

Customer-Centric Corporate Culture as a Differentiation Strategy in Service Companies: A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract

Intense rivalry within the service sector forces firms to develop unique differentiation strategies, spotlighting the critical role of a customer-centric corporate culture. This study aims to analyze and synthesize empirical findings on how such a culture serves as a strategic differentiator that drives service innovation, customer loyalty, organizational performance, and business sustainability. Methodologically, the paper adopts a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) guided by the PRISMA 2020 framework. After screening 199 articles based on strict inclusion and exclusion criteria, 20 core papers were selected for an in-depth thematic synthesis. The synthesis reveals that a customer-centric culture is a foundational strategy for forging a sustainable competitive advantage in service firms. Its impact is clearly visible in heightened service innovation, enriched customer experiences, a stronger corporate image, greater loyalty, and overall organizational longevity. Interestingly, the data also highlights that corporate purpose, leadership, innovation capability, digital transformation, and E-CRM technology serve as vital mediators or moderators bridging this cultural orientation and organizational performance. Ultimately, this study underscores a pivotal shift: customer-centricity has transitioned from a basic marketing orientation into a robust differentiation strategy that unlocks long-term value for both the firm and its clientele.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The increasingly aggressive dynamics of the business environment force the service sector to continuously rack its brains to secure a long-term competitive advantage. The problem is that the intangible and easily imitated nature of services, coupled with a high dependence on direct interaction with consumers, often makes conventional product differentiation challenging. At this critical juncture, organizational culture emerges as a strategic defense, an intangible asset that is nearly impossible for competitors to copy. Modern service corporations are beginning to shift their focus. Instead of focusing solely on operational efficiency or superficial service quality standards, they are now fully investing in long-term relationships with consumers. This gives rise to the customer-centricity paradigm, a new compass that places customers squarely at the heart of all organizational activities. Through this lens, customers are no longer viewed as mere objects of transactions, but rather as strategic partners who determine the life or death of a business.

Previous research has shown that customer-centricity is a powerful strategy for supporting organizational sustainability, primarily through fostering strong relationships

with customers and stakeholders. Its impact extends beyond immediate gratification to internal culture, organizational values, and even long-term performance (Pardo-Jaramillo et al., 2025). This idea is further solidified by the findings of Viet Ha et al. (Viet Ha et al., 2025), whose research demonstrates that customer orientation acts as a crucial bridge (mediator) connecting the company's overall vision, core organizational values, and the innovative spirit of employees in the field.

When applied to the service industry landscape, a focus on customers has proven effective in securing loyalty through creating positive experiences. Another study highlights how the implementation of Electronic Customer Relationship Management (E-CRM) significantly impacts customer loyalty, with customer experience as an intermediary variable (Ali & Alfayez, 2024). Similarly, Fener and Köse (2025) revealed that a strong corporate image can boost both satisfaction and loyalty. Consequently, this image becomes a highly effective differentiation strategy in the market.

The spectrum of impacts of a customer-centric corporate culture extends to organizational innovation. The combination of customer and relationship orientation can ignite a company's innovative potential, leading to business growth (Tuominen et al., 2023). Consistent with these findings, market orientation—as a manifestation of a market- and customer-centric culture—successfully boosts innovative performance (Shirmohammadi et al., 2023). This acceleration occurs through the support of dynamic capabilities and targeted corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs.

Unfortunately, while issues such as customer orientation, customer loyalty, service innovation, and differentiation strategy have been frequently discussed, most literature examines them separately. It's rare to find comprehensive studies that weave the relationship between service differentiation strategy and customer-centric corporate culture into an ecosystem of values, norms, and work practices that absorb customer needs and trust into the very fabric of the company. Yet, culture-based differentiation offers the highest level of protection, embedded in values, habituation, leadership style, system integration, and the quality of human interaction within the organization, making it extremely difficult to replicate.

