



**THE DILEMMA OF THE DEBT SYSTEM IN GROCERY STORE: BETWEEN
INCREASING CONSUMER PURCHASING POWER AND SELLER
FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT (A STUDY OF GROCERY STORE IN
TELUKNAGA DISTRICT)**

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the dilemma of implementing a debt system in grocery stores in relation to increasing consumer purchasing power and managing vendor finances. The debt system is a common practice in micro-enterprises based on trust and social relations, especially among low-income communities. The research method used was a qualitative approach with a case study design at a grocery store in Teluknaga District. Data were obtained through in-depth interviews, observations, and documentation of the store owners and customers, then analyzed using the Miles and Huberman model. The results show that the debt system plays a significant role in helping consumers maintain purchasing power and meet basic needs amid economic constraints. In addition, this practice can also increase customer loyalty and strengthen social relationships between sellers and consumers. However, the debt system also poses various challenges for sellers, particularly related to cash flow management, increased risk of bad debts, and hampered business capital turnover. This condition creates a dilemma for business actors between maintaining social relationships with customers and maintaining business financial stability. Therefore, a more structured debt management strategy is needed, such as limiting the amount of debt, systematic record-keeping, and payment monitoring to minimize risks without eliminating the social function of



the debt system. This research contributes to understanding the dynamics of the informal economy and decision-making in micro-enterprises.

Keywords: Debt System, Grocery Stores, Consumer Purchasing Power, Financial Management, Micro Enterprises

INTRODUCTION

Grocery stores are a microeconomic entity that plays a crucial role in meeting the basic needs of Indonesians, particularly in rural and suburban areas (Tanzili, 2023). According to Salsabillah et al. (2023), the micro, small, and medium enterprise (MSME) sector generally accounts for more than 99% of national business units and is a major pillar of the economy. Tambunan et al. (2022) state that the majority of micro-enterprises still rely on cash transactions and have very limited access to formal financing such as bank credit or structured business capital. This situation has led to the emergence of various informal economic practices, one of which is the debt or bond system commonly found in grocery store activities as a way to help consumers with low purchasing power meet their daily basic needs (Setiawan, 2024).

The credit system in grocery stores is a practice where consumers can purchase basic necessities and make payments later. This practice is generally recorded simply in a receipt book maintained by the store owner for each customer (Ulfi et al., 2023). Fitria & Hikmah (2024) state that this system is often seen as a form of social solidarity that helps consumers meet their needs when their finances are limited. However, Salshabilla & Amsari (2024) emphasize that the reliability of receivables in this practice is often low due to late payments by consumers, so the risk of loss tends to be borne by sellers who generally do not have a formal financial management system. This phenomenon has become part of the ongoing dynamics of the people's economy in traditional trade practices in Indonesia, as explained in an economic journalism study on the "credit first" practice still commonly found in traditional stores (Fitri et al., 2023).

The problem of unsystematic recording of accounts receivable and payable also poses a serious challenge in the financial management of grocery stores. Wulan (2023) stated that in addition to limitations in internal recording systems, the risk of bad debts increases when customers delay payments indefinitely. This situation has the potential to impact the financial stability of the business. Harianto (2024) also found that most traditional stores still rely on simple record-keeping or even the seller's memory to manage customer debt, without a more



structured administrative system or adequate legal protection. This situation is further complicated when macroeconomic pressures weaken people's purchasing power, resulting in unstable consumption and forcing store owners to consider the trade-off between maintaining business continuity and maintaining social relationships with customers (Gao & Li, 2022).

Several previous studies have examined the practice of debt receivables in the context of small shops or micro-enterprises. Aرسال (2015), for example, through a case study of a small grocery store in Banyumas, described how debt receivables are applied in everyday life. However, this study focused more on the practice and public perceptions, without exploring the internal dilemmas faced by sellers when balancing financial risk with customer social relationships. Other studies, such as those by Fitria & Hikmah (2024) and Wulan (2023), also discuss debt receivables in the context of micro-enterprises from an Islamic economic legal perspective, but have not specifically highlighted the dilemma between efforts to increase consumer purchasing power and seller financial management as the main focus of the research. Sholikhah's (2020) research also tends to be descriptive and normative, emphasizing the practice itself, without in-depth analysis of the decision-making process of small business owners in such dilemmas.

