

Designing a Model Influencing the Development of a Customer-Centric Culture among Employees of Ofogh Kourosh Chain Stores Nationwide

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Received: 2025-10-02 **Reviewed:** 2025-10-16 **Revised:** 2026-02-14 **Accepted:** 2026-02-21 **Published:** 2026-09-01

Abstract

The present study aims to design and explicate a model influencing the development and institutionalization of a customer-centric culture among employees of Ofogh Kourosh chain stores across the country. This research was conducted using a mixed-methods approach with an exploratory–confirmatory design. In the qualitative phase, the process of customer-centric culture formation was examined from the perspective of employees' lived experiences through in-depth semi-structured interviews with store personnel and data analysis using a phenomenological method. The results of open, axial, and selective coding indicated that this culture emerges not merely as a set of professional skills but as an integral component of employees' professional identity. It is shaped through a complex interaction among individual customer-oriented discourse, emotions and affective experiences within interactional contexts, organizational enabling and constraining structures, interpersonal and group dynamics, extra-organizational environmental pressures, and experiences of turning points and critical situations. In the quantitative phase, the model derived from the qualitative findings was tested using confirmatory factor analysis and Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), based on data collected from Ofogh Kourosh store employees nationwide. The findings demonstrated that construct reliability and validity indices were within acceptable ranges and that the measurement model exhibited satisfactory goodness of fit. Furthermore, the results revealed that the transition from organizational compliance to value internalization plays a central role in sustaining customer-oriented behaviors. Positive intrinsic drivers—such as professional pride, legitimate social identity, and perceived personal impact—contributed more significantly to the formation of authentic customer-oriented behaviors compared with inhibiting drivers. Ultimately, the proposed model may serve as an indigenous and practical framework for human resource policymaking, reward system design, training programs, and customer-oriented leadership development within Iran's retail industry.

Keywords: *Culture; Customer Orientation; Employee Behavior; Ofogh Kourosh Chain Stores.*

How to cite this article:

Ashkbous, M., Hassani, S. R., Baghfalaki, A., & Mir, S. (2026). Designing a Model Influencing the Development of a Customer-Centric Culture among Employees of Ofogh Kourosh Chain Stores Nationwide. Management Strategies and Engineering Sciences, 8(5), 1-21.

1. Introduction

In contemporary competitive markets, organizations increasingly recognize that sustainable success is no longer derived solely from operational efficiency or price advantages, but rather from the ability to cultivate enduring relationships with customers through deeply embedded customer-oriented values and behaviors. The transition from product-centric to customer-centric paradigms has fundamentally reshaped managerial thinking, positioning customer focus as a strategic capability rather than a tactical marketing activity. Organizations that successfully embed customer orientation within their cultural and behavioral systems demonstrate stronger adaptability, improved service outcomes, and enhanced organizational resilience [1, 2].

Customer orientation refers to the organizational commitment to understanding, anticipating, and responding

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to customer needs through coordinated organizational actions. Early conceptualizations treated customer orientation primarily as an individual-level sales behavior; however, recent scholarship emphasizes its multi-level nature encompassing organizational culture, leadership practices, employee cognition, and environmental adaptation mechanisms [3, 4]. In this expanded perspective, customer orientation becomes a shared interpretive framework guiding employee decisions, interactions, and emotional engagement with customers across organizational contexts.

The growing complexity of retail environments, particularly chain-store ecosystems, intensifies the importance of cultivating customer-focused cultures among frontline employees. Frontline staff represent the primary interface between organizations and consumers, meaning their perceptions, motivations, and emotional regulation directly shape service experiences and customer evaluations. Research demonstrates that employee engagement and customer-oriented behaviors mediate the relationship between organizational practices and business performance outcomes [5]. Consequently, organizations seeking competitive differentiation must invest not only in customer relationship management systems but also in the cultural and psychological mechanisms that sustain authentic customer-oriented conduct.

Customer-focused culture has emerged as a central construct linking organizational culture theory with service management research. Organizational culture functions as a system of shared meanings that coordinates behavior without constant managerial supervision. Studies indicate that adaptive cultures capable of aligning internal processes with external customer expectations achieve higher organizational performance and long-term sustainability [6]. A systematic review of organizational culture literature similarly emphasizes that cultural alignment enhances strategic execution and strengthens organizational responsiveness to environmental change [2]. Within this framework, customer orientation becomes an institutionalized norm embedded in organizational identity rather than a temporary managerial initiative.

Recent empirical investigations highlight that customer-focused cultures influence not only marketing outcomes but also broader strategic domains, including environmental reporting, innovation responsiveness, and organizational agility. For example, firms characterized by market-driven customer-oriented cultures demonstrate stronger commitment to socially responsible and climate-related disclosures, illustrating how customer focus shapes strategic decision-making beyond immediate service interactions [7]. Similarly, digital transformation initiatives increasingly rely on customer concentration as a driver of agile management capabilities, reinforcing the strategic role of customer orientation in organizational adaptation processes [8].

In service-intensive industries such as retail chains, employee-level psychological processes play a decisive role in translating organizational values into observable customer experiences. Perspective taking, empathy, and emotional engagement enable employees to deliver higher-quality service interactions and strengthen relational bonds with customers [9, 10]. Empathy-driven interactions enhance customer satisfaction and emotional attachment, while employees' identification with customers improves perceived service quality and loyalty outcomes [11]. Moreover, customer gratitude and positive feedback reinforce prosocial behavior among frontline employees, creating a virtuous cycle that sustains customer-oriented performance over time [12].

The alignment between organizational climate and employee customer orientation further amplifies organizational effectiveness. When service climate supports customer-focused values, employee commitment rises, which in turn strengthens customer loyalty and organizational performance [13]. Customer empowerment mechanisms also encourage active customer participation, deepening engagement and enhancing relational outcomes between organizations and consumers [14]. These findings collectively suggest that customer orientation operates as a systemic phenomenon shaped by organizational structures, interpersonal interactions, and environmental expectations.

Within the retail sector, chain stores face unique challenges due to standardized operations combined with highly localized customer interactions. Iranian chain-store contexts provide a particularly valuable setting for examining customer-focused culture because rapid expansion, digital integration, and shifting consumer expectations have intensified competition. Studies of Iranian retail environments reveal that customer relationship management quality, service value, and brand image jointly influence customer loyalty, highlighting the strategic significance of customer-oriented practices in sustaining market position [15]. Mixed-method research on Iranian chain stores also confirms that customer loyalty depends heavily on perceived service experiences and relational quality rather than transactional factors alone [16].

Social media and digital platforms further reshape customer expectations by increasing transparency, immediacy, and interaction intensity between organizations and consumers. Evidence from Ofogh Kourosh chain stores indicates that social media marketing activities significantly influence customer experience quality and relationship outcomes, reinforcing the need for employees capable of maintaining consistent customer-focused interactions across physical and digital channels [17]. The digitalization of retail operations therefore necessitates cultural transformation alongside technological adoption.

Customer orientation also influences organizational performance through managerial capabilities. Firms whose management teams effectively integrate customer knowledge into decision-making processes achieve superior performance outcomes and stronger customer concentration advantages [18]. Similarly, empirical research demonstrates that customer-oriented behaviors among sales personnel directly enhance customer satisfaction levels across diverse national contexts [19]. These findings indicate that customer orientation functions as a bridging mechanism linking managerial competence, employee behavior, and organizational performance.

Human resource development practices constitute another critical dimension in fostering customer-focused culture. Developing empathic and client-oriented competencies among personnel strengthens service delivery systems and enhances organizational learning processes [20]. Reward alignment mechanisms further reinforce customer-focused culture by ensuring that organizational incentives support desired behavioral outcomes rather than purely financial metrics [21]. In retail organizations, where employees frequently encounter emotional labor demands, supportive leadership and fair reward systems play essential roles in maintaining sustained customer orientation.

Ethical considerations also increasingly intersect with customer orientation. Emerging research on professional ethics in digital marketing and influencer ecosystems demonstrates that ethical responsibility toward customers strengthens trust and long-term relational engagement [22]. Ethical alignment therefore reinforces customer-focused culture by integrating moral commitment with strategic organizational objectives.

Customer orientation additionally contributes to broader business efficiency and organizational competitiveness. Evidence from multiple industries suggests that customer focus improves operational effectiveness, strengthens stakeholder relationships, and enhances organizational adaptability to environmental uncertainty [23]. These advantages are particularly relevant in highly competitive retail markets characterized by fluctuating consumer preferences and economic pressures.

Despite extensive scholarly attention to customer orientation, significant gaps remain regarding how customer-focused culture emerges and stabilizes at the employee level. Many studies concentrate on outcomes such as satisfaction or loyalty while overlooking the underlying cultural formation processes that transform customer orientation into a durable professional identity among employees. Moreover, existing research often treats organizational culture, emotional dynamics, environmental pressures, and interpersonal learning mechanisms as separate variables rather than components of an integrated developmental process [1].