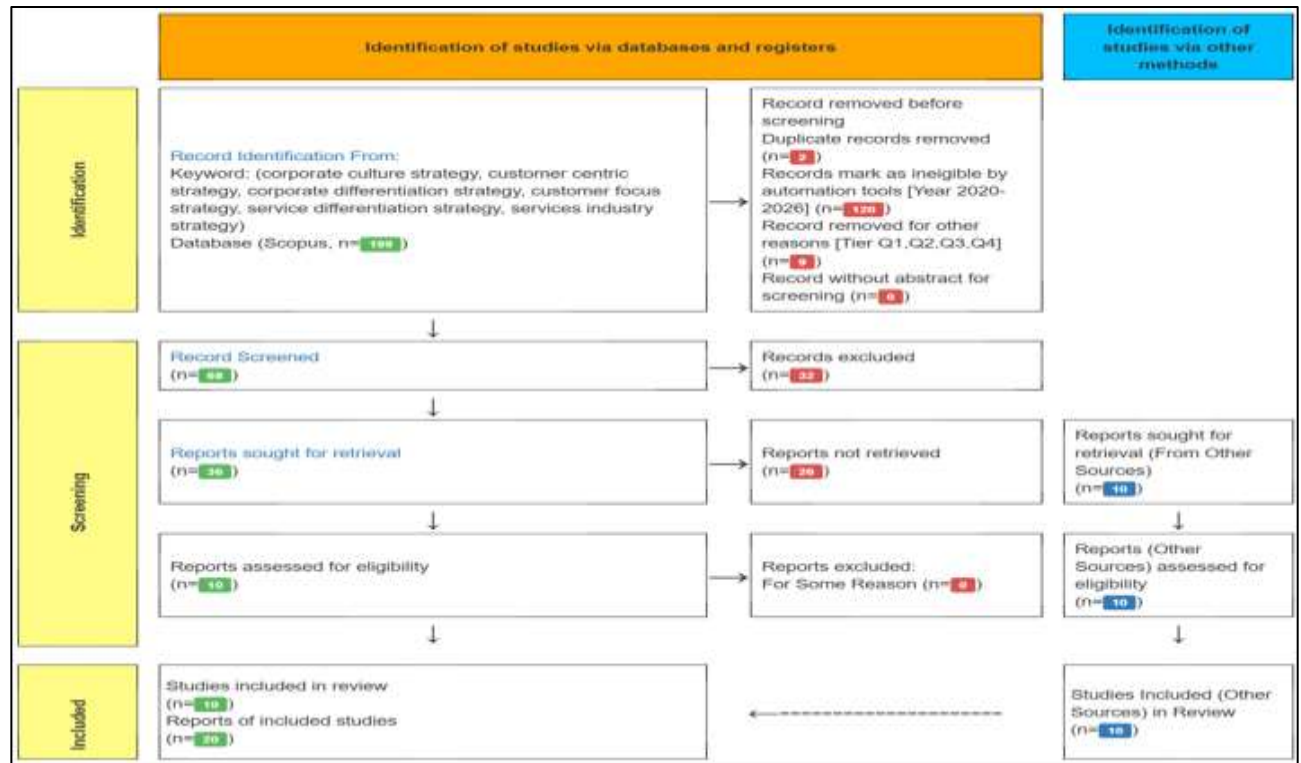
Recognizing this gap, our study aims to conduct a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) and identify the relationship patterns, determinants, and real-world implications of this cultural shift as a differentiation strategy in the service sector. The novelty of this study lies in two aspects: (1) it is the first systematic review to map the role of customer-centric corporate culture as a differentiation strategy across various service industries; and (2) it will develop a conceptual model that incorporates the dimensions of corporate purpose, dynamic capabilities, and digital transformation into a culture-based differentiation framework. Specifically, this study is designed to answer three fundamental questions: how does customer-centric corporate culture play a role as a differentiation strategy in service companies? What factors influence the successful implementation of customer-centric corporate culture? And how does customer-centric corporate culture influence organizational performance, customer loyalty, and the sustainability of service companies?

