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Digital Transformation for Enhancing Customer Value: Insights from Five Calabrian SMEs

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ABSTRACT

The paper analyzes the effects of digital transformation on the social sustainability of Italian small and medium enterprises (SMEs), focusing on the evolving relationship with customers and the potential for enhancing value creation for them. Following a literature review on digital transformation among SMEs, the paper examined five Calabrian SMEs across various sectors using a methodological framework incorporating multiple case studies. Specifically, semi-structured interviews and questionnaires were conducted. Secondary sources such as company websites and financial and non-financial reports were consulted to verify the data's accuracy. The findings indicate that, for the chosen SMEs, digital tools enhance the innovation of their business models by establishing new distribution channels and innovative methods for creating and delivering value to customers. The analysis also offers theoretical, practical, managerial, and social implications.

L'articolo analizza gli effetti della trasformazione digitale sulla sostenibilità sociale delle piccole e medie imprese (PMI) italiane, concentrandosi sull'evoluzione del rapporto con i clienti e sulla creazione di valore per l'azienda. A seguito di una revisione della letteratura sulla trasformazione digitale delle PMI, l'articolo esamina cinque PMI calabresi operanti in vari settori utilizzando un quadro metodologico che incorpora molteplici casi studio. Nello specifico sono state condotte interviste e questionari semi-strutturati. Per verificare l'accuratezza dei dati sono state consultate fonti secondarie, come i siti web aziendali e i loro documenti finanziari e non finanziari. I risultati indicano che, per le PMI selezionate, gli strumenti digitali migliorano l'innovazione dei loro modelli di business stabilendo nuovi canali di distribuzione e metodi innovativi per creare e fornire valore alla clientela. Vengono inoltre fornite le implicazioni teoriche, pratiche, gestionali e sociali ottenute dallo studio.

Keywords: Small and Medium Enterprises, Digital Transformation, Dynamic Capabilities, Customers, Sustainability, Multiple Case Studies.

1 – Introduction

This historical period is marked by ongoing evolution across various dimensions. The pandemic has fundamentally altered people's habits, accelerating the transition into an era where

technology is increasingly essential in daily life. As a result, in this digital transition, reality merges with the metaphysical, making it difficult to imagine life without technology. Simultaneously, a growing focus on sustainability encompasses well-being for the environment and humanity. To ensure sustainability plays a role in the future, it is essential to delve into the Italian business landscape and incorporate small and medium enterprises (SMEs, hereafter), representing around 99% of firms in our country (Cedec, 2025). Technology and sustainability, seen as the building blocks of our society, are now present in every sphere, including the economy.

This paper will examine these two elements through a business lens, aiming to identify how technology can promote social sustainability and particularly enhance the welfare of small and medium-sized enterprises in relation to their customer relations. A significant challenge for Italian SMEs is their inability to implement new technologies, primarily due to restricted financial resources that prevent them from adopting the same models as their larger counterparts. For example, the lack of an online sales channel signifies a considerable opportunity lost for SMEs. To begin with, they won't be able to gather data on customer market preferences. Moreover, online shoppers focus on big tech firms and often overlook the smaller ones. Digital technologies support value creation and customer engagement, which are critical factors for the success of SMEs. Once more, the "datafication of business" and the application of Big Data are crucial for small businesses. By utilizing these tools, they can gather insights into consumer preferences and develop products that genuinely reflect their tastes, ultimately fostering customer loyalty. Nevertheless, significant effort and a change in overall management and business practices are crucial. Currently, companies that excel in Digital Transformation adjust their mindset, strategies, and culture to address the ever-changing demands. Alternative distribution channels like social media keep consumers updated on the company's news. Digital media's interactive elements allow marketers to share information with customers, who can share insights.

This article investigates five Calabrian SMEs, assessing their progress in digitalization. It analyzes the transformations following the introduction of online channels, investments in digital marketing, and customer feedback on the companies and their products after online purchases. The research employs a multiple case study methodology, focusing on qualitative research and direct engagement to examine the different business models. Semi-structured questionnaires and interviews will be conducted with sustainability and IT managers, along with entrepreneurs. Moreover, secondary sources such as company websites and financial and non-financial reports were consulted to verify the data's accuracy. This is necessary as these companies often do not reveal strategic and organizational details regarding their business models. Among the principal results, companies that have embraced digital tools excel in innovating their business models, developing new distribution channels, and finding fresh methods to create and deliver value to diverse customer segments. They aim to enhance the shopping experience, provide valuable information, and encourage interactions and conversations between consumers and companies throughout every phase of the consumer journey.