Recent research trends emphasize the need for integrative models that combine psychological, organizational, and environmental determinants of customer orientation. Investigations into service quality and customer value demonstrate that loyalty outcomes depend on complex interactions among organizational systems, employee perceptions, and customer experiences [15]. Similarly, studies examining customer purchase decisions show that customer orientation influences both behavioral intentions and brand loyalty through multidimensional mechanisms [24]. These findings highlight the necessity of developing comprehensive conceptual models capable of capturing the dynamic formation of customer-focused culture.

In addition, prior studies within Ofogh Kourosh chain stores reveal strong links between employee job satisfaction and customer satisfaction, suggesting that internal organizational experiences directly influence external customer outcomes [25]. However, limited research has systematically explored how employees internalize customer orientation values and translate them into stable behavioral patterns embedded within organizational culture. Understanding this process is essential for designing effective human resource strategies, leadership practices, and organizational development interventions.

Given the accelerating pace of digital transformation, rising customer expectations, and intensifying retail competition, organizations require empirically grounded frameworks explaining how customer-focused culture develops and becomes institutionalized among employees. Such frameworks must integrate individual cognition, emotional engagement, organizational structures, interpersonal dynamics, and environmental pressures into a

unified explanatory model. Addressing this need contributes both theoretically—by extending organizational culture and service management literature—and practically—by providing actionable guidance for retail organizations seeking sustainable competitive advantage.

Accordingly, the aim of this study is to design and explain a comprehensive model influencing the formation and institutionalization of a customer-centric culture among employees of Ofogh Kourosh chain stores nationwide.

2. Methodology

The present study was conducted with the aim of designing a model influencing the development of a customer-centric culture among employees of Ofogh Kourosh chain stores nationwide and is applied in terms of research objective. Regarding research nature and strategy, the study adopts an exploratory–confirmatory mixed-methods approach, in which the qualitative component is grounded in phenomenological methodology and the quantitative component is based on structural equation modeling. The phenomenological method was selected because a customer-centric culture constitutes a subjective, experience-based phenomenon dependent on employees' lived perceptions, and its in-depth understanding requires access to the meanings that actors attribute to customer interaction experiences. In the qualitative phase, data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with employees of Ofogh Kourosh chain stores. Sampling was conducted purposively with maximum variation to capture diverse employee experiences across different work situations. The data collection process continued until semantic saturation was achieved. Data analysis followed an interpretive phenomenological approach, including repeated reading of interview transcripts, extraction of meaning units, thematic clustering, and reconstruction of the meaning structures underlying employees' lived experiences of customer-centric culture. The outcome of this phase was the identification of dimensions, themes, and behavioral indicators of customer orientation within the real operational context of Ofogh Kourosh chain stores.

In the quantitative phase, in order to test and validate the conceptual model derived from the qualitative stage, structural equation modeling using the Partial Least Squares approach (PLS-SEM) was employed. The data collection instrument was a researcher-developed questionnaire grounded in phenomenological findings, which was distributed among store employees. Construct reliability and validity, as well as measurement model fit, were evaluated, followed by analysis of structural relationships among the model dimensions. The results of the quantitative phase confirmed the empirical validity of the final model for developing a customer-centric culture.

3. Findings and Results

During the open coding stage, data obtained from in-depth interviews with Ofogh Kourosh chain store employees were analyzed through repeated reading, semantic segmentation, and constant comparison, resulting in a set of initial concepts reflecting employees' lived experiences of customer-centric culture. These concepts indicate that employees do not interpret "value" for the customer merely as product delivery or task completion; rather, they conceptualize it as a dynamic combination of functional, emotional, and social dimensions. In participant narratives, accurate and timely product delivery was perceived only as the starting point, whereas meaningful service experiences were associated with creating psychological comfort, mutual respect, and a sense of recognition for customers. In defining their role within the value-creation chain, employees employed diverse metaphors: some perceived themselves as limited components within a large organizational system, while others described their role as creators of "golden moments" in customer experience. Another prominent concept involved employees' cognitive distinction between "organizational instruction" and "personal commitment." The data suggest that many customer-oriented behaviors originate not from formal obligations but from internalized professional identity or ethical responsibility. Mental metaphors such as "the customer is a guest," "the customer is the boss," or "the customer is our partner" unconsciously guided the direction and quality of interactions. Employees also relied on diverse justification systems to explain behaviors beyond formal duties, ranging from religious beliefs and professional ethics to instrumental rationality related to career advancement or preservation of personal reputation. At the emotional level, multiple concepts related to both synergistic and depleting emotions were identified. Experiences of pride, belonging, and professional flourishing resulting from solving complex customer problems coexisted with feelings of exhaustion, powerlessness, and marginalization arising from workload pressure, disrespectful behavior, or structural constraints, creating a complex emotional landscape within customer interaction settings. Employees further referred to emotional

management strategies, ranging from surface acting to consciously deepened empathy, particularly under conditions where fatigue or time pressure hindered natural emotional expression. At interpersonal and organizational levels, concepts such as implicit group norms, social learning from experienced colleagues, intra-group social capital, and the quality of interaction among different store roles emerged as significant. Narratives indicated that stories of success or failure in customer interactions circulated informally within the organization and functioned as behavioral models or cautionary lessons shaping future conduct. Finally, concepts related to environmental pressures—including market competition, digitalization, economic conditions, and sociocultural norms of Iranian society—played a decisive role in shaping employees' perceptions of customers and regulating their behaviors.

During the axial coding stage, the extracted concepts were organized into coherent meaning clusters to reveal causal, contextual, and interactional relationships among them. The first axial category, "individual customer-orientation discourse," illustrates how employees construct frameworks for customer-oriented action based on their personal definitions of value. This discourse directly influences approaches to customer engagement, levels of initiative, and service experience quality. The second category, "emotions and affect within the interactional field," functions as either a driving force or an inhibitor of customer-oriented behavior. Findings indicate that perceived agency and positive feedback generate reinforcing emotions that sustain desirable behaviors, whereas role conflict, environmental pressures, and violated expectations produce depleting emotions that may lead to emotional withdrawal. Emotional regulation and empathy quality serve as mediating mechanisms within this process. The third category, "perceptions of organizational enabling and constraining structures," reflects how employees' experiences of leadership style, reward systems, training opportunities, access to information, and process agility determine whether customer orientation is genuinely operationalized or remains merely rhetorical. Lack of alignment among organizational units was identified as a key factor undermining integrated customer experience. The fourth category, "interpersonal interactions and group dynamics," demonstrates that customer-oriented behavior is not solely an individual phenomenon but emerges within collective norms, social capital networks, and shared learning environments. Trust and peer support increase the likelihood of discretionary, beyond-role behaviors, whereas restrictive norms may suppress individual initiative. The fifth category, "perception of the extra-organizational environment and contextual pressures," encompasses market competition, the perceived characteristics of Iranian customers, digital transformation, and economic conditions. Employees interpret these factors as external forces reshaping customer expectations and increasing interactional complexity. Finally, the category of "turning points and critical situations" indicates that specific experiences of success, failure, ethical conflict, or transformative feedback play a decisive role in redefining employees' attitudes and behaviors toward customer orientation.

In the selective coding stage, all axial categories were integrated around a central phenomenon that can be termed the "process of forming and stabilizing a customer-centric culture as part of the professional identity of Ofogh Kourosh employees." The findings indicate that a customer-oriented culture becomes sustainably and effectively institutionalized in employees' behavior when it moves beyond mere compliance with formal guidelines and reaches the stage of value recognition and internalization. In this condition, customer-oriented behavior is not regarded as an assemblage of teachable skills, but rather as part of an individual's "professional self." Another core indicator is the "perception of customer-centric culture as a competitive weapon." Employees who believe that the quality of their interactions can generate genuine differentiation in a saturated retail market demonstrate higher levels of commitment, initiative, and tolerance for pressure. This belief is particularly reinforced when the organization communicates a clear message about the value of customer orientation through its reward system, leadership style, and organizational narratives. Finally, the "balance between driving and inhibiting motivators" was identified as a complementary selective indicator. Although fear of the consequences of violating customer-oriented norms can secure minimum compliant behaviors, authentic and beyond-role behaviors primarily stem from positive motivators such as professional pride, a legitimate social identity, and a sense of real impact on customer experience. This balance constitutes the core of the final model of customer-centric culture at Ofogh Kourosh and serves as the basis for developing the study's conceptual model in the subsequent section.