2. METHOD

This study used the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method to identify, evaluate, and synthesize research findings related to customer-centric corporate culture as a differentiation strategy in service companies. The SLR approach was chosen because it allows researchers to gain a comprehensive understanding of conceptual developments, relationships between variables, and existing research gaps in the literature. The literature review process was conducted in accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for

Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA 2020) guidelines, which consist of the stages of identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion (Page et al., 2021).

The article search process was conducted during the 2020–2026 publication period. Of the 199 identified articles, 68 were eligible for further screening. After reviewing the abstracts and full texts, 10 articles were deemed eligible for synthesis. In addition to the primary database search, additional identification through other sources yielded 10 additional relevant articles. Thus, a total of 20 articles were used in this study, consisting of 10 articles from the Scopus database search and 10 articles from other additional sources. A summary of the article selection process is shown in Figure 1.



Data analysis was conducted using a thematic synthesis approach. This method is used to identify patterns, relationships, and dominant themes emerging from the various studies analyzed. The synthesis process was carried out through three stages: Open Coding, which identifies the main concepts that appear in each article; Theme Development, which groups similar concepts into broader themes; and Thematic Integration, which establishes relationships between themes to build a conceptual model of customer-centric corporate culture as a differentiation strategy.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Of the 20 articles analyzed, the majority were published between 2021 and 2025. The articles reviewed covered various service and service-support sectors, such as banking, aviation, healthcare, beauty services, public services, and financial services, as well as cross-industry studies relevant to organizational culture and differentiation strategy. The following is a summary.

NO	PENULIS	VARIABEL UTAMA	TEMUAN UTAMA
1	Ali & Alfavez (2024)	Customer loyalty in airline industry	E-CRM meningkatkan loyalitas melalui pengalaman pelanggan
2	Boakye-Ansah et al. (2021)	Service differentiation in urban water supply	Diferensiasi layanan dapat meningkatkan akses terhadap layanan
3	Suzan & Karasimac (2025)	Customer satisfaction in online banking	Service clues meningkatkan kepuasan pelanggan
4	De Chernatony, L., & Cottam, S. (2006)	Financial services brands	Organisasi dengan merek yang lebih sukses umumnya memiliki budaya yang berorientasi pada pelanggan, didukung oleh layanan yang personal, kemampuan adaptasi yang tinggi, serta keselarasan antara budaya organisasi dan strategi merek
5	Dehnert (2020)	Digital transformation in financial services	Transformasi digital memengaruhi kinerja perusahaan
6	Fageda & Flores-Fillol (2024)	Service quality in airline industry	Kualitas layanan dan harga menjadi sumber diferensiasi
7	Fener & Köse (2025)	Corporate image in healthcare industry	Corporate image sebagai diferensiasi layanan meningkatkan loyalitas melalui kepuasan pelanggan
8	Kim et al. (2021)	Competitive strategies in beauty service industry	Strategi berkelanjutan perlu fokus pada SDM dan layanan
9	Olson et al. (2020)	Differentiation strategies on corporate entrepreneurship	Kombinasi strategi diferensiasi, kelonggaran keuangan, dan kapabilitas teknologi memengaruhi kewirausahaan korporat
10	Osman et al. (2023)	Organization culture on construction firm	Budaya organisasi meningkatkan kinerja perusahaan melalui penguatan kapabilitas inovasi dan pemasaran, yang berpotensi semakin optimal ketika didukung oleh kapabilitas organisasi lainnya secara terintegrasi
11	Pardo-Jaramillo et al. (2025)	Corporate sustainability	Mengintegrasikan pendekatan berorientasi pelanggan (customer-centric) dan berbasis tujuan perusahaan (purpose-driven) untuk mencapai keberlanjutan organisasi
12	Pardo-Jaramillo et al. (2025)	Corporate sustainability	Penguatan hubungan dengan pelanggan dan pemangku kepentingan, penyelarasan nilai organisasi dengan harapan pelanggan, serta integrasi praktik berkelanjutan dalam strategi perusahaan sebagai upaya meningkatkan keberlanjutan organisasi melalui pendekatan customer centric dan corporate purpose
13	Park & Kim (2024)	Public sport organization	Dukungan organisasi yang kuat meningkatkan ketenakatan kerja karyawan, yang pada akhirnya mendukung perilaku dan orientasi yang lebih berfokus pada pelanggan
14	Pazzona & White (2024)	Private security industry	Ukuran sektor jasa keamanan perlu dibaca multidimensi dan penggunaan pendekatan metodologis yang inovatif mampu memberikan pemahaman yang lebih komprehensif mengenai karakteristik dan perkembangan sektor jasa keamanan, serta memungkinkan evaluasi yang lebih akurat terhadap indikator kinerja
15	Ruiz & Sanchez (2022)	Servitization	Servitisasi dan transformasi digital mendorong perusahaan mengembangkan kapabilitas baru yang mendukung orientasi layanan dan penciptaan nilai pelanggan sebagai sumber keunggulan bersaing
16	Sharmohammadi et al. (2023)	Market orientation approach of pharmaceutical companies	Market orientation meningkatkan innovative performance.
17	Sriviboon (2022)	Performance in rice industry	Inovasi layanan, strategi modal manusia, citra perusahaan, dan loyalitas pelanggan saling memperkuat dalam meningkatkan kinerja bisnis organisasi
18	Tuominen et al. (2022)	Customer centric in international market	Customer orientation mendorong inovativitas
19	Viet Ha et al. (2025)	Corporate vision, customer orientation, and core values	Budaya organisasi yang didukung oleh orientasi pelanggan, kepemimpinan, dan nilai inti perusahaan berkontribusi positif terhadap peningkatan kemampuan inovasi organisasi
20	Wunderlich et al. (2025)	Service technology	Teknologi memperkuat customer centric process