Current research emphasizes digital transformation and adopting new technologies in small businesses and startups. Still, there is a notable scarcity of studies focusing specifically on Calabrian SMEs. The geographical context is significant as Italy exhibits notable differences between its northern and southern regions. Alongside contributing to the theoretical literature on

digital transformation and organizational capability, this study offers practical managerial insights for Italian SMEs' digital transformations, aiming to generate value for enterprises and consumers.

The paper's reminder is structured as follows: *SECTION 2* presents the theoretical framework for digital transformation and customer value creation in SMEs; *SECTION 3* illustrates and describes the methodology adopted; *SECTION 4* examines the results obtained, answering the research question; *SECTION 5* discusses the study's findings and offers the main conclusions, while *SECTION 6* reviews the study's limitations and future directions research

2 – Theoretical Framework

2.1 – Digital transformation to create Customer value in SMEs

The concept of digital transformation does not have a single definition; it varies across different contexts. This paper emphasizes explicitly the business-economic aspect, which has received growing attention over the past two decades (Cha *et al.*, 2015; Morakanyane *et al.*, 2017; Rachinger *et al.*, 2018; Galindo-Martín *et al.*, 2019; Warner & Wager, 2019; Bianchi, 2024). Digital transformation within an enterprise refers to “the alignment of digital technology, skills, organizational processes, and business models to generate new value for stakeholders and ensure the organization's sustainability in an ever-evolving business ecosystem” (Venier, 2017).

The process involves altering essential business drivers—such as the operating model, business processes, employee relations, customer experience, and introducing new products or services. Leadership intentionally manages this shift, utilizing new digital technologies and services. These are understood as Social Software for workplace collaboration and digital content sharing, mobile technologies, analytics and big data systems, cloud services, and essential IT security management systems. Furthermore, developing organizational digital capability requires top management's awareness and ability to evaluate both digital technologies anticipated and actual benefits. It also entails aligning the business and IT functions, ensuring data governance, integrating digital systems and applications, and maintaining continuous IT service delivery. Simply put, it refers to how “a company uses digital technologies to create a new digital business model that enables the company to generate and capture more value” (Verhoef *et al.*, 2021).

This evolution influences business processes, daily operations, and organizational capabilities (Li *et al.*, 2018; Materazzo *et al.*, 2021; Mella, 2022). Research indicates that digitization transforms the fundamental structure of business models (Osterwalder & Pigneur, 2010; Saebi *et al.*, 2017; Volberda *et al.*, 2017), mainly focusing on enhancing value and fostering customer relationships (Arnold *et al.*, 2016; Bouwman *et al.*, 2018). Advancements in digital technologies strengthen relationships with current and potential customers by improving communication and fostering a deeper understanding of their needs. This leads to tailored offers and new products that meet specific customer needs. Traditional and high-tech SMEs adopt technologies to improve their business models and sales channels (Bonacci *et al.*, 2012). This shift is a response to Big Tech, contributing to the declining relationship between SMEs and their customers. However, significant progress is still needed. SMEs can achieve rapid growth and success by leveraging a digital business model that includes their website, blogs, social media, mobile apps, and other technologies (Materazzi *et al.*, 2020). Social media, alongside the growing significance of mobile devices, have fundamentally transformed interaction methods (Taiminen & Karjaluoto, 2015) and are seen by SMEs as the primary means of communication and value generation in their business models.

Through two-way communication, the latter enables users within an interconnected group to share content, including text, photos, and videos. Social media platforms like LinkedIn, Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube, blogging sites like WordPress and Blogger, and micro-blogging services like Twitter and Snapchat offer affordable ways to connect with a broad audience and share product and brand information online. When it comes to mobile applications, their primary goal is to strengthen consumers' connections and loyalty to brands by providing information, promotions, and entertainment (Bleier *et al.*, 2019). This approach enables SMEs to foster customer trust, helping them assess the products or services offered and facilitating swift and convenient payment through mobile platform applications. Social media and mobile apps have transformed corporate brand communication strategies, fostering engagement and collaboration (Lamberton & Rose, 2012). These digital media's interactive features enable sellers and customers to share information.