Table 1. Results of Qualitative Data Coding

Concept	Category	Indicator
Examines how the employee, in an agentic role, defines "value" for the customer—whether in functional terms (accurate product delivery), emotional terms (creating reassurance), social terms (respect), or as a combination. This definition structures the employee's action framework.	Value from the employee's perspective	Individual customer-orientation discourse
Analyzes narratives through which the employee constructs their role and impact within the overall value-creation process for the customer and the organization—whether as a passive cog, a necessary intermediary, or a creator of key "golden moments" in customer experience.	The self's role in the value chain	Individual customer-orientation discourse
Explores the perceived boundary between what the employee receives as an organizational directive/policy and what is internalized as an ethical or professional obligation. This distinction clarifies the internal source of motivation.	Perceived differentiation between organizational duty and personal commitment	Individual customer-orientation discourse
Identifies underlying metaphors (e.g., "the customer is a guest," "the customer is the boss," "the customer is a partner") that unconsciously steer the direction and quality of interactions.	Dominant mental metaphors governing the employee–customer relationship	Individual customer-orientation discourse
Uncovers justificatory systems used to explain beyond-expectation behavior versus mere task completion (e.g., religion-based justification, professional ethics, instrumental rationality for career advancement).	Justificatory system for customer-oriented actions	Individual customer-orientation discourse
Examines the employee's perceived level of power to influence processes and resolve customer issues—whether they see themselves as empowered agents or as constrained by organizational structures.	Perceived power and agency in dealing with the system	Individual customer-orientation discourse
Synergistic positive emotions (stemming from realized agency): pleasurable feelings such as flourishing (solving complex problems), pride (positive customer feedback reinforcing professional identity), and belonging (authentic connection).	Synergistic positive emotions	Emotions and affect in the interactional field
Depleting emotions such as emotional exhaustion (continuous work intensity), feeling belittled (demeaning encounters), and powerlessness (systemic barriers preventing quality service).	Negative emotions arising from role conflict and environmental pressure	Emotions and affect in the interactional field
Assesses conscious and unconscious emotion-regulation and display strategies aligned with role expectations (even when incongruent with inner feelings), such as surface acting or deep acting.	Emotional regulation and emotional labor	Emotions and affect in the interactional field
Analyzes empathy quality: whether it is purely cognitive understanding of customer needs or includes affective engagement; also examines empathy barriers (e.g., fatigue).	Empathy as an affective–cognitive experience	Emotions and affect in the interactional field
Feelings such as frustration or perceived injustice when employee efforts are ignored by customers or unsupported by the organizational system.	Emotions resulting from violated expectations	Emotions and affect in the interactional field
Examines how emotions (positive/negative) spread among team members, forming a dominant affective climate that shapes individual behavior.	Collective emotions and the unit's affective climate	Emotions and affect in the interactional field
Perceived extent to which direct management style (transformational, transactional, authoritarian) strengthens or weakens employee resilience and initiative in handling customer issues.	Experience of leadership and supervision style	Perceptions of organizational enabling and constraining structures
Analyzes perceived fairness in distributing tangible and symbolic rewards and the clarity of linking them to observable customer-oriented behavior (not merely quantitative sales metrics).	Perceived effectiveness of compensation and recognition systems	Perceptions of organizational enabling and constraining structures
Evaluates perceived relevance, practicality, and timing of training programs in strengthening product knowledge, communication skills, and problem-solving.	Experienced quality of competency development	Perceptions of organizational enabling and constraining structures
Describes ease/difficulty of timely access to reliable information (inventory, price, technical specs) at the point of customer interaction.	Access to organizational information and knowledge	Perceptions of organizational enabling and constraining structures
Captures employee experience of efficiency and speed of customer-related processes (returns, complaints, special requests) and the extent of unnecessary bureaucracy.	Flexibility and agility of support processes	Perceptions of organizational enabling and constraining structures
Assesses perceived coordination versus conflict among units (sales, warehouse, procurement, finance) regarding impact on seamless customer service delivery.	Perceived cross-unit integration	Perceptions of organizational enabling and constraining structures
Identifies unwritten rules and behavioral expectations among coworkers (e.g., "avoid getting involved in customer problems" vs. "always be ready to help teammates").	Implicit norms among coworkers	Interpersonal interactions and group dynamics
Examines informal learning processes through observing, imitating, and discussing customer-situation management with more experienced colleagues.	Social learning and peer modeling	Interpersonal interactions and group dynamics
Analyzes trust, cohesion, and willingness to cooperate within the team that supports individual customer-oriented actions (e.g., confidence in coworker backup in difficult situations).	Intra-group social capital and trust	Interpersonal interactions and group dynamics
Describes the quality of interaction among distinct but interdependent store roles (cashier, sales team, stockkeeper) and its effect on integrated customer experience.	Conflict or cooperation among roles	Interpersonal interactions and group dynamics

Examines how success/failure stories in customer encounters circulate orally and function as lessons learned or warnings shaping future behavior.	Transmission of organizational narratives and myths	Interpersonal interactions and group dynamics
Analyzes the unique, gradually formed relationship with repeat customers and its effect on mutual expectations and depth of service provision.	Experience of relationships with loyal customers	Interpersonal interactions and group dynamics
Employee perception of whether service quality and customer focus constitute a vital, real competitive advantage for Ofogh Kourosh relative to competitors.	Perceived intensity of competition and the organization's differentiation position	Perceptions of the extra-organizational environment and contextual pressures
Analyzes stereotypes, perceived behavioral patterns, and expectation levels attributed to Iranian customers and how employees adjust behavior accordingly.	Construction of the Iranian customer image and expectations	Perceptions of the extra-organizational environment and contextual pressures
Describes the impact of digital tools (mobile apps, social media) on customer interaction, including new expectations and pressures from increased transparency.	Experience of digitalization and the physical–virtual duality	Perceptions of the extra-organizational environment and contextual pressures
Interprets the effects of economic conditions (inflation, reduced purchasing power) on customer sensitivity/expectations and on employees' intrinsic motivation for service.	Economic pressures and perceived price–quality sensitivity	Perceptions of the extra-organizational environment and contextual pressures
Examines how broader sociocultural values (e.g., procrastination, individualism, importance of face-saving) shape micro-level interactions in the store.	Cultural–social norms governing exchange	Perceptions of the extra-organizational environment and contextual pressures
"Solving seemingly unsolvable problems": analyzes detailed stories in which employees use creativity, persistence, or collaboration to resolve complex customer issues, experiencing deep efficacy and impact.	Victory narrative	Turning points and critical situations
"Confronting insurmountable barriers": describes situations where employee willingness/capacity to help is neutralized by rigid policies, structural constraints, or resource shortages, producing despair and distrust in the system.	Structural failure narrative	Turning points and critical situations
Examines experiences where beyond-role efforts are ignored by customers or the organization, reducing future willingness to engage in such behaviors.	Violation of positive expectations	Turning points and critical situations
Analyzes cases where an initial error/failure becomes a powerful learning situation due to constructive feedback or managerial support, correcting employee attitudes.	Learning situations arising from mistakes	Turning points and critical situations
Explores ambiguous situations in which organizational interests (e.g., preventing a return) conflict with the employee's sense of "doing the right thing" for the customer, creating internal tension.	Encountering ethical conflict	Turning points and critical situations
Describes the impact of a specific (positive/negative) feedback event from a customer, coworker, or manager that functions as a turning point transforming long-term attitudes/behavior.	Transformative feedback experience	Turning points and critical situations
From compliance to recognition and internalization: analyzes the psychological process by which motivation shifts from external coercion (fear of punishment) to identity congruence (seeking approval) and finally full internalization ("this value is part of me").	Value internalization	Transition from attitude to action and stabilization of habitus
Examines development of the ability to rapidly diagnose customer needs, emotional states, and situational types without extensive analytic thought, based on accumulated experience.	Formation of automatic situational judgment	Transition from attitude to action and stabilization of habitus
Describes emergence of intuitive insight ("sixth sense") among experienced employees, enabling anticipation and fulfillment of implicit needs beyond explicit customer requests.	Development of a customer-orientation "professional sense"	Transition from attitude to action and stabilization of habitus
Analyzes how employees prioritize and integrate conflicting demands (queue speed vs. individualized attention) in practice and develop personalized efficient action strategies.	Managing role conflict and allocating cognitive resources	Transition from attitude to action and stabilization of habitus
Examines how direct customer feedback is used to revise and correct beliefs and behavioral schemas ("I thought this was right, but the customer showed a different view").	Customer feedback and revision of mental schemas	Transition from attitude to action and stabilization of habitus
Describes the point at which customer-oriented behavior is stabilized not as a "skill set" but as an inseparable element of self-definition as a "professional Ofogh Kourosh employee."	Stabilization as part of professional identity	Transition from attitude to action and stabilization of habitus
Examines employees' perceptions of this culture's role in differentiating Ofogh Kourosh from direct competitors (e.g., Hyperstar, Refah) and indirect competitors (online retailers); whether interaction quality can secure loyalty in a saturated market.	Perceiving customer-centric culture as a competitive weapon	Competitive and motivational (intrinsic–extrinsic) dimensions of customer-centric culture
Examines the extent to which "being a customer-oriented Ofogh Kourosh employee" is regarded as a valued and pride-generating professional identity and whether it confers social legitimacy in the community.	Link between customer orientation and legitimate professional identity	Competitive and motivational (intrinsic–extrinsic) dimensions of customer-centric culture
Explores how customer-orientation value is concretely materialized in the reward system: whether tangible (financial, promotion) and intangible (recognition, trust) rewards are transparently and fairly tied to behavioral evidence (not only quantitative outcomes).	Role of the reward system in objectifying customer-orientation value	Competitive and motivational (intrinsic–extrinsic) dimensions of customer-centric culture