Based on the literature that has been selected as the basis for this article, the following analysis was produced:

A. The Role of Customer-Centric Corporate Culture as a Differentiation Strategy

A literature review shows that a customer-oriented corporate culture is a source of competitive advantage that is difficult to imitate. From the resource-based view (RBV) perspective, tangible and intangible resources that are valuable, rare, difficult to imitate, and non-substitutable (VRIN) enable a company to achieve sustainable competitive advantage. A customer-oriented culture is an intangible resource because it is reflected in the values, norms, and practices internalized throughout the organization; it cannot be acquired instantly by competitors. The reviewed studies confirm that this culture functions as a differentiation mechanism through several key channels, namely the formation of long-term relationships with customers, the creation of service innovations, the enhancement of customer experience, and the strengthening of corporate image.

Regarding building long-term relationships, organizations that internalize customer-centric values are able to build long-term relationships with customers and

stakeholders; this approach increases customer satisfaction, loyalty, and retention (Pardo-Jaramillo et al., 2025). Furthermore, a customer-oriented culture fosters innovation because it helps organizations deeply understand customer needs. Viet Ha et al. (Viet Ha et al., 2025) found that customer orientation mediated the relationship between vision, core values, and employee innovation capabilities. Although customer orientation and customer relationship orientation are two different dimensions, both enhance service innovation and creativity (Tuominen et al., 2023). Ruiz and Sanchez (Ruiz De La Torre & Sanchez, 2022) reported that servitization and service-based business models open new value opportunities, thus motivating organizations to innovate. Meanwhile, Pazzona and White (Pazzona & White, 2024) emphasized the importance of measuring the service sector to understand innovation potential and enhance professionalism in the private security industry.

