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Investigating the impact of e-customer relationship management (eCRM) and digital innovation on the strategic competitive performance of small and medium-sized enterprises in Guilan province

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Abstract

This research was conducted with the aim of investigating the impact of e-customer relationship management (eCRM) and digital innovation on the strategic competitive performance of small and medium-sized enterprises in Guilan province. The statistical population of the research included all employees of small and medium-sized enterprises in Guilan province, based on Morgan's table, 384 questionnaires were distributed among the statistical population as a sample. The data collected by questionnaires was analysed by SPSS24 and AMOS24 software using structural equation modelling (SEM). The results of research showed that e-customer relationship management has a positive and significant effect on strategic competitive performance. Digital innovation has a positive and significant impact on strategic competitive performance. Finally, the results showed that digital innovation plays a mediating role in the relationship between eCRM and strategic competitive performance.

Keywords

Strategic competitive performance, electronic customer relationship management, digital innovation.

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1. Introduction

Nowadays, e-commerce is considered as one of the efficient methods in across the world. This new method is gradually making obsolete all the traditional methods and tools of business all over the world. The emergence of the Internet is one of the biggest technological evolutions in the history of the world, this emergence has deeply affected the daily life of people around the world. Internet access has made people's lives easier, because almost everything can be accessed online, regardless of time and place. Considering the attraction of users to the Internet, companies and marketers tend to advertise their products and services in this way. One of the basic issues that have been neglected in some Iranian organizations is e-commerce, marketing and advertising. Reducing purchasing and selling costs is one of the most important reasons why most successful companies use marketing and e-commerce strategies. Therefore, the best implementation method is to use the advantages of the Internet and e-commerce. This type of business does not require professional and academic training. Therefore, many people who are away from working in organizations and institutions for any reason can easily earn money in this way. Stores, institutions and organizations can introduce and provide their products and services to customers without the need to be located in all parts of a country (Mehrabi et al., 2022).

The strategic competitive performance of companies has a positive relationship with the development of internal capabilities (Kopanakis et al., 2016). Companies having the competencies and resources to adopt innovative market-based initiatives can lead to maintaining competitive advantage and developing more innovative capabilities, which ultimately improves strategic competitive performance and market efficiency (Ashrafi et al., 2019). The effectiveness of strategic marketing on strategic competitive performance has been shown in research literature (Sultana et al., 2022). Several recent studies also show the positive effect of the market on the competitive performance of the company (Gimang and Imagwali, 2020 and Zhou et al., 2019). The ability to deal with rapid and often unprecedented changes in the data-driven innovation environment (DDI) leads to competitive advantage (Theis et al., 2016). It indicates the capabilities of companies to visualize and appropriately respond to market opportunities or uncertainties (Lee et al., 2021). Therefore, acquiring and implementing agile organizational capabilities enables companies to create higher value in the business ecosystem (Shams et al., 2021). The altering needs of customers enhance strategic competitive performance (Carvalho et al., 2012).

Research results indicate the impact of innovation on strategic competitive performance in the market (Sultana et al., 2022). Innovation capability includes the ability of a company to use its resources in order to change the needs of customers and achieve a competitive advantage in a targeted manner (Purseed Bonab et al., 2017). Yesil and Kaya (2012) have defined innovation as follows: organizations have the ability to create innovation or can be innovative. Hence, innovation capability can be defined as a set of characteristics of an organization that supports and facilitates innovation strategies (Sabzinjad and Abbasi, 2019). Innovation capabilities are creating new ideas, identifying new market opportunities, and implementing innovation, by influencing the existing resources and capabilities of the organization (Hosseinzadeh Shahri and Shahini, 2017).