2.2 – *Dynamic Capabilities for SMEs*

For companies to thrive over time, they must adapt to their surroundings. The concept of dynamic capability effectively illustrates this idea. Specifically, dynamic capabilities encompass the “*higher-level competencies that enable a firm to integrate, build, and reconfigure both internal and external resources to manage and potentially influence swiftly changing business landscapes*” (Teece, 2012). They are often referenced to explain how companies react to fast-paced technological advancements (Teece, 2007). These capabilities play a crucial role in a company's digital transformation journey. Dynamic capabilities guarantee that a company's standard capabilities evolve (Rindova & Kotha, 2001; Matarazzo *et al.*, 2021). Ordinary capabilities allow a company to handle operational activities like accounting, human resources, logistics, and marketing. However, these capabilities can be easily copied in a digital setting and do not provide a sustainable competitive advantage. Conversely, dynamic capabilities, which oversee alterations within a company's routine abilities (Teece, 2007), are more complex to imitate and foster a company's growth.

Following Pavlou and El Sawy (2011) and Matarazzo *et al.* (2021), dynamic capabilities functional in the reconfiguration process can be divided into four groups of activities. To begin with, *perceiving* is key; it requires recognizing, nurturing, and assessing trends in digitization and technological opportunities influenced by customer needs. The skill to identify, comprehend, and leverage digital technologies—such as infrastructure, content, channels, services, and e-business applications—plays a vital role. These technologies improve the gathering of pertinent marketing intelligence. By recognizing and analyzing new customer contexts, this capability provides businesses with valuable insights into customer motivations, allowing them to deliver customized, personalized value to their clients. *Learning* involves updating existing skills with fresh knowledge. When an organization spots an opportunity, it should adjust and channel resources and engage new ones through learning activities to uncover innovative solutions and create new insights. Warner and Wager (2019) highlight that digitization has encouraged smaller firms to seize opportunities by breaking away from and simplifying their current value chains. *Integration* refers to incorporating new knowledge into a collective system to utilize the updated operational capabilities. Because individuals and collective capabilities typically possess this newly redeployed knowledge, it is essential to spread it throughout the business unit. Ultimately, *coordination* refers to the effective

“orchestration” of resources—organizing and distributing tasks, resources, and activities into cohesive capabilities. This includes the reconfiguration of structures, practices, and processes.

Perceiving, learning, integrating, and coordinating results from a process within an executive leadership team (Kor & Mesko, 2013; Martin, 2011). This is especially true for SMEs, where the participation of family owners is crucial. In SMEs, the CEO is essential in decision-making regarding dynamic capabilities (Goerzig & Bauernhansl, 2018). In SMEs, valuable dynamic capabilities lie within people, especially those tasked with coordinating, combining, and organizing resources to create value. In SMEs, the introduction of new technologies can be swayed by younger employees or family members, frequently the entrepreneur’s children, who leverage their familiarity with digital technologies business. Adapting the company’s business model to changes is essential for success. The company should analyze alternatives, deeply understand customer needs, and accurately grasp the value chain. This enables the company to deliver what customers require promptly and cost-effectively. Additionally, the company must maintain an impartial stance on outsourcing (Teece, 2018). Thus, adapting the business model is considered a dynamic capability.

3 – Methodology

Based on the previously discussed theory, this paper aims to explore the following research question:

RQ: Can digital transformation enhance customer value creation in Calabrian SMEs?

