

# Digital Platform-Based Value Creation in Micro-Enterprise Networks

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**Keywords:** Digital Platforms, Value Creation, Micro-Enterprises, Value Networks, Collaboration, Social Interaction.

**Abstract:** Digital platform-based value creation allows micro-enterprises to cost-effectively share information within their value networks. However, these enterprises face challenges due to limited resources and skills, making network participation crucial for value creation. Digital platforms are generally accessible, offering micro-enterprises practical tools for enhancing business operations and value creation. This study aims to examine the value networks in the non-timber forest sector, exploring how sector participants create value and the digital platforms they use. Conducted as qualitative research, the study combines a literature review with empirical data. Findings reveal that digital platforms, including websites, social media, and communication platforms, were primarily used for sales, marketing, and communication. However, digital platform use and perceived value creation were low; companies attributed this to resource constraints and satisfaction with current customer numbers.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Digital platforms have made it easier for companies to strengthen their networking and to manage the collection and processing of large amounts of information. This has changed the competitive landscape of companies considerably, as the platform economy is playing a larger role in daily business, and the role of information and interaction has grown significantly. (Stone et al. 2017; Park 2018)

For micro-enterprises aiming to grow their customer base and communicate their business through social interaction, it is easy to use digital platforms that help to disseminate information to the widest possible audience. The most typical platforms for this purpose are service platforms such as company websites and social media platforms (Ohlsbom et al. 2024). However, micro-enterprises face different challenges in using service platforms in their business, and therefore their use may be limited (Thrassou et al. 2020). Micro-enterprises often lack expertise, innovation capacity and resources, which are major constraints to their business development (Konsti-Laakso et al. 2012).

There has been little research on the value creation of microenterprises (Rashidirad & Salimian 2020). Two strong needs have been identified for micro-enterprise development, namely learning about marketing and sales and network development (Kuismanen et al. 2019).

The aim of this study is to find out what kind of value network exists in the non-timber forest product sector, how operators in the sector create value and what kind of digital platforms they use to create value. The study was conducted as qualitative research and consists of a literature review and an empirical part. In a case study, the non-timber forest product sector was examined. In doing so, two value networks for the sector were revealed and further information about the digital platform usage in micro-enterprises for value creation was gained.

## 2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### 2.1 Value Networks

In a value network, companies and consumers interact to create value not only through independent activities but through collaborative exchanges within the network (Kothandaraman & Wilson, 2001). A value network redefines the traditional supply chain by focusing on customer priorities, aligning a company's operations and relationships to meet genuine demand. This customer-centric approach emphasizes collaboration, agility, scalability, and rapid information flow. (Bovet & Martha, 2000) Bovet and Martha (2000) suggest that value networks

enable high customer satisfaction and increased competitiveness in dynamic business environments. Collaboration between companies does also have a known positive impact on value creation and performance (Nielsen, 1988; Madhavan et al., 1998).

Value networks function as interconnected value chains aiming to deliver the highest possible value to the end user. Three core elements underpin this goal: superior customer value, core capabilities, and strong inter-company relationships. These “value drivers” are essential for developing a product or service’s entire value chain (Kothandaraman & Wilson, 2001).

For micro-enterprises, stakeholder cooperation is crucial to business development. Research by Kuismanen et al. (2019) indicates that the primary needs of micro-enterprises include enhanced marketing, sales skills, and networking. Limited resources, expertise, and innovation capacity pose significant barriers to innovation and growth (Konsti-Laakso et al., 2012). Nonetheless, cooperation with suppliers and customers has a positive effect on performance (Zeng et al., 2010), and network members’ shared objectives are closely linked to improved network performance (Wincent, 2005). Moreover, studies highlight a clear correlation between the degree of networking and company growth (Zhao & Aram, 1995).