According to researchers, electronic customer relationship management is one of the variables predicting electronic innovation (Chi, 2021). Usually, organizations evaluate the benefits of a new technology before implementing it to ensure the appropriateness of the cost spent on implementing the system. This issue is also true for the implementation of electronic customer relationship management system. The purpose of electronic customer relationship management is to attract and retain customers (especially valuable customers) in the context of information technology, in order to improve customer service by establishing a strong relationship with them at the right time (Mohammed Shafiei et al., 2019). Due to the ever-

increasing growth of digital technologies and changes in consumer behavior, small and medium-sized companies should consider using new technologies to maintain and expand their market. This includes using electronic customer relationship management tools, improving user experience and increasing access to new markets. However, for the competitiveness of small and medium-sized companies, it is necessary to consider performance improvement in other areas, including improving operational performance, reducing costs, and increasing investment returns. Therefore, the impact of electronic customer relationship management and digital innovation on the strategic competitive performance of small and medium enterprises is very important, due to its impact on competitiveness, improvement of user experience and access to new markets. Therefore, in this research, the impact of electronic customer relationship management and digital innovation on the strategic competitive performance of small and medium enterprises in Guilan province was investigated.

2. Literature review

Customer Relationship and customer satisfaction leads to cost savings and increasing for businesses. Therefore, the establishment of customer-focused management is one of the necessities of business survival in recent competitive world. Customer relationship management is a perspective that emphasizes joint cooperation between parties to the transaction in order to create value. This perspective, which is the result of recent advances in information technology, by collecting and organizing customer data in databases, aims to respond better and faster to their demands and needs as a result of establishing the relationship with the customer and the survival of the organization. Without the support of information technology and especially internet and communication technologies, customer relationship management will not have the necessary efficiency (Zanjirchi et al., 2012).

At the same time as the complexity of the competitive environment increases, innovation is considered the main advantage for businesses. In order to survive under constant competitive stress, businesses shall innovate, because innovation is considered a valuable resource for gaining competitive advantage (Sabzinjad and Abbasi, 2020). In the face of competitive stress, new technologies and an uncertain environment, companies shall overcome their innovative competitors and develop innovative approaches in order to survive and meet their needs. The reliance of companies on innovation and creative activities in order to maintain a long-term advantage in competitive fields is completely exposed for today's societies. Rapid changes in technology in various industries and intense competition are two important factors that play the greatest role in the increasing importance of innovation (Purseed Bonab et al., 2017).

The process of reorganizing the business system in the digital environment is very complex. This process requires precise planning, modeling and implementation of a customer-focused approach. Adopting a customer-focused strategy depends on the application of CRM. This procedure can be considered a comprehensive strategy that includes the process of retaining and collaborating with selected customers to create value for the company and customers. According to Kotler (1997), deep analysis of customer behavior is the beginning of CRM. Customer relationship management is based on marketing principles. ECRM is a new concept that has been realized using the Internet and web technology, and its focus is on internet or web-based interaction. Its difference with CRM is the instrumental use of eCRM from the Internet. eCRM is a combination of hardware, software, applications and management obligations that take different forms according to the organization's goals and do not only include software and technology; Rather, it includes business processes based on a customer-focused strategy that is supported by various software and technologies. CRM in both traditional and electronic systems has unique features that support customer interactions,

internal communications with business processes and integrated systems to achieve functional, strategic and operational goals (Mohammed Shafiei et al., 2019).

Kumar et al. (2023) in research entitled Artificial intelligence (AI)-enabled CRM capability in healthcare: The impact on service innovation, investigated the underlying phenomena with a mixed approach. This research examines resource-based theory, dynamic capabilities theory, and productivity paradox theory to explore how healthcare in India can achieve AI-based CRM capabilities and enhance service innovation. In this research, aspects of CRM capabilities with artificial intelligence were identified and a framework for customer relationship management capabilities and service innovation enabled with artificial intelligence was created. In this study, it was shown that customer service flexibility (CSF) is a missing link in this relationship. The findings of a quantitative study using PLS-SEM showed linear relationships between artificial intelligence-enabled customer relationship management capabilities, customer service flexibility, and service innovation.

