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Social Media Marketing Capability and Customer Loyalty toward Culinary MSMEs: Mediating Role of Digital Customer-Centric Intimacy Capability

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ABSTRACT. The purpose of this study is to determine the effect of social media marketing capability on customer loyalty with digital customer-centric intimacy capabilities as a mediating variable. Building on dynamic capabilities theory, we theorize that social media marketing capability positively influences customer loyalty indirectly by augmenting firms' ability to develop personalized, customer oriented, digitally enabled experience relationships. This study employed a quantitative cross-sectional survey design of 300 culinary MSME owners and managers who use social media to market their goods. Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) was used to analyze the data. The results indicate that social media marketing capability has no direct and significant effect on customer loyalty but exerts a strong positive indirect influence through digital customer-centric intimacy capability. In addition, digital customer-centric-intimacy capability is positively related to customer loyalty and completely mediated the influence of social media marketing capability on customer loyalty. These findings suggest that the basic strategy to enhance customer loyalty is not just the use of social media marketing activities, but rather the ability of a firm to engage in meaningful, customized, and consistent digital interactions with customers. This paper adds to the dynamic capabilities literature by examining digital customer-centric intimacy capability as a second order relational capability that operates on operational digital marketing capability, transforming it into sustainable customer loyalty. Results also offer concrete managerial insights for culinary MSMEs to develop customer oriented digital marketing strategies that can bolster their long-run competitiveness.

Keyword: Culinary MSMEs; Customer Loyalty; Digital Customer-Centric Intimacy Capability; Social Media Marketing Capability

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INTRODUCTION

Digital technologies have transformed the ways small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) engage with customers in this rapidly evolving environment. Now you need social media to create customer value, develop relationships, and establish a lasting competitive advantage. What began as little more than a marketing tool has since grown into an essential element of the organization. According to Bartoloni and Ancillai (2024), social media marketing is an essential component of digital strategy, enabling firms to reach and engage customers through online communication channels. Additionally, Laradi et al. (2024) argued that although fashion MSMEs have social media accounts, they struggle to convert social interactions into loyal customers due to a shortage of strategic capabilities rather than technology. This implies that a certain level of organizational capability must be embraced in relation to social media strategies for businesses to convert any online encounters into relationships (Tarsakoo & Charoensukmongkol, 2019).

Now, the fashion industry is one of the most digitally well connected industries. Consumers are increasingly turning to social media to find products, compare brands, and engage with sellers directly before making a purchase. Jadhav (2024) emphasize the importance of digital marketing for SMEs, as consumers today expect to be spoken to in a personalized manner and to receive captivating digital experiences. Recent statistics indicate that fashion consumers are increasingly influenced by religiously authentic content, customer reviews, and influencer recommendations, and that these days, immediacy on social platforms such as Instagram and TikTok is key. Arguably, these social media interactions have a considerable impact on initiating purchasing (Joshi et al., 2023). Despite MSMEs accelerating digital adoption, there is a varying degree of strategic use of social media for relationship building. Despite massive investment in digital marketing, fashion MSMEs still experience a disconnect between their technology adoption and customer retention (Eric Opoku et al., 2024).

Previous studies indicate that social media marketing positively influences organizational output. Nonetheless, the vast majority of studies have examined such HR practices in relation to business performance, customer engagement, or brand equity rather than to customer loyalty, for example, customer loyalty (Radebe et al., 2024). Abbasi et al. (2018) found that customers' unique use of social media positively affects small business performance. However, the research did not address how social media relationships can foster durable patronage. Similarly, Laradi et al. (2024), the social media marketing capabilities will lead to an improvement in the likelihood of business success through digital competitive advantages, while Z. Luo et al. (2024), a study was presented that underscored the value of social CRM in enhancing marketing performance. Notably, little is known about the mediating role of digital customer-centric intimacy capability in this relationship, particularly in fashion MSMEs, where continuous digital interactions are critical for customer to firm long term relational ties (Hasibuan et al., 2026a). This study aims to bridge this lacuna by exploring the mediating role of social media marketing capability in the relationship between social media marketing capability and customer loyalty, enabling firms to forge deeper digital connections with their customers and thus contributing to existing knowledge that has looked at direct relationships in prior studies.

This research is based on the strategic product of Customer Intimacy proposed by Treacy and Wiersema (1993, 1995). A customer centric strategy like this emphasizes a deep understanding of customers and the delivery of personalized value to forge long term relationships. In contrast to

more general understandings of relationship marketing, customer intimacy focuses on the capacity of an organization to identify customer needs and deliver customized experiences and relationships. Liu et al. (2024) they contended that firms need to build competencies for providing customized experiences on digital platforms. Furthermore, Brock and Zhou (2012) reasoned that customer intimacy is a distinctive organizational capability rather than merely a special marketing task, as it enables firms to deliver superior relational value. Therefore, digital customer-centric intimacy capability is a practical conceptual framework for improving social media marketing to enhance merchant loyalty within fashion MSMEs in a high digital activity environment.

The importance of digital customer-centric intimacy capability becomes vital as social media marketing success relies not only on effective firm to customer communication but also on the ability to develop meaningful digital relationships. According to Maduku (2024), businesses that integrate social media into their customer focused strategies gain sustainable competitive advantages by enhancing customer relationships rather than relying solely on promotional efforts. Having digital capabilities satisfies the ever-changing customer interactions of businesses from different perspectives. This is why digital capability leads to organizational competitiveness, as mentioned in Khin and Ho (2019), where you can check out their findings and several other studies they cite. Moreover, Radebe et al. (2024) argue that a customer-centered strategy is a fundamental driver of business growth through enhanced relational value rather than transactional exchange. these insights reveal that nurturing digital customer-centric intimacy capability is vital if fashion MSMEs are to transform digital engagement into enduring customer loyalty.

