Validation of the Customer Experience Model of Iran Telecommunication Company from Commercial Sales Towards their Retention

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Objective: The purpose of this research is to validate the customer experience model of Iran Telecommunication Company in commercial sales towards their retention.

Methodology: This study was applied in objective and quantitative in execution with a structural modeling approach. The population in this part of the research included all commercial sales customers of the Telecommunications of Qom province, numbering 1700 individuals. The sample size was determined to be 315 individuals using Morgan's table and was selected through convenience sampling. The research instrument was a researcher-made questionnaire. The questionnaire's questions and statements were developed using the research literature, theoretical foundations, and the results of the qualitative study, whose face and content validity was confirmed by experts, and its reliability was obtained with a Cronbach's alpha method of 0.961. The data were analyzed using the structural equation modeling method in SMART PLS software.

Findings: The findings of this research showed that the evolutionary organizational structural model has 19 sub-components within seven prerequisite components of customer experience management, measurement and analysis of customer experiences, service experience, value creation, marketing mix, brand image, and support activities, all of which fit well and all variables obtained can be considered in designing the final model. The effectiveness of each variable was discussed and analyzed in terms of their existence. The results indicated that the prerequisites of customer experience management, measurement and analysis of customer experiences, service experience, value creation, marketing mix, brand image, and support activities were significant in the research model.

Conclusion: The results showed that the customer experience model of Iran Telecommunication Company in commercial sales towards their retention is valid.

Keywords: *Customer Experience, Commercial Sales, Retention.*

1 Introduction

It seems that telecommunications have become an integral part of our daily lives, as telephone conversations currently play a significant role in enhancing effective communication both at the individual and organizational levels, and from one location to another (Banik & Sinha, 2022; Hossain et al., 2018). However, an increasing number of subscriber complaints are due to poor service quality. Operators continually upgrade the quality of their services to meet customer needs and achieve their goals. Consequently, telecommunication companies strive to retain existing profitable consumers and offer attractive pricing plans and apparent service quality to attract potential consumers. For market share retention, customer satisfaction and loyalty metrics are influenced by the quality of service (Bhatti et al., 2016).

According to Kiplagat and Oyugi (2016), a one percent increase in customer retention increases the company's value by up to five percent. Given the competition, changes in consumer tastes and preferences, customer churn in this industry is quite high and adversely affects operator durability (Kiplagat & Oyugi, 2016). Joshi et al. (2016) confirm that customer churn in developing countries ranges between 20 to 70 percent, and a strategy to reduce customer churn through improving customer experience is essential. Customer experience includes enhancing customer interactions at all customer touchpoints. Nowadays, customer experience serves as a competitive basis for businesses (Joshi et al., 2016). Studies showed that it is expected that four out of every five organizations will compete based on customer experience within two years (Klink et al., 2018). The economic benefits of competing on customer experience are evident. On average, organizations with superior customer experience grow five times faster than those that are weak in this area (Forrester, 2017). Moreover, over 80 percent of consumers are willing to pay more for a better experience (Capgemini, 2017).

While customer experience is very enticing for organizations, evidence suggests that it is often not implemented correctly in organizations or is only implemented in one part of the company (Saeedi et al., 2021). For instance, 90 percent of organizations believe that maintaining customer-centricity is a culture and an essential principle. However, only 15% consider themselves effective in delivering customer experience. On the other hand, such a gap also exists among customers. Three-quarters of organizations believe they are customer-centric. However, only 30% of customers shared this belief (Capgemini, 2017). Improving customer experience is primarily the responsibility of marketing experts since a significant portion of organizations' budgets is focused on improving customer experience management by the marketing department. Many researchers and officials believe that Customer Relationship Management has not met some of the expected value levels for customers and organizations' profitability and that Customer Experience Management can be considered a composite framework to overcome theoretical and practical barriers and limitations associated with Customer Relationship Management (Palmer, 2010). Customer experience often plays a more crucial role than the services provided and includes stages before and after service delivery. Organizations look for mechanisms to engage with customers in pre-consumption and during consumption stages. They actively conduct post-consumption engagement activities with customers (Kandampully & Solnet, 2018; Kandampully et al., 2018). Also, by using Customer Experience Management, service organizations can gain a distinctive advantage; creating positive moments for the customer that lead to a better customer experience, increased revenues, customer retention, and positive customer referrals/mentions. This focuses on happy customers in the value proposition and includes all interactions at various touchpoints (Johnston & Clark, 2008).