To achieve this, five practical examples will be examined. The analyzed data were gathered through a multiple case study method (Meyer, 2001; Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Pavione *et al.*, 2023). This approach was initially adopted for the research scope, which includes digital transformation, value creation, and capability perspective. It is also selected for the type of company being studied, specifically SMEs. Analyzing multiple cases enables the development of broader theories compared to examining just one case. Therefore, this qualitative analysis employs a semi-structured questionnaire and face-to-face interviews with the firm’s sustainability managers, IT managers, and entrepreneurs. This allowed for comparisons between the companies involved, which shared many common elements despite being from various sectors. The questionnaire sought to evaluate digital transformation regarding how customer relationships evolve within the business model. It covered digital tools, distribution channels for delivering customer value throughout the consumer journey, leadership, essential digital transformation triggers, and key resources and capabilities, including Perceiving, Learning, Integrating, and Coordinating. Initially, the question arose about the impact of digital transformation on business model transformation, particularly regarding marketing channels and social media marketing, as well as shifts in consumer segments and value propositions (e.g., transitioning from B2B to B2C). Following that, the various phases of the consumer journey—pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase—were outlined to determine how digital transformation enhances customer value at each stage. Regarding dynamic capabilities, the questionnaire collected information on the perceived usefulness of ordinary resources and capabilities, along with the different dynamic capabilities (perceiving, learning, integration, and coordination). The respondents’ answers in Italian were transcribed and subsequently translated into English. The data were analyzed using the following protocols for qualitative data analysis.

The analysis used an interpretive method (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). Additionally, secondary sources such as company websites and financial and non-financial reports were consulted to verify the data's accuracy.

3.1 – Company Profiles

The cases analyzed consist of family businesses based in Calabria, Italy. Despite representing various sectors, the selection focused on southern Italian firms due to different geographical, economic, and social conditions compared to northern Italy. This approach aims to evaluate their levels of innovation and progress in technological and social sustainability practices.

Table 1 summarizes each company's founding year and location, as well as its size based on revenue and number of employees, industry type, sales channels, and strategies. Among the five companies, some opted not to reveal their revenue figures. Still, they indicated they meet the criteria for SMEs, defined as having revenues below 50 million (<50 million€*) and fewer than 250 employees.

Founded in 1873, *Lanificio Leo* is the oldest textile factory in Soveria Mannelli (CZ). It is a prominent example of a museum company and an internationally oriented brand, effectively communicating its identity values through fresh and impactful visuals that resonate with a contemporary audience. The corporate philosophy emphasizes the importance of leveraging archetypal resources to create artifacts that blend territorial identity with modern design, resulting in innovative collections that narrate a story. Central to the creation of the Company Museum is the recovery and enhancement of technological heritage and traditional craftsmanship. *"It is not the technology that creates things, but the idea that makes them move"*.

Founded in 1990 by the Greco family in Acri (CS), *Caffè Greco Semicaf S.r.l.* is a roasting company. Their production begins with roasting high-quality raw coffee beans meticulously sourced from the best available options. The process is automated and allows us to offer coffee beans, ground coffee, pods, and capsules compatible with the major systems, which are therefore capable of processing large volumes quickly. The company's core business is the single-portion coffee market for pod and capsule coffee machines. Initially, the company focused on the local economy but has successfully expanded across regions and into national markets over the years. Their mission is *"to create authentic quality espresso for discerning connoisseurs who can appreciate the diverse aromas of our blends while also surprising the average consumer who hasn't yet learned to recognize the genuine essence of espresso"*. Caffè Greco has brought together the best skills on the market to create a coffee capable of distinguishing itself and telling the palate the story of the artisan spirit and the technological innovation fielded by the company.

The *Azienda Agricola BioSila* has been dedicated to its mission for three generations, emphasizing family values to promote an organization committed to the quality and safety of food excellence. This company leads the agricultural sector as the first certified firm in Calabria to innovate the livestock line. Since 1989, BioSila has proudly held the distinction of being the first company to receive organic certification for processing dairy from sheep, goats, and cattle. Within the company, each family member is employed in a particular reference sector, from farms to commercial network management, up to the opening of the new business. Since 2015, agritourism has opened to the public. It is managed by new generations who enhance the company's vision with innovation and modernity while respecting the tradition that remains the foundation of the entire activity. Their mission is to eliminate any distance between the

company (the producer) and the consumer, allowing them to buy indeed 0 km products of certified quality and offer careful food education.