Examines the negative driving force: fear of which consequences (from managers, coworkers, or customers) prevents anti-customer behavior; whether fear is driven more by formal sanctions or informal threats (loss of team respect); and its relative weight compared with positive drivers.	Fear of the consequences of violating customer-centric norms	Competitive and motivational (intrinsic–extrinsic) dimensions of customer-centric culture

To test the measurement model and examine the factorial structure of the constructs, confirmatory factor analysis was conducted within a structural equation modeling framework using the Partial Least Squares approach (PLS-SEM). This approach was selected because the study's aim was to confirm the theoretical structure extracted from the qualitative phase and to assess relationships among constructs, rather than to explore new dimensions. In addition, PLS-SEM was deemed appropriate for the nature of the data and the objectives of the present study due to its limited dependence on strict data normality assumptions, its adequate explanatory power with moderate sample sizes, and its capability to simultaneously evaluate construct reliability and validity. The results of the confirmatory factor analysis indicated that the items demonstrated acceptable factor loadings and that the reliability and validity indices of the constructs fell within recommended ranges. This finding evidences an adequate fit of the measurement model and the suitability of the behavioral items for measuring customer-centric culture. Accordingly, the conceptual model derived from the qualitative phase was also supported at the quantitative data level, providing the necessary basis for subsequent analyses, including determining component weights, ranking dimensions, and extracting structural relationships among factors.

Table 2. Final Items of the "Developing a Customer-Centric Culture" Model for CFA

Indicator	Symbol	Category	Causal Behavioral Item (for CFA)	Item Type
Individual customer-orientation discourse	q1	Value from the employee's perspective	My understanding of customer value determines the direction of my customer-oriented behavior in the store.	Direct
	q2	The self's role in the value chain	When I perceive myself as a creator of customer experience, customer-oriented behavior in my work is strengthened.	Direct
	q3	Perceived differentiation between organizational duty and personal commitment	My personal commitment to the customer shapes the culture of customer orientation.	Direct
	q4	Dominant mental metaphors governing the employee–customer relationship	The image I hold of the customer guides how I interact in a customer-oriented manner.	Direct
	q5	Justificatory system for customer-oriented actions	My ethical beliefs are the primary justification for my customer-oriented behavior.	Direct
	q6	Perceived power and agency in dealing with the system	Feeling empowered to solve customer issues strengthens my customer-oriented behavior.	Direct
Emotions and affect in the interactional field	q7	Synergistic positive emotions	Feeling satisfied after helping a customer increases the continuity of my customer-oriented behavior.	Direct
	q8	Negative emotions arising from role conflict and environmental pressure	Work pressure prevents me from developing sustained customer-oriented behavior.	Reverse
	q9	Emotional regulation and emotional labor	The ability to manage emotions enables me to maintain customer-oriented behavior.	Direct
	q10	Empathy as an affective–cognitive experience	Genuine empathy with the customer increases the quality of my customer-oriented behavior.	Direct
	q11	Emotions resulting from violated expectations	When my efforts are ignored, my motivation for customer orientation decreases.	Reverse
	q12	Collective emotions and the unit's affective climate	The team's emotional climate determines the intensity of my customer-oriented behavior.	Direct
Perceptions of organizational enabling and constraining structures	q13	Experience of leadership and supervision style	Leadership that supports initiative strengthens the culture of customer focus.	Direct
	q14	Perceived effectiveness of compensation and recognition systems	Linking rewards to customer-oriented behavior stabilizes this culture.	Direct
	q15	Experienced quality of competency development	Practical training increases my capacity for customer-oriented behavior.	Direct
	q16	Access to organizational information and knowledge	Rapid access to information is a prerequisite for customer-oriented behavior.	Direct

	q17	Flexibility and agility of support processes	Simplified processes make effective customer interaction possible.	Direct
	q18	Perceived cross-unit integration	Coordination among units creates a customer-oriented experience.	Direct
Interpersonal interactions and effective group dynamics	q19	Implicit norms among coworkers	The team's unwritten norms guide my customer-oriented behavior.	Direct
	q20	Social learning and peer modeling	Observing experienced colleagues establishes customer-orientation patterns in me.	Direct
	q21	Intra-group social capital and trust	Coworker trust strengthens the continuity of my customer-oriented behavior.	Direct
	q22	Conflict or cooperation among roles	Cooperation among roles increases customer satisfaction.	Direct
	q23	Transmission of organizational narratives and myths	Narratives about customer encounters shape my customer-oriented attitude.	Direct
	q24	Experience of relationships with loyal customers	Continuous interaction with loyal customers increases the depth of my customer-oriented behavior.	Direct
Perceptions of the extra-organizational environment and contextual pressures	q25	Perceived intensity of competition and the organization's differentiation position	Belief in the competitive role of customer orientation strengthens my interactions.	Direct
	q26	Construction of the Iranian customer image and expectations	My perception of customer expectations determines my customer-oriented behavior.	Direct
	q27	Experience of digitalization and the physical–virtual duality	The digitalization of interactions has increased the necessity of customer orientation.	Direct
	q28	Economic pressures and perceived price–quality sensitivity	Economic pressures reduce my sensitivity to customer needs.	Reverse
	q29	Cultural–social norms governing exchange	Social norms constrain my customer-oriented interaction style.	Reverse
Turning points and critical situations	q30	Victory narrative	Successfully solving a customer's problem strengthens my customer-oriented commitment.	Direct
	q31	Structural failure narrative	Structural constraints weaken the inclination toward customer orientation.	Reverse
	q32	Violation of positive expectations	When my beyond-duty actions go unnoticed, my customer-orientation motivation decreases.	Reverse
	q33	Learning situations arising from mistakes	Turning mistakes into learning improves my customer-oriented attitude.	Direct
	q34	Encountering ethical conflict	Conflict between regulations and customer interest makes customer-oriented decision-making difficult.	Direct
	q35	Transformative feedback experience	Influential feedback changes my long-term attitude toward the customer.	Direct
Transition from attitude to action and stabilization of habitus	q36	Value internalization	Customer orientation has become part of my internal values.	Direct
	q37	Formation of automatic situational judgment	Work experience has enabled rapid recognition of customer needs.	Direct
	q38	Development of a customer-orientation "professional sense"	My professional sense guides behavior that exceeds customer expectations.	Direct
	q39	Managing role conflict and allocating cognitive resources	My ability to manage speed and quality simultaneously has stabilized my customer orientation.	Direct
	q40	Customer feedback and revision of mental schemas	Customer feedback corrects my mental patterns.	Direct
	q41	Stabilization as part of professional identity	Customer orientation has become part of my professional identity.	Direct
Competitive and motivational (intrinsic–extrinsic) dimensions of customer-centric culture	q42	Perceiving customer-centric culture as a competitive weapon	Belief in the competitive advantage of customer orientation increases my behavioral commitment.	Direct
	q43	Link between customer orientation and legitimate professional identity	Customer orientation creates a valued professional identity for me.	Direct
	q44	Role of the reward system in objectifying customer-orientation value	Reward transparency based on customer orientation makes this culture real.	Direct
	q45	Fear of the consequences of violating customer-centric norms	Fear of the consequences of violating customer orientation prevents anti-customer behavior.	Direct

Descriptive statistics for the items related to developing a customer-centric culture among Ofogh Kourosh chain store employees nationwide are presented across eight dimensions: individual customer-orientation discourse;

emotions and affect in the interactional field; perceptions of organizational enabling and constraining structures; effective interpersonal interactions and group dynamics; perceptions of the extra-organizational environment and contextual pressures; turning points and critical situations; the transition from attitude to action and stabilization of habitus; and the competitive and motivational (intrinsic–extrinsic) dimensions of customer-centric culture. The mean, standard deviation, skewness, and kurtosis indices served as the basis for analyzing respondents' perspectives.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics for Items Measuring the Development of a Customer-Centric Culture among Employees of Ofogh Kourosh Chain Stores Nationwide