Today, creating unique experiences has also become one of the most important managerial goals. According to joint research by Accenture and Forrester in 2015, managers ranked improving customer experiences as their highest priority in their business plans for the next 12 months, prioritizing this activity over any other. Moreover, companies focus on customer experience due to countless touchpoints and channels and multi-media, resulting in a complex experience for customers. Companies are faced with scattered channels and media, which are increasing daily. As a result of these developments, multi-channel management has become a new rule in business (Mohammadian & Naeli, 2019). Additionally, in the research by Homburg et al. (2015), it was stated that 93 percent of consulting companies are engaged with the concept of customer experience management, meaning companies seeking advice are doubtful about how to effectively implement customer experience management (Homburg et al., 2017). Consequently, it can be said that most efforts for customer experience end in failure, and very few organizations reach maturity in customer experience

management, highlighting the need for more academic attention to this area. In industries like telecommunications, which are experience-driven, this importance doubles, and designing a unique customer experience becomes a necessity (Hwang & Seo, 2016).

Nowadays, organizations strive to use customers as participants and brand promoters. Therefore, research on customer experience should examine all its dimensions. Advances in the internet and technology have helped increase the importance of interaction and communication between organizations and customers (Nambisan & Baron, 2007). Understanding customer experience and ensuring it is effectively managed at every point of interaction between organizations and customers has become a key goal for organizations aiming for market advancement. The question often asked is whether organizations truly deliver the customer experience that customers expect and whether organizations have plans to manage such an experience considering all the changes in the world of communications and technology (Kandampully & Solnet, 2018). Paying attention to this matter and creating a mechanism to satisfy customer expectations based on their experience is vital for organizations, especially service organizations like telecommunications, which are based on customers and have strong competitors in the country. Various strategies can be used for customer retention, but customer experience as an important strategy has been overlooked. Therefore, based on the research conducted in the first phase, the customer experience model of Iran Telecommunication Company in commercial sales for their retention was designed based on a grounded theory approach with a descriptive-survey approach. In this model, 71 concepts were constructed from the analysis of interviews. In the axial coding stage, concepts related to each other were identified and categorized into 19 subcategories and 7 main categories. Therefore, this research aims to validate the related model by implementing it in the Iran Telecommunication Company, seeking to answer the question:

Is the customer experience model of Iran Telecommunication Company in commercial sales for their retention valid?

2 Methods and Materials

This study was applied in objective and quantitative in terms of execution with a structural modeling approach. The research population consisted of all commercial customers of telecommunications in Qom province, totaling 1700 individuals. To determine the sample size, 315 commercial customers were selected using Morgan's table and convenience sampling method. The commercial customers of telecommunications referred to all commercial institutions, governmental organizations, and public entities receiving their commercial services from the Iran Telecommunication Company, and in this study, the questionnaire was distributed among the managers of these organizations.

The instrument used in this research was a researcher-made questionnaire. The questions and items of the questionnaire were developed using theoretical foundations, literature review, and the results from the model of customer experience of Iran Telecommunication Company in commercial sales for their retention. Accordingly, 71 items across 19 sub-components and 7 components of the prerequisites for managing customer experience (Strategic prerequisites, Human prerequisites, and Technical prerequisites); Measurement and analysis of customer experiences (Collecting and recording customer experiences, Interpretation of customer experiences, and Monitoring customer experience performance); Service delivery experience (Network quality and service delivery quality); Value creation (Service personalization, Customer relationship management, and Customer satisfaction); Marketing mix (Price, Place, Product, and Promotion); Brand image (Brand reputation and Social responsibility); Support activities (Complaint management and After-sales services) comprised the research questionnaire. Each item of the researcher-made questionnaire was rated on a five-point Likert scale from strongly disagree with a score of one to strongly agree with a score of five. The overall Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the questionnaire was found to be 0.961, and the validity of the questionnaire was confirmed.