Bovet and Martha (2000) propose a three-stage framework for forming a value network: (1) customer orientation, (2) activity and supplier alignment, and (3) value flow. This process begins with understanding customer needs, which informs the company’s focus and aligns its operations and supplier relationships accordingly. Realigning processes, such as reorganizing production or adjusting supplier contracts, enhances value flow to customers. The dominant firm in the network benefits from a competitive advantage, higher profits, and market value. To understand value networks better, a tool called value network analysis has been introduced.

Value network analysis can be used to describe the dynamics of value creation between the different actors in the network from a commodity perspective (Allee 2008). Value network analysis tells us where in the value network a particular value is located and how it is created. The value network analysis allows a firm's management to distinguish between the basic functions performed by the firm in the design, production, marketing and distribution of a service or product. (Peppard & Rylander 2006) Peppard and Rylander (2006) outline a five-step approach which can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1: Value Network Analysis.

Phase	Description
1. Defining the network	Identify which actors and stakeholders should be part of the value network analysis. In this phase, the main actor of the value network is also identified, and the analysis is structured around this actor's perspective.
2. Defining the actors	Understand the role and significance of each actor within the value network, based on the main actor's perspective.
3. Defining the actors perceived value	Identify the dimensions and sources of value for each actor in the network.
4. Finding out the interaction between actors	Map the value flows between actors, understanding how value is transferred within the network.
5. Picturing the value network and analysis	Create a final representation of the actors and resource flows in the value network. This phase aims to reveal how actors influence each other and allows for analysis and development of network activities.

This five steps analysis starts by identifying the key actor in the value network, followed by the identification of the other actors. The actors in the value network are all those members that have a direct impact on the value delivered to the customer (Peppard & Rylander 2006). The most important actors that can be found in almost all value networks are suppliers, competitors, manufacturers, distributors and customers. Other actors may include regulators, distribution channels, designers or technology suppliers (Peppard & Rylander 2006).

Once the members of the value network have been identified, an attempt is made to determine the perceived value of the network members. Not all members of the network benefit from being part of the network. The disadvantages may be greater than the benefits and it is therefore worth remembering that not all members of the network are involved voluntarily (Peppard & Rylander 2006). After identifying the benefits and disadvantages, the aim is to identify the interaction between the network members. Interaction can take the form of sharing information, services or goods, but the most important thing at this stage is to identify the value

that the member brings to the network. The final step in the analysis is the formation of an overall picture of the network, i.e. the formation of a value network, which is not addressed by Peppard and Rylander (2006).

## 2.2 Digital Platforms in Value Creation

Digital platforms have transformed how companies innovate and operate, with significant impacts on networking, information processing, and competition (Viitanen et al., 2017). Platforms today serve as foundations for developing services, technology, and products (Stone et al., 2017), marking a shift toward the "platform economy" that leverages digitalization to enhance organizational processes. This shift has altered the competitive landscape by prioritizing interaction and information as central to business operations (Stone et al., 2017; Park, 2018).

The platform economy offers companies new ways to create and transfer (Koponen 2019) value by monetizing data and the added value it generates. Information is a primary value stream in the network, with material and financial flows relying on real-time information to function efficiently (Herrala & Pakkala, 2009). Service platforms, such as websites and social media, streamline communication and partnerships by facilitating timely information exchange between companies (Kothandaraman & Wilson, 2001; Herrala & Pakkala, 2009).

For micro-enterprises aiming to expand their reach and engage audiences, digital platforms—particularly social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter—offer accessible and effective options (Ohlsbom et al., 2024). Studies show that small businesses with fewer than 50 employees rely heavily on social networking platforms like Facebook and Twitter, with over 80% utilizing them (Webb & Roberts, 2016). Social media enhances value creation through its capacity for data collection, customer interaction, and reputation management. Companies can use social media to engage in sales, communicate with customers, and develop relationships that may lead to new business opportunities. (Drummond et al., 2023)

In addition to advertising, social media is also an effective platform for e-commerce. E-commerce refers to the sale of products and services over the internet and enables businesses to redefine their value proposition, develop customer relationships and improve operational efficiency. Using social media as a platform for e-commerce enables companies to reach a wider customer base, lower costs, continuous sales, better supply chain management, more efficient

analysis of customer data, a more dynamic pricing strategy and the possibility of innovative business models and partnerships. (Kothandaraman & Wilson 2001)

