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Design a Competency Model for Salespeople in Food Distribution Industry of Iran

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Abstract
To fulfill customers' expectations in the food distribution industry, empowering salespeople is important. Therefore, this study aims to identify salespeople's competencies and construct a competency model. This research is an applied research from the perspective of its objectives, and it is conducted with a mixed method (qualitative-quantitative, respectively). Grounded theory has been used for model presentation in the qualitative section and Semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect information. The data set was organized in 172 codes that included initial propositions, 16 categories at the first level, 7 categories at the second level, and 3 categorical clusters. The final result was prepared in the form of an initial theory and finally, hypotheses was tested by means of quantitative techniques, such as structural equations, descriptive statistics, and confirmatory factor analysis. A researcher-made questionnaire collected the quantitative data provided by a statistical population of 214 active salespeople in food distribution companies of Iran.
Keywords: Model design, Retail industry, Salespeople Competencies

Introduction

One of the most critical concerns of the food distribution companies' leaders is Meritocracy. Considering this point is believed to result in resolving a range of main issues in these companies. The fixed profit margin of distribution companies forces these companies to focus on cost reduction methods to increase their profits. Identifying the factors that can effect efficiency and choosing an appropriate method are some of the fundamental actions that can be taken to elevate the efficiency and reduce costs.

Distribution industry is highly competitive and has a dynamic environment; therefore, recruiting mighty and committed salespeople is a valuable and irreplaceable advantage. Selling is a technical subject that requires specialized human resources with diverse skills. The necessity of adopting a coherent and scientific approach in choosing and developing the activists of this field has given particular importance to identifying their necessary competencies.

The purpose of the competency-based approach is to determine the required competencies of the people in key positions of

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the whole organization, try to eliminate competency gaps through effective selection and training, and ensure that worthy performance is recognized and rewarded (Chao et al., 2017). A competency model is a list of obtained competencies by comparing satisfactory performance with the expected performance of the employees to create a specific job (Skorková, 2016). The key competencies play an important role as a lever to identify the critical requirements for achieving a sustainable competitive advantage, necessary for active companies in the food industry

Sales and sales force management is a complex activity that largely determines a company's commercial success. (Arditto, 2020). with an increased focus on customer value, certain researchers have started to investigate the role of the sales force in the value-creation process. (Echchakoui, 2016) . In this regard, the sales force not only communicates a firm's value but also can create it (Rackham and DeVincintis, 1999). Moreover, salespeople satisfied with their jobs can be expected to increase customer satisfaction (Zablah et al., 2016). They may go far beyond their selling role to act as specialized consultants to customers; they also may improve company-wide product design, delivery schedules, or pricing policies on behalf of those same customers (Jaushyaum, 2018) This highlights the critical role of effective salespeople as a competitive advantage for organizations. This research seeks to identify the required competencies of the food industry salespeople, as a tool for companies, that is also in line with their need for an appropriate method to take fundamental actions and adopt a strategy that can strengthen their competitive advantage. so in this research, we are looking for an answer to this question: "what is the competency model of

salespeople in the food distribution industry in Iran?"

Objectives of the Study
Identifying the components of the salespeople's competencies in the food distribution industry including:
- Determining the relationship of the salespersons' competence components in the food distribution industry.
- Determining the optimal salespeople's competency model in the food distribution industry.
- Validating the salespersons' competency model in the food distribution industry.

Data collection
The required data are collected in two parts. The first part includes the theoretical foundations and literature review of the subject. This part has been prepared based on using the library research, related university books to the topic, presented articles in scientific conferences' collections and theses, searching for information, translating electronic resources on the Internet, etc. The second part includes collecting related statistics and information to the studied variables in the statistical population. Interviews were used in this part for collecting raw data. Few researches have been performed about the mentioned topic in Asia and Iran. So, a qualitative method is needed for data analysis; Therefore, investigation and exploration at different levels are necessary, and grounded theory is the best qualitative method to study the problem. Researchers can seek to develop different levels of theory while using this method.

Sample Selection
The statistical population of the qualitative section includes active experts in the Iran's food distribution industry who have at least 5