Furthermore, to examine the conceptual relation of items to the subject being evaluated, the questionnaire's ability to measure the subject, and the clarity and fluency of each item's appearance, the questionnaire was reviewed by five faculty members, thereby reaffirming its validity. To check the usability of the sample size (sampling sufficiency) for conducting confirmatory factor analysis, the KMO test was used. Finally, to examine the validity of the proposed model, goodness-of-fit indices in the confirmatory factor analysis technique were presented. Confirmatory factor analysis determines if the factors and related items are correctly chosen, i.e., whether the items of each factor have been appropriately selected or not, for which purpose the data

were analyzed using the structural equation method in SMART PLS software.

3   Findings and Results

Analyzing the research conceptual model with the PLS method required passing through three essential stages, each encompassing several indices and criteria that must be validated for the model to be deemed credible and for the derived results to be confidently referenced. The stages of the PLS method are as follows:

First Stage: Evaluating measurement models with indices such as Cronbach's alpha coefficient, composite reliability coefficient, significance of factor loadings, and item homogeneity, convergent validity, and divergent validity. The Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability values for all research variables were found to be above 0.7, confirming the reliability with this index. Moreover, the average variance extracted for variables was found to be above 0.5, thus confirming convergent validity with this index. The results of the Fornell and Larcker method for examining

divergent validity also showed that the square root of AVE of each variable is located on the main diagonal, and the correlation values of variables are placed below the main diagonal. The necessity of confirming divergent validity in this method is having the main diagonal greater than the values below it, which has occurred in this research, and divergent validity is confirmed by the Fornell and Larcker method.

After conducting confirmatory factor analysis and testing the measurement instrument (questionnaire), we will seek to determine whether the seven factors (executive prerequisites of customer experience management, measurement and analysis of customer experiences, service delivery experience, value creation, marketing mix, brand image, and support activities) can be considered as factors of customer experience towards their retention in a model. Based on the types of questions included in the research questionnaire, this concept will be possible through higher-order confirmatory factor analysis (third order).

The Figure 1 shows the conceptual model without subscales.

Figure 1

Simple Presentation of the Model
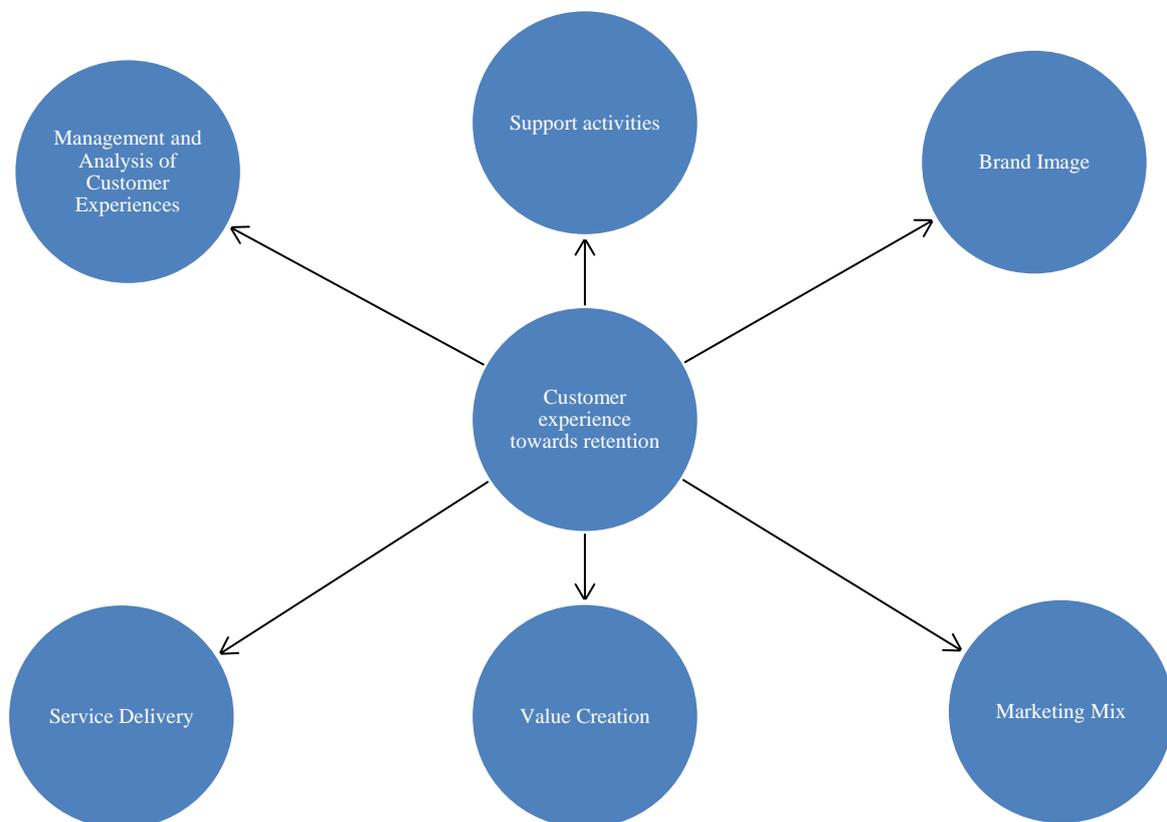
Table 1

