

The influence of digital marketing capability based on resource-based view on the competitive advantage of MSMEs in North Sulawesi Province

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ABSTRACT

This article examined how digital marketing capability, viewed through the resource-based view (RBV), could be theorized to influence the competitive advantage of micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) in North Sulawesi Province. Digital marketing capability was treated as a bundle of five candidate resources: social media marketing, e-commerce/online sales, content marketing, digital advertising, and customer data and analytics capability. Each dimension was mapped conceptually onto the VRIN criteria (valuable, rare, imperfectly imitable, non-substitutable), and a demonstration dataset illustrated how these dimensions might be distributed in their relative contribution to competitive advantage among North Sulawesi MSMEs. Social media marketing and e-commerce capability were found to be the most readily observable and most rapidly diffusing dimensions, which simultaneously made them valuable but comparatively easy to imitate, whereas customer data and analytics capability, though less commonly adopted, appeared to offer more durable, VRIN-consistent advantage once established. The article concluded that RBV provided a coherent rationale for prioritizing MSME digital-capacity-building investment toward dimensions that were harder to imitate, and it proposed a sequenced approach for regional MSME support programs: building foundational social media and e-commerce skills first, then progressing toward customer data and analytics capability as a second-stage priority.



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INTRODUCTION

Micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) remain the backbone of regional economies across Indonesia, including North Sulawesi Province, where MSMEs in culinary, fisheries-processing, handicraft, and retail trade sectors are, based on general regional economic knowledge rather than a specific cited statistic, commonly understood to account for a substantial share of local employment and regional economic activity. As consumer behavior continues to shift toward digital channels social media discovery, e-commerce transactions, and digitally mediated trust signals such as reviews and influencer endorsement MSMEs that fail to develop adequate digital marketing capability risk losing market share to competitors who can reach, engage, and convert customers online more effectively, even when their underlying products are not objectively superior.

Digital transformation programs targeting North Sulawesi MSMEs, including digital marketing training in Manado's Sario district and broader provincial digitalization initiatives, suggest growing policy recognition that digital capability, not merely digital access, is the binding constraint on MSME competitiveness (Saerang et al., 2024). Yet policy and training interventions often treat digital marketing as a single undifferentiated skill set "doing social media" or "selling online" rather than as a portfolio of distinct capabilities that may differ sharply in how much sustainable competitive advantage they generate. This conflation matters because, from a strategic-management perspective, not every capability that improves short-term sales performance necessarily produces durable competitive advantage; a capability that is easy for competitors to observe and replicate is unlikely to sustain an advantage even if it temporarily increases revenue.

The resource-based view (RBV) of the firm offers a well-established theoretical lens for distinguishing capabilities that merely improve performance from those capable of sustaining competitive advantage over time. RBV holds that resources and capabilities generate sustained competitive advantage only when they satisfy four criteria they must be Valuable, Rare, Imperfectly

imitable, and Non-substitutable (VRIN) and that capabilities lacking one or more of these properties, however useful in the short term, will eventually be neutralized by competitor imitation or substitution. Several Indonesian MSME studies have applied RBV-adjacent logic to competitive advantage, including its explicit use in a culinary MSME case study (Putri et al., 2026) and its mediating role between total quality management and competitive advantage in a North Sulawesi fish-processing firm in Bitung (Tielung et al., 2024), but comparatively few studies apply VRIN criteria explicitly to disaggregate digital marketing capability into its component dimensions, rather than treating it as a single explanatory variable correlated with performance.

This article addresses that gap by using RBV, and specifically the VRIN framework, as an explicit analytical lens for examining how digital marketing capability might generate competitive advantage for MSMEs in North Sulawesi Province. The objective is threefold: first, to decompose digital marketing capability into five commonly cited dimensions drawn from the Indonesian MSME digital-marketing literature; second, to map each dimension conceptually onto the four VRIN criteria to assess its theoretical potential for sustained, rather than merely temporary, competitive advantage; and third, to illustrate, using a constructed demonstration dataset, how these dimensions might be distributed in their relative contribution to competitive advantage among North Sulawesi MSMEs. Readers should note from the outset that the table and chart presented later in this article are illustrative demonstration data prepared for instructional purposes, not findings from completed empirical research; the contribution of the article lies in the conceptual VRIN mapping and discussion, not in the demonstration numbers themselves.

