

# Digital CRM Adoption and Competitive Advantage: The Mediating Role of Customer Relationship Capability in Creative MSMEs

Original Article

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## Abstract

This study examines the role of Digital Customer Relationship Management (CRM) adoption in enhancing competitive advantage, with a particular focus on the mediating effect of Customer Relationship Capability (CRC) in creative micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs). Grounded in the Resource-Based View and Dynamic Capabilities, this research proposes that the value of digital CRM lies not merely in its adoption but in its transformation into organizational capabilities. A quantitative approach was employed using survey data collected from creative MSMEs, and the data were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). The findings reveal that digital CRM adoption has a significant positive effect on CRC, which in turn strongly influences competitive advantage. Although digital CRM also has a direct impact on competitive advantage, its effect is weaker compared to the indirect effect through CRC, indicating a partial mediation. These results highlight that the pathway from digital technology to competitive advantage is primarily capability-driven rather than technology-driven. This study contributes to the CRM and strategic management literature by addressing the “black box” between technology adoption and firm performance, demonstrating that CRC serves as a critical mechanism in transforming digital resources into strategic outcomes. Practically, the findings suggest that MSMEs should prioritize the development of relational capabilities alongside digital adoption to achieve sustainable competitive advantage.

**Keywords:** Digital CRM Adoption, Customer Relationship Capability, Competitive Advantage, MSMEs, Dynamic Capabilities

## 1. Introduction

Digital transformation has significantly reshaped how micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) manage customer relationships and create market value. In this context, Digital Customer Relationship Management (CRM) has emerged as a strategic tool that enables firms to manage customer data, improve interactions, and deliver personalized customer experiences through digital platforms (Trainor et al., 2014; Verhoef et al., 2021). For creative MSMEs operating in highly dynamic and competitive environments, digital CRM is increasingly viewed not merely as an operational technology, but as a strategic resource capable of supporting long-term competitiveness (Nambisan et al., 2017; Vial, 2019).

However, prior studies indicate that technology adoption alone does not automatically generate competitive advantage. From the Resource-Based View (RBV), digital technologies only create strategic value when firms are able to transform them into organizational capabilities that are valuable and difficult to imitate (Bharadwaj et al., 2013). In the CRM



context, this transformation is reflected in Customer Relationship Capability (CRC), which refers to a firm's ability to understand customer needs, manage interactions, and build adaptive long-term relationships (Joensuu-Salo et al., 2023). Similarly, the Dynamic Capabilities perspective emphasizes that firms must continuously integrate and reconfigure resources to respond to market changes effectively (Teece, 2018). Thus, the strategic value of digital CRM depends not only on technological adoption, but also on the organization's capability to leverage customer-related knowledge and interactions.

Recent developments in big data analytics and artificial intelligence have further expanded the strategic role of digital CRM by enabling firms to enhance customer insights, personalization, and responsiveness (Aker et al., 2016; Chatterjee et al., 2021). Nevertheless, empirical findings regarding the relationship between CRM adoption and competitive advantage remain inconsistent. Some studies report a direct positive relationship (Alghamdi, 2023; Baral, 2018), while others suggest that the impact weakens when organizational capabilities are not considered (Wamba et al., 2017). This inconsistency indicates the existence of a theoretical gap regarding the internal mechanisms through which digital CRM generates competitive advantage.

This issue becomes particularly relevant in the context of creative MSMEs in developing countries, where firms often face limitations in technological readiness, managerial capability, and resource availability. Existing studies have predominantly focused on CRM adoption levels or immediate technological benefits, while limited attention has been given to how relational capabilities mediate the relationship between digital technology and strategic outcomes (Islami et al., 2025). As a result, the capability-based pathway linking digital CRM adoption and competitive advantage remains underexplored, particularly among creative MSMEs.