Dimension (Indicator)	Item (Category)	Symbol	Mean	Standard Deviation	Kurtosis	Skewness
Individual customer-orientation discourse	My understanding of customer value determines the direction of my customer-oriented behavior in the store.	q1	3.640	1.015	-0.213	-0.481
	When I perceive myself as a creator of customer experience, customer-oriented behavior in my work is strengthened.	q2	3.893	0.881	-0.191	-0.467
	My personal commitment to the customer shapes the culture of customer orientation.	q3	3.883	0.981	-0.082	-0.657
	The image I hold of the customer guides how I interact in a customer-oriented manner.	q4	3.927	0.884	-0.253	-0.467
	My ethical beliefs are the primary justification for my customer-oriented behavior.	q5	3.887	0.997	-0.040	-0.684
	Feeling empowered to solve customer issues strengthens my customer-oriented behavior.	q6	3.807	0.981	-0.232	-0.540
Emotions and affect in the interactional field	Feeling satisfied after helping a customer increases the continuity of my customer-oriented behavior.	q7	3.693	0.990	-0.551	-0.349
	Work pressure prevents me from developing sustained customer-oriented behavior.	q8	3.733	0.957	-0.347	-0.408
	The ability to manage emotions enables me to maintain customer-oriented behavior.	q9	3.737	0.980	-0.734	-0.305
	Genuine empathy with the customer increases the quality of my customer-oriented behavior.	q10	3.743	0.944	-0.291	-0.399
	When my efforts are ignored, my motivation for customer orientation decreases.	q11	3.750	0.980	-0.337	-0.442
	The team's emotional climate determines the intensity of my customer-oriented behavior.	q12	3.830	0.946	-0.357	-0.462
Perceptions of organizational enabling and constraining structures	Leadership that supports initiative strengthens the culture of customer focus.	q13	3.777	0.987	-0.437	-0.460
	Linking rewards to customer-oriented behavior stabilizes this culture.	q14	3.790	1.003	-0.231	-0.565
	Practical training increases my capacity for customer-oriented behavior.	q15	3.773	0.957	-0.454	-0.405
	Rapid access to information is a prerequisite for customer-oriented behavior.	q16	3.817	0.929	-0.313	-0.429
	Simplified processes make effective customer interaction possible.	q17	3.770	0.911	-0.629	-0.272
	Coordination among units creates a customer-oriented experience.	q18	3.857	0.981	-0.307	-0.560
Effective interpersonal interactions and group dynamics	The team's unwritten norms guide my customer-oriented behavior.	q19	3.810	0.868	-0.501	-0.266
	Observing experienced colleagues establishes customer-orientation patterns in me.	q20	3.873	0.975	-0.117	-0.611
	Coworker trust strengthens the continuity of my customer-oriented behavior.	q21	3.937	1.019	0.099	0.802
	Cooperation among roles increases customer satisfaction.	q22	3.653	1.049	-0.213	-0.541
	Narratives about customer encounters shape my customer-oriented attitude.	q23	3.687	0.970	-0.574	-0.327
	Continuous interaction with loyal customers increases the depth of my customer-oriented behavior.	q24	3.687	0.967	-0.313	-0.404

Perceptions of the extra-organizational environment and contextual pressures	Belief in the competitive role of customer orientation strengthens my interactions.	q25	3.703	0.998	-0.570	-0.369
	My perception of customer expectations determines my customer-oriented behavior.	q26	3.847	0.992	-0.076	-0.637
	The digitalization of interactions has increased the necessity of customer orientation.	q27	3.853	0.976	0.193	0.698
	Economic pressures reduce my sensitivity to customer needs.	q28	3.697	1.041	-0.176	-0.577
	Social norms constrain my customer-oriented interaction style.	q29	3.923	0.989	-0.226	-0.657
Turning points and critical situations	Successfully solving a customer's problem strengthens my customer-oriented commitment.	q30	3.947	0.904	-0.228	-0.548
	Structural constraints weaken the inclination toward customer orientation.	q31	3.863	1.006	-0.435	-0.553
	When my beyond-duty actions go unnoticed, my customer-orientation motivation decreases.	q32	3.877	0.939	-0.215	-0.553
	Turning mistakes into learning improves my customer-oriented attitude.	q33	3.720	0.939	-0.174	-0.385
	Conflict between regulations and customer interest makes customer-oriented decision-making difficult.	q34	3.937	0.969	0.096	0.734
	Influential feedback changes my long-term attitude toward the customer.	q35	3.907	0.958	-0.311	-0.566
Transition from attitude to action and stabilization of habitus	Customer orientation has become part of my internal values.	q36	3.847	0.961	-0.411	-0.482
	Work experience has enabled rapid recognition of customer needs.	q37	3.837	1.066	-0.152	-0.715
	My professional sense guides behavior that exceeds customer expectations.	q38	3.893	0.977	-0.083	-0.646
	My ability to manage speed and quality simultaneously has stabilized my customer orientation.	q39	3.847	1.044	-0.379	-0.608
	Customer feedback corrects my mental patterns.	q40	3.967	0.930	-0.158	-0.607
	Customer orientation has become part of my professional identity.	q41	3.857	0.964	-0.414	-0.494
Competitive and motivational (intrinsic–extrinsic) dimensions of customer-centric culture	Belief in the competitive advantage of customer orientation increases my behavioral commitment.	q42	4.003	0.918	-0.214	-0.630
	Customer orientation creates a valued professional identity for me.	q43	3.953	0.992	0.111	0.770
	Reward transparency based on customer orientation makes this culture real.	q44	3.917	0.964	-0.684	-0.482
	Fear of the consequences of violating customer orientation prevents anti-customer behavior.	q45	3.787	1.033	-0.739	-0.437

An examination of the descriptive statistics for the items measuring the development of a customer-centric culture among Ofogh Kourosh chain store employees shows that the mean of all items across all eight dimensions is higher than the theoretical midpoint of the scale (3). This indicates that, from respondents' perspectives, the components identified in the study's conceptual model have empirical salience and are perceived as influential elements in shaping and reproducing a customer-centric culture. In addition, skewness values are predominantly negative and kurtosis values fall within an acceptable range, indicating a tendency toward positive evaluations and the adequacy of the data for causal and structural analyses.

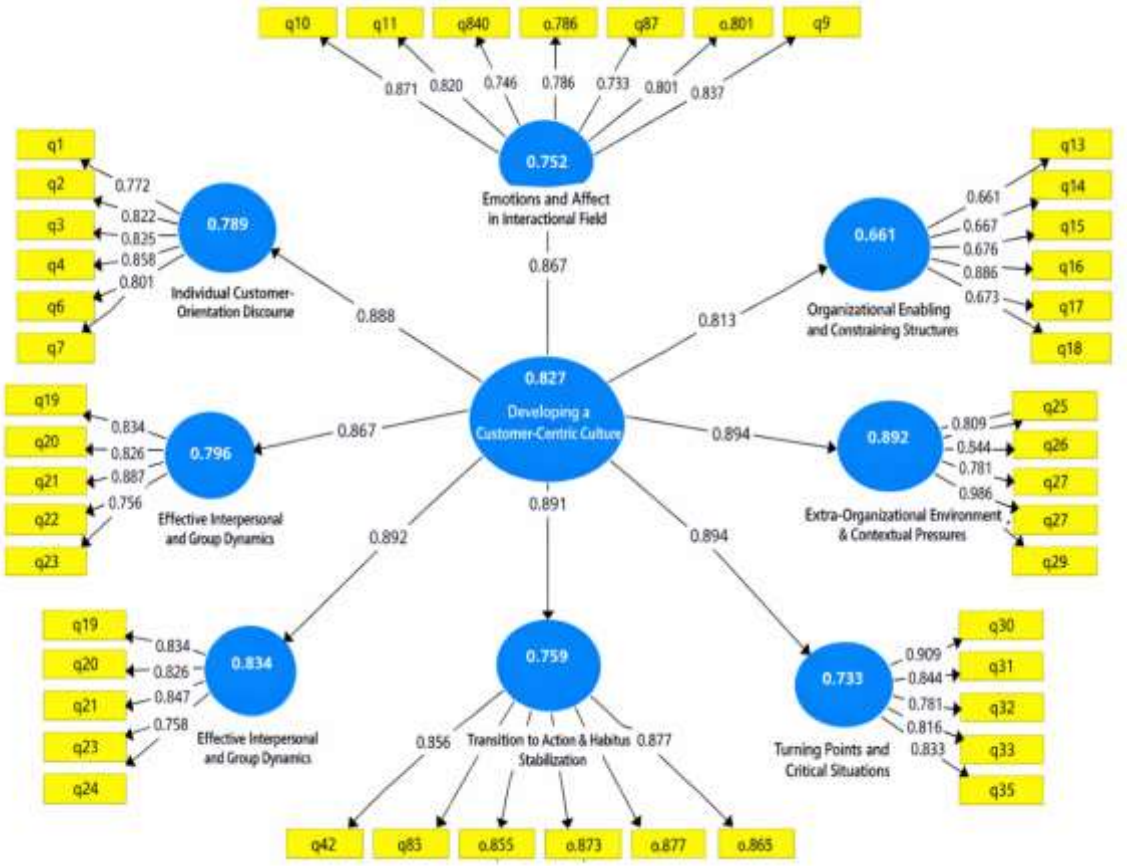


Figure 1. Measurement Model of Developing a Customer-Centric Culture among Employees of Ofogh Kourosh Chain Stores Nationwide

All constructs in the model of developing a customer-centric culture demonstrate strong internal consistency reliability, adequate convergent validity, and desirable measurement quality. These findings indicate that the designed items measure the latent dimensions of customer-centric culture among employees of Ofogh Kourosh chain stores in a meaningful and coherent manner. Accordingly, with methodological confidence, the analysis can proceed to the structural model stage and the interpretation of path coefficients in order to determine the weights and the relative influence of the model's dimensions and components.