This study will investigate the influence of social media marketing capability on customer loyalty to fashion MSMEs, with digital customer-centric intimacy capability as a mediating variable. The proposed model contributes to the literature by extending prior studies that primarily emphasized direct associations between social media marketing and organizational performance whilst overlooking the capabilities that facilitate ongoing customer commitment. K. J. Trainor et al. (2014) it is also noteworthy that social media technologies can only create substantial business value for a firm when the firm has the capabilities to manage customer relationships. Similarly, Marolt et al. (2022) determined that relational skills are an essential element connecting social media use and business performance. Radebe et al. (2024) similarly called for further study using customer-centric perspectives in small business research. Therefore, this study seeks to contribute to the literature on digital marketing capability by providing evidence of a critical strategic role that digital customer-centric intimacy capability plays in increasing fashion MSME customer loyalty.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Customer Intimacy Theory

Customer intimacy theory by Treacy and Wiersema (1993, 1995) it outlines one of three value disciplines that allows firms to develop endearing sustainable competitive advantage through close lifelong relationships with customers. While operational excellence and product leadership strategies focus on executing domains with precision, customer intimacy is much broader, observing customers as individuals and studying their evolving preferences, needs and behaviors to deliver personal value. According to Treacy and Wiersema (1993, 1995), the theory suggests that organizations achieve more success when, rather than using standardized market offerings, they develop products, services and communicate based on specific customer insights. Brock and Zhou

(2012) confirmed that true customer intimacy should be thought of as an organizational capability through which firms establish trust, enhance relationships, and sustain customers in the long run. Hence, customer intimacy theory stresses that long-term success of any business is driven by firms doing more than just a single transaction and deeply engaging the consumer with meaningful relationships.

Customer intimacy theory evolved going from face to face relationship with customers to the other type of environments, the digital environment. The idea expanded as digital technologies were more integrated into marketing. Not only face to face engagement, it now traces on online platforms and social media with personalized interaction. Digital customer intimacy by Liu et al. (2024) suggests that firms must create capabilities to sense customer expectations, personalize digital experiences and execute constant communication across multiple digital channels. Similarly, Jain et al. (2022), he said that to meet the needs of customers in a more digital era requires organizations to integrate technology skills with relationship-based tactics so they can deliver superior customer interactions. That last change is a sign that customer intimacy has evolved from being the practice of personal relationships to becoming a digital strategic capability for firms, one which allows better and more frequent dynamic connections in tightly connected markets.

This study is backed by a strong theoretical basis in customer intimacy theory. It describes how firms are transforming the digital equivalents of interactions between sellers and buyers into long-term customer loyalty with customer-centered capabilities. This theory dictates that organizations are perceived as having a stronger relationship with you if they use personalized communication, respond to your queries in a timely fashion and bring them back up continuously. Social media marketing capability allows the firms to communicate with customers, while digital customer-centric intimacy capability allows them such interaction turn into deeper relationships in fashion MSMEs context. Hasibuan et al. (2026a) found that the experience of a customer in relation to a business can support their loyalty, emphasizing that the responsiveness and empathy between customers and employees are improved by customer intimacy. On the other hand, as Osakwe (2020) claimed that customer orientation capabilities are crucial to being strategic resources for micro and small business enterprises. The implication of customer intimacy theory is that social media marketing capability by itself will not enhance customer loyalty unless firms also provide customers with constructive digital interaction.

Social Media Marketing Capability

Social media marketing capability is the ability of an e-business to leverage social media channels for communicating with customers, creating content and valued customers, engaging customers along with business goals. This capability encompasses how firms have embedded digital communication into their wider marketing strategy, rather than just simply the adoption of social media technologies (Tarsakoo & Charoensukmongkol, 2019). Bartoloni and Ancillai (2024) noted that social media marketing has matured into a skill set that is more strategically important for organizations, as companies are turning to interactive digital platforms to create customer value and enhance market relationships. Laradi et al. (2024) proposed that businesses with strong social media marketing abilities are better positioned to adjust through changing consumer expectations and rapidly altering digital locations. Thus, social media marketing capability is a strategic resource that enables organizations to obtain competitive advantages by accomplishing its tasks effectively on the social networks.

Social media marketing capability is an important technique to think about along with customer intimacy theory in order to close the distance between customers. As social media usage represents effective avenues to reach those goals, customer intimacy requires firms to understand not only individual customer preferences but also engage in and continue ongoing communication while responding in a timely manner to individual needs. The invention of digital platforms has generated opportunities for organizations to tailor communication, obtain feedback from customers and present interactive experiences time that increments relational value. According to K. Trainor et al. (2014), organizations that leverage social media technologies in an effective manner get positive results against the customer relationship because these technologies have a great impact on providing interaction and responsiveness to customers. As such, the capability of social media marketing fits well into customer intimacy theory because by engaging customers and building continuous interactions in digital platform, firms are able to increase reach for their messages and engage customers with unique experiences at a personal level.

Having a social media marketing capability has been confirmed to be strategically important for organizational outcomes (Chatterjee et al., 2024; Erkan & Evans, 2016). Bai et al. (2026) revealed that increased social media capability leads to a much higher firm performance through the ability to interact with customers and manage market information. Likewise, Cao and Weerawardena (2023) found that social media use on a strategic level assist SMEs to enhance their customer relationships which translates into higher overall business performance through marketing as well. These studies mainly studied business performance, but in them it has been established that companies with higher (better) social media marketing capabilities are also more capable of creating customer-centered relationships to achieve better loyalty. Therefore, drawing upon customer intimacy theory and historical empirical evidence, this study posits that

H1: Social media marketing capability, has a significant positive influence on digital customer-centric intimacy capability

Digital Customer-Centric Intimacy Capability

Digital customer-centric intimacy capability is the process of creating, managing and deepening a personal relationship with customers using digital technologies and interactive communication platforms. It could be that this is not just using digital tools, but where firms draw on customer data, online exchanges and personalised offers to deliver relational experiences. Liu et al. (2024) definition of digital customer intimacy as a strategic capability that enables firms to comprehend whom their customers are identifying preferences, anticipating shifting expectations and delivering individual value across digital channels. Likewise, Jain et al. (2024) product enablers and these types of customer-facing services remain the leading fortunes for companies to seize competitive advantage as omnichannel interaction made possible via digital technologies results in increasingly faster, more responsive, and hyper-personalized customer experience. digital customer-centric intimacy capability is thus an organizational capability to convert digital interactions into sustained relational value, not merely enabling online transactions.

This empowers the customer intimacy theory which is also a reason for building digital customer-centric intimacy capability. This emphasizes understanding individual customer needs and providing custom value. These days customer intimacy in a digital business world is no longer just done face to face. More than ever it depends upon the capability of firms to tailor communication

and build continuous contact across dozens of online channels. Among those authors, Treacy and Wiersema (1995) already stated some 20 years ago that organizations aiming at customer intimacy need to constantly adapt their offerings in accordance with changing customer expectations. At that time, Brock and Zhou (2012) noted that customer intimacy is a strategic driver to further build trust and elevate the long-term quality of relationships. Digital customer-centric intimacy capability turns these theoretical principles into action by using digital tools to enhance customer engagement. As a result, this ability is an important demand for transforming social media marketing into sustainable consumer loyalty in fashion MSMEs.