Furthermore, most research on accounts receivable and payable in grocery stores remains in the form of case studies in specific locations without comprehensively integrating informal economic and microfinance management perspectives (Salshabilla & Amsari, 2024). Sarkar & Kundu (2018) also emphasized that research highlighting the subjective experiences of sellers in bridging social and economic relations is still relatively limited, particularly in qualitative approaches that place the experiences of business actors at the center of analysis. Therefore, this study seeks to fill this gap by presenting a contextual qualitative analysis of the debt system practices at the 3N Grocery Store, thereby providing a deeper understanding of the socio-economic dynamics involved.

Unlike previous studies that tended to only describe the debt practices in grocery stores or examine them from a normative and legal economic perspective, this study places the dilemmas faced by business owners as the primary focus. This research goes beyond simply discussing the debt system as part of informal economic practices, but also analyzes how grocery store owners make and negotiate decisions to balance two interrelated interests: maintaining social relations with customers and maintaining the financial stability of their businesses.



Through a qualitative approach that emphasizes the subjective experiences of business owners, this research seeks to make a new contribution to the development of informal economic studies and micro-enterprise management. Specifically, it provides a deeper understanding of the social and economic dynamics underlying debt practices in small businesses, particularly in the context of decision-making by business owners at the grocery store level.

Based on this description, the main problem in this study is how grocery store owners face the dilemma of maintaining social relationships with customers through a debt system and maintaining the business's financial stability. Therefore, the research question posed is how grocery store owners understand, negotiate, and manage the debt system in their daily practices. This study aims to analyze the debt system practices in grocery stores and uncover the dilemmas faced by business owners in balancing increasing consumer purchasing power with managing business finances. Theoretically, this research is expected to enrich studies on the informal economy and micro-enterprises by presenting an empirical overview of business owners' experiences in navigating challenging economic situations. Practically, the results of this study are expected to serve as a reference for small business owners in formulating more effective and sustainable debt management strategies, as well as for policymakers in designing more relevant support programs for MSMEs in the informal sector.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) play a dominant role in the Indonesian economy, accounting for more than 99% of total business units and serving as a key driver of economic stability (Salsabillah et al., 2023). However, many micro-enterprises, particularly grocery stores, still face limited access to formal financial institutions, which forces them to rely on informal financial practices such as debt or credit systems (Tambunan et al., 2022). These informal credit mechanisms emerge as adaptive strategies to address liquidity constraints both for sellers and consumers (Setiawan, 2024).

The debt system in grocery stores refers to a transactional practice where customers can obtain goods and delay payment, usually recorded informally by the seller (Ulfi et al., 2023). This practice is deeply rooted in social relationships and trust between sellers and customers, making it a form of informal credit without collateral or legal contracts (Mokodenseho & Puspitaningrum, 2022). Previous studies suggest that such systems reflect social solidarity, particularly among low-income communities, where financial limitations often hinder immediate purchasing ability (Fitria & Hikmah, 2024).



From the consumer perspective, informal credit plays a crucial role in maintaining purchasing power, especially under conditions of unstable income. According to Rosa et al. (2022), purchasing power among low-income households is highly dependent on income stability, and when income is insufficient, households tend to adopt alternative coping mechanisms such as borrowing. This aligns with Keynesian Consumption Theory, which explains that low-income groups exhibit a high marginal propensity to consume, meaning they prioritize spending on basic needs even under financial constraints (Keynes, 1936). Consequently, the debt system in grocery stores functions as a buffer that enables households to sustain consumption during periods of economic hardship (Soseco et al., 2024; Dwiputri, 2020).

However, while beneficial for consumers, the debt system poses significant challenges for sellers, particularly in terms of financial management. Increasing levels of receivables can disrupt cash flow and slow down capital turnover, which are critical for the sustainability of micro-enterprises (Hasanudin, 2023). Poor record-keeping and delayed payments further increase the risk of bad debts, making financial management more complex (Wulan, 2023). This situation creates a trade-off between maintaining customer relationships and ensuring business stability.