The Summary of Modeling Results Including Subscales

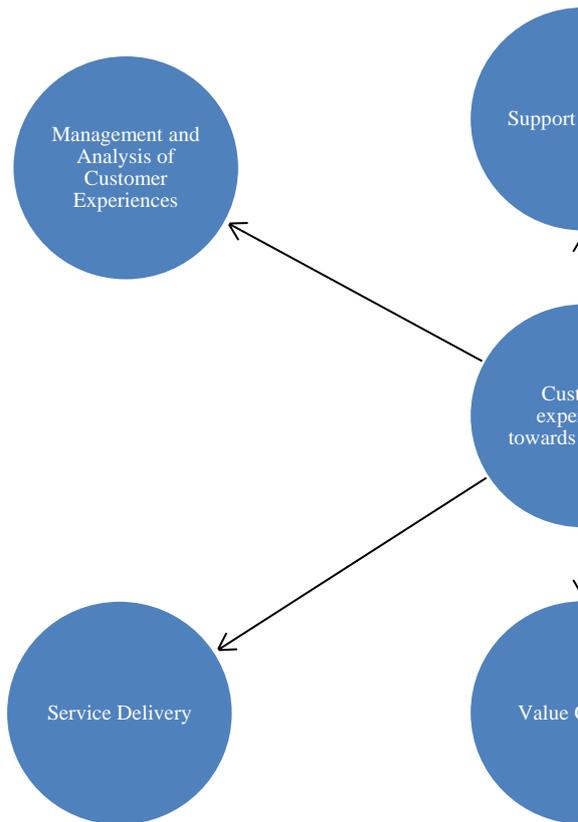| Paths	Path Coefficient	t	p	R^2	Q^2
Executive prerequisites for managing customer experience -> Strategic prerequisites	0.793	31.79	0.00	0.629	0.493
Executive prerequisites for managing customer experience -> Human prerequisites	0.758	26.28	0.00	0.575	0.431
Executive prerequisites for managing customer experience -> Technical prerequisites	0.780	27.84	0.00	0.609	0.470
Measurement and analysis of customer experiences -> Collection and recording of customer experiences	0.912	75.53	0.00	0.832	0.526
Measurement and analysis of customer experiences -> Interpretation of customer experiences	0.766	31.55	0.00	0.587	0.505
Measurement and analysis of customer experiences -> Monitoring of customer experience performance	0.758	23.28	0.00	0.574	0.479
Service delivery experience -> Network quality	0.909	79.21	0.00	0.826	0.432
Service delivery experience -> Service delivery quality	0.848	50.87	0.00	0.719	0.510
Value creation -> Service personalization	0.769	20.86	0.00	0.592	0.433
Value creation -> Customer relationship management	0.795	30.75	0.00	0.632	0.334
Value creation -> Customer satisfaction	0.865	55.31	0.00	0.749	0.451
Marketing mix -> Price	0.789	32.65	0.00	0.623	0.498
Marketing mix -> Place	0.690	21.38	0.00	0.476	0.371
Marketing mix -> Product	0.913	74.77	0.00	0.833	0.497
Marketing mix -> Promotion	0.819	31.86	0.00	0.670	0.441
Brand image -> Brand reputation	0.790	32.46	0.00	0.625	0.496
Brand image -> Social responsibility	0.914	101.80	0.00	0.835	0.611
Support activities -> Complaint management	0.867	63.23	0.00	0.752	0.560
Support activities -> After-sales services	0.828	34.96	0.00	0.685	0.365
Customer experience towards retention -> Executive prerequisites for managing customer experience	0.781	33.20	0.00	0.610	0.285
Customer experience towards retention -> Measurement and analysis of customer experiences	0.782	28.75	0.00	0.612	0.311
Customer experience towards retention -> Service delivery experience	0.799	35.51	0.00	0.639	0.290
Customer experience towards retention -> Value creation	0.903	87.78	0.00	0.815	0.329
Customer experience towards retention -> Marketing mix	0.780	26.57	0.00	0.609	0.282
Customer experience towards retention -> Brand image	0.506	8.75	0.00	0.256	0.145
Customer experience towards retention -> Support activities	0.584	12.73	0.00	0.341	0.153