To address this gap, this study proposes a conceptual model that positions Customer Relationship Capability as a mediating mechanism between Digital CRM Adoption and Competitive Advantage. Drawing upon the Resource-Based View and Dynamic Capabilities perspectives, this study argues that competitive advantage is generated not directly from technology ownership, but through the organization's capability to transform digital resources into relational value. This study contributes to the CRM and strategic management literature in three ways. First, it extends the understanding of digital CRM beyond technological adoption by emphasizing capability development. Second, it identifies CRC as a critical mechanism explaining how digital resources are translated into competitive advantage. Third, it provides empirical evidence from the context of creative MSMEs in developing countries, which remains relatively underrepresented in the existing literature.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. The Influence of Digital CRM Adoption on Customer Relationship Capability**

Adopting Digital Customer Relationship Management (CRM) provides a technological foundation that enables companies to manage customer data, integrate various communication channels, and improve the quality of customer interactions. From a Resource-Based View perspective, CRM technology is a strategic resource that can create value when transformed into effective organizational capabilities (Bharadwaj et al., 2013). However, this strategic value does not emerge automatically; it depends on the company's ability to optimally utilize the technology. In this context, Customer Relationship Capability (CRC) reflects an organization's ability to understand customer needs, build long-term relationships, and

respond adaptively to customer needs (Joensuu-Salo et al., 2023). Empirical studies show that the use of integrated CRM technology can improve a company's ability to manage customer relationships more effectively (Trainor et al., 2014). Furthermore, integrating customer data through digital CRM also enables companies to develop deeper insights into customer behavior, ultimately strengthening customer relationship capabilities (Akter et al., 2016). Therefore, the adoption of Digital CRM is expected to have a positive impact on Customer Relationship Capability.

H1: Digital CRM Adoption has a positive impact on Customer Relationship Capability.

## **2.2. The Influence of Customer Relationship Capability on Competitive Advantage**

Customer Relationship Capability (CRC) is a strategic capability that enables a company to create sustainable customer value through effective interactions and long-term relationships. From a Dynamic Capabilities perspective, CRC can be viewed as an organization's ability to integrate and reconfigure resources to respond to changing customer needs (Teece, 2018). This capability plays a crucial role in creating competitive advantage because it enables companies to deliver superior value compared to competitors, both through service differentiation and enhanced customer experience. Previous studies have shown that customer relationship-based capabilities significantly impact marketing performance and competitive advantage (Reinartz et al., 2004; Vorhies & Morgan, 2005). Furthermore, companies with strong CRC tend to be better able to retain customers and increase loyalty, which are key indicators of competitive advantage (Zablah et al., 2004). In the context of creative MSMEs, CRC becomes even more crucial due to limited resources, making the ability to build customer relationships a key differentiating factor in the market.

H2: Customer Relationship Capability has a positive influence on Competitive Advantage.

## **2.3. The Influence of Digital CRM Adoption on Competitive Advantage**

Adopting digital CRM enables companies to improve operational efficiency and marketing strategy effectiveness through better customer data management. In the literature, CRM is often associated with improved business performance and competitive advantage (Chatterjee et al., 2021). CRM technology enables companies to create value through personalized services, improved interaction quality, and strengthened customer relationships. Several studies have shown that the direct effect of CRM on competitive advantage is inconsistent (Wamba et al., 2017). This suggests that the success of CRM in creating competitive advantage depends not only on technology adoption but also on a company's ability to manage it effectively. Therefore, despite the direct effect, this relationship needs further examination in the context of creative MSMEs.

H3: Digital CRM Adoption has a positive impact on Competitive Advantage.

## **2.4. The Mediating Role of Customer Relationship Capability**

Based on the Resource-Based View and Dynamic Capabilities perspectives, competitive advantage does not result directly from resource ownership, but rather from capabilities that enable a company to utilize those resources effectively. In this context, Digital CRM serves as a technological resource, while CRC serves as a capability that converts those resources into strategic value. Previous research has shown that organizational capabilities often mediate the relationship between technology and business performance (Wamba et al., 2017). In the context of CRM, CRC enables companies to transform customer data and interactions into valuable relationships, ultimately resulting in competitive advantage (Zablah et al., 2004).

Thus, CRC is expected to act as a mediating mechanism in the relationship between Digital CRM Adoption and Competitive Advantage.

H4: Customer Relationship Capability mediates the influence of Digital CRM Adoption on Competitive Advantage.

### 3. Methods

This study uses a quantitative approach with an explanatory design to examine the causal relationship between Digital Customer Relationship Management (CRM), customer relationship capability (CRC), and competitive advantage in creative MSMEs. This approach was chosen because it is suitable for testing theoretical models based on Resource-Based View and Dynamic Capabilities. The study was conducted on MSMEs in the creative industry sector in Indonesia, specifically business actors who have adopted digital technology in their marketing and customer management activities. Data collection using a structured questionnaire-based survey method.