Sultana et al. (2022) in research entitled "How data-driven innovation capability is shaping the future of market agility and competitive performance?" stated that in the race to achieve market dominance and remain competitive in a disruptive and rapidly changing business environment, many companies have invested significantly in data-driven innovation capabilities (DDIC). Surprisingly, the role of strategic market agility in achieving firm's competitiveness through DDIC has not been studied. Addressing this gap, mentioned researchers conceptualize the DDIC research model using the resource-based perspective, dynamic capability, market orientation, and disruptive innovation theory. We empirically test the model with survey data from 312 Australian managers. It highlights the importance of strategic market agility as a key mediator between DDIC and strategic competitive performance. They discuss the implications of our findings for theoretical contributions and managerial implications.

Chi (2021) in research titled " Innovation capability: The impact of e-CRM and COVID-19 risk perception" stated: The application of e-CRM currently offers benefits to companies in different business sectors, especially in the hospitality industry. The aim of this paper is to investigate the impact of e-CRM components (i.e. technology-based CRM, knowledge management and customer orientation) on companies' innovation capabilities. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire survey conducted in Vietnam. The dataset contains of 213 valid responses by managers. Correlation analysis and structural equation modeling (SEM) were used to investigate the causal relationships between technology-based CRM, knowledge management, customer orientation, long-term relationships, and innovation capability. The results show that knowledge management, customer orientation and technology-based CRM have a positive effect on long-term relationships and innovation capability. Understanding the risk of Covid-19 plays a role in enhancing the link between long-term relationships and innovation capability. Based on these findings, this study provides an improved perception of how knowledge management, customer orientation and technology influence innovative activities.

Mehrabi et al. (2022) in research entitled "Explain the optimization model of marketing successfulness and customer relationship management in electronic businesses and electronic works" explained the optimization model of marketing successfulness and customer relationship management in electronic businesses and electronic works. This research is descriptive-scrolling in terms of nature and method. The statistical population consisted of 2500 customers of companies active in the field of electronic services in various activities. Amos software was used to analyze the data. The results of the analysis showed that; Price, sales promotion, branding, perceptual/emotional features, hardware facilities, software facilities, social media, technological features, networking, innovation, customer orientation,

digital marketing, inter organizational factors, marketing and customer relationship management has a significant impact on the marketing successfulness and e-commerce.

Panahi et al. (2020) studied the effect of customer relationship management on knowledge management with the mediating role of employee empowerment. The statistical population of the research was the employees of the General Directorate of Railways of Azerbaijan, which was obtained by a simple random sampling method and according to the Cochran equal formula, including 131 people as a sample size. This research included three main hypotheses and eight sub-hypotheses. The results showed that knowledge management has a direct positive effect on the empowerment of employees and the implementation of customer relationship management and can lead to mutual synergy. Also, knowledge management can have a positive and significant effect on the customer relationship management by empowering employees. Therefore, empowering employees can enhance the effect of knowledge management on customer relationship.

Mohammad Shafiee et al. (2020) in research titled "Antecedents and Consequences of Implementing Electronic Customer Relationship Management in Small and Medium Enterprises" investigated the factors affecting the establishment of eCRM and the effect of its implementation on loyalty, profitability and competitive advantage in small and medium-sized enterprises. The statistical population of the research includes managers and employees of knowledge-based companies in Isfahan Scientific Research Town, 300 of whom were selected by simple random method. A researcher-made questionnaire was used to data collection. Content and construct validity were used to determine the validity of the questionnaire, and Cronbach's alpha was used to determine its reliability, and its value was 0.79. Structural equation approach and AMOS22 and SPSS22 software were used to analyze the data and test the research hypotheses. This research, while identifying the most important main factors affecting the success and failure of electronic customer relationship management, made it clear that the effective establishment of electronic customer relationship management has a positive effect on customer loyalty, profitability and competitive advantage. In addition, the results showed that using proper and up-to-date technology, implementing knowledge management and information sharing, teaching and preparing human resources, and interacting with customers had a vital role in the effective implementation of E-CRM.