Despite these advantages, micro-enterprises face significant challenges in using digital platforms effectively. Key issues include platform instability, targeting difficulties, and intense competition (Thrassou et al., 2020). Constant changes to platform features can make it challenging for small companies with limited resources to keep up. Additionally, accurately targeting consumers requires a deep understanding of the audience, which micro-enterprises may lack due to limited resources and data access. Finally, competition on service platforms is intense, making it difficult for smaller players to differentiate themselves. (Zeng et al., 2010)

## 2.3 The Non-Timber Forest Product Sector

The non-timber forest products (NTFP) sector encompasses activities related to natural products such as wild berries, mushrooms, and other unique forest products such as sap (Wacklin, 2021). The Finnish definition of non-timber forest products (NTFPs) differs from that in other countries; for instance, some definitions exclude materials derived from trees as NTFPs (Penn & James, 2008), while others include game and fish as part of NTFPs (Stanziani, 2008). The sector includes various activities, from the harvesting of raw materials to their processing, trade, and use in tourism and wellness services (Wacklin 2021). In 2020, approximately 770 companies were operating within Finland's non-timber forest products sector. Of these, 72% were micro-enterprises with fewer than 10 employees, 23% were small enterprises, and only 5% were medium or large enterprises with over 50 employees (Wacklin 2021).

The natural products sector's value chains remain somewhat underdeveloped, creating challenges in defining a comprehensive value network. This underdevelopment is largely due to limited resources for research and development (Wacklin 2022). Despite this, several key aspects of customer value have been identified within the sector. Customer value in the natural products sector is based on product sustainability, health benefits, and quality. Consumers particularly value the purity, quality, and domestic origin of natural products. Interest in sustainability has grown in recent years as public awareness of environmental and biodiversity concerns has increased (Wacklin 2022).

### 3 RESEARCH DESIGN

This study follows a qualitative case study approach, integrating various theories to form a synthesized framework (Vilkka, 2023). The primary theories of value networks and value creation are applied within the context of the Finnish non-timber forest products (NTFP) sector. The theoretical foundation was developed through a comprehensive literature review, which included both academic literature and annual reports from the NTFP sector. This review prioritized recent, relevant publications, along with industry-specific standards and regulatory publications. The inclusion of annual reports provided up-to-date quantitative data and insights specific to the NTFP sector.

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured thematic interviews to ensure consistency across interviews, covering core themes and questions (Saunders et al., 2016). Interviews were conducted with seven NTFP operators and one expert to gain insights into sector dynamics, value creation in micro-enterprises, and the role of digital platforms in value generation. Selected companies represented diverse roles in the supply chain—production, sales, and processing—and were chosen using information-oriented sampling (Flyvbjerg, 2011). Interviewed companies also had extensive experience with natural products.

The research process consisted of the five stages illustrated in Figure 1.

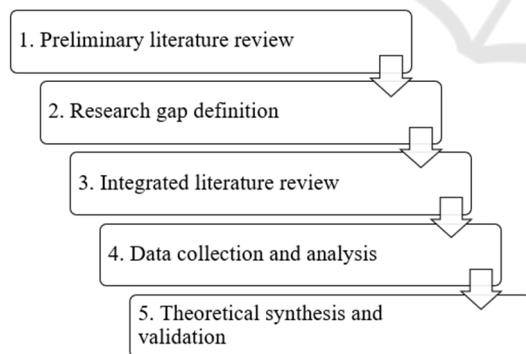


Figure 1: Research Process.

The process began with a preliminary literature review to analyse prior research on value networks, digital platforms, and micro-enterprises, followed by the identification of a research gap. After establishing the research gap, a deeper literature review was conducted to build a theoretical foundation.

