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Original Article (Quantified)

# Designing an expanded customer relationship management model with an emphasis on virtual marketing strategies for sports products in Guilan Province

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## Abstract

The aim of the present study was to develop a model for customer relationship management with an emphasis on virtual marketing strategies. Purposive sampling was used in the present study. Given the exploratory nature of the subject, a qualitative research method and data-driven theory (grounded data) were used in the form of open, axial, and selective coding. For this purpose, first, the raw data of in-depth interviews conducted with 20 experts knowledgeable about the research topic were analyzed. Open coding was performed by analyzing the interviews line by line. Axial codes were formed based on the identified open codes, and a theoretical model was developed by selective coding. Then, the paradigmatic model was approved by the experts. The results of open coding indicated that 469 indicators can be effective in customer relationship management with an emphasis on virtual marketing strategies in sports manufacturing companies in Gilan Province. Then, in axial coding, the symbols were classified into 105 concepts and 41 categories. The data obtained from the interviews were analyzed by a grounded theory approach. The results showed that seven main categories including marketing, organizational environment, infrastructure, performance, management and planning, service quality, and relationship management are important for optimizing the customer relationship management system for developing customer relationship management with an emphasis on virtual marketing strategies. Managers of sports manufacturing companies can use the identified symbols, concepts, and categories in their future planning to effectively communicate with customers.

## Keywords:

Customer Relationship Management, Virtual Marketing, Marketing Strategies, Sports Products

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## Extended Abstract

### Introduction

Today, the emergence of web-based services such as e-commerce, digital marketing, and similar items has caused fundamental changes in the way people live and the process of providing services in businesses (Fani et al., 2019). As a result, given the changes in digital technologies, businesses need to adapt to these changes in order to survive and profit so as to respond to customer behavior and marketing needs. New advances in technology have led to digitalization, which is the main driver of marketing innovation and has led to the use of new communication channels, branding strategies, design changes, and interaction environments (Purchase & Volery, 2020). These changes have transformed the way brands and businesses use technology for marketing purposes (Desai, 2019); therefore, the rapid trend of digitalization challenges customer relationship managers in the process of market innovation; because the process of customer acquisition with traditional methods faces serious problems and requires new methods to influence customer behavior (Purchase & Volery, 2020).

Customer relationship management is based on long-term relationships with customers, understanding their needs, and responding to them through diverse goods and services through multiple channels. This perspective, which is a result of recent advances in information technology, seeks to respond better and faster to customer demands and needs, thereby establishing relationships with them and the survival of the organization (Usuli, 2020). The goal of customer relationship management is to establish closer and deeper relationships with customers and the ability and willingness to change the behavior of companies towards the individual interests and needs of each customer (Bakhtiari & Bakhtiari, 2019).

According to statistics, there are 170 manufacturing units in the country capable of supplying the country's sports products, and about 50 units offer their products under sports brands. Currently, the increase in the number of sports brands, the increase in the level of competition between brands in gaining market share, the increase in the presence of foreign brands in the country's sports market, the decrease in sales of domestic brands, and the disregard for scientific principles of marketing on one hand; and the attractiveness of the Iranian market, the increase in competition between foreign goods, and the lack of sufficient research in this field on the other hand, are some of the factors that have challenged the survival of domestic sports brands and have caused a decrease in profits and even the bankruptcy of some domestic manufacturers. Unfortunately, we see that even some domestic manufacturers use foreign brands on their clothing and manufactured goods in order to sell their products, which is due to the lack of reputable brands and effective and reliable marketing strategies in the country (Azadi et al., 2015). On the other hand, the expansion of social networks in Iran has created a good opportunity for marketing and the growth of virtual culture due to the creation of an informal media space and the increase in the power of the audience. In Iran, Instagram, Telegram, Facebook, etc., are the most widely used networks, and this is a special opportunity for the sports industry to flourish and expand its performance in terms of increasing access to the audience to develop virtual marketing strategies and improve their perception of the unique value of domestic sports products (Gholami et al., 2018). Research needs to be directed to determine how managers can successfully use virtual marketing. Therefore, the main question that guides this research is: Does customer relationship management affect virtual marketing?

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Customer Relationship Management**

Customer relationship management is a management approach that seeks to create, develop, and enhance relationships with targeted customers to maximize customer value and organizational profitability. Using data collected from organizations that have implemented customer relationship management technology, it can be seen that the use of customer relationship management technology increases the value of the organization. On the other hand, living in today's competitive world without achieving desired productivity is very difficult (Dalir et al., 2017).

### **Virtual Marketing**

Digital marketing is a window opened for businesses to improve their sales in a way that is in line with today's technology and, in turn, to strive to respond to consumer needs. (Seman & Segar, 2023) Digital marketing is a type of modern marketing that uses Internet-based tools to address the main function of marketing, which is effective and efficient buying and selling. Today, businesses need efficient and effective management in order to succeed in their activities; therefore, in the present era, instead of focusing on selling and providing services in the traditional way, businesses are seeking to increase their influence, attract customers, and affect them by using new methods and digital tools. (Farhang & Piri, 2022).

### **Research Methodology**

The present study is an applicable research in terms of purpose, and the qualitative research method was used in the present study. The statistical population consists of two groups. The first group includes specialists and experts who were faculty members of universities in Gilan province in the field of sports management, and the second group includes experts and managers of sports product manufacturing companies in Gilan province, conducted by theoretical sampling. In the present study, the opinions of 20 elite individuals were collected during 20 semi-structured interviews until theoretical saturation. Also, mixed sampling was used in two methods: purposive and snowball. In this study, all three processes of open, axial and selective coding were used to analyze the data obtained from the interviews.

### **Research findings**

The data obtained from the interviews were conducted by the grounded theory approach. The results showed that seven main categories including marketing, organizational environment, infrastructure, performance, management and planning, service quality, and relationship management are important for optimizing the customer relationship management system for developing customer relationship management with an emphasis on virtual marketing strategies.

### **Conclusion**

The aim of this study is to design a customer relationship management development model with an emphasis on virtual marketing strategies for sports products in Gilan province. The results showed that the seven main categories in the paradigm model, including marketing, organizational environment, infrastructure, performance, management and planning, service quality, and relationship management, are important for optimizing the customer relationship management system for developing digital marketing strategies. These results are consistent with the findings of Bakhtiari & Bakhtiari (2019), Basri & colleagues (2019), Bani Asadi & colleagues (2019), and Ashikole & Baker (2019). Managers of sports manufacturing companies can use the identified symbols, concepts, and categories in their future planning to

effectively communicate with customers. As a result, sports product manufacturing companies should prioritize customer relationship management programs and policies.

According to the research results, the following suggestions are made:

Since in the future, the customer relationship management system will use data for prediction and become a proactive tool, and in this regard, companies that can better use their robotic assistant will grow, it is suggested that other companies in the country take action in the field of optimizing the customer relationship management system as an open innovation; and with the entry of information technology into companies under the protection of customer relationship management, a basis will be provided for companies to move towards smart and knowledge-based companies and; by using customer relationship management software, reduce information processing costs and communicate with customers in less time and with greater speed, which ultimately results in increasing the company's competitive power in today's turbulent environment.