

### **Customer Relationship Management, Innovation Capability, Technological Environment, and Performance of Small and Medium Scale Enterprises: A Research Framework and Proposition**

#### **ABSTRACT**

This study looked into the consequences of customer relationship management by creating empirical evidence grounded in relationship marketing theory and dynamic capability theory. The study proposed a direct as well as an indirect relationship between customer relationship management and firm performance, recognizing technological environment as the interacting variables of customer relationship management that influences the performance of small and medium scale enterprises (SMEs), suggesting that technology environment as a moderator in the customer relationship management model. The study explained the theoretical and practical contributions of the model in our understanding of customer relationship management practices and the intervening role of innovation capability. Technological environment was also discussed especially from the perspective of SMEs.

**Keywords:** Customer Relationship Management, Innovation Capability, Technological Turbulence, Firm Performance, SMEs

#### **Introduction**

“There has been a convergence of opinion by both scholars and managers on the inconsistency in the marketing strategy employed by small firms and larger firms” [1]. Customer Relationship Management (CRM) has been noted for survival strategy for business organizations especially in today's customer-oriented business world and intensely competitive environments. According to Baran and Galka [2] “CRM is all about understanding customers’ needs and their purchasing behaviors. It is strategy that strength the relationship between a firm and its customer; metamorphose links into friends and partners”. In another study, Alshourah, Jodeh, and Swiety

[3] opined that “CRM create share value between customers and firms, it also, increase profit and loyalty of small and medium scale enterprises (SMEs)”

SMEs are seen to be struggling to find new ways to attract more customers in the current global competition. According to the United Nations Industrial Development Organization of 2017, which was quoted in Olaora, Adejere, and Udofia [4] SMEs continue to face fierce competition, especially from larger companies, as seen by their persistently low growth and survival rates. SMEs still have a 31% capacity rate [5]. Only 20% of SMEs in Nigeria manage to survive, according to studies on the subject. This low survival rate is attributed to poor customer retention as a result of poor customer relationship management practices and a lack of innovation capacity in the form of process, product, market, and technological innovation. Regrettably, it would seem that most SMEs in Nigeria have not yet accepted the necessity of adopting customer relationship management in order to achieve the intended outcome for their operations. Worse yet, the marketing literature still don't cover much of the use of customer relationship management in SMEs. More importantly, achieving customer relationship management is crucial for firms in the 21st century and has a significant positive impact on economic growth.

Similarly, Olannye and Eromafaru [6] pointed SMEs operate in dynamic and competitive business environment characterized by high mortality rate, decreased ability to forecast and low technological know-how. The business landscape of this environment is regularly controlled by speedy changes, intricate decision, and consumer's lofty hopes, leaving the smaller business owners with inadequate options [7]. Similarly, “the present events present managers and entrepreneurs with restricted alternative following the overwhelming effect of the global COVID 19 pandemic has ravaged the global economy resulting in business losing trillions of dollars and recently Russian - Ukraine war which also affected the price of goods and services globally.

These resulted in the creation of a new normal which is reshaping marketing activities globally with customers taking the lead” [1]. “In the new normal, Gross Domestic Product (GDP) was projected to decline by 2.1% and 2.5% in developed and developing countries respectively with income increasing by 1.9%” [8]. These events have brought- forth new ways for firms to adopt CRM strategies in marketing the products or services to customers, employees, and other stakeholders to increase the firm’s profitability and competitiveness through the use of digital marketing devices [9]. In the contemporary business environment, with growing demand for goods and services, SMEs must adopt digital marketing platform such as virtual marketing, social media and e mail marketing to influence firms product strategies which leads to e CRM (electronic customer relationship management) [10]. Therefore, e CRM attracts consumers and enhances their purchasing intention [11]

Prior studies on customer relationship management and firm performance have produced difference results with some showing positive association [12, 13]. In Nigeria researches by Aremu, Adeniran, and Adesola [14] found that CRM increases organizational performance. Though some studies discovered that CRM and SMEs performance are unconnected [15, 16]. According to AlQershi, Mokhtar, and Abas, [17] Sofi, Bashir, Parry, & Dari [18] the different dimensions of CRM related on positive and negative relationship depending on firm environment, types and the level of technology used by the firm

Flowing from the previous findings, this study proposes a model of customer relationship management focusing on the consequences in ensuring firm performance. We found the relationship marketing theory [19] underpinning the study while the dynamic capability theory [20] played supporting role. This study departs from the current debate by exploring the consequences of customer relationship management, thus presenting a parsimonious model on its

impact on firm performance. Peterson [21] had expressed concern that CRM scholars have devoted little consideration to the link with external environmental conditions. He was not surprised that significant discussions for CRM have remained scanty as discourse on CRM as strategic marketing strategies to cope environmental changes and technological turbulences has been neglected [21]. Thus, we theorize that innovation capabilities, technological environment and SMEs performance interplay as consequences of customer relationship management.