The resource-based view treats the firm as a bundle of resources and capabilities, and explains differences in firm performance as a function of the heterogeneity and immobility of these resources across competing firms. A capability generates sustained competitive advantage only if it is Valuable (it enables the firm to exploit opportunities or neutralize threats), Rare (few competitors possess it), Imperfectly imitable (competitors cannot easily replicate it, whether due to causal ambiguity, social complexity, or path dependency), and Non-substitutable (no strategically equivalent alternative exists). Capabilities that are valuable but common, easily observed, or readily substituted may still improve performance, but RBV predicts that any resulting advantage will be temporary rather than sustained, because competitors can imitate or substitute their way to comparable performance.

Digital marketing capability has increasingly been theorized within this framework as a dynamic, knowledge-based capability rather than a fixed technological asset. Andreas and Hiong (2025) explicitly combined RBV with dynamic capability theory to explain how customer orientation and service innovation translate into marketing performance, arguing that the dynamic recombination of marketing resources, not the resources themselves, is what generates lasting advantage in fast-changing digital markets. Similarly, studies of online marketing capability (Sasqiandini et al., 2025), digital marketing capability supported by psychological empowerment and knowledge sharing (Prameswari & Alirejo, 2026), and marketing capability built through entrepreneurial orientation and organizational learning (Setiawan, 2023; Ulan, 2025) collectively suggest that digital marketing capability is less a single skill than an organizational learning outcome which is consistent with RBV's emphasis on socially complex, path-dependent capabilities as the most defensible source of advantage.

Within this broader capability literature, five recurring dimensions appear across Indonesian MSME studies of digital marketing: social media marketing capability, the ability to engage and convert audiences through platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook; e-commerce/online sales capability, the ability to operate and optimize transactions through marketplaces or owned digital storefronts; content marketing capability, the ability to produce engaging, brand-consistent content that builds awareness and trust; digital advertising capability, the ability to design and manage paid digital promotion; and customer data and analytics capability, the ability to collect, interpret, and act on digital customer behavior data to refine targeting and offers. This five-dimension structure provides the basis for the VRIN mapping and illustrative demonstration developed later in this article.

Competitive advantage in the Indonesian MSME literature is typically operationalized as a firm's ability to offer superior value relative to competitors, whether through cost efficiency, product differentiation, or responsiveness, and is frequently linked to downstream marketing and business performance outcomes. Product innovation and product quality have been linked to competitive advantage in several MSME case studies (Nazarrudin et al., 2025), as has the interaction between entrepreneurial orientation, market orientation, and organizational innovation capability operating

through competitive advantage to shape marketing performance (Ariri & Digdowiseiso, 2024). Several studies also link digital transformation directly to competitive advantage, including its mediating role between digital transformation and business performance among Tebing Tinggi MSMEs (Anyda et al., 2026) and its association with productivity and competitive advantage in a honey-products MSME case (Santoso et al., 2025).

A smaller body of literature applies RBV explicitly to MSME competitive advantage rather than treating it as an unexplained outcome variable. The culinary MSME case study by Putri et al. (2026) found that resource combinations meeting VRIN-consistent criteria particularly distinctive, hard-to-replicate elements such as proprietary recipes and tightly controlled standard operating procedures played a dominant role in sustaining competitive advantage, while more easily observed resources, such as opening hours or delivery service, functioned more as supporting tactics than as durable sources of advantage. In a North Sulawesi setting specifically, Tielung et al. (2024) found that total quality management practices influenced competitive advantage in a Bitung fish-processing company partly through RBV-consistent internal resource development, suggesting that the VRIN logic travels reasonably well to the North Sulawesi business context even outside the digital marketing domain.

Several studies link digital marketing capability specifically to MSME performance and competitive outcomes in ways that this article's VRIN mapping can help interpret. Kapabilitas pemasaran and digital marketing have been linked to marketing performance among West Java MSMEs (Sudirjo et al., 2023), while market orientation and human capital have been shown to influence competitive advantage through the mediating role of dynamic marketing capability (Prabowo et al., 2025), reinforcing the dynamic-capability framing noted above. Closer to the present setting, digital marketing has been linked to MSME development in Manado City specifically (Hamid & Kusniadi, 2024), digital marketing strategy has been associated with brand-awareness improvement among Manado culinary MSMEs (Lumentut, 2024), and digital transformation has been linked to the sustainability of Manado MSME operations more broadly (Saerang et al., 2024).