After confirming the reliability and convergent validity of the constructs in the customer-centric culture development model, the next step in evaluating the measurement model is to assess discriminant validity. Discriminant validity indicates the extent to which each construct is distinct from other constructs in the model and represents an independent concept. The discriminant validity of the constructs in the customer-centric culture development model was fully supported using the Fornell–Larcker criterion. Specifically, in all cases, the square root of the Average Variance Extracted (√AVE) for each construct—reported on the main diagonal of the matrix—was greater than the construct's correlations with all other constructs. This finding suggests that, despite their theoretical and functional relationships with other dimensions, each model dimension possesses adequate conceptual distinctiveness and measurement independence, and that the items of each construct explain their corresponding construct more strongly than they correlate with other constructs. Meeting the Fornell–Larcker criterion across all dimensions—particularly in a process-oriented and causal model such as "developing a customer-centric culture"—indicates that components such as organizational structures, interpersonal interactions, emotions, contextual pressures, and the transition from attitude to action have been properly operationalized without unjustified overlap. Therefore, the measurement model can be considered adequate for entering the structural model analysis and interpreting path coefficients.

Table 4. Discriminant Validity Assessment of the Constructs in the Customer-Centric Culture Development Model among Employees of Ofogh Kourosh Chain Stores Nationwide (Fornell–Larcker Criterion)

Construct	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Competitive and motivational (intrinsic–extrinsic) dimensions of customer-centric culture	0.873							
2. Perceptions of organizational enabling and constraining structures	0.593	0.828						
3. Perceptions of the extra-organizational environment and contextual pressures	0.732	0.680	0.836					
4. Developing a customer-centric culture among Ofogh Kourosh employees	0.683	0.701	0.794	0.827				
5. Effective interpersonal interactions and group dynamics	0.735	0.570	0.776	0.718	0.836			
6. Turning points and critical situations	0.662	0.762	0.715	0.750	0.634	0.792		
7. Emotions and affect in the interactional field	0.774	0.587	0.755	0.733	0.804	0.678	0.841	
8. Transition from attitude to action and stabilization of habitus	0.674	0.707	0.765	0.780	0.692	0.787	0.734	0.808

After confirming discriminant validity using the Fornell–Larcker criterion, discriminant validity was also assessed using the HTMT (Heterotrait–Monotrait Ratio) index to provide additional assurance of conceptual distinctiveness among constructs. The HTMT values between the constructs of the customer-centric culture development model are reported below. All HTMT values were below the accepted threshold of 0.90 (and in most cases below 0.85), indicating full support for discriminant validity of the constructs in the study model. This finding indicates that each of the eight dimensions, despite theoretical and causal connections with the other dimensions, measures a distinct and non-overlapping concept.

Table 5. Discriminant Validity Assessment of the Constructs in the Customer-Centric Culture Development Model among Employees of Ofogh Kourosh Chain Stores Nationwide (HTMT Index)

Construct	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Competitive and motivational (intrinsic–extrinsic) dimensions of customer-centric culture								
2. Perceptions of organizational enabling and constraining structures	0.654							
3. Perceptions of the extra-organizational environment and contextual pressures	0.819	0.751						
4. Developing a customer-centric culture among Ofogh Kourosh employees	0.756	0.768	0.879					
5. Effective interpersonal interactions and group dynamics	0.812	0.622	0.859	0.787				
6. Turning points and critical situations	0.744	0.850	0.805	0.838	0.706			
7. Emotions and affect in the interactional field	0.854	0.640	0.834	0.803	0.878	0.752		
8. Transition from attitude to action and stabilization of habitus	0.751	0.782	0.854	0.865	0.763	0.887	0.809	

All items have positive and statistically significant outer weights. Specifically, the T-statistic values for all indicators are substantially greater than the threshold of 1.96 and their significance levels are below 0.01 (P = 0.000), indicating the significant role of each item in explaining its corresponding construct. In addition, VIF values for all items are below the critical threshold of 5 and mostly fall within the range of 1.8 to 3.0, indicating no multicollinearity problem among indicators and adequate statistical stability in estimating outer weights. Overall, these results confirm that the designed items explain the causal constructs of the customer-centric culture development model meaningfully and without unjustified statistical overlap, and that the measurement model is sufficiently adequate for interpreting causal and structural results.

Table 6. Goodness-of-Fit Indices for the Structural Model and the Overall Model of Developing a Customer-Centric Culture among Employees of Ofogh Kourosh Chain Stores Nationwide

Construct	CV.RED	R^2	Effect Size	GOF	SRMR
Competitive and motivational (intrinsic–extrinsic) dimensions of customer-centric culture	0.498	0.694	2.273	0.719	0.066
Perceptions of organizational enabling and constraining structures	0.422	0.661	1.953		
Perceptions of the extra-organizational environment and contextual pressures	0.524	0.800	4.003		
Effective interpersonal interactions and group dynamics	0.507	0.796	3.899		
Turning points and critical situations	0.478	0.733	2.744		
Emotions and affect in the interactional field	0.440	0.752	3.030		
Transition from attitude to action and stabilization of habitus	0.508	0.769	3.333		
Individual customer-orientation discourse	0.481	0.789	3.749		

After establishing measurement model reliability and validity through confirmatory factor analysis based on PLS-SEM, the next step is to determine the statistical significance of the model paths. Accordingly, standardized path coefficients (β), standard errors (SE), T-statistics, and significance levels are reported. Overall, the standardized path coefficients (Original Sample) indicate that the construct "developing a customer-centric culture" exerts a strong and statistically significant causal effect on all eight dimensions, such that all path coefficients are greater than 0.81 and statistically significant at $p < 0.001$.

Table 7. Path Coefficients of the Customer-Centric Culture Development Model among Employees of Ofogh Kourosh Chain Stores Nationwide and Their Significance Tests

Path	Standardized Path Coefficient (β)	Standard Error (SE)	T-statistic	p-value
Developing a customer-centric culture → Competitive and motivational (intrinsic–extrinsic) dimensions of customer-centric culture	0.833	0.022	37.917	0.000
Developing a customer-centric culture → Perceptions of organizational enabling and constraining structures	0.813	0.032	25.238	0.000
Developing a customer-centric culture → Perceptions of the extra-organizational environment and contextual pressures	0.894	0.017	53.267	0.000
Developing a customer-centric culture → Effective interpersonal interactions and group dynamics	0.892	0.021	43.140	0.000
Developing a customer-centric culture → Turning points and critical situations	0.856	0.032	27.003	0.000
Developing a customer-centric culture → Emotions and affect in the interactional field	0.867	0.021	41.836	0.000
Developing a customer-centric culture → Transition from attitude to action and stabilization of habitus	0.877	0.017	51.086	0.000
Developing a customer-centric culture → Individual customer-orientation discourse	0.888	0.019	47.002	0.000

The study's final structural model, estimated using the PLS-SEM approach, depicts the causal relationships between the core construct "developing a customer-centric culture among employees of Ofogh Kourosh chain stores" and its eight explanatory dimensions. The blue circles represent latent constructs and the yellow rectangles represent observable items. The numbers displayed on the arrows indicate bootstrapped T-statistics, all of which exceed the critical value of 1.96, confirming the significance of causal relationships at the 95% confidence level. The T-statistics for the items further indicate that all indicators have meaningful explanatory power and statistically significant loadings; therefore, the model demonstrates satisfactory statistical and conceptual validity at both the measurement and structural levels.