3. Research hypotheses

The main goal of the current research is to investigate the impact of eCRM and digital innovation on the strategic competitive performance of small and medium-sized enterprises in Guilan province. Based on this, in order to achieve the aforementioned goal, the research hypotheses were designed as follows:

- 1- ECRM has a significant impact on strategic competitive performance.
- 2- Digital innovation has a significant impact on strategic competitive performance.
- 3- Digital innovation plays a mediating role in the relationship between eCRM and strategic competitive performance.

4. Conceptual model of research

The conceptual model of the research was designed as Figure 1. This model is a combination of the model of the articles of Sultana et al. (2022) and Chi (2021):

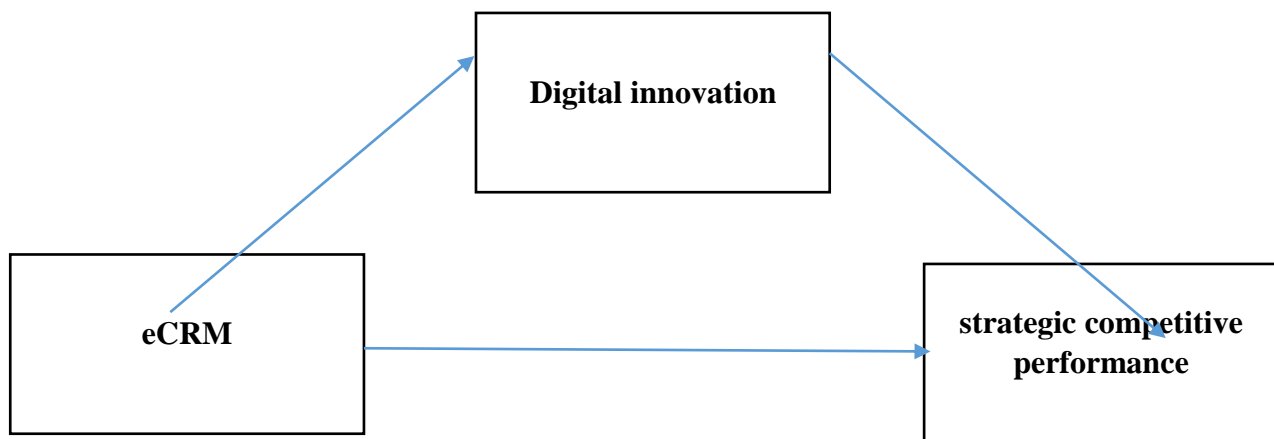


Figure 1. Conceptual model of research

5. Research Method

The current research is an applied research, because the aim of this research is to investigate the effect of eCRM and digital innovation on the competitiveness of small and medium-sized enterprises. Therefore, this research is very useful for small and medium enterprises that are looking for competitiveness and electronic marketing. Due to the fact that the data collection tool in this research was a researcher-made questionnaire, this research is included in descriptive survey research. Also, the current research is an applied research and according to the method, it is in the correlation research category. Data collection related to the theoretical basis and literature review was done using the library method. Also, data collection related to the research variables to analyze the hypotheses was done using a questionnaire under the survey method. The statistical population of the research was the employees of small and medium-sized enterprises in Guilan province. Since the size of the statistical population is uncertain, it was not possible to collect data from all the people of the statistical population, and as a result, a sample of the statistical population was selected. In this research, a non-probability sampling method was used; The statistical population of the current research was unclear, and for this reason, the number of the statistical sample of the research was obtained using Morgan's table. According to Morgan's table and unspecified population, the sample number was 384 people, and the same number of questionnaires were completed by the employees of small and medium-sized enterprises in Guilan province.