To create a memorable customer experience, differentiation in the service sector lies in the customer experience, not just the product. Electronic Customer Relationship Management (E-CRM) is said to strengthen the relationship between customer orientation and loyalty by improving the customer experience (Ali & Alfayez, 2024). It was found that functional and mechanical service clues in digital banking increase customer satisfaction (Dağışaner & Karaatmaca, 2025). Fener and Köse (Fener & Köse, 2025) demonstrated that a positive corporate image increases patient satisfaction and loyalty, while Fageda and Flores-Fillol (Fageda & Flores-Fillol, 2024) showed that the right combination of pricing and service quality strategies can provide a unique experience for airline users. Thus, a customer-centric culture enables companies to design consistent and valuable experiences, thus becoming a key differentiator.

Corporate image is a crucial dimension of differentiation. For example, in the healthcare sector, a positive image serves as a differentiation strategy that protects hospitals during both normal and crisis conditions (Fener & Köse, 2025). Sriviboon (2022) shows that service innovation, corporate image, and customer loyalty collectively enhance business performance. A consistent customer-centric culture generates a positive image because customers judge an organization based on collective experiences. Olson et al. (2020) add that a differentiation strategy must be supported by the right resource configuration; without financial flexibility and technological capabilities, differentiation does not always translate into positive opportunity interpretation.

The implications of this previous research illustrate that a customer-oriented culture serves as a source of differentiation because it focuses the organization on creating customer value. The findings indicate that this culture supports long-term relationships, stimulates innovation, and enhances experiences and image, enabling the company to offer differentiated value from competitors. Culture-based differentiation is not simply a marketing activity but a sustainable strategy integrated into the organization's systems and processes.

B. Factors Influencing the Implementation of Customer-Centric Corporate Culture

Analysis of 20 articles identified several factors that determine the success of implementing a customer-oriented culture, namely:

1. Company vision and goals.

Alignment between corporate purpose and customer value is a prerequisite. Pardo-Jaramillo et al. (2025) show that customer centricity is effective when supported by a strong purpose and aligned with customer expectations. Without a clear purpose, customer orientation tends to be a slogan without implementation.

2. Leadership and organizational commitment.

Visionary leadership and organizational support are necessary to translate customer value into behavior. Viet Ha et al. (Viet Ha et al., 2025) showed that customer orientation impacts innovation only when accompanied by visionary leadership. Park & Kim (Park & Kim, 2024) confirmed that organizational support enhances customer orientation through mediating employee work engagement. This indicates that employee involvement and management commitment are key.

3. Dynamic innovation capabilities.

The success of a customer-centric culture depends on an organization's ability to translate customer insights into innovation. Shirmohammadi et al. (Shirmohammadi et al., 2023) showed that market orientation and dynamic capabilities enhance the innovative performance of pharmaceutical companies. Osman et al. (Osman et al., 2023) found that clan, adhocracy, and market cultures in the construction industry enhance performance through innovation and marketing capabilities. Olson et al. (Olson et al., 2020) highlighted that financial slack and technological capabilities moderate the effect of differentiation strategy on corporate entrepreneurship. Without these resources, differentiation strategy can be misinterpreted.

4. Digital transformation and service technology.

Technology is a crucial enabler for a customer-centric culture. Wunderlich et al. (Wunderlich et al., 2025) introduced the CCTECH framework, explaining that technologies such as augmented reality, virtual reality, digital twins, and smart products enhance customer-centric processes by providing real-time data, immersive experiences, and predictive services. Ali and Alfayez (Ali & Alfayez, 2024) demonstrated that e-CRM strengthens the relationship between customer orientation and loyalty, while Dehnert (Dehnert, 2020) asserted that only digital transformation configurations aligned with business models yield high performance. Ruiz and Sanchez (Ruiz De La Torre & Sanchez, 2022) added that servitization and digitalization open up new business models that enhance a company's capacity to personalize services.