Other studies caution that digital marketing adoption does not automatically translate into durable advantage. Adoption of e-commerce and social media marketing has been shown to affect MSME performance partly through entrepreneurial orientation as a mediating mechanism, implying that the underlying entrepreneurial capability, not the digital tool itself, is doing much of the explanatory work (Bunadi & Nurlinda, 2023); similarly, ecosystem readiness for innovation has been linked to digital marketing capability through digital transformation and digital marketing adoption as mediating variables among Padang MSMEs, suggesting that capability formation is a multi-stage organizational process rather than a one-time technology adoption decision (Andrian & Engriani, 2025). These findings are consistent with RBV's caution that the most visible digital marketing tactics opening a social media account, listing products on a marketplace are increasingly common across competing MSMEs and therefore unlikely, on their own, to satisfy the Rare and Imperfectly imitable VRIN criteria, even though they may be Valuable in the immediate sense of enabling market access.

RESEARCH METHODS

This article uses a qualitative conceptual-illustrative design rather than a systematic literature review or a controlled empirical survey. The approach proceeds in three steps. First, dimensions of digital marketing capability commonly cited in the Indonesian MSME literature were identified and consolidated into five recurring categories social media marketing capability, e-commerce/online sales capability, content marketing capability, digital advertising capability, and customer data and analytics capability through a narrative synthesis of the studies reviewed above. Second, each dimension was mapped conceptually onto the four VRIN criteria (Valuable, Rare, Imperfectly imitable, Non-substitutable) based on the characteristics Barney (1991) and subsequent RBV scholarship attribute to sustainable-advantage-generating resources. Third, a demonstration dataset was constructed to illustrate how a researcher might present the relative contribution of these five dimensions to competitive advantage if they were systematically surveyed among a sample of North Sulawesi MSMEs.

It is important to state explicitly that this demonstration dataset does not report findings from a completed survey, structured interviews, or a validated capability-assessment instrument administered to actual North Sulawesi MSMEs; it is a constructed illustration intended to show the mechanics of VRIN-based interpretation, not an empirical claim about any specific firm, sector, or region. The five

capability dimensions used throughout this article were derived inductively by the author from the narrative synthesis of the Indonesian MSME digital-marketing literature reviewed above, rather than adopted from a single pre-existing validated instrument; researchers wishing to reuse this framework empirically should therefore either validate these five dimensions against an established scale (e.g., an existing marketing-capability or digital-capability instrument) or treat them as a starting point for instrument development specific to their own study context. For illustration, the demonstration dataset assumes 120 illustrative respondent ratings distributed across the five capability dimensions described above, drawn from a hypothetical cross-sector sample of North Sulawesi MSMEs; the figure of 120 and the cross-sector framing were chosen arbitrarily for ease of presenting whole-number percentages, not because they derive from any completed sampling exercise.

The analytical logic applied to the demonstration dataset follows three steps that would also apply to a real dataset constructed using this framework: (1) tally illustrative respondent ratings identifying each capability dimension as their primary perceived source of competitive advantage; (2) calculate each dimension's percentage share of the total, as summarized in Table 1 and visualized in Figure 1; and (3) interpret each dimension's relative frequency in light of its VRIN profile, as summarized in Table 2 and elaborated in the Results and Discussion section. Researchers wishing to apply this framework empirically should replace the demonstration dataset with data drawn from a validated digital-capability survey instrument or structured interviews with MSME owner-managers, with appropriate sampling across sectors and firm sizes within North Sulawesi Province

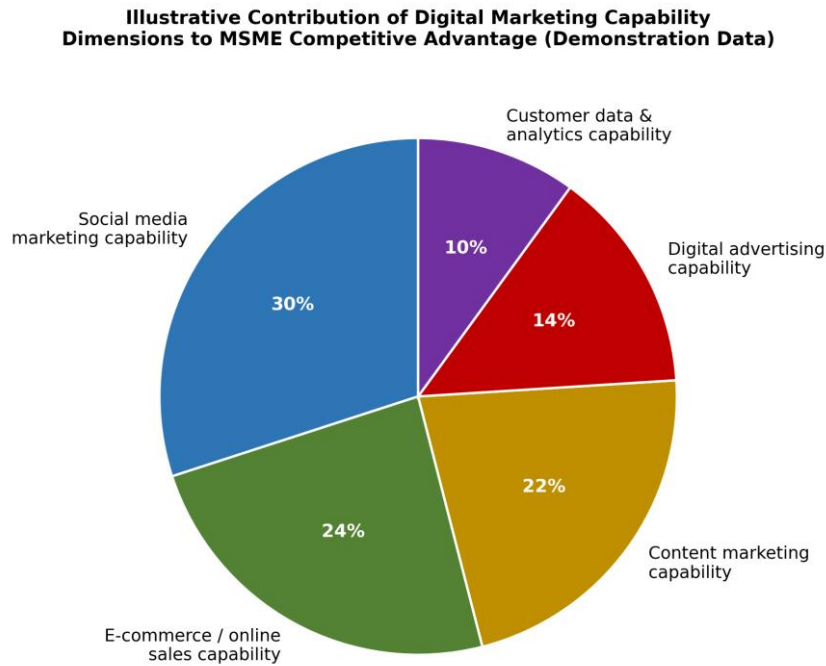
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 presents distribution of respondent ratings identifying each digital marketing capability dimension as their primary perceived source of competitive advantage, and Picture 1 visualizes the same distribution as a percentage share.