From a behavioral perspective, decision-making in debt transactions is not always purely rational. The concept of bounded rationality suggests that individuals make decisions under limited information and social pressures (Simon, 1957). In grocery store contexts, sellers often prioritize social relationships over financial considerations, especially when dealing with familiar customers. This phenomenon is also explained by Social Exchange Theory, which emphasizes that economic interactions are embedded within long-term social relationships based on trust and reciprocity (Homans, 1961; Blau, 1964).

Despite extensive discussions on informal credit, previous studies have largely focused on descriptive or normative aspects without deeply analyzing the dilemma faced by sellers in balancing economic and social interests (Arsal, 2015; Salshabilla & Amsari, 2024). Therefore, this study contributes to the literature by highlighting the complex interplay between consumer purchasing power, informal credit practices, and micro-business financial management, particularly from the perspective of business actors.



RESEARCH METHOD

This research uses a qualitative approach with a case study method to gain a deeper understanding of the practice of implementing a debt system in grocery stores and its implications for consumer purchasing power and vendor financial management. A qualitative approach was chosen because this research seeks to more comprehensively explore the social phenomena that occur in debt transactions within grocery stores.

This research was conducted at several grocery stores in Teluknaga District. The research location was chosen because the debt system is still frequently used as a form of service to customers to meet their daily needs.

The informants in this study consisted of grocery store owners and customers who had previously made transactions using the credit system. Informants were selected using purposive sampling, which involves deliberately selecting informants based on their experience and relevant information relevant to the research focus. Five informants were recruited: three grocery store owners and two customers.

The data collection techniques in this study were conducted through three methods: in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation. In-depth interviews were conducted to obtain information regarding the experiences, views, and practices of the debt system implemented by the stall owners and customers. Observations were conducted by directly observing transaction activities occurring at the grocery stall, particularly those related to the practice of granting debt to customers. Furthermore, documentation techniques were used to supplement the research data through a review of documents in the form of customer debt records held by the stall owners.

The data analysis in this study used the interactive analysis model proposed by Miles and Huberman, which includes three main stages: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. Data reduction was carried out by selecting and focusing on data relevant to the research objectives. The data was then presented in descriptive form, making it easier for researchers to understand patterns and relationships between the data. The final stage was drawing conclusions systematically based on the results of the data analysis.

To ensure data validity, this study employed source and method triangulation techniques. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing information obtained from various informants, namely shop owners and customers. Meanwhile, method triangulation was conducted by comparing data obtained through interviews, observations, and documentation.



RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Debt System Practices in Grocery Stores in Teluknaga District

Based on field observations and interviews conducted at several grocery stores in Teluknaga District, it was found that debt is a fairly common form of transaction in the buying and selling of basic necessities. This study involved three grocery stores as data collection locations: Warung Sembako 3N, Warung Berkah Jaya, and Warung Sinar Rezeki. All three stores are known to provide debt purchases for certain customers, particularly those with close relationships or long-standing relationships with the store owners.

Observational findings indicate that debt collection practices in grocery stores generally occur informally without formal written agreements. Debt transactions are typically recorded in a simple notebook containing the customer's name, the type of item purchased, and the amount due. This notebook serves as a control tool for the store owner to monitor the amount of receivables owed to each customer.

The owner of the 3N Grocery Store explained that credit facilities are generally offered to long-time customers. "If a customer has been a long-time customer, they're usually allowed to pay on credit. It's recorded in the book, and then paid when the money is available." (Informant 1)

This statement shows that the granting of credit is heavily influenced by the level of trust between the seller and the customer. Social relationships formed through long-term interactions are a key consideration for shop owners when determining whether a customer is willing to make a purchase on credit.