As observed in

Simple Presentation of the Model

4   Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the behavior of customer experience in the context of their retention by analyzing the factors affecting this concept. Researchers (Dassanayake & Herath, 2020; Dewasiri & Tharangani, 2014; Saeedi et al., 2021) also argue that customer experience significantly impacts customer retention. Customer experience, as a reliable element, has a positive relationship with customer retention and is part of it. The findings of this research showed that the experiences gained by customers can be categorized into seven categories: prerequisites for managing customer experience, measuring and analyzing customer experience, service delivery experience, value creation, marketing mix, brand image, and support activities. This research aimed to validate a model developed based on the opinions of experts and academic and telecommunications managers active in the field of marketing in the telecommunications company, which is generalizable to all telecommunications companies. The findings of this study showed that the model under investigation has a suitable fit. In examining the relationships in the model, the results showed that the customer experience towards their retention has been examined from seven angles or factors (executive prerequisites for managing customer experience, measurement and analysis of customer experiences, service delivery experience, value creation, marketing mix, brand image, and support activities). The results showed that the relationships between variables were statistically significant.

The highest path coefficient in the validated model of the study was related to the category of value creation, which in this study includes customer satisfaction, service personalization, and customer relationship management components. Researchers (Auniel & Mokaya, 2018; Banik & Sinha, 2022; Sugiato et al., 2023) state that customer relationship management affects customer retention. It can be said that when the capability of customer relationship management by bank marketers in all branches decreases, the ability to retain customers considering the number of customers decreases. On the other hand, when bank marketers in branches improve their customer relationship management capabilities, it will follow the capabilities of customer retention, which can also be measured by a relatively increasing number of customers. The customer might expose the customer care services of the service provider too much in the sight of others. Prompt customer care services are a precursor to creating loyal customers.

Table 1, the customer experience towards their retention has been examined from seven angles or factors (executive prerequisites of customer experience management, measurement and analysis of customer experiences, service delivery experience, value creation, marketing mix, brand image, and support activities). Decisions on confirming or rejecting this structuring will be made based on t-values and significance levels. According to the results of the above table, it can be concluded that the relationships between variables are recognized as significant. It is worth noting that each of the mentioned seven factors had several sub-components, and all relationships between them and their primary variables have been statistically confirmed (P<0.05).

To examine the model fit in the partial least squares method, a criterion called GOF exists. The GOF criterion was devised by Tenenhaus et al. (2004) and is calculated according to the formula provided in the table. Values of 0.01, 0.25, and 0.36 are introduced as weak, medium, and strong values for GOF, respectively. As seen in the above table, the GOF criterion value was found to be 0.521, indicating a strong model fit according to the aforementioned classification. Therefore, the model presented for customer experience towards their retention is appropriate and highly potent.