A research of this nature is central in increasing the literature on customer relationship management in business world particularly in the perspective of small and medium scale enterprises. “The theoretical descriptions would set a plan on customer relationship management in the context of small firms, providing propositional arguments that would give a coherent investigation on the consequences of customer relationship management. A new implication of this research is the understanding of the role of innovation capability and technological environment in the link between CRM and firm performance. While innovation capability serves as the intervening mechanism, technological environment forms the interacting boundary condition under which the relationship between the predictor and the outcomes becomes possible” [22]. Lastly, the conceptualized model is applicable to small firms that implement customer relationship management technique rather than large business corporations, providing a more slightly different approach of the consequences of CRM with other outcomes.

“A plethora of studies on CRM has been carried out by scholars from diverse fields of study in both advanced economies and developing economies” [14, 12, 23- 28]. However, most of the studies focused on large organizations while small size organizations have not been explored especially in Nigeria. This study intends to fill this missing gap by examining the influence of CRM, innovation capability, technological environment on the performance of SMEs in Nigeria.

The structure of this paper is as follows. First, we review previous pertinent literature on CRM, SMEs, innovation capability, firm performance and technological environment. Next, the approach and methodology are explained. Subsequently, the findings of the study are presented, followed by a detailed discussion section. Lastly, the conclusion section summarizes the contribution of this research, and limitation (s) of the study and future directions

## **Literature Review**

The concept of customer relationship management has been considered by researchers and managers as an important source of superior firm performance and competitive advantage [29, 30, and 31]. “Though CRM has been found to improve business success regardless of size, there appears to be a consensus on its higher impact on small businesses” [32]. Mwai, [33] and Eggers, Niemand, Kraus and Breier, [34] underscored “the importance of examining relationship marketing efforts used in small firms as opposed to predominantly researched large firms with much resources”.

A cursory survey of existing literature reveals that CRM has a positive impact on firms’ performance [35, 36, 37, 38 and 24]). In addition, Chatterjee et al, [39] found that AI- embedded CRM system has a significant positive impact on relationship satisfaction and firm performance.

A company's ability to innovate is described as its power to translate its knowledge, competencies, and resources into new goods, services, processes, organizational structures, and management that can benefit interested parties [40]. By encouraging product and service innovation, which supports domestic and international sales, market expansion, and organizational growth, the ability to innovate can boost firm competitiveness. Innovative businesses incorporate cutting-edge technology into their systems and procedures to boost cost effectiveness and added value.

Evidence also indicated that customer relationship management practices have consequences for product/service innovation capability [41, 42, and 43], customer loyalty, and customer satisfaction [44] service quality which enable firms to gain competitive advantage [3]

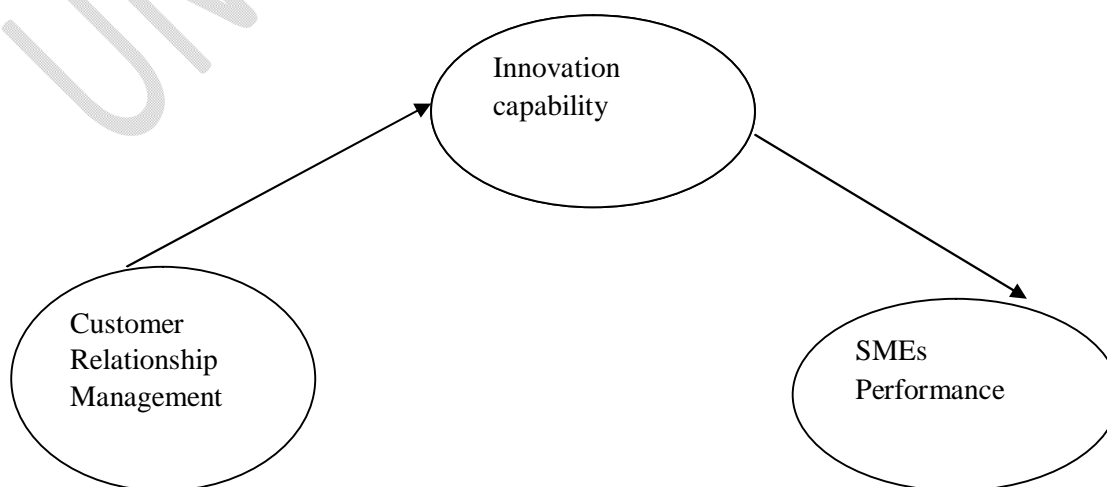
Environmental variable have always been adjudged as an important contingency factor in the customer orientation performance relationship [45, 46]. Previous studies such as [39, 13, and 12] found that technology turbulence moderates the relationship between CRM and business performance. In addition, the study of Neneh [46] revealed that environmental factor as market turbulence, competitive intensity, and technology turbulence moderates the association between CRM and SMEs performance.