Past empirical researches show that customer-oriented digital capabilities are increasingly important in enhancing a number of customer-centric outcomes. Hasibuan et al. (2026b) demonstrated that customer intimacy leads to increased customer loyalty because customers are more likely to stay with firms in the longer term when these firms deliver personalized interactions and responsive services over time. Additionally, Radebe et al. (2024) found that customer-oriented social media behaviors improve small-business performance through exhibiting growth in customer relationships and fostering continuous engagement for customers. Although these studies did not empirically test digital customer-centric intimacy capability as a mediator between firm capabilities and customer loyalty, their results suggest that firms able to create closer digital relationships with customers engage in greater customer retention. The below hypothesis is formulated, built on both the customer intimacy theory and already existing evidence.

H2: Digital customer-centric intimacy capability has a positive influence toward customer loyalty for fashion MSMEs

Customer Loyalty

Customer loyalty is when a customer chooses repeatedly to buy a product or service from the same business, in this case, having competitive alternatives. Loyalty is not about repeated purchases alone. It contains the emotion the frames of mind, established trust and emotional relationship with a strong desire to refer business outwards. According to Rauyruen and Miller (2007), customer loyalty is a continuous relationship formed through repeated purchase behaviour with satisfaction that cannot be recognised as a one time purchase or individual occurrence based interaction. Similarly, Kumar Chaudhary et al. (2025), loyalty is in fact when customers are willing to stay with companies because they regularly feel value and have best experiences. As such, having returning customers is one of the biggest targets in a sustainable fashion MSME trying to make it into competitive online markets.

Customer intimacy theory this theory addresses how customer loyalty takes root. It means such a theory that long-term business success relies on the company's capacity to comprehend their clients' needs, tailor their communication, and provide innovative value over time. Theories about customer intimacy strategies suggest that companies which successfully leverage upon customer intimacy strategies are able to engender trust, enhance relationship quality and promote future behaviour specifically with regards to long-term customer retention. Verhoef et al. (2010), customer engagement improves relationship results as a result of continued interaction between companies and customers. Drawing on data collected in their research, De Waal and Van Der Heijden (2016) demonstrated that the relational experience enjoyed by customers is improved through a greater level of customer intimacy, leading to further loyalty. Thus, Digital customer-

centric intimacy capability serves as an implementation example by making use of customer intimacy theory to ensure a digital means for individualized connections that perpetuate customer commitment fidelity among fashion MSMEs. Consequently, companies which have stronger capabilities focused on their customers are predicted to gain more loyalty.

Organizational capabilities that are focused on the customer have consistently been shown to strongly facilitate customer retention over time in previous literature. In research on customer loyalty, Hasibuan et al. (2026b) examined several variables, including the extent to which consumers perceive customized experiences. Their findings reveal that customer intimacy positively influences loyalty because it fosters personalized interactions, an essential antecedent to trust and commitment. Aziz (2024) also confirmed that customer experience mediates social media marketing and brand loyalty. It implies that long-term relationships can only be cultivated by the digital interactions with an emphasis on the interests of customers. These studies were conducted across several industries, but they consistently demonstrate that behaviors focused toward the customer establish an environment conducive to cultivating loyalty. Therefore, the hypothesis is stated based on the Customer Intimacy Theory and earlier research.

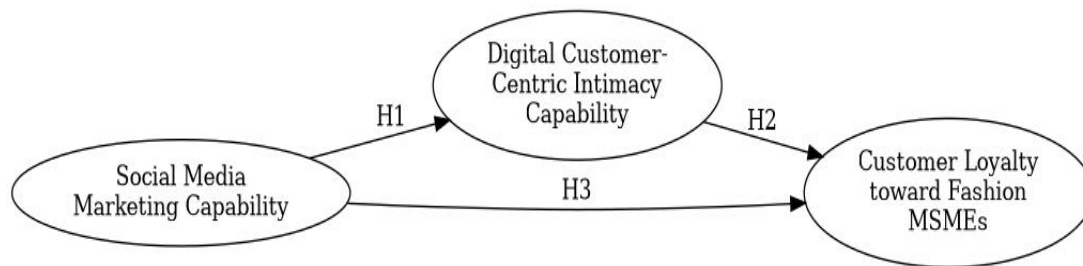
H3: Social Media Marketing Capability has a positive effect on Customer Loyalty toward Fashion MSMEs.

The mediating role of digital customer-centric intimacy capability

Social media marketing capability does not directly influence customer loyalty. Firms need to transform digital interactions into real customer relationships. The customer intimacy theory argues that organizational capabilities geared toward opportunity to build personalized communication, responsiveness and understanding aimed at the customer side of marketing in turn lead to more solid relationship outcomes. Similarly, Liu et al. (2024) digital customer intimacy provides a platform for firms to forge long-term relations, leveraging digital interactions into personalized experiences. Therefore, digital customer centric intimacy capability will also be proposed to be a key mediator among the impact of social media marketing capability and customer loyalty.

Indirect evidence for such mediating relationships has been previously shown, where customer-oriented digital capabilities reinforce the effectiveness of social media marketing. Marolt et al. (2022) examination by Fan (2023) found that relational social commerce capability serves as a mediator of the relationship between social media use and business performance. B. Luo et al. (2023) explained how Social CRM capability mediates the relationship between social media in improving marketing results through stronger customer relationships. Our findings can be summed up in the form of capabilities that are used to connect your digital marketing efforts with winning results for the business through customer intimacy. Underpinned by these findings, the present study suggests that digital customer-centric intimacy capability mediates the effect of social media marketing capability on customer loyalty among fashion MSMEs through digital communication becoming customized and enduring customer relationships. Hence, the following hypothesis is stated.

H4 : Digital customer-centric intimacy capability mediates the effect of social media marketing capability on customer loyalty toward fashion MSMEs.