In this research, a standard questionnaire was used to collect data. For each question, a number of options and answers were selected, and the respondent should choose one of them as the answer. Each of the answers was organized in such a way that while being logical for that question, it is separate from the answers related to other questions. Therefore, the questionnaire was designed in such a way that the respondents set the options based on a 5-point Likert scale from completely agree to completely disagree. The questionnaire that was used for data collection was distributed to the respondents in person and included two parts; the first part is related to the personal characteristics of the respondent and includes age, gender and education level. In the second part, questions related to research variables including 12 questions were asked. In order to determine the reliability of the questionnaire, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was calculated through SPSS software. Considering that the minimum reliability coefficient for research questionnaires is 0.70, Cronbach's alpha coefficients obtained for all variables were higher than this value. Therefore, it can be mentioned that the reliability and validity of the research questionnaire was approved. In Table 1, the results of Cronbach's alpha coefficient were shown.

Table 1. Cronbach's alpha coefficient

Variable	Number of Questions	Cronbach's alpha coefficient
eCRM	4	0.821
Digital Innovation	5	0.864
Strategic Competitive Performance	3	0.785
Total	12	0.864

6. Results

In this research, descriptive statistics and inferential statistics were used to analyze the collected data. First, the variables were described using SPSS software, in the form of tables and statistical indices, and then the hypotheses were tested to analyze the data. In general, to generalize the results from the sample to the statistical population, structural equation modeling was used using Amos24 software. The results of descriptive statistics of research variables are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics of research variables

Variable	mean	STD	Min.	Max.	Skewness	Kurtosis	Qty.
eCRM	3.325	0.655	1.50	5.00	-0.302	0.631	384
Digital Innovation	3.348	0.575	1.60	5.00	0.144	0.507	384
Strategic Competitive Performance	3.484	0.631	1.33	5.00	-0.501	0.435	384

According to the results of Table 2, the coefficients of skewness and kurtosis are in the range (2, -2), so the data have a normal distribution. In order to test the hypotheses of this research, first, the conceptual model was fitted using the SEM in Amos software version 24. Then, the relevance of this model was investigated. Before fitting the structural model, it is necessary to use confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) in order to prove whether the 12 observed items (including questions) are determined by the overall fit of the measurement model. Obtaining a poor fit at this stage indicates the need to refine the measurement model and prevent the investigation of the structural model with hidden variables. In this stage of analysis, CFA was performed to determine the degree of fit of the model, adequacy of factor loadings, standardized residuals and explained variances for the observed variables. The following figure shows the measurement model for this research. In this model, observed variables and hidden variables are specified with their names.