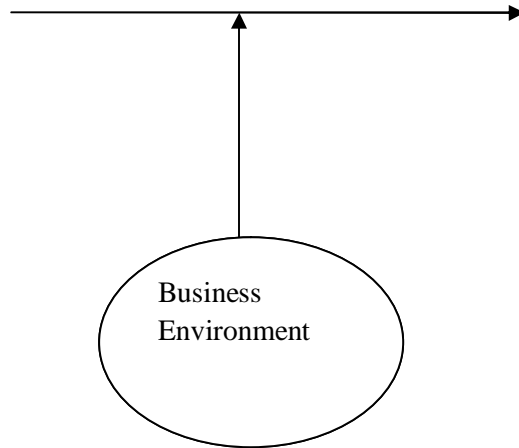
Peterson [21] had expressed concern that CRM scholars have devoted little consideration to the link with external environmental conditions. He was not surprised that significant discussions for CRM have remained scanty as discourse on CRM as strategic marketing strategies to cope environmental changes and technological turbulences has been neglected [21]. Thus, we theorize that innovation capabilities, technological environment and SMEs performance interplay as consequences of customer relationship management.

A research of this nature is central in increasing the literature on customer relationship management in business world particularly in the perspective of small and medium scale enterprises. The theoretical descriptions would set a plan on customer relationship management in the context of small firms, providing propositional arguments that would give a coherent investigation on the consequences of customer relationship management. A new implication of this research is the understanding of the role of innovation capability and technological environment in the link between CRM and firm performance. While “innovation capability serves as the intervening mechanism, technological environment forms the interacting boundary

condition under which the relationship between the predictor and the outcomes becomes possible” [22]. Lastly, the conceptualized model is applicable to small firms that implement customer relationship management technique rather than large business corporations, providing a more slightly different approach of the consequences of CRM with other outcomes.

The study model (Figure 1) was proposed based on the literature, and the following propositions were produced: P1. The knowledge of customer relationship management by SMEs to large extent will lead to SMEs performance: P2. The understanding of customer relationship management to superior degree will influence innovation capability of SMEs. P3. The practice of innovation capability of firms to a larger extent will influence performance of SMEs. P4. The knowledge of innovation capability by SMEs will mediate the association between customer relationship management and firm performance: P5. Technological environment moderates the link between CRM and SMEs performance in a way that high technological environment will make stronger the impact of CRM, whereas low technological environment will reduce the impact on firm performance.





**Figure 1: Proposed Conceptual Model for the Study**

### **Research Method**

An all-inclusive check of literature allows the researchers to review the works of other researchers in the area of study and to avoid repeating what other scholars had done. To reconsider the literature, we looked for studies on customer relationship management on the performance of SMEs, mediating role of innovation capability and moderating role of technological environment in Nigeria and other countries. The review of the literature involved researching articles to gain in depth knowledge of customer relationship management activities in SMEs, and relationship marketing theory and dynamic capability theory that we used as the conceptual framework of the study. The studies are chosen from the work of researchers in Nigeria and other parts of the world. The literature review includes 46 peer-reviewed journals, one book, one conference paper, and one working paper. We reviewed a total number of 53 papers with 73% of the articles published in or after 2015. The databases that we used include the Emerald Management Journal, ABI-INFORM Complete Pro Quest, Science Direct, Directory of Open Access Journal, World Bank Publication, Institutional Based Research, and Google Scholar. A total of forty two empirical articles were identified consisting of thirty eight (38) studies published in journals targeting those who explored the consequences of customer

relationship management in SMEs. The database search included different combination of words such as customer relationship management, customer relationship marketing, innovation capability, innovativeness, firm performance, business environment, technological turbulence, and small and medium enterprises (SMEs), relationship marketing theory and dynamic capability theory. This was based on availability and accessibility of articles. This section captures the study methodology and in line with the study objectives, a detailed literature review was adopted which was achieved in phases. This was based on availability and accessibility of articles.