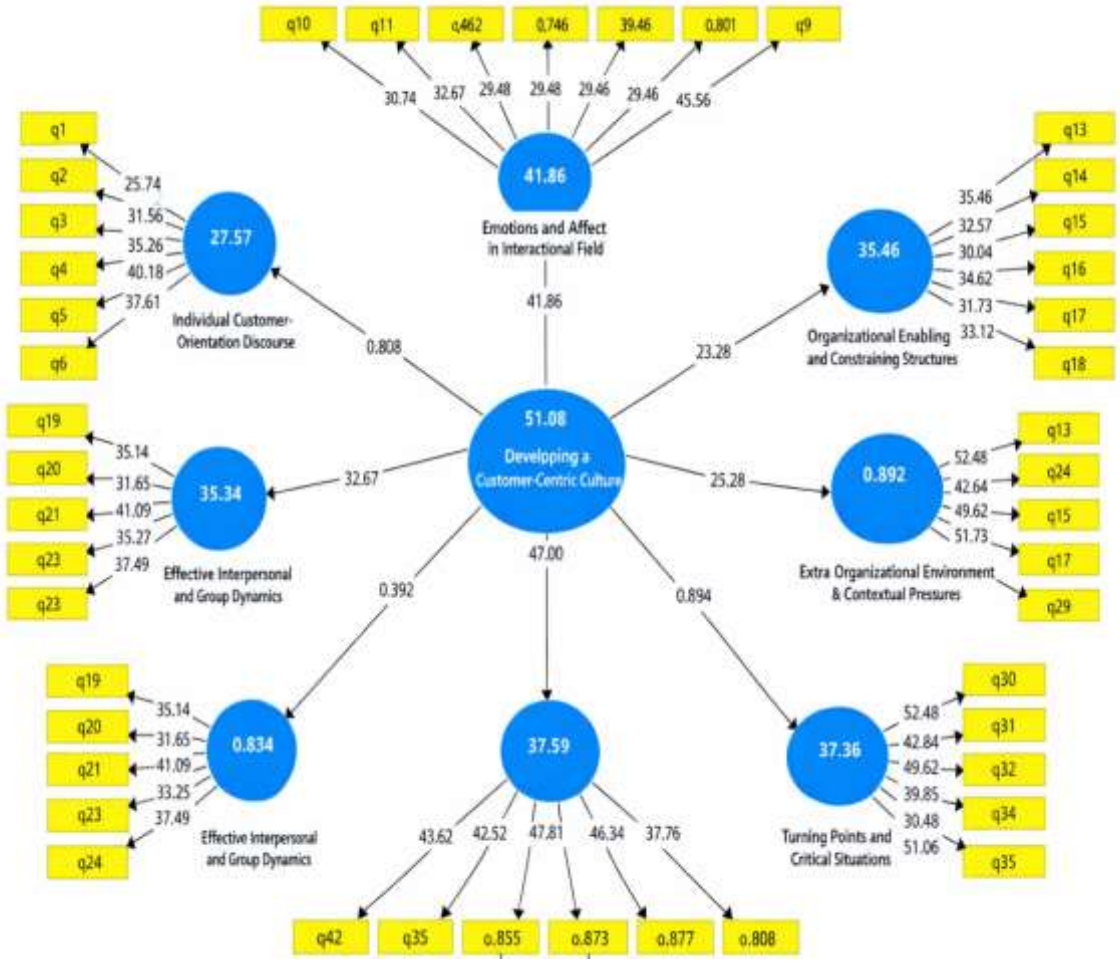


Figure 2. Customer-Centric Culture Development Model among Employees of Ofogh Kourosh Chain Stores Nationwide (T-statistics / Significance Values)

Accordingly, the final weight of each component (item) was calculated as the product of the item's standardized factor loading and the standardized path coefficient of its corresponding construct. This weighting procedure—by simultaneously accounting for the item's contribution to explaining the latent construct and the magnitude of the construct's effect on the ultimate variable—enables a more precise estimation of the components' relative importance. Moreover, the final weight of each indicator (latent construct) was determined based on its standardized path coefficient in the structural model, which reflects the direct and causal effect of each dimension on the ultimate construct, "developing a customer-centric culture." This analytical approach, aligned with the methodological principles of Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling, and grounded in the interpretation of standardized path coefficients and factor loadings emphasized in the PLS-SEM literature (Hair et al., 2022), facilitates weighting dimensions and components and scientifically prioritizing the key drivers of customer-centric culture formation. The highest weight assigned to a given indicator or component in the table indicates that, based on the standardized coefficients of the PLS-SEM model, that element has the greatest relative importance within the study's causal structure. This implies that the role of that element in explaining customer-centric culture is not merely salient at the level of respondents' perceptions, but is also more prominent than other elements within the model's causal and explanatory relationships.

Table 8. Determining the Weights of Indicators and Components Influencing the Development of a Customer-Centric Culture Based on Confirmatory Factor Analysis Results

Indicator (Latent Construct)	Indicator Weight	Component (Dimension)	Symbol	Item Weight
Individual customer-orientation discourse	0.888	Value from the employee's perspective	q1	0.686
		The self's role in the value chain	q2	0.730
		Perceived differentiation between organizational duty and personal commitment	q3	0.733
		Dominant mental metaphors governing the employee–customer relationship	q4	0.763
		Justificatory system for customer-oriented actions	q5	0.712
		Perceived power and agency in dealing with the system	q6	0.678
Emotions and affect in the interactional field	0.867	Synergistic positive emotions	q7	0.670
		Negative emotions arising from role conflict and environmental pressure	q8	0.695
		Emotional regulation and emotional labor	q9	0.700
		Empathy as an affective–cognitive experience	q10	0.683
		Emotions resulting from violated expectations	q11	0.720
		Collective emotions and the unit's affective climate	q12	0.647
Perceptions of organizational enabling and constraining structures	0.813	Experience of leadership and supervision style	q13	0.678
		Perceived effectiveness of compensation and recognition systems	q14	0.670
		Experienced quality of competency development	q15	0.676
		Access to organizational information and knowledge	q16	0.686
		Flexibility and agility of support processes	q17	0.673
		Perceived cross-unit integration	q18	0.657
Effective interpersonal interactions and group dynamics	0.892	Implicit norms among coworkers	q19	0.699
		Social learning and peer modeling	q20	0.735
		Intra-group social capital and trust	q21	0.731
		Conflict or cooperation among roles	q22	0.758
		Transmission of organizational narratives and myths	q23	0.755
		Experience of relationships with loyal customers	q24	0.746
Perceptions of the extra-organizational environment and contextual pressures	0.894	Perceived intensity of competition and the organization's differentiation position	q25	0.735
		Construction of the Iranian customer image and expectations	q26	0.773
		Experience of digitalization and the physical–virtual duality	q27	0.781
		Economic pressures and perceived price–quality sensitivity	q28	0.727
		Cultural–social norms governing exchange	q29	0.718
Turning points and critical situations	0.856	Victory narrative	q30	0.736
		Structural failure narrative	q31	0.722
		Violation of positive expectations	q32	0.705
		Learning situations arising from mistakes	q33	0.717
		Encountering ethical conflict	q34	0.700
		Transformative feedback experience	q35	0.710
Transition from attitude to action and stabilization of habitus	0.877	Value internalization	q36	0.711
		Formation of automatic situational judgment	q37	0.757
		Development of a customer-orientation "professional sense"	q38	0.754
		Managing role conflict and allocating cognitive resources	q39	0.769
		Customer feedback and revision of mental schemas	q40	0.718
		Stabilization as part of professional identity	q41	0.716

Competitive and motivational (intrinsic–extrinsic) dimensions of customer-centric culture	0.833	Perceiving customer-centric culture as a competitive weapon	q42	0.691
		Link between customer orientation and legitimate professional identity	q43	0.747
		Role of the reward system in objectifying customer-orientation value	q44	0.745
		Fear of the consequences of violating customer-centric norms	q45	0.724

Among the indicators influencing the development of a customer-centric culture, the indicator "perceptions of the extra-organizational environment and contextual pressures" (weight = 0.894) and the indicator "effective interpersonal interactions and group dynamics" (weight = 0.892) account for the largest shares in explaining this construct. This finding indicates that the formation of a customer-centric culture among employees of Ofogh Kourosh chain stores is driven primarily by employees' perceptions of competitive intensity, their construction of the Iranian customer image and associated expectations, economic pressures, technological transformations and the duality of physical–virtual spaces, as well as by the quality of everyday interactions, implicit workgroup norms, social capital, and patterns of social learning. Next in importance are "individual customer-orientation discourse" (weight = 0.888) and "the transition from attitude to action and stabilization of habitus" (weight = 0.877), underscoring the meaningful role of employees' cognitive, interpretive, and identity-based processes in institutionalizing a customer-centric culture. In contrast, the indicators "emotions and affect in the interactional field" (weight = 0.867), "turning points and critical situations" (weight = 0.856), "competitive and motivational (intrinsic–extrinsic) dimensions of customer-centric culture" (weight = 0.833), and "perceptions of organizational enabling and constraining structures" (weight = 0.813), while all demonstrating high and acceptable weights, occupy relatively lower explanatory ranks compared with the two leading indicators within the study's causal framework. Overall, the distribution of indicator weights suggests that developing a customer-centric culture is less a function of formal structures, reward systems, or administrative policies alone, and more the result of the interaction among environmental pressures, social dynamics, and employees' cognitive–behavioral processes within everyday work experience.