Figure 1. Research Model

Source: Processed by author, 2026

A research model indicating the relationships of these three concepts is shown in figure 1. Therefore, the social media marketing capability becomes the independent variable which influences upon digital customer-centric intimacy capability and customer loyalty. Digital customer-centric intimacy capability has a direct effect on customer loyalty and through mediation. This model is derived from customer intimacy theory, which states that organizations can create stronger customer loyalty by converting digital-based interactions into meaningful and personalized relationships. Thus, the theoretical framework describes that customer-oriented social media skills play a direct and indirect role in enhancing loyalty, yielding via customer-oriented digital intimacy.

METHODS

Research Design

This study employs a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design (Hair et al., 2022). This research examines the effects of social media marketing capability of fashion MSMEs on digital customer-centric intimacy capability and customer loyalty. The sampled unit of analysis are the owners or managers of digital marketing and MSMEs in fashion the research is conducted on fashion MSMEs in Cirebon City and Cirebon Regency. Digital growth is rapidly growing in this area and social media is being used more to promote or market the business. Primary data is collected using structured questionnaires which are administered both online and offline. Such a cross-sectional study allows the researchers to capture the respondent's view in time as per their practice of organizational digital capabilities and customer relationship.

Population and Sample

The population is all fashion MSMEs in Cirebon City and Cirebon Regency who use at least one of the 4 social media marketing channels which include Instagram, Facebook, TikTok or WhatsApp Business. As reported by the regional cooperative and MSME office, there are more than 1,500 fashion MSMEs registered. According to (Hair et al., 2022), the minimum sample for PLS-SEM is from 200 to 300 observations for models of moderate complexity. With this, this study attempts to collect data from 200 respondents via purposive sampling. Respondents were required to be (1) the overseeing owner or manager responsible for marketing decisions, (2) have been in business for at least a year, and (3) play an active role in managing the firm's social media marketing.

Data Collection Procedure

The primary data is collected through a well-designed questionnaire distributed in online and face-to-face. Five-point Likert scales ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) are used for all measurement items. Prior to the main survey, item clarity, readability and preliminary reliability checks are conducted by pilot-testing the questionnaire with around 30 fashion MSME owners. The last survey involved a four-week data collection period through both fashion MSME cluster visitations and online distribution via Google Forms and WhatsApp Business networks. Employing online and offline methods maximises response rates while minimising non-response bias. The variables used in this study were operationalized based on relevant previous studies. The operational definitions and measurement indicators for each variable are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Variable and Indicator

Variable	Definition	Indicator
Social Media Marketing Capability	Social Media Marketing Capability is a firm's Ability to use social media platforms to interact with customers, increase customer engagement, and achieve marketing goals. This measurement is based on earlier studies on social media and digital marketing capability.	1. Ability to create attractive social media content. 2. Ability to manage multiple social media platforms effectively. 3. Ability to respond quickly to customer inquiries. 4. Ability to analyze customer interactions on social media. 5. Ability to integrate social media into the overall marketing strategy. 6. Ability to use customer feedback obtained through social media. (Z. Luo et al., 2024)
Digital Customer Centric Intimacy Capability	Digital Customer-Centric Intimacy Capability is the firm's Ability to build personalized, responsive, and long-lasting digital relationships with customers using digital technologies and customer data.	1. Perceived Digital Personalization Proximity Based on User Experience 2. Perceived Digital Proximity to Sharing 3. Perceived Closeness based on Needs 4. Perceived Emotional Connection Closeness 5. Perceived Digital Personalization Trust 6. The Perceived Relationship of Digital Conformity from User Experience 7. Perceived Digital Relevance Trust

Variable	Definition	Indicator
Customer Loyalty	Customer Loyalty is the Commitment of customers to keep buying products from the same fashion MSME and to recommend the business to others over time.	8. The Relationship of Perceived Digital Convenience to Customer Needs
		9. Perceived Digital Convenience Trust (Hasibuan et al., 2026b)
Customer Loyalty	Customer Loyalty is the Commitment of customers to keep buying products from the same fashion MSME and to recommend the business to others over time.	1. Intention to repurchase products.
		2. Willingness to recommend the MSME to others.
		3. Preference for buying despite competitors' offers.
		4. Positive word-of-mouth intention.
		5. Commitment to maintaining long-term relationships. (Banerji & Singh, 2024)

Source: Processed by author, 2026

Data Analysis Technique

The gathered data are analyzed by means of Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) using SmartPLS 3 program (Hair et al., 2022). This is an appropriate approach as the proposed model consists of direct and indirect relationships (Depression → Externalizing Problem Behavior mediated by Suicidal Ideation) and also that we were interested in prediction rather than confirmation of the model. This analysis occurs in two stages. The first stage concerns the measurement model evaluation, including indicator reliability, internal consistency reliability (Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability), Convergent Validity (Average Variance Extracted) and Discriminant Validity (using Heterotrait–Monotrait ratio). The second stage tests the structural model (collinearity statistics, coefficient of determination [R^2] and predictive relevance [Q^2], effect size [f^2], hypothesis testing through a bootstrapping procedure using 5,000 resamples). This analytical method generates good parameter estimates and is ideal for studies in which perceptual indicators measure latent variables and moderate sample size (Hair et al., 2022).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

RESULT

Respondent Profile

Demographic information on respondents and the need for the sample to be representative of culinary MSMEs currently using social media marketing were summarized through a descriptive analysis. Respondent profiling includes gender, age, educational attainment, system since when the business had been in operation, and primarily used social media for marketing activities. These traits are critical since the success of social media marketing capability and digital customer-centric intimacy capability, to a large extent, relies on business owners who have practical experience in managing customers through conducting digital interactions. The distribution of these demographics also gives you an insight into how ready they are for digital marketing practices and

sustaining customer relationships in the long term. In addition, providing respondent characteristics helps to increase transparency and the credibility of the empirical findings. A sample size of more than 300 respondents is sufficient to obtain stable parameter estimates and meets the recommended minimum requirement for PLS-SEM analysis. The respondents are owners or managers of culinary MSMEs who actively use social media as the main channel for marketing communications. The demographic characteristics of the respondents are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Respondent Characteristics

Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	136	45.3
Female	164	54.7
Age		
< 30 years	69	23.0
30–40 years	142	47.3
> 40 years	89	29.7
Education Level		
High School	118	39.3
Diploma/Bachelor	156	52.0
Postgraduate	26	8.7
Business Operating Period		
< 3 years	82	27.3
3–5 years	109	36.3
> 5 years	109	36.3
Primary Social Media Platform		
Instagram	118	39.3
TikTok	96	32.0
Facebook	42	14.0
WhatsApp Business	44	14.7