A pilot interview preceded the main data collection to refine the thematic interview guide (Yin,

2003). The guide for operator interviews was organized around three themes:

1. Operator Background and NTFP Usage: Basic information about the business and products used.
2. Value Creation: How the operator generates value for customers.
3. Digital platform Use in Value Creation: Operator's use of digital service platforms and how it supports value creation.

The interviews with the expert followed similar themes but took a more general approach, focusing on value creation and digital platform use from a micro-enterprise perspective. The expert, though not a professional in NTFP, provided insights on platform exploitation and value creation strategies.

The interviews lasted approximately 25-40 minutes each, were recorded with permission, and subsequently transcribed. A thematic analysis was then conducted following Naeem et al. (2023), providing insights that align with the study's objectives.

## 4 RESULTS

### 4.1 Defining the Value Network

Through the interviews, it was possible to identify the different actors involved in the networks of companies. However, the interviewed companies operated with different business models and at different stages of the value network which means that not all of them have the same network members and relationships with regards to the network member.

The interviews revealed that operators in the non-timber forest product sector have very different relationships with different types of actors. As a result, the value networks in the sector can vary greatly and it was therefore useful to draw up two different value networks for the non-timber forest products sector according to whether the companies used retailers to sell their products or whether they sold their products by themselves. The first value network (see Figure 2) describes the network of actors most frequently encountered in the interviews, i.e. the companies that sell themselves. The second, wider value network (see Figure 3) describes the network of actors who use retailers to sell their products.



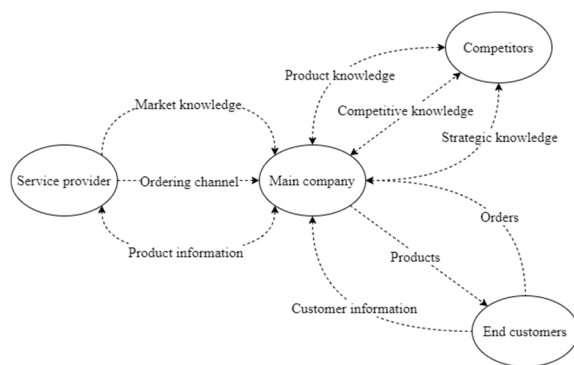


Figure 2: Narrow Value Network.

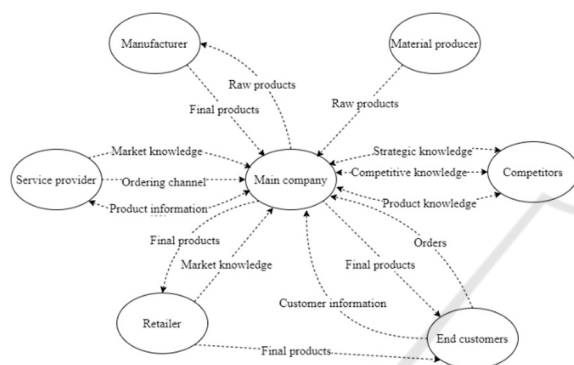


Figure 3: Wide Value Network.

Most of the companies interviewed had no relations with other actors and ran their business entirely on their own. The collection of the raw material was handled by entrepreneurs themselves; they were sold unprocessed or processed by the entrepreneurs themselves, again without any member of the network. As a rule, the entrepreneurs sold their products themselves, which meant that there were no operators involved in resale or distribution. However, all the businesses interviewed did use some type of a digital platform. Although the level of digital platform usage varied greatly from one company to another, the value network of each company interviewed also included a service provider. Most of the companies interviewed also had some form of competitive relationship, which is why the value network also includes competitors.

The value generated by the actors in a network of non-timber forest product companies varies greatly from one actor to another. Some actors provide only physical products to the main actor of the network, some only information and some actors do both. The physical products vary from raw materials to finished product and are passed around in the value chain slightly differently according to the interviewees. In the narrower value networks, where no suppliers or

distributors are used, the products pass exclusively from the main company to the final customer. The main company collects its natural products itself, so that no raw materials are sourced from material producers. In wider value networks, the raw materials and the finished products move between the main company, the material producers, the distributors, the manufacturer and the final customer. Some of the companies interviewed sold their products both directly and through retailers. Information about products also circulates between different actors.