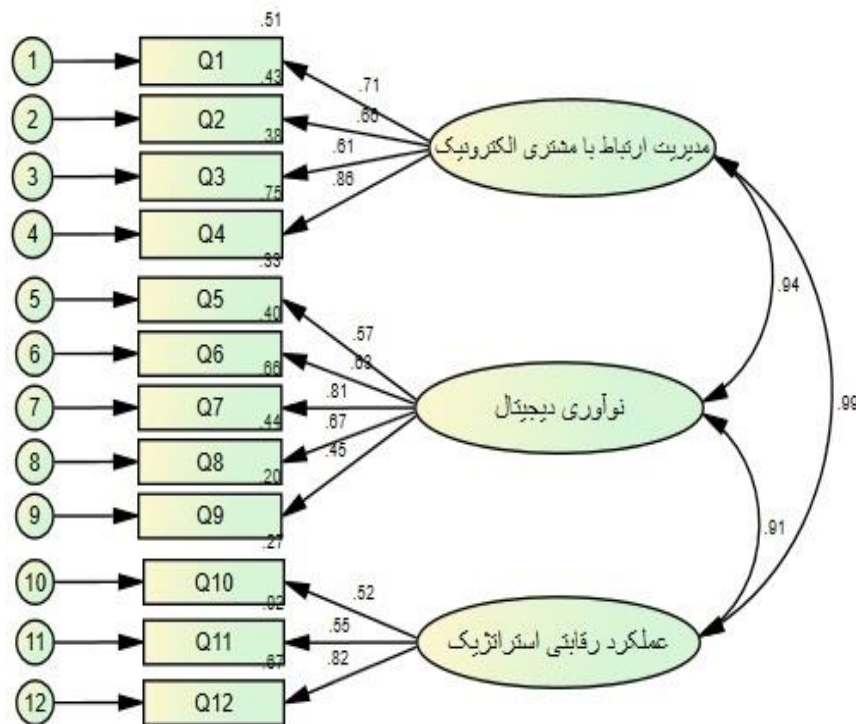


Figure (2): Measurement model after corrections

Before testing the hypotheses, it is necessary to ensure the validity and accuracy of the measurement models of the research variables so that the structural relationships can be checked in the subsequent stages. For this purpose, fit indices are used, which are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. fit indices for the research measurement model

Model fit indices	CIMIN df	GFI	IFI	TLI	CFI	NFI	RMSEA
Main Model	3.321	0.961	0.925	0.971	0.963	0.942	0.011
Acceptable fit value	1 to 5	>0.9	>0.9	>0.9	>0.9	>0.9	<0.08

According to the results of Table 3, all the indicators are in the desired range. Therefore, the suitability of the confirmatory factor analysis model is confirmed in fitting the collected data. In this part, the structural model of the research is suitable for testing the main hypotheses. This model is shown in figure 3.

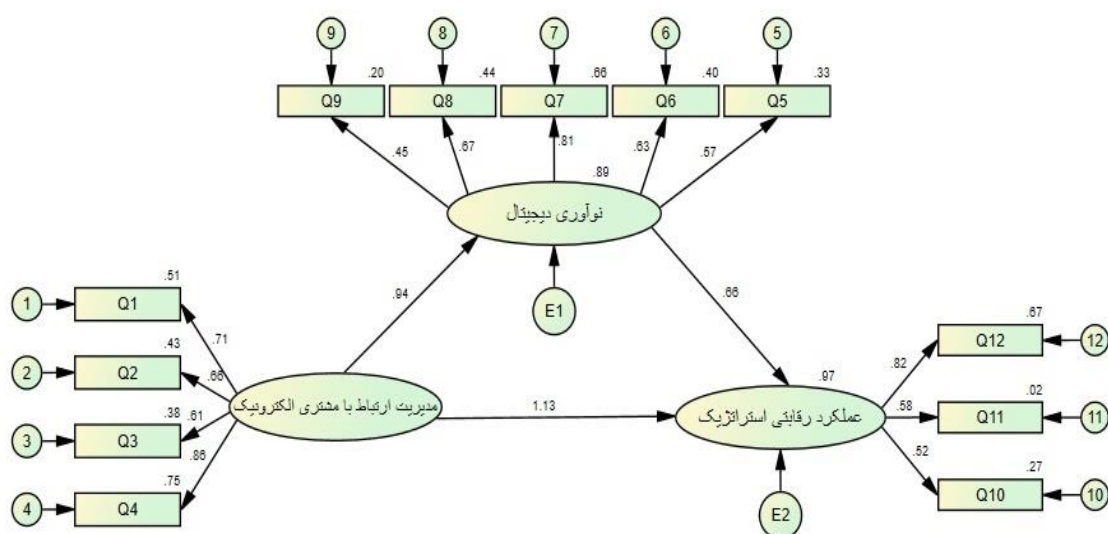


Figure 3. structural model of the research

According to the results of this model and the coefficients obtained from the structural analysis of the research data, the results of the structural path analysis (including the relationships of the latent variables with each other) are presented as follows.

Table 4. Results of path coefficients of variables

Path	Standardized coefficient	STD	t	p-value
Digital Innovation ← eCRM	0.942	0.062	8.558	0.000
Strategic ← Digital Innovation competitive performance	0.661	0.102	4.343	0.000
Strategic competitive ← eCRM performance	1.127	0.315	3.544	0.000

The first hypothesis: Based on table (4), the effect of eCRM on strategic competitive performance is equal to 1.127 and the obtained significance level (0.000) is less than 0.05, it was determined that eCRM had a positive and significant effect on strategic competitive performance. Therefore, it can be mentioned that, the first research hypothesis regarding the significant effect of eCRM on strategic competitive performance was accepted at the confidence level of 95%.