A similar view was expressed by the owner of Warung Berkah Jaya, who stated that the credit system is part of the service provided to loyal customers. "Some customers often ask for credit, especially at the end of the month. They usually pay after they get their paycheck." (Informant 2)

Meanwhile, the owner of Warung Sinar Rezeki emphasized that credit facilities are not offered to all customers, but are instead selectively applied based on the level of closeness and trust that has been established. "Not all customers can get credit. Usually, only those who are well-known and frequent shoppers here." (Informant 3)

These findings indicate that the debt system at grocery stores in Teluknaga District is a form of informal credit based on trust and social relationships within the community. This practice does not involve formal contracts, collateral, or interest mechanisms, so its sustainability is heavily influenced by social norms and interpersonal relationships between sellers and consumers.



This phenomenon aligns with the concept of informal credit proposed by Mokodenseho & Puspitaningrum (2022), who explain that credit transactions in the informal sector generally take place without formal mechanisms such as written contracts or legal guarantees. Informal credit thrives in local communities because it offers greater flexibility and relatively easier access for consumers compared to formal financial institutions.

Furthermore, this practice can also be understood as a response to the community's limited access to formal financial services, as explained in Informal Credit Theory (Besley & Coate, 1995). In this context, grocery stores not only serve as providers of daily necessities but also serve as a source of short-term consumption financing for the surrounding community.

The findings of this study also align with studies by Ulfi et al. (2023) and Mansour & Samak (2024), which show that informal credit remains a crucial source of financing for low-income households, particularly when access to formal financial institutions is limited. However, unlike those studies, which primarily focus on larger-scale informal credit institutions, this study demonstrates that micro-grocery stores also play a significant role as informal credit providers in the daily economic dynamics of the community.

The Debt System as a Support for Consumer Purchasing Power

Besides being a common transaction practice in the trade of basic necessities, the credit system at grocery stores also plays a significant role in helping consumers maintain purchasing power. Interviews with several consumers shopping at grocery stores in Teluknaga District revealed that credit facilities are often used when consumers face financial constraints to meet daily needs.

One customer shopping at Warung Berkah Jaya revealed that the credit system provides flexibility for households when their available income isn't enough to cover their kitchen needs. "Sometimes there's not enough money, but we still have to cover our kitchen needs. So, if possible, I'll pay at the shop first and then pay when I have the money." (Informant 4)

This statement demonstrates that the existence of a debt system allows consumers to continue meeting basic consumption needs despite short-term liquidity constraints. In other words, debt facilities are used as a strategy to maintain the sustainability of household consumption when income is unavailable.

Another customer who shops at Warung Sinar Rezeki expressed a similar view. "If the kids need food or have an urgent need, I usually pay first at the shop near our house." (Informant 5)



These findings indicate that the debt system serves as a household adaptation mechanism to limited purchasing power. In low-income communities, consumer purchasing power tends to fluctuate due to income instability and the high proportion of spending on basic necessities.

This condition aligns with the view of Rosa et al. (2022), who stated that low-income consumers' purchasing power is significantly influenced by their real income levels and the stability of their income sources. When income is insufficient to cover consumption needs, households tend to develop various alternative strategies to maintain basic needs.

This phenomenon can also be understood through the perspective of Keynesian Consumption Theory, specifically the concept of Marginal Propensity to Consume, which explains that low-income groups have a high tendency to allocate a large portion of their income to consuming basic necessities (Keynes, 1936). In situations of limited income, household consumption levels do not always experience a direct decline, but are maintained through various adaptation mechanisms, including the use of informal credit such as the debt system at grocery stores.

In this context, grocery stores not only serve as providers of daily necessities but also act as an economic buffer, helping households maintain minimum consumption levels when facing income uncertainty. This finding aligns with research by Soseco et al. (2024) and Dwiputri (2020), which shows that community-based credit practices can serve as an economic protection mechanism for vulnerable households in the face of short-term economic shocks.

However, beyond its benefits for consumers in maintaining purchasing power, the practice of debt systems also has implications for sellers, particularly in terms of cash flow management and business capital turnover. Therefore, understanding the debt system in grocery stores requires not only the perspective of consumers as users of debt facilities, but also from the perspective of the micro-entrepreneurs who provide these services.

The Impact of the Debt System on Seller Financial Management

While the debt system benefits consumers in maintaining their ability to meet basic needs, this research findings indicate that the practice also poses challenges for food stall owners in managing their business finances. Based on interviews with several grocery stall owners in Teluknaga District, the increase in customers transacting on credit has resulted in some of their business capital being tied up in receivables.