The identified information that flows between the interviewed companies and the different actors was market information, competitive information, strategic information, product information and customer information. In the narrower value network, market information flows only between the website provider and the main company, and in a wider network, market information can also be obtained from retailers. In both networks, strategic and competitive information flows between competitors and the main company. Product information also flows between the website provider, competitors and the main company in both networks. In both networks, customer information is provided by the end customer. The platforms used by the interviewed companies also provided a sales and ordering channel.

The website provider allows the interviewed companies to access the sales and ordering channel. The sales and ordering channels allow the main company to get closer to its customers, which are easier to reach using digital platforms. These channels are present in both value networks and in addition, orders are also received directly from customers.

Based on the interviews, collaboration between the various actors in the value network is limited. The interviewees did not mention any research or development being a part of their network activities. The collaboration between the members in the value network consists of information sharing and some members also resale their products together. Some of the actors in the field did not have any relationships with other members in the value network. Those who had felt like that information flows freely between different parties, and that the relationships with other members are close. Information sharing happens mainly digitally, but also face to face.

The interviews revealed that the key values for customers include sustainability, quality and purity of the products. The customers are also keen on knowing the origin of the products they are buying. The companies interviewed didn't have a particularly

strong brand image. There were no attempts made to create communal activities with the customers and that customers were not an active part of the R&D processes. Customer feedback collection was not facilitated even though the interviewees felt it was an important part of operating the business.

## 4.2 Value Creation Using Digital Platforms

The interviews explored the types of platforms that companies use in their business. The assumption was that companies would use several social media platforms, as well as platforms familiar to the Finnish non-timber forest product sector such as Kerääjä.fi, which is a digital platform where companies and collectors can meet each other (Kerääjä.fi, 2024).

When asked about digital platforms, companies initially identified only social media platforms in their own operations, but when asked more specific questions, they also found platforms related to internal operations. Companies had relatively few service platforms in use, the most popular of which was Facebook. In addition, many had their own websites and some communication platforms. The platforms used are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Digital Platforms Used.

Webpages	Social media	Communication
Company webpages Kerääjä.fi	Facebook Instagram	E-mail WhatsApp

After mapping the digital platforms, the interviews focused on the value-creating activities for which the platforms were used. Companies used platforms for both internal and external activities, but there were significantly more external activities than internal ones. The external activities for which companies used platforms were marketing, REKO rings and sales. REKO circles, also known as "rings", offer consumers the opportunity to buy food produced and prepared in close proximity directly from the primary producer or manufacturer. The producer presents their range in a closed Facebook group, through which the consumer orders the products they want. The exchange takes place at a time and place agreed in advance by the district. (Aitomaaseutu.fi, 2024) The only internal activity identified was communication with customers and other actors.

Table 3: External and Internal Activities.

External activities	Internal activities
Marketing REKO Sales	Communication

Companies felt that the digital platforms helped them to increase sales and better serve their customers and that digital platforms are cost efficient and can be widely used on business purposes. Marketing was the most used activity by the interviewed companies on the digital platforms and the main marketing activity of the companies was to distribute company related news. For example, the companies shared information about their opening hours, new products and participation in events. The interviewed companies mainly marketed on Facebook, but also on Instagram.

A few interviewees mentioned that they do not spend any money on marketing. There was interest in using digital platforms for marketing, but here again, the situation was encountered that companies do not have the time or resources to invest more in marketing and that companies are currently selling at a sufficient level. The companies interviewed did not consider marketing to be a terribly important part of their business, and did not seem to have any kind of marketing plan, but instead took a relaxed approach to it.

The only internal activities for which the interviewed companies used digital platforms was communication. Communication was done with customers and other actors, and the interviews revealed that many interviewees preferred to use e-mail or phone calls to communicate with customers.