Source: Data Processed, 2026

The respondents profile shows that the sample is slightly dominated by female entrepreneurs, with 54.7% of the total respondents. This suggests that women have an important role as managers in culinary MSMEs and also in conducting digital marketing activities. Almost half of those who took part in the poll were aged 30 to 40, an industry average for keyworkers, which makes them more likely to be generally adaptable and to use digital criteria. The majority of respondents are diploma or bachelor's degree holders, suggesting that most business owners have sufficient education to understand and implement digital marketing strategies. With respect to business experience, 72.6% of respondents were able to run their businesses for over three years already and thus have had sufficient time to gain experience in terms of building relationships with customers as well as responding to market changes. 04: Instagram is the most used social media for promoting culinary products and engaging customers, right in front of TikTok. In general, the demographic structure indicates that respondents have sufficient experience with digital technology to provide reliable

information on social media marketing capability, customer-centric intimacy capability, digital customers, and customer loyalty in culinary MSMEs.

Measurement Model Assessment

Before testing the structural relationships, we assessed the measurement model to confirm that all constructs met or exceeded acceptable standards for validity and reliability. This evaluation included assessments of convergent validity, construct reliability, discriminant validity, and collinearity. The outer loadings and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) were used to assess convergent validity, whereas Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability were used to assess construct reliability. Testing for discriminant validity was conducted using the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT), and collinearity was assessed using the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF). This is particularly important for PLS-SEM, as reliable and valid measurement instruments strengthen the estimation of the structural model.

Convergent Validity

Convergent validity is concerned with the degree to which the indicators of a latent construct serve as adequate representations of that construct. Good indicator reliability is when the outer loading values of the indicator are above the recommended minimum value of 0.70. Loading values in the high range indicate a good fit of the model or its factors, implying that observed variables contribute significantly to explaining their underlying latent variable. As such, assessment of outer loadings is a necessary first step before evaluating construct reliability and structural relationships.

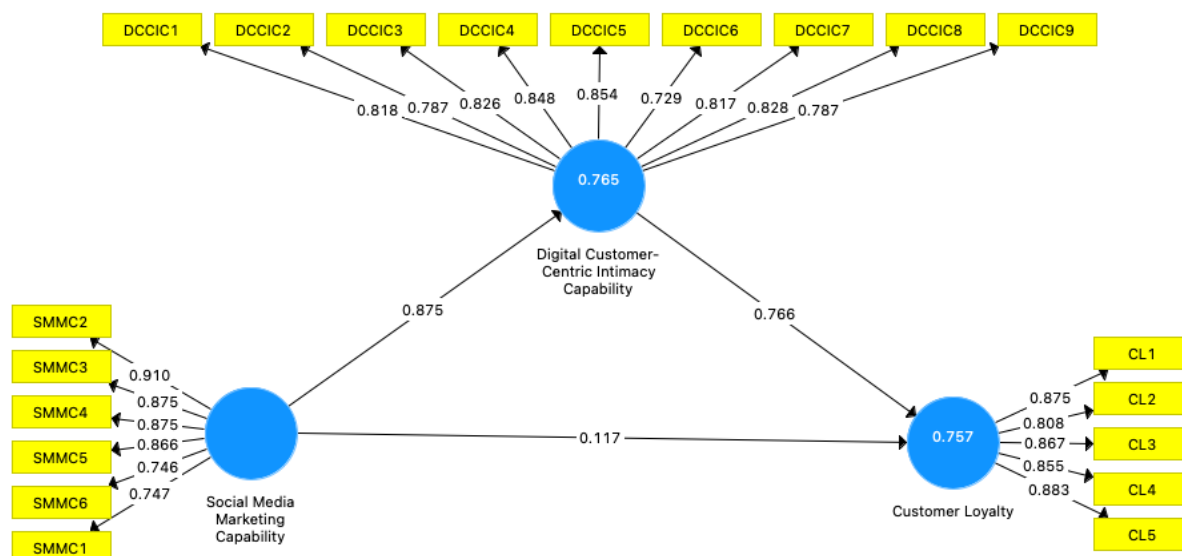
Table 3. Outer Loadings

Construct	Indicator	Loading
Social Media Marketing Capability	SMMC1	0.747
	SMMC2	0.910
	SMMC3	0.875
	SMMC4	0.875
	SMMC5	0.866
	SMMC6	0.746
Digital Customer-Centric Intimacy Capability	DCCIC1	0.818
	DCCIC2	0.787
	DCCIC3	0.826
	DCCIC4	0.848
	DCCIC5	0.854
	DCCIC6	0.729
	DCCIC7	0.817
	DCCIC8	0.828
	DCCIC9	0.787
Customer Loyalty	CL1	0.875
	CL2	0.808
	CL3	0.867
	CL4	0.855

Construct	Indicator	Loading
	CL5	0.883

Source: Data Processed, 2026

Figure 2. Outer Loading



Source: Data Processed, 2026

The output of outer loading values using PLS estimation is presented in table 3, which explains that all measurement indicators achieve an outer loading value (> 0.70) ranging from 0.729 to 0.910 based on the recommended zone. The largest loading was related to SMMC2 (0.910), which indicates that all the other indicators contributed to measuring this construct particularly well. On the other hand, DCCIC6 reported the lowest loading (0.729), although it is still above the threshold criterion and was retained in the model. The consistent, reasonable loading values across all constructs indicate that each indicator adequately reflects its respective latent variable. These results indicate acceptable convergent validity and sufficient indicator reliability for further examination.

Construct Reliability and Convergent Validity

Construct reliability assesses the internal consistency of a set of indicators that measure the same latent construct. Cronbach's alpha and Composite Reliability (CR) are generally used to assess reliability, while Average Variance Extracted (AVE) is calculated to verify convergent validity. Cronbach's alpha and CR values above 0.70 indicate acceptable internal consistency, while AVE values greater than 0.50 indicate that the construct explains more variance in its indicators than is left unexplained. Ordering these in a "Q" ensures that the measurement model is reliable and can meaningfully define the theoretical constructs.