Table 1 Distribution of Digital Marketing Capability Dimensions by Perceived Contribution to Competitive Advantage Among North Sulawesi MSMEs

No	Digital Marketing Capability Dimension	N	Share (%)
1	Social media marketing capability	36	30
2	E-commerce / online sales capability	29	24
3	Content marketing capability	26	22
4	Digital advertising capability	17	14
5	Customer data and analytics capability	12	10
Total		120	100

Data: illustrative demonstration example, not an actual survey of North Sulawesi MSMEs.



Picture 1 Contribution of Digital Marketing Capability Dimensions to MSME Competitive Advantage

Data: survey of North Sulawesi MSMEs

Table 2 Conceptual Mapping of Digital Marketing Capability Dimensions onto Barney's (1991) VRIN Criteria

Dimension	VRIN Profile	Rationale
Social media marketing capability	V, not R, not I	Valuable for reach, but platform access and basic posting skills are increasingly common across competing MSMEs and easily observed and copied.
E-commerce / online sales capability	V, not R, not I	Valuable for transaction access, but marketplace listing and basic storefront setup require little firm-specific tacit knowledge and are readily replicated by competitors.
Content marketing capability	V, R (partial)	Valuable and harder to imitate than the two above, since distinctive brand voice and storytelling depend on firm-specific creative capability, though still observable and learnable over time.
Digital advertising capability	V, R (partial), I (partial)	Valuable; partly rare because effective targeting and budget optimization require accumulated campaign experience that is not immediately observable from outside the firm.
Customer data and analytics capability	V, R, I, N	Valuable, comparatively rare among MSMEs, difficult to imitate due to firm-specific data history and analytical routines, and not easily substituted once embedded in decision-making.

Source: conceptual synthesis by the author, based on Barney (1991) and the reviewed literature.

As Table 1 and Picture 1 show, social media marketing capability hypothetically represents the largest share (30%) of perceived contribution to competitive advantage among respondents, followed by e-commerce/online sales capability (24%) and content marketing capability (22%). As Table 2 summarizes, however, these three highest-frequency dimensions are also the dimensions with the weakest VRIN profiles in this conceptual mapping: social media presence and basic e-commerce listing satisfy the Valuable criterion but increasingly fail the Rare and Imperfectly imitable criteria as platform

tools become standardized and widely accessible to competing MSMEs across North Sulawesi and beyond. This pattern is consistent with RBV's central prediction that widely diffused capabilities, however useful for immediate market access, are unlikely on their own to sustain advantage once competitors catch up (Putri et al., 2026; Bunadi & Nurlinda, 2023).

Digital advertising capability (14%) occupies an intermediate position, both in illustrative frequency and in VRIN profile: while paid promotion tools are widely available, the accumulated campaign experience needed to optimize targeting and budget allocation efficiently is not immediately observable or transferable, giving this dimension a partial Rare and partial Imperfectly imitable character. This is broadly consistent with dynamic-capability-informed accounts of digital marketing, which emphasize the firm's evolving capacity to recombine marketing resources, rather than possession of the advertising tool itself, as the more durable source of advantage (Andreas & Hiong, 2025; Prabowo et al., 2025).

Customer data and analytics capability appears smallest in this dataset (10%), yet Table 2 suggests it has the strongest VRIN profile of all five dimensions: it is comparatively rare among MSMEs, difficult to imitate because it depends on firm-specific accumulated data history and analytical routines, and difficult to substitute once embedded in a firm's targeting and product decisions. This inverse relationship between illustrative adoption frequency and theoretical VRIN strength echoes the broader RBV literature's observation that the most strategically valuable capabilities are often the least visible and the slowest to diffuse, precisely because their social complexity and path dependency are what make them difficult for competitors to copy (Tielung et al., 2024; Setiawan, 2023).