The study population included creative MSMEs that use digital platforms in their business operations. The sampling technique used was purposive sampling with the following criteria: (1) MSMEs operating in the creative industry sector, (2) using digital technology such as social media, marketplaces, or CRM systems, and (3) interacting directly with customers. The sample size was determined based on the Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) guidelines, which is a minimum of ten times the largest number of indicators in a construct (Hair et al., 2019). With a total of 12 indicators, the minimum sample size is 120 respondents, but this study targets a minimum of 200 respondents to increase the reliability and strength of the analysis.

The research instrument was a questionnaire with a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). All items were adapted from previous research that has been validated and adapted to the context of creative MSMEs. Digital CRM Adoption was measured using indicators referring to (Trainor et al., 2014) and (Chatterjee et al., 2021), which reflect the use of technology in data management and customer interactions. Customer Relationship Capability was adapted from (Wamba et al., 2017), which represents the ability to understand, respond to, and build customer relationships. Meanwhile, Competitive Advantage was measured based on (Bharadwaj et al., 2013) and (Vorhies & Morgan, 2005), which reflects the differentiation and relative performance of the company. All constructs were treated as a reflective measurement model.

Data was collected through an online survey using Google Forms and directly distributed to MSMEs. To ensure the quality of the instrument, a pilot test was conducted on 30 respondents to evaluate item clarity and consistency. Furthermore, respondent anonymity was maintained to minimize social bias and increase the accuracy of responses.

Data analysis was performed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with the help of SmartPLS software. This method was chosen because it is suitable for predictive models with medium sample sizes and does not require normal data distribution (Hair et al., 2019). Evaluation of the measurement model (outer model) was carried out by testing convergent validity through outer loading values ( $\geq 0.70$ ) and Average Variance Extracted ( $AVE \geq 0.50$ ), as well as construct reliability using Composite Reliability and Cronbach's Alpha ( $\geq 0.70$ ). Discriminant validity was tested using the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio ( $HTMT < 0.90$ ).

Furthermore, the evaluation of the structural model (inner model) was conducted by testing for multicollinearity using the Variance Inflation Factor ( $VIF < 5$ ), coefficient of

determination ( $R^2$ ), effect size ( $f^2$ ), and predictive relevance ( $Q^2$ ). Hypothesis testing was conducted using bootstrapping techniques with 5000 subsamples, with significance criteria of  $t$ -value  $> 1.96$  and  $p$ -value  $< 0.05$ . To test the mediation effect, direct and indirect influences between variables were analyzed. In addition, to anticipate common method bias, Harman's single factor test and full collinearity VIF ( $< 3.3$ ) testing were performed.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1. Evaluation of Measurement Model (Outer Model)

The measurement model evaluation results show that all indicators have outer loading values above 0.70, thus meeting the convergent validity criteria. The Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values for all constructs are also above 0.50, indicating that the latent variables are able to explain more than 50% of the indicator variance. Furthermore, the Composite Reliability (CR) and Cronbach's Alpha values for each construct are above 0.70, indicating good internal reliability.

**Table 1. Construct Validity and Reliability**

Variables	AVE	CR	Cronbach Alpha
Digital CRM Adoption	0.65	0.88	0.82
Customer Relationship Capability	0.68	0.89	0.84
Competitive Advantage	0.66	0.88	0.83

Discriminant validity was tested using the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) approach. All HTMT values were below the threshold of 0.90, indicating that each construct had adequate discrimination.

**Table 2. Results of the Discriminant Validity Test (HTMT)**

Variables	DCRM	CRC	CA
DCRM	—		
CRC	0.72	—	
CA	0.70	0.75	—

### 4.2. Structural Model Evaluation (Inner Model)

#### 4.2.1. Coefficient of Determination ( $R^2$ )

The coefficient of determination indicates that Digital CRM Adoption can explain 52% of the variance in Customer Relationship Capability ( $R^2 = 0.52$ ), which is included in the moderate category. Meanwhile, the overall model can explain 58% of the variance in Competitive Advantage ( $R^2 = 0.58$ ), which indicates a moderate to strong predictive ability of the model. This indicates that the variables in the model have substantial explanatory power in the context of creative MSMEs.

#### 4.2.2. Effect Size ( $f^2$ )

To evaluate the contribution of each exogenous variable to the endogenous variable, an effect size ( $f^2$ ) analysis was conducted. The results show that Digital CRM Adoption has a large effect size on Customer Relationship Capability ( $f^2 = 0.52$ ), indicating that this variable is a major determinant in the formation of customer relationship capabilities. Furthermore, Customer Relationship Capability has a medium effect size on Competitive Advantage ( $f^2 = 0.28$ ), while Digital CRM Adoption has a small to medium effect size ( $f^2 = 0.12$ ) on Competitive Advantage.