### **Proposed Measures**

***Customer Relationship Management:*** Though different versions of customer relationship management measures have evolved over time [47, 48], they were used as multi – dimensional constructs. We found the scale development by Dawes [49] was used as one- dimensional construct since our study is using CRM as a one – dimensional constructs, we decided to adapt the measurement scales to serve our purpose. The measurement scale has five items; with Crobach Alpha figure of 0.823. It was measured on a 5 point Likert typed scale of strongly agree (5), agree (4), not sure (3), disagree (2), and strongly disagree (1).

***Innovation Capability;*** the study adapted the scale development by Zegarra [50] appropriate for this study because it is used as uni- dimensional constructs. Measurement scale has six items and measured on five points likert scale of strongly agree (5), agree (4), not sure (3), disagree (2), and strongly disagree (1).

***Technological Environment:*** In measuring technological environment a number of scales have been developed and validated. However, we adapt the scale developed by Ayadin et al, [51]

using a sample of 4 items with a Cronbach, Alpha 0.925, measured on five point likert scale ranging from strongly agree (5) to strongly disagree (1)

***Firm Performance*** A number of measures have been developed to measure firm performance [52]. The scale was adapted from Dawes [49] and Zegarra [50] used subjective measures to determine organizational performance. It is appropriate for this study because it covers financial and non financial performance. We found the scale robust with Cronbach Alpha of 0.85. It is measured on 5 point Likert typed scale.

### **Result and Discussion**

In an attempt to understand the practice of customer relationship management in business environment, this research projected an economical model of the customer relationship management, taking into cognizance of business environment in which these SMEs operate. This study leverages on the relationship marketing theory [19] and dynamic capability theory [20] as the theoretical foundation, while innovation capability, technological turbulence, and firm performance are proposed as the mechanism boundary condition and consequence of CRM respectively. The anticipated model provides an all summarizing approach that centres on the entirety of stakeholders' interactions in the business environment. This would be beneficial to future research regarding the consequences of customer relationship management in the future business environment which recent global trend seems to be uncertain about.

Theoretically, incorporating innovation capability and technological turbulence into the model, customer relationship management model has underscored the importance of firm innovation capability, market capability and organizational capability in the CRM, firm performance link. Understanding the managers and owners capabilities and firm's innovativeness and good marketing practices would increase likely the technological advancement of the firm in such way

that SMEs marketing behavior would enhance and clarify the multifaceted characteristic of relationship marketing as it relates to different firm's performance outcomes.

“The study also made contributions to the field of marketing, especially in the context of customer relationship management. Poor performance of SMEs causes serious problem for entrepreneurs; this places firms at the disadvantaged side” [53]. Thus, understanding the consequences of the phenomenon especially in this difficult period where most businesses are facing the scourge of Covid-19 pandemic and Russian Ukraine war that has increased the price of fuel, gas and other products required by this firm for production of other items, this has affected business globally most especially SMEs. Worse occurrences of performance and collapse of these SMEs would be more and more reported if survival factors important to SMEs' achievement are ignored. A model to understand this occurrence particularly from the perspective of SMEs is relevant.

### **Conclusion**

The main drawback of this research is that the model of customer relationship management developed in this study is conclusion based on the fact obtained from the current argument in literature. Therefore, there is need to quantitatively and qualitatively test the model using collected data with the help of the suggested measures and responses in form of interview gotten from managers| owners of the SMEs. We recommend that researchers validate this model across a number different contexts and industries. Secondly, inclusion of articles in the review is not scientifically determined but based on the authors' discretion and limitation to most data bases. It is possible some high impact journals are unavoidably inaccessible and would have influenced the viewpoints of the researchers on the consequences of CRM as premeditated in this study. Thirdly, we acknowledge the addition of more results from diverse background in the future

reviews, with the result capturing and stressing important variables that explain the consequences of CRM as it relates to diverse cultures and industries. Fourthly, firm characteristics [33] have been found to impact organizational outcome positively. We expect that firm that are matured and stable, and have grown or increase in size and well equipped technologically performed better than a new entrance into the business. Innovation in new ways of marketing the firm's products and services, identifying new market and new process will further help exploring the role of firm characteristics in enhancing business performance.

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### **Authors' contributions**

This work was carried out in partnership among all authors. Author one wrote the introduction, part of the research method and the references Author 2 designed the study, construct the proposed model, part of research method and wrote the first draft of the manuscript. Author 3 managed the literature reviews and contributes to the references. All authors approved the final manuscript.

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