The interviews highlighted two different groups of customers who have very different attitudes towards the use of business platforms. These customer groups were older and younger customers. Based on the interviews, the older customers did not seem to mind whether a company uses digital platforms or not. This contrasts with younger customers, who tend to measure a company's credibility based on its presence and engagement on digital platforms.

Although the interviews mainly highlighted the opportunities for businesses created by the digital platforms, the companies interviewed also identified challenges. They felt that the digital platforms were of some benefit to their business but could not really identify any tangible benefits of using them. While there are many different opportunities for digital platforms, there is fierce competition for customers and how to reach them, which poses challenges for

some of the companies interviewed. The main challenges faced by the companies interviewed in creating value were limited resources, coupled with a lack of skills and a reluctance to develop. One of the companies interviewed mentioned as a pre-cursor that they do not have enough resources and as a result they have not made any mark-to-market sales recently.

## 5 DISCUSSION

The companies surveyed had few network activities, which means that the value networks do not include many different actors. For micro-enterprises, networking and being part of a network is important for doing business. In small businesses, lack of resources is a major challenge for business development and, in some situations, for enabling business (Konsti-Laakso et al. 2012), which is why networking and building relationships is also important for the business of small non-timber forest product companies. The companies interviewed also lacked resources and skills to further develop their business through digital platforms which is a similar finding with the research made by Zeng et al. (2010).

Micro-enterprises should focus on their customers. Earlier, it emerged that the interviewees are interested in customer feedback, but they do not collect it in any way. They do not in any other way map out the customer's wishes or needs. The idea of value networking is to create value for the customer, and therefore it is good to know what customers want from digital platforms and which things create value for them (Bovet & Martha, 2020). Collaboration in the value network in turn leads to higher value creation for the customer (Nielsen, 1988; Madhavan et al., 1998).

To effectively communicate to customers and to build up customer base, the easiest way is to use digital platforms so that information can be distributed to the widest audience possible (Ohlsbom et al., 2024). The effective use of digital platforms such as social media together with the customers of the non-timber forest product sector could therefore have the potential to create both customer value and satisfaction. The usage of digital platforms could also be utilized to collect customer feedback, an activity which was seemingly lacking in the companies interviewed.

The main activity that digital platforms were utilized in the companies interviewed was marketing, but this wasn't seen as such an important activity. As learning marketing is seen as one of the most important needs for micro-enterprises (Kuismanen et

al. 2019) it would likely be beneficial for the companies in the non-timber forest product sector to create solid marketing strategies and to learn marketing skills.

Finally, it's important to note that business owners do have different motivations for running their business. For some, it isn't done out of the need for monetary funds, but out of the pure joy of providing fresh produce to local communities. If everything gathered is sold and the owner of the business is happy with the result, it doesn't force the owner to allocate resources to boost the sales even more. This is especially true if the new activity requires the owner to sacrifice their time and perhaps money to learn a new skill which might seem trivial to them.

## 6 CONCLUSION

This study aimed to explore the relevance of cooperation with stakeholders for micro-enterprises. As the most important needs for business development learning marketing and sales and networking were identified. Micro-enterprises suffered from lack of expertise, resources and innovation capacity, which were a major constraint to innovation and business development. For micro-enterprises the most efficient way to grow their customer base and marketing audience is to apply digital platforms. In doing this, the social media platforms have also gained popularity. However, micro-enterprises face various challenges in leveraging the use of digital platforms in their business including the constant changes in digital platforms, targeting consumers and competition in the markets. The digital platforms used by the companies interviewed included various websites, social media platforms and communication platforms. The most popular of these platforms were Facebook and email. The companies did not use websites for non-timber forest products operators. The use of different digital platforms was very limited some organizations do not utilize any digital platforms.

This study provides a limited perspective due to its case-study approach. Future studies should explore ways to develop micro-enterprise networks to support collaboration and to find ways to tackle the issues micro-enterprises have with digital platforms.

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