Table 4. Construct Reliability and Validity

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	AVE
Social Media Marketing Capability	0.914	0.934	0.704
Digital Customer-Centric Intimacy Capability	0.935	0.945	0.658
Customer Loyalty	0.910	0.933	0.736

Source: Data Processed, 2026

In table 4, we can see that all constructs meet the recommended reliability and validity criteria. Cronbach's alpha results range from 0.910 to 0.935, demonstrating strong internal consistency among the indicators within each construct. Composite reliability ranges from 0.933 to 0.945, indicating the robustness of the measurement scales' fit. Also, all AVE values exceed the minimum recommended value of 0.50 (ranging from 0.658 to 0.736), indicating that each construct explains a large share of the variance in its indicators. These results confirm that the measurement model has high construct reliability and acceptable convergent validity.

Discriminant Validity

Discriminant validity assesses whether each construct is empirically distinct from other constructs in the study's model. The Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) is currently considered the most stringent approach for testing discriminant validity in PLS-SEM. HTMT values below 0.90 support the notion that conceptually distinct constructs have been appropriately discriminated. Discriminant validity is one of the criteria to be demonstrated because it assures that each construct in your model measures a distinct theoretical concept (not overlapping with other variables).

Table 5. Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT)

Constructs	Customer Loyalty	DCCIC
Digital Customer-Centric Intimacy Capability	0.877	
Social Media Marketing Capability	0.862	0.898

Source: Data Processed, 2026

As shown in Table 5, the HTMT values range from 0.862 to 0.898, all of which are below the suggested cut-off value of 0.90. The highest HTMT value is observed between social media marketing capability and digital customer-centric intimacy capability (0.898), suggesting they are conceptually related yet sufficiently distinct. Similarly, the HTMT values for customer loyalty relative to other constructs also meet the discriminant validity criteria. These findings indicate that each construct measures a distinct concept, and so the presence of multicollinearity stemming from overlap between constructs is unlikely to have biasing effects on the following analysis based on structural models.

Collinearity Assessment

The collinearity test was conducted to assess whether multicollinearity among indicators biased the estimated path coefficients due to multicollinearity among indicators. By virtue, if $VIF < 5.00$, it indicates collinearity is not a threat on the measurement model. Low collinearity makes

parameter estimates more stable and structural relationships more interpretable. Hence, checking the VIF values is a necessary step before testing the structural model.

Table 6. Collinearity Statistics (Outer VIF Values)

Construct	VIF Range
Social Media Marketing Capability	2.034 – 5.116
Digital Customer-Centric Intimacy Capability	2.263 – 4.359
Customer Loyalty	2.096 – 3.144

Source: Data Processed, 2026

Table 6 presents the VIF Matrix, indicating that all indicators were at acceptable levels of collinearity. The VIF values for customer loyalty indicators range from 2.096 to 3.144, and for digital customer-centric intimacy capability indicators, from 2.263 to 4.359. For social media marketing capability indicators, the VIF values range from 2.034 to 5.116, with only one indicator to marginally exceeding ($VIF = 5.116$) the conventional threshold level of five (5.00). Since the excess is small and all other measurement quality criteria are met satisfactorily, we kept the indicator in the model. In summary, the results indicate that multicollinearity is not a significant issue and does not compromise the reliability of the measurement model.

Structural Model Assessment

Once the measurement model meets the required validity and reliability criteria, the next step is to assess the structural model to test the hypothesized relationships among latent constructs. Next, the analysis covered: (a) coefficient of determination (R^2), (b) effect size (f^2), (c) hypothesis testing to establish direct effects and indirect effects through mediation. The procedures provide substantial information about the model's predictive ability as well as direct and indirect relations. We applied the bootstrapping procedure in AMOS with 5,000 resamples to obtain robust estimates of path coefficients, t-statistics, and significance levels for the structural model.

Coefficient of Determination (R^2)

The coefficient of determination (R^2) evaluates the predictive accuracy of endogenous constructs by showing the proportion of variance explained by their predictor variables. Higher R^2 values indicate greater explanatory power of the structural model. As per the common conventions in PLS-SEM, R^2 values of 0.75, 0.50, and 0.25 indicate substantial, moderate, and weak explanatory power, respectively. Consequently, to evaluate how well the proposed model explains the variance of the endogenous constructs, it is important to examine R^2 .

Table 7. Coefficient of Determination (R^2)

Endogenous Construct	R^2	Adjusted R^2
Digital Customer-Centric Intimacy Capability	0.765	0.764
Customer Loyalty	0.757	0.754

Source: Data Processed, 2026

The impact in table 7 indicates that the structural model has significant predictive capability. It can be seen that social media marketing capability accounts for 76.5% of the variance in digital customer-centric intimacy capability ($R^2 = 0.765$), indicating strong predictive power of social

media marketing capability for firms' relational activity with customers and their customer-centric digital relationships in totality. In addition, both social media marketing capability and digital customer-centric intimacy capability together account for 75.7% of the variance in customer loyalty ($R^2 = 0.757$). The research findings show that the proposed model has a high level of explanatory power as to how culinary MSMEs can enhance customer loyalty. The remaining unexplained variance may be attributable to other organizational or environmental factors beyond the scope of this research.

Effect Size (f^2)

Effect size (f^2) indicates what an exogenous construct contributes to the explained variance of an endogenous construct when removing the predictor from the model. Interpretive magnitudes of f^2 values are often categorized as small (0.02), medium (0.15), and large (0.35), respectively. This assessment provides additional perspective on the relative importance of each predictor in terms to statistical significance. Thus, effect size analysis enhances hypothesis testing by assessing the usefulness of the proposed relationships within a structural model.

Table 8. Effect Size (f^2)

Relationship	f^2	Interpretation
Social Media Marketing Capability → Digital Customer-Centric Intimacy Capability	3.256	Large
Digital Customer-Centric Intimacy Capability → Customer Loyalty	0.567	Large
Social Media Marketing Capability → Customer Loyalty	0.013	Negligible

Source: Data Processed, 2026

As shown in table 8, social media marketing capability also has a large effect on digital customer-centric intimacy capability ($f^2=3.256$), indicating that social media capability is the most important driver of firms' customer-centric digital relationships. Similarly, digital customer-centric intimacy capability has the highest impact ($f^2=0.567$) on customer loyalty, indicating that the company should maintain a close digital relationship with its customers to develop new levels of intimacy that reinforce loyalty behaviors. However, the direct impact of social media marketing capability on customer loyalty is weak ($f^2 = 0.013$), indicating that social media marketing capability alone does not directly improve customer loyalty without first building more robust digital customer intimacy.