Moreover, higher levels of competition among telecommunications service providers to adopt new customer service techniques to retain their current customers and also attract new customers highlight the importance of customer relationship management services. Therefore, the marketing manager should try to provide more efficient and customer-friendly services that can help retain customers towards a particular service (Hossain et al., 2018). In the context of the Indian telecommunications service sector, customer relationship management plays a crucial role in retaining consumers. This aligns with past findings in the literature (Banik & Sinha, 2022; Ryals & Payne, 2001), where authors found that good customer services lead to greater customer retention. Saeedi & Darudi (2021) also considered personalization effective on customer retention (Saeedi et al., 2021). This study also confirms the conclusion of Hussein & Sushi (2013) that satisfaction is the main factor in customer retention. These findings are consistent with previous studies in the field of satisfaction and customer retention (Hossain & Suchy, 2013). Previous studies reported that satisfaction is the highest predictor of customer retention (Ansariranani et al., 2011; Bhatti et al., 2016; Chuah et al., 2017; Climis, 2016; Picón et al., 2014; Sugiato et al., 2023). Satisfaction and customer retention become more important in current competitive environments. Dissatisfied customers tend to defect to competitors. It has been previously determined by many researchers in various industries that satisfied consumers, compared to those less satisfied, have a higher level of service use and a stronger intention for repurchase. This finding also reinforces the application of this relationship in the telecommunications service sector.

The category of service delivery experience, having components of network quality and service delivery quality, had the highest path coefficient after value creation. In describing the category of service delivery experience, which has components of network quality and service delivery quality, Adebiyi et al. (2016) state that a telecommunications company's inability to expand its bandwidth to cover more areas, typically occupied by subscribers, increases the likelihood of churn by 17.6%. Their research results indicate that improving network quality increases the likelihood of customer loyalty by maintaining it (Adebiyi et al., 2016). Additionally, if internet services provided are perceived as efficient, mobile subscribers are likely to be loyal to their mobile companies. Studies (Alkitbi et al., 2021; Climis, 2016; Mardika et al., 2022; Sugiato et al., 2023) reiterated that

telecommunications companies should focus on improving the quality of employee services to retain customers. Studies conducted by Khan & Afsheen (2012) in the telecommunications industry of Pakistan and Zimbabwe showed that network coverage and customer services are the main determinants of customer satisfaction and consequently retention (Khan & Afsheen, 2012). Further studies by Thilakarathne & Abeysekera (2016) emphasized that telecommunications companies should focus on ease and quality of services to retain customers (Thilakarathne & Abeysekera, 2016). Dehghan et al. (2016) found empathy to be effective in retaining customers (Dehghan et al., 2016). Additionally, studies show that network quality is a fundamental tool associated with customer retention (Dassanayake & Herath, 2020). This is consistent with literature (Banik & Sinha, 2022; Cheng & Sun, 2012; Kubat, 1991) stating that network quality is an important factor affecting customer repurchase intention. Emotional factors are also widely recognized to be very beneficial for both customers and organizations. Therefore, if a company wants to have a strong relationship with its customers, it must improve in terms of the emotional factor related to service quality and have strategies. The organization should act to improve service quality in terms of emotional factors and service quality among employees and customers (Ansariranani et al., 2011; Dastane & Fazlin, 2017).

Based on the results, the next category with a higher coefficient is the measurement and analysis of customer experiences, which has three components: collection and recording of customer experiences, interpretation of customer experiences, and monitoring of customer experience performance. The importance of collecting and analyzing data and using it in the customer experience management process is well referenced in the research literature (Homburg et al., 2017; Meyer & Schwager, 2007). Identifying the point at which a person's physical experience elements are affected by these emotions can specify the experiential gap, i.e., the difference between what we do and what people really need, is crucial. Also, Saeedi et al. (2021) referred to the impact of prerequisites for managing customer experience on customer experience in their research (Saeedi et al., 2021).

Executive prerequisites for managing customer experience can be of greater importance, following the measurement and analysis of customer experiences, which consists of three components: strategic prerequisites, human prerequisites, and technical prerequisites. Managing customer experience requires fulfilling executive

prerequisites encompassed within three principles: strategic prerequisites, human-related prerequisites, and technical prerequisites. The state of strategic prerequisites can be found in research literature. This finding could be related to the existing literature. According to Rahimi Bagh Malek and colleagues (1398), causal factors affecting customer perception and expectations from services and their providers offer multiple value-creation strategies to the customer, and the outcomes of such value creation determine the level of loyalty. The research literature has made few references to human and technical strategies (Saeedi et al., 2021).