Table 1 – Selected Company Profiles (Source: Own Elaboration)

Company	Year of foundation and location	Profile (kind of industry)	Size (revenues and employees in 2022)	Foreign sales or services (YES or NOT)	Number of international markets	Strategic Paths
LANIFICIO LEO	1873 Soveria Mannelli, CZ	Currently the company specializes in the production of home textiles and small fashion accessories with a designed oriented approach	< 50 million€* 6 employees	YES	Italy, countries belonging to the EU area, non-European countries (US, UK, etc.)	Design oriented approach based on the interpretation of technological limits and on scouting
CAFFE' GRECO S.r.l.	1990 Acri, CS	Roasting, production and packaging of coffee pods and capsules.	< 50 million€* 13 employees	YES	Italy and countries belonging to the EU area	Diversification of the production.
AZIENDA AGRICOLA BIOSILA	1986 Acri, CS	Agriculture, Breeding, Agri-ice cream shop, Production of organic food (dairy, cheese)	1,5 million€ 30 employees	YES	Italy and countries belonging to the EU area	Always maintain a high quality of raw materials; promote innovation and sustainability.
IL GIARDINO DEL BERGAMOTTO	2015 Rodi, RC	Organic and eco-sustainable farm specialized in the production of bergamot	< 50 million€* 5 employees	YES	Italy and countries belonging to the EU area	Maintain the authenticity of the product. Avoid waste by using each part of the citrus fruit for different productions.
ARKE' S.r.l.	1992 Veneto, Calabria, Umbria, Sicily, Sardegna	Construction and maintenance of overhead and underground power lines, Metalworker	9 million€ 75 employees	NO	No Country	Diversification of energy multi-utility sectors, turnkey packages for the customer with design, construction and assistance service.

Since 1943, the *Il Giardino del Bergamotto* in Rodi (RC) has centered its operations around this citrus fruit, showcasing its diverse and high-quality production. Reggio Calabria accounts for 90% of the world's bergamot essential oil production. The Attinà family works with unwavering dedication and enthusiasm. The visionary efforts of Aurelio, a veterinarian and grandfather, led to the company's establishment, which initially focused solely on producing traditional Calabrian citrus fruits. In 2006, Elio, Aurelio's son and a lawyer passionate about the land, took over. He initiated the switch to certified organic farming. The younger generation made an impact, and in 2015, Fulvia, Elio's daughter and the current owner, took a significant step forward for the company by recognizing the amazing potential of bergamot. She developed the concept of establishing a laboratory to process certified organic fruit. All products are harvested a few hours prior from their fields, except for raw cane sugar and dark chocolate, which are sourced exclusively from organic producers. They produce jams, preserves, and juices without thickeners, colorings, and preservatives. Every part of the bergamot is used imaginatively and surprisingly, with refined and skillful craftsmanship.

Arkè S.r.l. has fifty years of experience in the power lines industry. The company consistently strives for efficiency and quality. It features a network organizational structure and utilizes advanced equipment to provide effective solutions for every project. Focusing on suction excavations and constructing electrical and technological systems, Arkè maintains high safety standards to satisfy customer needs. Multiple certifications, including ISO and SOA, validate its commitment to quality.

4 – Results

This section presents the questionnaire results and addresses the research question: “Can digital transformation enhance customer value creation in Calabrian SMEs?” The SMEs considered have all embarked on a digital transformation process to shape customer relationships and change the traditional business model (Table 2). They have established new distribution channels to connect with customers more effectively, including at least one social media channel and a website company. In the pre-acquisition phase, i.e., the “awareness, consideration, and research” phase, companies can identify, engage, and interact with current and potential customers who notice and value a brand. At this stage, companies can use social media, including social networking, blogging, influencer engagement, paid advertising, and video and photo content, to promote their products or services. (Cawsey & Rowley, 2016), as well as mobile instant messaging to support customers in the research process. The aim is to assist customers in identifying specific solutions, products, and brands while also connecting with potential customers before needs emerge. This involves recommending suitable products or creating new solutions tailored to those needs. During the purchase and post-purchase stages, businesses need to shift from merely attracting potential customers to fostering enduring relationships characterized by positive emotions (Matarazzo *et al.*, 2021).

Digital tools enhance customer satisfaction during the purchasing journey, essential for engagement. Chatbots significantly improve the shopping experience by initiating conversations, addressing customer inquiries, managing product orders, and providing suggestions and recommendations through artificial intelligence. At this point in the customer journey, the emotional aspect is crucial since strong positive feelings link directly to customer satisfaction, loyalty, and engagement. In the final post-purchase phase, positive emotions foster brand advocacy—where individuals share their positive experiences with a product, brand, or

company on social networks—and engagement, which involves customers participating in co-creating value. During this phase, the social aspect takes center stage, enhancing customer satisfaction as they engage with existing and potential customers, turning them into enthusiastic supporters.