The owner of Warung Sinar Rezeki explained that the more customers owe, the more business funds can't be immediately used to purchase inventory. "If there are too many invoices, my money gets tied up. I have to buy more stock from the agent." (Informant 3)

This statement indicates that debt practices have direct implications for business capital turnover. In micro-enterprises like grocery stores, business continuity is highly dependent on smooth cash flow, which is used to repurchase inventory from suppliers. When some transactions are conducted on credit, funds that should be circulating in operational activities are delayed because they remain in the form of customer receivables.

The owner of Warung Berkah Jaya shared similar findings. "Sometimes we have to wait for customers to pay before we can shop again at the wholesaler." (Informant 2)

This situation indicates that debt practices can impact a business's liquidity, namely its ability to meet short-term operational needs. In the context of micro-enterprises, limited liquidity has the potential to hinder the procurement of goods and impact the stability of sales activities.

From the perspective of consumer purchasing power, these findings suggest that the debt system in grocery stores serves as a mechanism that allows consumers to continue meeting basic needs despite limited income. Rosa et al. (2022) explain that consumer purchasing power in low-income communities is significantly influenced by income stability and household consumption priorities. When income is insufficient, households tend to seek alternatives to maintain basic needs.

This phenomenon can also be explained through Keynesian Consumption Theory, specifically the concept of Marginal Propensity to Consume, which states that low-income groups have a high tendency to allocate a large portion of their income to consuming basic necessities (Keynes, 1936). Under conditions of limited income, household consumption does not always decline directly, but is maintained through various adaptive mechanisms, including the use of informal credit, such as the debt system at grocery stores.

In this context, grocery stores serve not only as a place for buying and selling transactions but also as an economic buffer for households facing income uncertainty. This finding supports the views of Soseco et al. (2024) and Dwiputri (2020), who stated that community-based credit can serve as an economic adaptation mechanism to maintain consumption stability among low-income households.



However, unlike some previous studies that emphasized the benefits of informal credit for consumers, this study shows that this mechanism also has economic consequences for sellers. From a micro-business financial management perspective, increasing consumer receivables can impact cash flow stability and slow down business capital turnover.

The Seller's Dilemma between Social Demands and Economic Rationality

Further analysis shows that grocery store owners often face a dilemma when deciding whether to extend credit to customers. On the one hand, providing credit can help customers meet basic needs and strengthen social relationships between sellers and consumers. However, on the other hand, this practice also has the potential to increase financial risks for the continuity of the shop owner's business.

The owner of the 3N Grocery Store revealed that the decision to extend credit is often influenced by the close social ties between the owner and the customer. "It's sometimes awkward to refuse a credit, because they're neighbors. But too much debt can also cause problems for the store." (Informant 1)

This statement illustrates the tension between economic considerations and social norms in the practice of grocery stores. In local communities like those in Teluknaga District, the relationship between sellers and customers is not solely based on economic transactions, but is also built through close social ties, such as neighborhood ties and family ties.

This phenomenon can be understood through the perspective of behavioral economics, specifically the concept of bounded rationality proposed by Simon (1957). This theory explains that individuals often make economic decisions under conditions of limited information, time, and resources, resulting in decisions that are not always entirely rational. In the context of a grocery store, the business owner considers not only financial gain but also social dimensions such as maintaining good relationships with customers and the norms of mutual assistance that develop within the community.

This finding also relates to the Social Exchange Theory proposed by Homans (1961) and Blau (1964), which views economic interactions as part of long-term social relations based on expectations of reciprocity. In practice, lending to grocery stores is often maintained as a form of social investment to maintain customer loyalty and maintain harmonious relationships within the community.

The results of this study align with the findings of Supriadin (2025) and Junianto and Riyanto (2026), which show that micro-business owners often maintain financially disadvantageous economic practices in order to maintain



social relationships with customers. However, this study provides an additional contribution by showing that these practices also pose a real dilemma for sellers in balancing social interests with business sustainability.

