marketing performance	0.486*	0.146	3.335	0.001	

Note: * Significant at α 5%.

3.5. Direct Effect of Market Strategy on Marketing Performance

Table 3 shows that market strategy had no significant effect on marketing performance. Based on the ruling indicator for the number of processed rubber materials sold to customers from the dimension of market formation, auction system marketing did not impose a rule on the volume/number of processed rubber materials to be sold. Factors such as small area of land and erratic weather could affect the performance in producing and selling processed rubber materials. The result shows that the farmer groups never decided on the number of processed rubber materials that should be sold: farmers were free to determine the volume of sales. The absence of a stipulated rule on the number of processed materials to be sold meant that the volume of production produced varied with each sale. This is contrary to the opinion of Orsi, De Noni, Corsi, and Marchisio (2017) that farmer groups need to expand the cumulative amount of production to develop more effective actions to sell products to the market and increase their bargaining power.

3.6. Direct Effect of Marketing Mix Strategy on Marketing Performance

Table 3 shows the marketing mix strategy had no significant effect on performance. Purohit et al. (2021) considered physical access to products and services as the main challenge. The inseparability, perishability, and intangibility of services made traditional distribution channels ineffective.

3.7. Direct Effect of Customer Value on Marketing Performance

Table 3 shows that customer value had a significant effect on marketing performance. The higher the customer value in the indicator that farmers were satisfied with selling to customers, the higher the marketing performance. Based on the indicator of how satisfied farmers were in selling to customers from the emotional value dimension, farmers' satisfaction in selling was affected by the price that the farmer receives and the availability of access to the customer. The satisfaction felt by farmers in selling materials to customers increased the enthusiasm of farmers in producing quality products.

The result show that several factors led to farmer satisfaction in selling processed rubber materials to customers, including price received by farmers and availability to the customer. If the price received by farmers was high, they would be enthusiastic about producing processed rubber materials in large quantities. If availability was adequate and supported by transportation, it would make it easier for farmers to deliver processed rubber materials.

3.8. Indirect Effect of Market and Marketing Mix Strategies on Marketing Performance

The indirect effect of market and marketing mix strategies on marketing performance is shown in Table 4.

Table-4. Use of values for the Sobel test.

Hypothesis	a	b	Sa	Sb
Market strategy -> customer value -> marketing performance	0.203	0.370	0.022	0.085
Marketing mix strategy -> customer value -> marketing performance	0.284	0.457	0.041	0.083

Note: a = The direct effect coefficient of the independent variable with the intervening variable; b = The direct effect coefficient of the intervening variable with the dependent variable; Sa = Standard error coefficient a; Sb = Standard error coefficient b.

3.9. Indirect Effect of Market Strategy on Marketing Performance

The hypothesis of the effect of market strategy on marketing performance through customer value used the Sobel test. The values required for the Sobel test are as follows:

a = 0.203
b = 0.370
Sa = 0.022
Sb = 0.085

The indirect coefficient of market strategy variables on marketing performance is as follows:

ab = a x b
= 0,203 x 0,370
= 0,07511

The indirect standard error for market strategy variables on marketing performance was obtained as follows:

$$Sab = \sqrt{b^2 \cdot Sa^2) + (a^2 \cdot Sb^2)}$$
$$Sab = \sqrt{(0,457^2 \times 0,041^2) + (0,284^2 \times 0,083^2)}$$
$$Sab = \sqrt{0,00035 + 0,00055}$$
$$Sab = 0,019$$

Thus, the *t*-test value was obtained as follows :

$$t = \frac{0,075}{0,019}$$

$$t = 3,947$$

Based on the results from the processed data, the *t*-count was determined to be (3.947) > 1.96, which means the hypothesis was accepted. Market strategy through customer value had a significant effect on marketing performance. Thus, higher market strategies mediated by customer value increase marketing performance: namely, if the rubber farmer groups carried out the market strategy properly, this creates customer value, which in turn would increase the marketing performance of smallholder rubber plantations. This is in accordance with the conditions at the research location, where farmer groups that applied the best market strategies, such as maintaining high quality, creating good relationships with customers, using technology, making innovations, increasing knowledge about rubber farming, and providing optimal service so as to create satisfaction and added value in the eyes of customers, thereby increased their marketing performance. Brege and Kindström (2019) have suggested that market strategy acted as a coordinated proactive activity aimed at creating customer value and increasing sales volume and business profits.

3.10. Indirect Effects of Marketing Mix Strategy on Marketing Performance

The hypothesis of the effect of the marketing mix strategy on marketing performance through customer value was assessed using the Sobel test. The values required for the Sobel test are as follows:

a   = 0.284
b   = 0.457
Sa   = 0.041
Sb   = 0.083

The indirect coefficient of market strategy variables on marketing performance is as follows:

ab   = a x b
            = 0,284 x 0,457
            = 0,129788

The indirect standard error for market strategy variables on marketing performance was obtained as follows:

$$Sab = \sqrt{(b^2 \cdot Sa^2) + (a^2 \cdot Sb^2)}$$

$$Sab = \sqrt{(0,457^2 \times 0,041^2) + (0,284^2 \times 0,083^2)}$$

$$Sab = \sqrt{0,00035 + 0,00055}$$

$$Sab = 0,0009$$

The *t*-test value is obtained as follows:

$$t = \frac{0,129}{0,03}$$

$$t = 4,300$$

The *t*-count was (4.300) > 1.96, which means that the marketing mix strategy through customer value had a significant effect on marketing performance. Higher marketing mix strategies mediated by customer value improve marketing performance: namely, if the rubber farmer groups carried out a good marketing mix strategy, it created customer value, which in turn improved the marketing performance of smallholder rubber plantations. According to Purohit et al. (2021), product is a major concern and it is important to acknowledge the customer's perspective when developing it.

4. CONCLUSION

Market-based strategies on smallholder rubber plantations in Riau Province during the Covid-19 pandemic have had a significant effect on customer value. The market-based strategies included both market and marketing mix. The market strategy had a dominant effect on the strategy formulation of smallholder rubber plantation farmer groups, where the dimensions of the marketing mix strategy show positive associations and were responded to very well by farmer groups. Better market strategies create superior customer value. Customer value, in turn, was affected by the dominant marketing mix strategy in the dimensions of agricultural product differentiation and product elasticity. Customer value had a direct effect on marketing performance, while market and marketing mix strategies had an indirect effect.

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