Table 2 – Change in business model and value creation process (*Source: Own Elaboration*)

Company	Customer segments within the business model	Channels	Digital tools employed	Pre-purchase phase	Purchase phase	Post-purchase phase
LANIFICIO LEO	B2C B2B E-commerce	E-commerce Physical store Marketplace Agents and distributors	Social media Sito Web	Social media Web (shop window and e-commerce)	Social media Web (shop window and e-commerce)	Social media
CAFFE' GRECO S.r.l.	B2C B2B E-commerce Direct relationship with clients	Home delivery Mailing Call center E-commerce Physical store/bar Agents and distributors	Social media Sito Web	Social media Web (shop window and e-commerce)	Social media Web (shop window and e-commerce)	Social media
AZIENDA AGRICOLA BIOSILA	B2B B2C Direct relationship with clients	Home delivery E-commerce Physical store	Social media Sito web APP per B2B APP per B2C	Social media Web (shop window and e-commerce)	Social media Web (shop window and e-commerce)	Social media
IL GIARDINO DEL BERGAMOTTO	B2B	Mailing E-commerce Physical Store	Social media Sito web	Social media Web (shop window and e-commerce)	Web (shop window and e-commerce)	Social media
ARKÈ S.R.L.	B2B	Tenders, Direct assignments	Social media Big Data CRM APP B2B	Social media CRM	Web (shop window and e-commerce) CRM	Social media

The ability to attract new customer segments lies in the initial skill to identify them and the capability to seamlessly integrate offline and online channels—such as web, social media, mobile, and landline—naturally and transparently. Each of the five companies sees the comprehension of opportunities arising from digital technologies—like tools, content, distribution channels, services, and e-business applications—as essential for delivering customer value.

Since all firms investigated are family businesses, family entrepreneurs are directly involved in strategic governance with the support of external managers. This is a typical situation for

Italian SMEs. Consequently, in all cases, the entrepreneurial family, driven by the top management, propelled the decision to undergo digital transformation.

These latest figures need to be aligned and merged with current organizational structures to prevent conflicts and resistance to changes by existing functions. Table 3 highlights explicitly the five firms' key drivers of digital transformation, identifying the leaders in digital processes and their dynamic capabilities.

Table 3 – Capabilities for digital transformation (Source: Own Elaboration)

Company	Major trigger of digital transformation	Leader in the digital process	Main resources	Capabilities perceiving	Capabilities learning	Capabilities innovation/cooperation
LANIFICIO LEO	New systems: CAD/CAM, i.e. computer aided design and manufacturing	Creative director, as well as family members	Technology	They monitor the entire reference sector internationally and typically keep up with the design world and its trends	After observing, they seek to learn about new technologies and how they might be adapted for their company	Technologies learned are integrated into the company
CAFFE' GRECO S.r.l.	New needs and requests from customers have resulted in the creation and development of new digital channels	Family member supported by a marketing person	Human and technological resources	They analyze technology trends and consumer behavior to capitalize on new opportunities	They learn new methods of doing business using innovative tools	The firm is continually adapting to the evolving environment
AZIENDA AGRICOLA BIOSILA	Shorten supply chain between producer and consumer	Family member	New technological resources	They quickly identify and adapt to market dynamics while committing to sustainability principles	They study innovative marketing techniques and tools	Adopting new organizational functions related to digital
IL GIARDINO DEL BERGAMOTTO	Control production costs and enhance product promotions	Family member	New technological resources	They track current digital trends and analyze the actions of major companies within the same sector	Propensity to learn innovative processes	Integrating and coordinating the new processes within the company's business model
ARKÈ S.R.L.	Adapting to market trends, optimizing costs and resources, and providing accurate job estimates	Sales manager	Human and technological resources	They observe competitors and pay attention to customers' feedback to provide them with a customized experience	They learn by diversifying into several sectors, such as automotive electrification	The company is currently in a development phase, driven by a digital figure within it

Dynamic capabilities that are essential for digital transformation are rooted in the insights and actions of individuals, particularly entrepreneurs (Vial, 2019), who support, build, and maintain those capabilities and are responsible for decision-making related to dynamic capabilities issues (Goerzig & Bauernhansl, 2018). According to Materazzi *et al.* (2021), since SMEs often act as “digital followers” of larger companies, the ability to learn, along with the ability to perceive, represents the most crucial capability in the value creation process initiated by digital transformation. For SMEs, “*learning focuses on using market information to create new knowledge*” (Pavlou & El Sawy, 2011, p. 244), i.e., using what already exists to create something new. Every company that has invested in technology and new and existing human resources has implemented the organizational renewal necessary for digitalization.