Direct Effect (Hypothesis Testing)

The bootstrapping procedure was conducted to test the significance of the proposed direct relationships and the indirect effect. Path coefficients (β), t-statistics, and p-values were used to evaluate statistical significance. A relationship is found to be significant if the t-statistic is larger than 1.96 and the p-value is smaller than 0.05. This paper contributes to the empirical evidence regarding the direct effects of social media marketing capability and digital customer-centric intimacy capability on customer loyalty.

Table 9. Direct Effects

Hypothesis	Path	β	t-value	p-value	Decision
H1	Social Media Marketing Capability → Customer Loyalty	0.117	1.202	0.230	Rejected
H2	Social Media Marketing Capability → Digital Customer-Centric Intimacy Capability	0.875	37.743	0.000	Supported
H3	Digital Customer-Centric Intimacy Capability → Customer Loyalty	0.766	8.602	0.000	Supported

Source: Data Processed, 2026

The path coefficients show that social media marketing capability is not a direct determinant of customer loyalty ($\beta = 0.117$, $p = 0.230$); thus, H1 is rejected as presented in Table 9. Thus, this finding emphasizes that merely managing social media marketing by culinary MSMEs shall not directly improve customer loyalty. In contrast, social media marketing capability has a significant positive influence on digital customer-centric intimacy capability ($\beta = 0.875$, $p < 0.001$), corroborating H2. Additionally, digital customer-centric intimacy capability plays a major role in driving customer loyalty ($\beta = 0.766$, $p < .001$), thereby confirming H3. The findings can be concluded that customer loyalty is fostered by firms' ability to build intimate, individualized, and consumer-centric digital relationships, rather than specifically through social media marketing activities.

Mediation Effect

The mediation analysis was to test if Digital Customer-Centric Intimacy Capability (DC-CIC) mediates the relationship between Social Media Marketing Capability (SMMC) and Customer Loyalty (CL). The bootstrap method was applied to evaluate the indirect effect. A sizeable indirect effect suggests that the mediating construct plays a key role in transmitting the independent variable's influence on the dependent variable. Mediation analyses give more insights into the mechanism of customer loyalty in culinary MSMEs.

Table 10. Specific Indirect Effect

Hypothesis	Indirect Relationship	β	t-value	p-value	Decision
H4	Social Media Marketing Capability → Digital Customer-Centric Intimacy Capability → Customer Loyalty	0.670	8.745	0.000	Supported

Source: Data Process, 2026

The mediation analysis results are summarized in Table 10. The output of mediation analysis reveals that digital customer-centric intimacy capability indeed takes a significant role in the indirect relation ($\beta = 0.670$, $t = 8.745$, $p < 0.001$) between social media marketing capability and customer loyalty even though similarity is shown with P value column. As well as what has not been shown here yet digital media as form entirely seems to transforms immediate contacts into everlasting long term binding bonds. Since the direct effect of social media marketing capability on customer loyalty is not statistically significant, whereas the indirect effect is significant, this suggests full mediation. This finding implies that social media marketing capability supports customer loyalty by enabling the firm to establish interactive, customized, and long-term digital relationships with

customers. Thus, digital customer-centric intimacy capability becomes the driver through which social media marketing capability leads to customer loyalty among culinary MSMEs.

DISCUSSION

Influence of social media marketing capability on consumer loyalty

The results prove that social media marketing capability has no direct effect on customer loyalty in culinary MSMEs. This finding indicates that the mere usage of MSMEs' social media platforms for promotional activities, content generation, and customer interaction will not be enough to galvanize customer loyalty. While social media does provide businesses with increased visibility and engagement during these times, meaningful customer relationships rely on something much deeper than just a few online interactions per week. Dynamic capabilities theory suggests that organizational capabilities lead to competitive outcomes, achieved to transforming lower-order capabilities into higher-order capabilities, thereby enabling organizations to outperform the competition in customer value creation perpetually (Teece, 2007). In the culinary MSME context, social media marketing capability is an operational capability that enables digital communication but does not directly lead to emotional attachment or enduring customer commitment. While there is some merit in beautiful content or mighty customer service, these, in isolation, cannot drive repeat purchases until brands manage to create tailored digital experiences that build long-lasting bonds with their customers. In this regard, the non-significant direct relationship observed in this study reinforces the finding that only the quality of digital relationship management drives customer loyalty, rather than actual social media marketing activities.

This is inconsistent with some previous studies, which found that social media marketing capability positively impacts customer loyalty. For example, Trainor et al. (2014) proposed that firms with enhanced social media capabilities are better positioned to improve customer relationship performance through interactive digital communication. Similar to the study findings of Khin and Ho (2019), digital capability was found to indirectly and positively impact organizational performance, as a better response to changes in customer expectations translates into higher performance (Khin & Ho, 2019). Nevertheless, recent results indicate that social media capabilities in culinary MSMEs are insufficient to achieve customer loyalty, as customers now demand personal communication rather than generic marketing messages. This difference can be attributed to the highly competitive culinary industry, which serves content with similar attributes across digital platforms. Accordingly, social media marketing capability has value only in conjunction with organizational capabilities that offer greater levels of customer intimacy and its persistence through digital ties over time.

Digital customer-centric sophistication: The social media marketing capability

The findings showed that social media marketing capability has a significant positive impact on digital customer-centric intimacy capability. This implies that culinary MSMEs with greater capability in handling social media platforms are more successful at creating personalized digital engagement with consumers. Social media helps businesses to gather customer data, identify customer interests, respond to feedback promptly, and stay connected. Dynamic capabilities theory views organizations as constantly augmenting their competitiveness through the identification of customer needs, the recognition of market opportunities, and the transformation of organizational

resources into capabilities in service of the customer (Teece, 2007). The social media marketing capability therefore acts as a key organizational resource, enabling the creation of customer-centric digital relationships. To this end, rather than merely serving as a channel for promotion, social media serves as a strategic interface through which MSMEs can build trust, responsiveness, and personal connections with their customers.

The empirical evidence corroborates prior studies that position digital capability as a technological enabler of customer-centric organizational capabilities. In another study, Khin and Ho (2019) confirmed that digital capability enables firms to enhance organizational performance through greater digital innovation and improved customer responsiveness. Since social media technology centers on customer engagement, it is believed to improve customer relationship performance. The current study builds on these conclusions, with results suggesting that social media marketing capability does not yield immediate customer loyalty but instead catalyzes the development of digital customer-centric intimacy capability. This feature allows culinary MSMEs to shift from a unidirectional promotion mindset to a relationship-based engagement that generates greater customer value. Thus, the set of investments undertaken in social media marketing should focus as much on facilitating the increasing adoption of applicable technologies as it should on augmenting the firm's ability to engage in at least two-way communication with individual consumers.