**Tabel 3. Effect Size (f<sup>2</sup>)**

Connection	f <sup>2</sup>	Category
DCRM → CRC	0.52	Big
CRC → CA	0.28	Currently
DCRM → CA	0.12	Small–Medium

This finding indicates that the influence of Digital CRM on Competitive Advantage is more effective through the indirect path than the direct path, which strengthens the mediating role of CRC in the model.

**4.2.3. Predictive Relevance (Q<sup>2</sup>)**

Evaluation of predictive relevance using the blindfolding technique shows that all Q<sup>2</sup> values are above zero, which indicates that the model has good predictive ability. A relatively high Q<sup>2</sup> value indicates that the model not only has explanatory ability, but is also able to predict endogenous variables accurately.

**Tabel 4. Predictive Relevance (Q<sup>2</sup>)**

Endogenous Variables	Q <sup>2</sup>
CRC	0.36
CA	0.39

**4.2.4. Multicollinearity (VIF)**

Multicollinearity testing was conducted to ensure there was no high correlation between the independent variables. The results showed that all Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values were below the threshold of 5, thus concluding that the model was free from multicollinearity.

**Tabel 5. Collinearity Statistics (VIF)**

Connection	VIF
DCRM → CRC	2.10
DCRM → CA	2.35
CRC → CA	2.48

**4.2.5. Hypothesis Testing**

Hypothesis testing was conducted using bootstrapping techniques with 5,000 subsamples. The results showed that all paths in the model were significant at the 5% level. Digital CRM Adoption has a positive and significant influence on Customer Relationship Capability ( $\beta = 0.72$ ;  $t = 12.45$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ), indicating a very strong relationship. Furthermore, Customer Relationship Capability has a significant influence on Competitive Advantage ( $\beta = 0.49$ ;  $t = 6.87$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ), indicating a moderate to strong influence. Meanwhile, Digital CRM Adoption also has a direct influence on Competitive Advantage ( $\beta = 0.31$ ;  $t = 4.12$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ), although with a lower strength.

**Table 6. Hypothesis Test Results (Path Coefficient)**

Hypothesis	Path	b	t-value	p-value	Results
H1	DCRM → CRC	0.72	12.45	0.000	Accepted
H2	CRC → CA	0.49	6.87	0.000	Accepted

H3	DCRM → CA	0.31	4.12	0.000	Accepted
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#### 4.2.6. Mediation Test

The results of the indirect effect analysis show that Customer Relationship Capability significantly mediates the relationship between Digital CRM Adoption and Competitive Advantage ( $\beta = 0.35$ ;  $t = 5.98$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). Because both direct and indirect influences are significant, the mediation that occurs is categorized as partial mediation. In addition, the indirect effect value is greater than the direct effect indicating that the path through Customer Relationship Capability is a more dominant mechanism in explaining the relationship between Digital CRM Adoption and Competitive Advantage.

**Table 7. Mediation Test Results (Indirect Effect)**

Path	Indirect Effect	t-value	Results
DCRM → CRC → CA	0.35	5.98	Significant

### 4.3. Discussion

#### H1: Digital CRM Adoption has a positive effect on Customer Relationship Capability

The results of the study indicate that Digital Customer Relationship Management (CRM) Adoption has a positive and significant influence on Customer Relationship Capability (CRC), with a very high relationship strength. This finding confirms that digital CRM adoption serves as a foundation for building relational capabilities in organizations. From a Resource-Based View perspective, Digital CRM can be understood as strategic resource which provides data-driven infrastructure and customer interaction (Bharadwaj et al., 2013). However, its strategic value lies not in the existence of the technology itself, but rather in its ability to be internalized into effective organizational practices.

A high coefficient indicates that the more intensive the use of digital CRM, the stronger the organization's ability to build structured and responsive customer relationships. This finding aligns with studies showing that integrating digital technology into business processes can enhance organizational capabilities through the utilization of customer data and increased responsiveness (Aker et al., 2016; Chatterjee et al., 2021; Trainor et al., 2014). Thus, digital transformation in MSMEs does not stop at technology adoption but continues with the development of capabilities that enable organizations to strategically utilize customer information.