5. Organizational environment and employee well-being.

A customer-centric culture requires a supportive work environment. Kim et al. (Kim et al., 2021) showed that job stress and high turnover in the beauty services sector hinder the implementation of customer orientation. Boakye-Ansah et al. (Boakye-Ansah et al., 2022) highlighted the risk of inequality in service differentiation; therefore, organizations must ensure that differentiation does not compromise employee access and well-being. Pazzona and White (Pazzona & White, 2024) emphasized the importance of industry size and structure in establishing fair practices in the security services sector.

The implications of this previous research illustrate that implementing a customer-centric culture requires synergy between company goals, visionary leadership, innovation capabilities, digital transformation, and employee well-being. These factors act as enablers and mediators, ensuring customer value is truly reflected in organizational processes and outputs.

C. The Influence of Customer-Centric Corporate Culture on the Performance, Loyalty, and Sustainability of Service Companies

Literature synthesis shows the broad impact of customer-centric culture on organizational performance:

1. Service innovation and business performance.

Customer orientation drives service innovation. Tuominen et al. (Tuominen et al., 2023) found that innovation mediates between customer orientation and business

growth. Shirmohammadi et al. (Shirmohammadi et al., 2023) showed that market orientation and dynamic capabilities enhance innovative performance. Boakye-Ansah et al. (Boakye-Ansah et al., 2022) showed that service differentiation can improve water access, but must also be balanced with equity. Olson et al. (Olson et al., 2020) showed that the effect of differentiation on corporate entrepreneurship depends on resource availability. Thus, customer-oriented innovation becomes a key differentiator when accompanied by the right resource configuration.

2. Customer loyalty and satisfaction.

A customer-oriented culture strengthens loyalty through experience and satisfaction. Ali and Alfayez (Ali & Alfayez, 2024) explain that E-CRM implementation increases customer loyalty through improved experiences. Suzan and Karaatmaca (Dağışaner & Karaatmaca, 2025) show that functional and mechanical service instructions increase customer satisfaction. Fener and Köse (Fener & Köse, 2025) and Fageda and Flores-Fillol (Fageda & Flores-Fillol, 2024) emphasize that a good corporate image, service quality, and pricing strategy play a significant role in shaping loyalty and satisfaction. These findings suggest that customer orientation, combined with technological innovation and service quality, strengthens long-term relationships.

3. Corporate image and business performance.

A positive image enhances performance and reputation. Sriviboon (2022) showed that a combination of service innovation, corporate image, human capital strategy, and customer loyalty positively impacted performance. Fener and Köse (2025) found that a positive image strengthened patient satisfaction and loyalty. Service sectors such as the security industry (Pazzona & White, 2024) and water services (Boakye-Ansah et al., 2022) demonstrated that reputation is crucial for convincing the public of the reliability and fairness of services.

4. Organizational sustainability.

Customer-centricity contributes to long-term sustainability. Pardo-Jaramillo et al. (Pardo-Jaramillo et al., 2025) emphasize that customer orientation and corporate purpose form the foundation of sustainable organizations. Servitization and service-based business models (Ruiz De La Torre & Sanchez, 2022) encourage companies to create value for customers, the environment, and society. Other research shows that sustainability also requires equitable access (Boakye-Ansah et al., 2022) and employee protection (Kim et al., 2021). By partnering with customers and stakeholders, organizations can increase social legitimacy and trust, and embed sustainable practices into their operations.

The implications of this previous research illustrate that a customer-oriented culture enhances organizational performance through service innovation, quality experiences, a positive image, customer loyalty, and sustainable practices. This influence is strongest when supported by resources, technology, leadership, and a commitment to fairness. Without these enablers, customer-based differentiation can fail or even exacerbate inequalities.

D. Integration of Findings with Theory

The following is an integration of findings from research literature with theory:

1. Resource-Based View and Dynamic Capabilities

According to RBV theory, sustainable competitive advantage is achieved when a company possesses valuable, rare, difficult-to-imitate, and non-substitutable resources and capabilities. A customer-centric culture meets these criteria because it is an internalized intangible asset that is not easily copied. Dynamic capabilities theory explains that companies must be able to integrate, build, and reconfigure

resources to address change; these capabilities include adapting to new technologies, learning from customer interactions, and changing internal processes. Literature findings indicate that a customer-centric culture is only effective when supported by innovation and technology capabilities (Shirmohammadi et al., 2023; Wunderlich et al., 2025). This modifies the RBV by emphasizing the role of digital transformation and corporate purpose as part of intangible resources.