The marketing mix is the next significant factor confirmed in the research model, comprising product, price, place, and promotion components. One of the most critical factors in the marketing mix affecting customer retention is price (Adebiyi et al., 2016; Banik & Sinha, 2022; Darvishi, 2022; Dastane & Fazlin, 2017). Price appears to be a very important factor in attracting satisfaction and making users loyal. In this regard, telecommunications operators should exercise greater caution in determining and maintaining the price structure for calls and the variety of services offered to customers; otherwise, the tendency of customers to switch operators would increase, consequently reducing customer loyalty (Hossain et al., 2018). Further study explains that the perceived price significantly impacts customer perception. The hypothesis related to perceived price proves the importance between perceived price and customer retention, with strong evidence explicitly against assumptions that cause mobile subscribers to have high expectations regarding perceived price. In this situation, maintaining a fair price for determining customer attribution to ensure retention is very important (Dassanayake & Herath, 2020). Studies conducted by Khan & Afsheen (2012) and Viviri & Phiri (2017) in the telecommunications industries of Pakistan and Zimbabwe concluded that tariffs are among the main determinants of customer satisfaction and consequently retention (Khan & Afsheen, 2012; Viriri & Phiri, 2017). These findings match the findings of the Zimbabwe telecommunications sector. Further studies emphasized that telecommunications companies should focus on pricing to retain customers. Explaining product pricing with its benefits and offering comparison opportunities is used to increase customer satisfaction (Thilakarathne & Abeysekera, 2016). Moreover, managers emphasize that customers are more satisfied when they realize that the price they pay matches the quality of the product they receive. Additionally, Darvishi (2022)

considers the product factor (Darvishi, 2022); Mardika et al. (2022) consider the place factor (Mardika et al., 2022); and Salimnejad and colleagues (2015) and Seyedi & Darroudi (2020) see the promotion factor as effective marketing mix factors on the experience leading to customer retention (Salimnejad et al., 2015; Seyedi & Darroudi, 2020).

The category with a lower but significant and confirmed coefficient in the research model compared to the mentioned categories is support activities, which in this study consists of complaint management and after-sales services components. Customer service support and a successful complaint handling process are considered crucial by experts. The willingness of employees to listen to their customers' needs in the customer service system and support for achieving customer retention rates is very important. The research findings in this section align with the results of previous research (Banik & Sinha, 2022; Darvishi, 2022).

The last category in the research model in terms of impact is brand image, which with components of brand reputation and social responsibility has been introduced in some studies as affecting customer retention (Banik & Sinha, 2022). Currently, unfair practices, unethical behavior, etc., are very common, and in this market, similar to a third-world economy, serious misconduct exists that makes users skeptical of service providers. Users perceive the recommendations of others and see trustworthy brands for logical decision-making for purchases. Therefore, brand image plays an important role among consumers, and managers should pay careful attention to this phenomenon (Hossain et al., 2018).

As observed, the highest path coefficient was identified for value-creation activities. Therefore, it is recommended that telecommunications managers in the country, especially in the field of commercial customers, pay special attention to service personalization (creating a network for customer recognition everywhere, offering services related to customer needs, paying conscious attention to customers, providing services as per customer quality expectations). Also, by paying more attention to activities such as compatible and comfortable interactions with customers, the warm presence of officials at service desks, providing services with respect to customers, creating and increasing social benefits for the customer, expanding programs towards hearing the customer's voice more, creating a good feeling in the customer with responsible employee behavior, to take steps towards successful customer relationship management. Attention to customer satisfaction in all these actions should be considered, and by raising accuracy in

providing services, accuracy of transactions, accessibility of customers to electronic transactions, efficiency of customer services, employees' efforts to inform customers about new services, and providing correct and transparent information to customers, customer satisfaction should also be facilitated.

Authors' Contributions

All authors have contributed significantly to the research process and the development of the manuscript.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

In this research, ethical standards including obtaining informed consent, ensuring privacy and confidentiality were observed.

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