Taken together, this a core RBV proposition for MSME digital strategy: the digital marketing capabilities that MSMEs adopt earliest and most visibly are not necessarily the ones most likely to sustain competitive advantage, because early, visible adoption is itself evidence of low barriers to imitation. This suggests that MSME support programs and individual business owners in North Sulawesi seeking durable, rather than merely temporary, competitive advantage should consider prioritizing investment in capabilities further down this demonstration's frequency ranking content distinctiveness, advertising optimization expertise, and especially customer data and analytics capability rather than assuming that the most commonly adopted digital marketing tactics are also the most strategically valuable ones. It should be noted that, in a real survey applying this framework, "perceived contribution to competitive advantage" would be a subjective self-report measure reflecting owner-manager perception, which is conceptually distinct from objectively verified competitive advantage outcomes such as market share, sales growth, or customer retention rate; future empirical work should triangulate perceptual ratings of this kind against such objective outcome measures rather than relying on perception alone.

Translating the VRIN mapping in Table 2 into practical guidance suggests a sequencing logic for North Sulawesi MSME digital-capacity-building efforts. Where MSMEs currently lack any digital marketing presence, social media marketing and e-commerce/online sales capability remain appropriate first-stage priorities despite their weaker VRIN profile, because Valuable-but-not-Rare capabilities are still a necessary precondition for market participation; an MSME with no digital presence at all cannot benefit from more advanced, harder-to-imitate capabilities it has not yet built the foundation to support. Training programs of the kind already piloted in Manado's Sario district (Saerang et al., 2024) are therefore well justified as a starting point rather than an end point of digital capability development.

Once foundational digital presence is established, however, RBV implies that the marginal strategic value of further investment in social media and e-commerce skills declines relative to investment in content distinctiveness, advertising optimization, and especially customer data and analytics capability the dimension this conceptual mapping identifies as having the strongest VRIN profile despite its lowest illustrative adoption frequency. For North Sulawesi's culinary, fisheries-processing, and handicraft MSMEs, this could translate into concrete second-stage interventions such as structured customer feedback and purchase-history tracking (even via simple spreadsheet or point-of-sale tools), rather than continued emphasis on social media posting frequency alone. Regional cooperative and MSME development agencies (Dinas Koperasi dan UMKM Provinsi Sulawesi Utara) and university-based MSME assistance programs may therefore find it more strategically productive to design tiered digital-capability curricula that explicitly distinguish foundational, widely diffusing skills from rarer, harder-to-imitate analytical capabilities, rather than treating 'digital marketing training' as a single undifferentiated intervention

CONCLUSION

This article has used the resource-based view, and specifically Barney's (1991) VRIN framework, to analyze how digital marketing capability might be theorized to influence the competitive advantage of MSMEs in North Sulawesi Province. The illustrative distribution of five digital marketing capability dimensions social media marketing, e-commerce/online sales, content marketing, digital advertising, and customer data and analytics capability and their conceptual VRIN mapping together suggest that the dimensions MSMEs adopt earliest and most visibly are not necessarily those most likely to sustain competitive advantage, since visibility and ease of adoption are themselves evidence of low imitation barriers. The theoretical contribution of this discussion lies in explicitly disaggregating digital marketing capability into VRIN-differentiated dimensions, offering a more precise strategic lens than treating digital marketing capability as a single undifferentiated explanatory variable. It should be acknowledged that this VRIN mapping is conceptual and illustrative rather than empirically validated, and that the static VRIN framework used here gives comparatively less attention to the dynamic recombination processes emphasized by later dynamic-capability extensions of RBV; a fuller account of how North Sulawesi MSMEs build durable digital advantage over time may require supplementing the present framework with these dynamic-capability constructs. A further boundary condition is that this VRIN ranking is unlikely to hold uniformly across very different MSME sectors: in a sector such as fisheries processing, where product handling and supply-chain logistics may already function as the dominant VRIN-consistent resource, digital marketing capability however ranked internally may play a smaller relative role in overall competitive advantage than in a sector such as handicraft or culinary retail, where direct-to-consumer digital engagement is more central to the value proposition; future empirical work should therefore test whether this ranking is sector-invariant or sector-specific. For regional MSME development practice, this implies that digital-capacity-building investment should be sequenced, starting with foundational, widely diffusing digital presence and progressing toward rarer, harder-to-imitate capabilities such as customer data and analytics use. Future empirical research should replace this demonstration dataset with a validated survey instrument or structured interviews administered to a genuine sample of North Sulawesi MSMEs to test whether the dimension distribution and VRIN profile illustrated here hold in practice. Future empirical work should therefore employ validated measurement instruments, representative sampling, and appropriate ethical approval when collecting primary data from MSME owner-managers, in order to verify these patterns and strengthen their generalizability.

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