Among the items of the customer-centric culture construct, two items with the highest weights (with weights exceeding 0.78 and 0.76, respectively) play the most substantial role in explaining the construct. These items primarily pertain to practical behaviors, direct interactive actions with customers, and the concrete enactment of customer orientation in the operational field, indicating that what most strongly shapes a customer-centric culture is employees' lived experience and actual behavior in day-to-day encounters with customers. Conversely, two items with the lowest weights (approximately 0.52 and 0.54), although statistically significant and acceptable, contribute less to explaining the construct and refer more to general, abstract, or indirect perceptions of customer orientation. This pattern indicates that within the study's PLS-SEM framework, behavioral and action-oriented items exhibit greater explanatory power in shaping customer-centric culture than items that are purely attitudinal or descriptive.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study aimed to design and validate a comprehensive model explaining the formation of a customer-centric culture among employees of Ofogh Kourosh chain stores. The findings confirmed that customer-focused culture is a multidimensional organizational phenomenon emerging from the interaction of environmental perceptions, interpersonal dynamics, employee cognition, emotional processes, organizational structures, and motivational mechanisms. The structural model results demonstrated that all eight identified dimensions exerted significant and strong causal effects on the development of customer-centric culture, indicating that customer orientation among employees cannot be reduced to isolated behavioral skills but must instead be understood as an integrated cultural system.

One of the most important findings concerns the dominant role of employees' perceptions of the extra-organizational environment and contextual pressures, which received the highest explanatory weight. This result suggests that customer-centric behavior among employees is strongly shaped by how they interpret competitive intensity, digital transformation, economic conditions, and evolving customer expectations. This aligns with research emphasizing that customer focus functions as an adaptive organizational response to environmental complexity and market competition [23]. Similarly, digital transformation studies

show that customer concentration enhances organizational agility by forcing firms to continuously adjust processes and employee behaviors to external demands [8]. The finding also supports evidence that market-driven cultures influence broader strategic decisions, including corporate accountability and stakeholder responsiveness [7]. Thus, employees' environmental awareness appears to activate customer orientation as a survival mechanism rather than merely a managerial directive.

The second strongest dimension was effective interpersonal interactions and group dynamics, highlighting the collective nature of customer-centric culture. The results indicate that implicit group norms, social learning, collaboration among roles, and intra-team trust significantly reinforce customer-oriented behavior. This finding confirms prior research demonstrating that frontline employee engagement mediates the relationship between organizational conditions and business performance [5]. Organizational culture studies likewise emphasize that shared meaning systems formed through interactional learning play a central role in shaping organizational performance outcomes [6]. The importance of peer modeling and collective emotional climate also resonates with systematic analyses identifying social learning processes as key antecedents of customer orientation among frontline staff [3]. Therefore, customer-centric culture emerges socially through everyday cooperation rather than solely through formal organizational policies.

Another key result relates to the significance of individual customer-orientation discourse, which ranked among the most influential dimensions. Employees' internal interpretations of customer value, professional identity, and ethical commitment strongly predicted customer-oriented behaviors. This supports theoretical perspectives viewing customer orientation as a cognitive schema guiding employee decision-making and behavioral intention [1]. Empirical studies demonstrate that perspective taking enhances service quality because employees who cognitively understand customer experiences deliver more responsive service interactions [9]. Furthermore, ethical commitment and professional responsibility have been shown to reinforce customer trust and relational engagement across service environments [22]. The findings therefore indicate that customer-centric culture becomes sustainable only when employees internalize customer orientation as part of their professional self-concept.

The dimension of transition from attitude to action and stabilization of habitus also exhibited strong explanatory power. This finding suggests that customer orientation evolves through a developmental process moving from compliance with organizational expectations toward value internalization and behavioral automatization. Employees gradually develop intuitive judgment, professional sensitivity, and habitual customer-focused responses. This result is consistent with studies showing that alignment between service climate and employee orientation strengthens commitment and customer loyalty outcomes [13]. Research on customer gratitude similarly indicates that repeated positive interactions reinforce prosocial service behaviors over time, transforming them into stable habits [12]. The present findings therefore extend existing literature by empirically demonstrating the mechanism through which customer orientation becomes embedded in employees' behavioral routines.

The results further revealed a significant role for emotions and affect within the interactional field. Positive emotions such as pride, satisfaction, and empathy enhanced customer-oriented conduct, whereas emotional exhaustion and perceived injustice weakened it. These findings corroborate empirical evidence showing that empathy-based service behaviors strongly influence customer satisfaction and emotional responses [10]. Studies on employee-customer identification similarly confirm that emotional connection between employees and customers enhances perceived service quality [11]. The current study contributes by demonstrating that emotional regulation functions as a mediating mechanism linking organizational context to behavioral outcomes, highlighting the psychological dimension of customer-centric culture formation.

Although organizational enabling and constraining structures displayed comparatively lower weights, they remained significant predictors. Leadership style, training quality, information accessibility, and reward systems influenced the sustainability of customer orientation. This result aligns with evidence that reward alignment and human resource policies play essential roles in reinforcing customer-focused organizational cultures [21]. Previous studies within Iranian chain stores similarly indicate that employee satisfaction and managerial support significantly affect customer satisfaction outcomes [25]. The findings therefore suggest that organizational structures operate as facilitating conditions rather than primary drivers; culture formation ultimately depends on how employees interpret and enact these structures.

The dimension of turning points and critical situations also demonstrated meaningful influence. Experiences of

success, failure, ethical conflict, and transformative feedback reshaped employee attitudes toward customers. This finding expands existing research by illustrating how critical incidents function as learning mechanisms that redefine professional identity. Customer loyalty research has similarly emphasized the importance of experiential interactions in shaping long-term customer relationships [16]. Such experiences appear to accelerate cultural internalization by linking emotional memory with professional learning.

Finally, competitive and motivational dimensions confirmed that employees' belief in customer orientation as a competitive advantage strengthens behavioral commitment. When employees perceive customer-focused service as a source of organizational differentiation, they demonstrate greater initiative and resilience. This finding supports empirical evidence showing that customer orientation positively influences brand loyalty and purchasing decisions [24]. Studies examining customer empowerment likewise indicate that customer involvement strengthens employee engagement and relational outcomes [14]. Moreover, research on customer satisfaction and CRM effectiveness highlights the role of perceived customer value and brand image in reinforcing loyalty through customer-focused practices [15].

Overall, the integrated model suggests that customer-centric culture in retail organizations is not primarily created through formal managerial control but emerges from the dynamic interaction between environmental awareness, social relations, emotional engagement, and cognitive internalization processes. The findings extend organizational culture theory by demonstrating that customer orientation functions simultaneously as a cultural value, psychological process, social practice, and strategic capability. Consistent with customer-orientation literature emphasizing multidimensionality [4, 18], the study provides empirical evidence that sustainable customer-focused culture requires alignment across individual, group, organizational, and environmental levels.

The results therefore contribute theoretically by integrating fragmented streams of research on customer orientation, organizational culture, service behavior, and retail management into a unified explanatory framework. Practically, the findings highlight that cultivating customer-centric culture requires simultaneous investment in employee meaning-making processes, interpersonal collaboration, emotional support systems, and adaptive organizational strategies.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the research was conducted within a single retail chain organization, which may limit the generalizability of findings to other industries or cultural contexts. Second, data were collected using self-reported measures, which may introduce perceptual bias or social desirability effects. Third, the cross-sectional design prevents observation of long-term cultural transformation processes and causal evolution over time. Additionally, contextual economic and organizational conditions specific to the study period may have influenced employees' perceptions of customer orientation. Finally, although the mixed-methods approach enhanced model validity, qualitative interpretations remain dependent on participants' subjective narratives.

Future studies may examine customer-centric culture across different sectors such as banking, hospitality, healthcare, or digital platforms to evaluate the robustness of the proposed model. Longitudinal research designs could investigate how customer orientation evolves over time and how organizational interventions influence cultural stabilization. Comparative cross-cultural studies would also help identify cultural moderators affecting customer-focused behaviors. Researchers may further integrate psychological constructs such as emotional intelligence, organizational justice, or leadership authenticity into expanded models. Additionally, combining behavioral observation data with survey methods could reduce common-method bias and strengthen causal inference.

From a managerial perspective, organizations seeking to develop customer-centric culture should prioritize employee meaning-making processes rather than relying solely on formal policies. Managers should foster collaborative team environments that encourage social learning and shared responsibility for customer experience. Leadership practices should emphasize empowerment, emotional support, and recognition of customer-oriented behaviors. Training programs must move beyond technical skill development toward cultivating empathy, perspective taking, and professional identity formation. Organizations should also align reward systems with demonstrated customer-focused behaviors and create mechanisms for learning from critical service experiences. Finally, adapting organizational strategies to environmental changes—especially digital transformation and evolving customer expectations—will be essential for sustaining authentic customer-centric culture in competitive retail environments.

Authors' Contributions

Authors equally contributed to this article.

Acknowledgments

Authors thank all participants who participate in this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

Funding

According to the authors, this article has no financial support.

Ethical Considerations

All procedures performed in this study were under the ethical standards.

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