Impact of Digital Customer-Centric Intimacy Capability on Customer Loyalty

The results validate that digital customer-centric intimacy capability has a significant positive impact on customer loyalty. On the other hand, this outcome suggests customers are likely to continue in the long term because these culinary MSMEs successfully develop more personalized, responsive, customer-oriented digital interactions. Digital intimacy allows brands to understand customer preferences, respond in real time, and customize messages based on specific customer requirements. By the dynamic capabilities theory, sustainable competitive advantage occurs when firms routinely reconfigure organizational capabilities to create superior customer value in changing environments (Teece, 2007). Digital customer-centric intimacy capability is a second-order capability of this sort, as it combines customer relationship management with digital technology. As a result, customer loyalty is not driven by its digital presence but by value-adding digital experiences bound by emotional connection and trust.

The findings align with prior research indicating that businesses focused on customer-centered digital relationships outperform their peers. It has been in favor of use because customer relationship capabilities developed through digital technologies have been demonstrated to positively influence both relationship performance and customer retention (Hossain et al., 2025). Similarly, Varadarajan et al. (2022) stated that sustainable marketing strategies increasingly rely on firms' ability to create long-term customer value and manage customer relationships over the short term, in contrast to the traditional approach of promotional activities. In the context of culinary MSMEs, these arguments are further supported by demonstrating that customer intimacy is the primary mechanism by which digital interaction translates into customer loyalty. Thus, what MSMEs should do is to focus on relationship quality, communication, and persistence (continuous engagement with customers) as opposed to just increasing the quantity of promotional messages across different social media channels.

Digital Customer-Centric Intimacy Capability as a Mediator

The mediation analysis indicates that digital customer-centric intimacy capability fully mediates social media marketing capability to customer loyalty. These findings provide evidence that social media marketing capability does not directly promote customer loyalty but rather reinforces loyalty through the firm's customer-centered digital relationship-building capabilities. Dynamic capabilities theory assumes that organizational resources lead to competitive value-creating outcomes only after they are modified into strategic capabilities, while continuously creating future customer value. While social media marketing capability lays the technological and operational foundation for effective digital communication, digital customer-centric intimacy capability translates these digital resources into experiences that deliver value to customers. This mechanism uncovers why firms need not only to get on social media but also to build competencies that enable customer trust, responsiveness, and personalized engagement to gain loyal customers. Hence, digital customer-centric intimacy capability serves as the essential strategic capability that transforms digital marketing efforts into durable customer loyalty.

The mediation result is also an extension of the literature for SME on digital capability and customer relationship management. Khin and Ho (2019) explained that digital capability improves organizational performance not through direct operational improvement but rather by developing so-called innovation-oriented organizational processes. Similarly, Trainor et al. (2014) highlighted that customer relationship performance must involve a firm's capability to leverage digital technologies to enhance relationship opportunities rather than simply maximizing online visibility. The current research provides empirical support by identifying the digital customer-centric intimacy capability as a specific mediating mechanism between social media marketing capability and customer loyalty in culinary MSMEs. From a theoretical perspective, this finding extends dynamic capabilities theory into the digital realm of relationship management; more specifically, it shows that customer-centered digital intimacy is a strategic capability through which investments in digital marketing ultimately create durable and sustainable loyalty. Culinary MSMEs should, therefore, be geared towards two separate components regarding its "digital engagement" by way of relationships with consumers includes engage in building strategic influence through social media platforms to receive feedback single from one to many including goal-driven strategic content for pre-introduction and proactive communication as a pre-social media communication pilot study (also known as an exploratory survey to seek responses) and subsequently build upon long-term value management such also being consumption behaviour alignment against promotional objectives and response leanings much like long-term relationship marketing commitment behaviours.

CONCLUSION

Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to the dynamic capabilities theory by showing that social media marketing capability alone cannot directly enhance customer loyalty among culinary MSMEs. Instead, the results demonstrate that digital customer-centric intimacy capability is the strategically important capability in which social media marketing resources are deployed to deliver longstanding customer relationships. The study indicates that providers will need to find a way to include in an agile,

customer-oriented manner the digital marketing capability, which is no longer only static (e.g., how well a firm uses social media), but rather dynamic as well (e.g., creating bespoke, responsive, and directed digital primal interactions). The research advances the dynamic capabilities literature by uncovering how operational digital capabilities are reframed as top-order relational capabilities embedded within their higher-order, intimate digital customer development pathway, which acts as a full mediating mechanism, labeled as digital customer-centric intimacy capability, to engender sustainable customer loyalty. This research enriches the emerging literature on digital marketing for culinary MSMEs by integrating capability development and customer relationship perspectives into a single conceptual framework.

Managerial Implications

The results provide essential managerial insights for owners and managers of culinary MSMEs to increase customer retention through loyalty programs in an increasingly competitive digital market. Instead of only scaling up their social media promotions, the MSMEs need to work towards building customer-centric digital relationship strategies that emphasize personalization, responsiveness, and sustainable engagement with their customers. Hence, investments in social media marketing should be complemented by systematic approaches to gauging customer preferences, responding to customer feedback promptly, and creating interactive digital experiences that instill trust and emotional attachment. The integration of digital customer-centric intimacy capability empowers culinary MSMEs to transition from mere digital messaging to deep-rooted, sustained, and meaningful connections with their customers, thereby enhancing customer retention and supporting business sustainability.

Limitations and Future Research

First, When interpreting the results, some limitations of this study should be considered. Secondly, the study is limited to culinary MSMEs, which may limit the generalizability of this research finding to other MSME business types. Third, the measurement model yielded valid and reliable estimates, but respondent bias may have been introduced due to the use of self-reported questionnaires. Future research is suggested to use longitudinal designs, cover a wider range of industrial sectors, and include objective measures of business performance to provide a broader understanding of the customer loyalty-building process. Future research will also be required to include other moderating strategic variables that can complete the puzzle and explain how digital marketing capabilities translate into sustainable competitive results in MSMEs, for example, customer engagement capability, exploratory innovation capability, or customer experience management.

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