Recognizing these risks, some shop owners have begun implementing various adaptive strategies to minimize the negative impact of the debt system. These strategies include limiting the amount of debt they can extend to customers, recording debt transactions more systematically, and reminding customers to make regular payments.

These efforts demonstrate that micro-entrepreneurs are not completely passive in the face of economic pressures arising from debt practices. Instead, they are attempting to make various adjustments to maintain social relationships with customers while ensuring the sustainability of their businesses.

Thus, the practice of the debt system in grocery stores can be understood as a complex economic phenomenon because it involves interactions between consumer purchasing power, economic behavior, informal credit mechanisms, and the social dynamics that develop in local communities.

Based on the data analysis process carried out through the stages of data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions as proposed by Miles and Huberman, this study identified several main themes that represent the dynamics of debt system practices in grocery stores in Teluknaga District. These themes include debt practices based on trust, the role of debt as a mechanism supporting consumer purchasing power, the impact of debt on the liquidity of the seller's business, consumer economic behavior in making decisions related to debt, and the dilemmas faced by sellers in balancing economic interests and social demands. The relationship between empirical findings in the field, analytical interpretations, and the theoretical foundations used in this study are systematically summarized in the following table.

Table 1.
Summary of Research Findings

Theme Findings	Empirical Evidence	Interpretation of Findings	Theory Supporters
Trust-based debt system practices	The shop owner only extends credit to customers with whom he knows them and has close social ties.	The debt system in grocery stores is a form of informal credit based on trust and social relations, not on	Informal Credit Theory (Besley & Coate, 1995); Mokodenseho & Puspitaningrum (2022)



	Debt recording is done simply through a notebook.	formal contracts or legal guarantees.	
The debt system as a support for consumer purchasing power	Consumers utilize debt facilities when income is not yet available or is insufficient to meet household needs.	The debt system functions as a household economic adaptation mechanism to maintain consumption of basic necessities amidst limited income.	Keynesian Consumption Theory (Keynes, 1936); Rosa et al. (2022); Nazaruddin et al. (2023)
The effect of debt on the liquidity of the seller's business	The shop owner revealed that the increasing number of customers who were in debt had caused some of the business capital to be tied up in the form of receivables.	Debt practices can hinder the circulation of business capital and create liquidity risks for micro-entrepreneurs.	Micro-Business Financial Management Theory (Gitman, 2015); Nabilla & Narundana (2025); Hasanudin (2023)
Consumer economic behavior in the use of debt	Consumers decide to go into debt due to urgent needs and easy access to credit at grocery stores.	Debt decisions are not entirely economically rational, but are influenced by limited information, pressures of need, and social norms.	Bounded Rationality (Simon, 1957); Rakovská et al. (2020); Ullah et al. (2024)



The seller's dilemma between economic and social interests	The shop owner finds it difficult to refuse a loan request because the customer is a neighbor or someone they already know.	Debt practices reflect the existence of social exchange in community economic relations, where social considerations often influence business decisions.	Social Exchange Theory (Homans, 1961; Blau, 1964); Jackson (2019)
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CONCLUSION

Based on the research findings, it can be concluded that the practice of the debt system in grocery stores in Teluknaga District is part of an informal economic mechanism that has a dual function. On the one hand, this system serves as an adaptive strategy for consumers to maintain purchasing power in the face of limited income and uncertain household cash flow. On the other hand, the practice of providing debt is also part of the business activities of micro-entrepreneurs, which is inseparable from social considerations in their relationships with customers. For consumers, the availability of debt facilities makes it easier to meet basic daily needs when financial conditions do not permit cash payments. However, this practice also has implications for the financial management of the store, particularly regarding the smooth circulation of capital and the potential risk of bad debts. This situation places grocery store owners in a dilemma, because the decision to provide debt is not solely based on economic rationality but is also influenced by social relationships, levels of trust, and norms that have developed within the local community. Thus, the debt system in grocery stores can be understood as an economic practice inherent in the social dynamics of society. This shows that micro-business management is not only determined by financial considerations alone, but is also influenced by social relations and community values that shape interactions between business actors and consumers at the local level.

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