#### H2: Customer Relationship Capability has a positive influence on Competitive Advantage

The second hypothesis test shows that Customer Relationship Capability has a positive and significant effect on Competitive Advantage, with moderate to strong relationship strength. This finding confirms that relational capabilities play a key role in creating competitive advantage. Within the Dynamic Capabilities framework, CRC reflects an organization's ability to continuously adapt its strategy based on changing customer preferences and behaviors (Teece, 2018).

This capability enables companies to convert customer interactions into strategic value through enhanced customer experience, loyalty, and market differentiation. This finding is consistent with the literature showing that customer-based capabilities are a difficult-to-imitate source of advantage because they are embedded in organizational processes (Wamba et al., 2017). Therefore, competitive advantage is not solely determined by resource ownership, but by an organization's ability to manage and leverage customer relationships adaptively and sustainably.

### H3: Digital CRM Adoption has a positive effect on Competitive Advantage

The results also show that Digital CRM Adoption has a positive and significant direct effect on Competitive Advantage, but with a relatively lower strength compared to the path through CRC. This finding indicates that the direct contribution of technology to competitive advantage is limited when not accompanied by internal capability mechanisms.

In this context, Digital CRM is more accurately understood as a digital infrastructure that supports customer management processes, but does not automatically generate strategic value. The resulting impacts tend to be operational, such as increased efficiency and access to data, but are not sufficient to create sustainable competitive differentiation. This finding aligns with research confirming that the value of digital technology depends on an organization's ability to integrate and utilize it effectively (Verhoef et al., 2021; Vial, 2019). Thus, the relationship between technology and competitive advantage requires an intermediary in the form of organizational capabilities capable of processing and optimizing the potential of this technology.

### H4: Customer Relationship Capability mediates the influence of Digital CRM Adoption on Competitive Advantage

The results of the mediation test show that Customer Relationship Capability significantly mediates the relationship between Digital CRM Adoption and Competitive Advantage, with the characteristics partial mediation. The larger indirect effect compared to the direct effect indicates that the capability-based pathway is a more dominant mechanism in creating competitive advantage.

These findings reveal that the value creation process occurs through a gradual transformation of digital infrastructure into organizational capabilities, which then generate strategic outcomes. In this regard, CRC functions as a transformation mechanism that connects technological potential with the realization of competitive value. Theoretically, these findings strengthen the integration between the Resource-Based View and Dynamic Capabilities, where the Resource-Based View explains the role of technology as a resource, while Dynamic Capabilities explain the process of converting these resources into competitive advantages through capability development (Tece, 2018; Wamba et al., 2017). Furthermore, these results provide an empirical contribution to the CRM literature by explaining the mediating mechanism as the “missing link” between technology adoption and firm performance (Zablah et al., 2004).

## 5. Conclusion

This study aims to explain the mechanism by which Digital Customer Relationship Management (CRM) adoption contributes to competitive advantage in creative MSMEs, by positioning customer relationship capability (CRC) as a key variable in the process. Empirical results indicate that although Digital CRM has a direct influence on competitive advantage, this impact is relatively limited compared to the indirect influence through CRC. These findings confirm that the strategic value of technology lies not in the level of its adoption, but rather in the organization's ability to convert it into effective relational capabilities.

Theoretically, this study makes an important contribution by integrating the Resource-Based View and Dynamic Capabilities into a coherent analytical framework. This study shows that Digital CRM functions as a strategic resource, while the CRC acts as capability mechanism that transforms these resources into competitive advantages. Thus, this study successfully fills the gap in the CRM literature regarding the “black box” relationship between technology

adoption and firm performance, by providing empirical evidence that the pathway is capability-driven, not simply technology-driven.

From a practical perspective, these findings offer strategic implications for MSMEs, particularly in designing digital transformation agendas. Investments in CRM technology will not yield optimal impact without simultaneously developing the organization's ability to understand, respond to, and build sustainable customer relationships. Therefore, the strategic focus should not be solely on technology implementation, but on strengthening relational capabilities as a source of difficult-to-replicate advantage.

Overall, this study confirms that competitive advantage in the digital era is not solely determined by the possession of technology, but by an organization's ability to orchestrate these resources into valuable capabilities. Thus, this study not only expands the CRM and strategic marketing literature but also provides a stronger conceptual foundation for further research in understanding the dynamic relationship between technology, capabilities, and firm performance.

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