5 – Discussion and Conclusions

This study aimed to demonstrate how the digital transformation adopted by Calabrian SMEs could create value for consumers. Thus, following the theoretical discussion on digital transformation within businesses, focusing on customer value creation and dynamic capabilities, five practical examples illustrate how companies adapt to emerging needs and strengths. A noteworthy point is that transformation occurs in the more developed realities and those that exhibit more significant problems. This perspective can be viewed positively, even in the smallest realities like SMEs, which seek to create value for customers and, in turn, for the company itself. Emerging technologies enable SMEs to create value for customers in innovative ways that align with market trends.

Additionally, the paper aimed to comprehend how customer value is generated and co-created throughout various stages of the customer journey and the specific roles of the distinct dynamic capabilities that facilitate the adoption of digital technologies. The five SMEs studied are predisposed to utilize digital tools during distribution, communication, and market analysis, influencing their business models. Digital tools like social media, apps, chatbots, and big data reshape how consumers create value. This transformation opens new distribution channels, encouraging more substantial and innovative connections with consumers and showing that Calabrian SMEs are adapting their business models and practices. They have transitioned from a single distribution channel, namely direct contact with customers, to multiple distribution channels. By digitizing and connecting various distribution and communication channels, companies aim to enhance the shopping experience, provide more information, and encourage interactions and dialogues between consumers and businesses throughout every stage of the consumer journey. Thanks to the chatbot on the website and the company’s social media page, customers can stay updated on all the news offered. Social media serve as primary tools for SMEs to enhance emotional experiences like “social presence” and “entertainment” while engaging with customers. The selected companies have invested in Instagram and Facebook to implement and improve the corporate brand’s communication strategies and encourage consumer interaction, participation, and collaboration.

Furthermore, the study highlights that perceiving and learning abilities are crucial for achieving successful digital transformation, driven primarily by entrepreneurs and household owners. Perception is the primary driver of digital transformation, integral to entrepreneurs and family members, and signifies the initiation of digital transformation within a company. For SMEs, digital transformation involves a learning journey requiring strong skills to merge technology, business, and educational strategies. Human capital plays a crucial role. Indeed, all SMEs have recruited a new, specialized

professional or have an existing employee specializing in e-commerce and digital marketing. Integration and coordination skills are natural consequences. Moreover, as these new organizational functions engage with traditional roles, companies must adapt to harness digital opportunities. When viewed as a unified process, this enhances value creation for the customer. These case studies help to understand the dynamic capabilities of digital transformation in SMEs, particularly those from the Calabria region in Italy.

This research carries significant implications for management. Digital technologies support SMEs in traditional sectors, where reputation, brand visibility, and customer relations are essential competitive factors for success. Ignoring digital tools poses risks that could seriously jeopardize the company's survival. Conversely, these technologies present challenges and necessitate shifts in management and vision, stemming from the need for new organizational and marketing skills. This should encourage policymakers to invest in promoting and supporting SME entrepreneurs and managers to enhance digital transformation capabilities. Considering SMEs' resource constraints, it is essential to incorporate actionable measures such as research initiatives, training programs, and support from public administrations to help SMEs discover digital tools and innovations and identify financial resources for investments.

6 – Study Limitations and Future Directions Research

The analysis does have limitations. First, it considers only five companies from the southern region of Italy, specifically Calabria. Therefore, the principal results cannot be generalized to Italy. Second, it uses certain case studies as examples that may not necessarily represent the digital transformation process. Future research could include additional companies and explore other regions of Italy. Moreover, it would be intriguing to examine the evolution of this phenomenon in the upcoming years, i.e., how AI could personalize the customer experience, improving the communication between SME and customers. Another compelling study might examine how augmented and virtual reality (AR, VR) can educate customers about sustainability and the digital transformation of offered services and products.

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