Second hypothesis: Based on table (4), the impact of digital innovation on strategic competitive performance is equal to 0.661 and the obtained significance level (0.000) is less than 0.05. So, it was determined that digital innovation has a positive and significant impact on strategic competitive performance. Therefore, it can be mentioned that the second hypothesis of the research regarding the significant effect of digital innovation on strategic competitive performance was accepted at the 95% confidence level.

The third hypothesis: based on table (4), the effect of eCRM on digital innovation is equal to 0.942 and the obtained significance level (0.00) is less than 0.05. So, it was determined that eCRM had a positive and significant effect on digital innovation. Also, the effect of digital innovation on strategic competitive performance is equal to 0.661 and the obtained significance level (0.000) is less than 0.05. Based on this, it was determined that digital innovation had a positive and significant effect on strategic competitive performance. Therefore, the assumption of mediation is acceptable. Also, regarding the value of indirect t through Sobel test (table 4), it is shown that the value of indirect t is 5.354, which considering that this value is greater than 1.96, it can be concluded that there is a mediation relationship. Therefore, at the 95% confidence level, the third research hypothesis regarding the mediating role of digital innovation in the relationship between eCRM and strategic competitive performance was accepted.

7. Conclusion

According to the results of structural analysis, it can be stated that eCRM has a positive and significant effect on strategic competitive performance. Electronic customer relationship management as a strategic approach in marketing helps companies to communicate with customers and enhance long-term relationships. Because customers communicate with companies through electronic channels, eCRM can help companies improve their competitive performance. In general, electronic customer relationship management helps companies to connect with their customers and enhance long-term relationships with them, which can lead to improved competitive performance. These results are in line with the findings of Chi (2021) and Sultana et al. (2022). Digital innovation has a positive and significant effect on strategic competitive performance. Digital innovation as a strategic approach in marketing helps companies to enhance long-term and sustainable relationships with their customers by new technologies and digital innovations. Due to the positive effect of digital technologies on the expansion of companies' markets and providing better services to customers, digital innovation can help companies improve their competitive performance. In general, digital innovation helps companies to enhance long-term and sustainable relationships with their customers by new technologies and digital innovations, which can ensure improved competitive performance. Digital innovation has a mediating and positive role in the relationship between eCRM and strategic competitive performance. Digital technologies help companies communicate with their customers through electronic channels. So, companies can provide better services to their customers and increase their customer satisfaction, which can guarantee the improvement of their competitive performance. In general, digital innovation plays a mediating role in the relationship between eCRM and strategic competitive performance because by implementing the new technologies and digital innovations, the companies can improve their communication with customers and provide better services, which can guarantee their competitive performance. Managers of small and medium-sized companies in Guilan province are suggested to use digital technologies to improve their communication with customers and provide better services in this regard. Also, it is suggested that they collect and analyze the data of their customers so that they can improve their services and ensure their competitive performance. Also, company managers should look for digital innovations in relation to eCRM in order to improve their competitive performance. A practical suggestion to managers of small and medium-sized companies in Guilan province is to use digital technologies to improve their competitive performance. Due to the fact that today many customers are looking for the required services and products through the Internet and social networks, therefore, the use of digital methods is very effective in improving communication with customers and providing better and faster services. In addition, collecting and analyzing customer data also helps small and medium-

sized companies to have a better perception regarding the customer needs and improve their services. Also, companies should consider digital innovations in relation to eCRM in order to have the ability to compete with rival companies and improve their competitive performance. In general, the use of digital technologies helps small and medium-sized companies to be a strong and dynamic player in the competitive market.

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