2. Porter's Differentiation Strategy

Porter (1985) identified two types of competitive advantage: differentiation and cost leadership. Differentiation is achieved by offering unique value that customers value. This study extends Porter's concept to the cultural realm: uniqueness stems not only from product features but also from the experiences, relationships, and values embodied in a customer-centric culture. By understanding customer needs, organizations can create unique value propositions through quality personalized service, integrated digital experiences, and a positive image. However, as explained by Olson et al. (2020), the success of differentiation depends on resource structure; without financial flexibility and technological capabilities, this strategy can be misinterpreted.

AND. Customer Culture-Based Differentiation Model

Based on a thematic synthesis of 20 articles, this study proposes a Customer Culture-Based Differentiation Model. This model consists of four interrelated components: (1) customer-centric corporate culture as the foundation; (2) dynamic capabilities – innovation and technology capabilities – that enable resource reconfiguration; (3) digital transformation (e.g., E-CRM, AR/VR, digital twin) as an enabler that strengthens service personalization; and (4) corporate purpose as a strategic direction that ensures differentiation is aligned with societal and customer values. These four components result in service innovation, great customer experience, positive image, loyalty, and corporate sustainability. This model modifies the RBV by adding a digital dimension and goal orientation to the definition of intangible resources.

4. CONCLUSION

The literature review confirms that customer-centric corporate culture is an intangible resource that meets the VRIN criteria—valuable, rare, difficult to imitate, and non-substitutable. This culture is reflected in internalized values, norms, and practices, making it difficult for competitors to copy. A customer-oriented corporate culture provides differentiation through four mechanisms: building long-term relationships, triggering service innovation, creating consistent customer experiences, and shaping a positive corporate image. This achievement confirms that culture-based differentiation is not merely a marketing activity, but a sustainable strategy embedded in the organizational system.

The success of a customer-centric culture is determined by the synergy of several factors: alignment between corporate purpose and customer values, visionary leadership that fosters employee engagement, dynamic innovation capabilities to translate customer expectations into new products, digital transformation as an enabler of personalized service, and a supportive and equitable work environment. Without these resources, technology, and commitment, customer-based differentiation risks failure or even exacerbating inequalities.

A customer-centric corporate culture has been proven to increase service innovation and business performance, strengthen customer loyalty through experience and satisfaction, and build a positive image that supports reputation. This culture also contributes to long-

term sustainability by engaging customers and stakeholders as partners and embedding sustainable practices throughout the organization.

Based on the results of this study, service companies need to integrate customer orientation into their overall vision, mission, values, and organizational culture so that customer centricity is not just a concept, but is reflected in every business process. The implementation of this culture must be supported by visionary leadership, employee engagement, strengthening innovation capabilities, and the use of digital technologies such as e-CRM and customer analytics to produce more personalized and valuable services. Furthermore, companies need to maintain a balance between customer value creation, employee welfare, and service fairness so that the differentiation strategy they develop can create sustainable competitive advantage while strengthening the organization's image and reputation.

For the development of knowledge, further research needs to empirically test the Customer Culture-Based Differentiation Model generated in this study in various service sectors and different organizational contexts. This study provides theoretical contributions by integrating the perspectives of Resource-Based View, Dynamic Capabilities, and differentiation strategies into a customer-centric corporate culture framework. The novelty of this research lies in the development of a conceptual model that positions customer-centric corporate culture as the main foundation of differentiation strengthened by dynamic capabilities, digital transformation, and corporate purpose in generating service innovation, customer loyalty, organizational performance, and sustainability of service companies.

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