years of management experience in some designations like regional sales manager and above. In a qualitative study, sampling cannot be planned in detail from the beginning of the field research but can it be concentrated in parallel with the project progress and stops when all the categories are saturated. This means that further searching will not add supplementary materials to the theory components. After the 6th interview of this research, it was concluded that there is no new concept. Still, all 8 interviews were conducted to be ensured that theoretical saturation is reached, as no new concept was emerging from the last two interviews. Moreover, the statistical population of the quantitative part are 483 sales unit activists in Iran food distribution industry. The sampling method of the qualitative aspect is conducted as the purposive sampling. In this type of study, the researchers go to the people or the groups that have the most knowledge about the research question to get the richest information ([Devers, 2000](#)). A random sampling method was also used in the quantitative part. The sample size was estimated to be 214 people by the help of Cochran's formula.
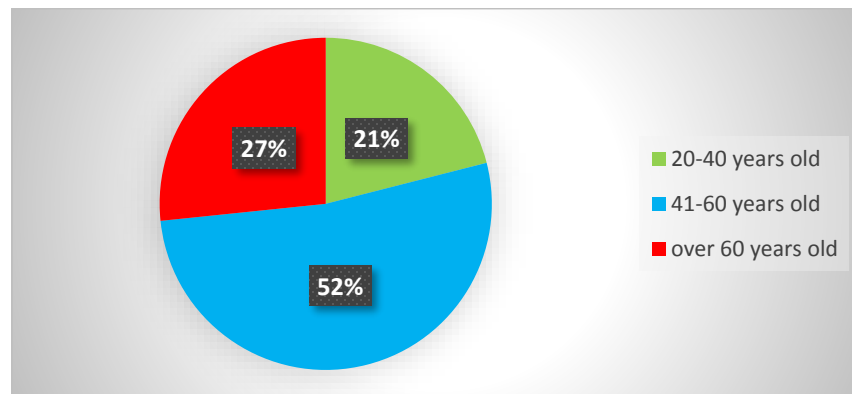

Fig. 1. *Age frequency percentage of sample members*

The related information to the age frequency of the sample members is illustrated in Fig. 1. Based on this, 45 of the participants in the research are between 20 to 40 years old, 112 people are between 41 to 60 years old, and 57 people are over 60 years old.
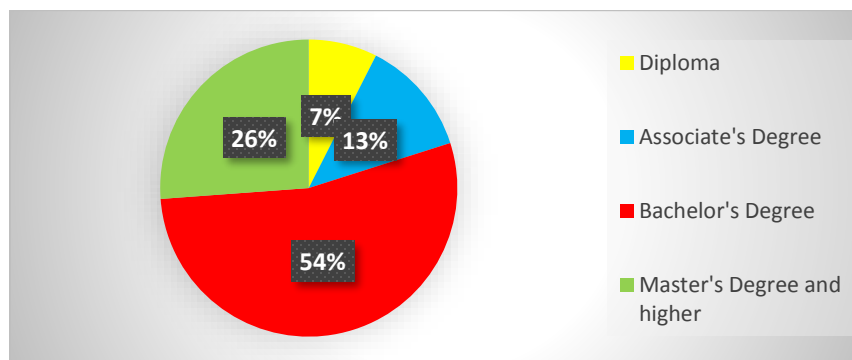

Fig. 2. *The education frequency of sample members*

The related information to the education frequency of the sample members are illustrated in Fig. 2. Based on this, 16 individuals of the participants in the research

have a diploma, 27 of them have an associate's degree, 115 of them have a bachelor's degree, and 56 individuals have a Master's degree or higher.
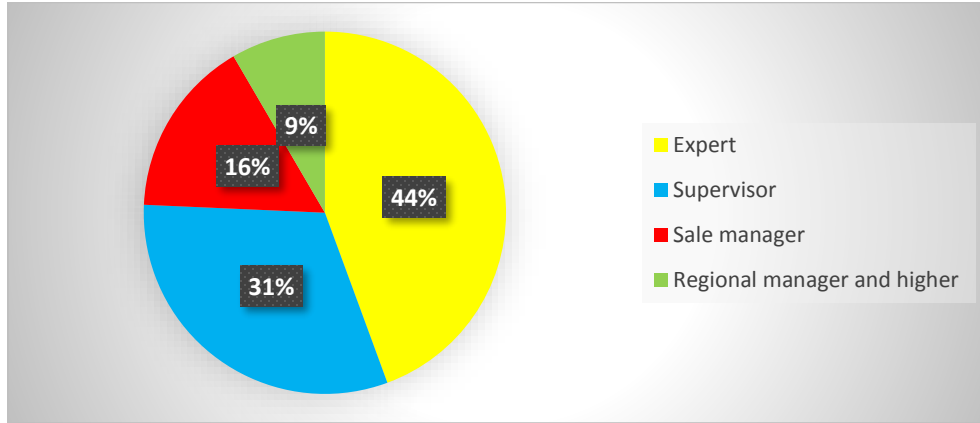

Fig. 3. *Organizational post frequency percentage of sample members*

The related information to the organizational post frequency of the sample members are illustrated in Fig. 3. Based on this, 95 individuals of the participants in the research are experts, 67 of them are supervisors, 34 of them are sales managers, and 18 individuals are regional managers and higher.

Theoretical Framework

To obtain the data that can be used to answer the research question, deep and semi-structured interviews were conducted with 8 effective managers of Iranian food distribution industry organizations. When planning a study, the researcher should thoughtfully choose an appropriate methodology based on an awareness of its philosophical underpinnings and its unique characteristics (McEwen & Wills, 2014; Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, & Spiers, 2002; Ryan, 2018). One potential option is grounded theory, a qualitative research methodology that incorporates guidelines for simultaneous data collection and analysis to develop theories about social processes that are grounded in real-life

experiences (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; McClement & Harlos, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Hence, all of the conducted interviews were recorded with the permission of the participants, their text was converted to text, and each interview was analyzed. Based on the three-stages of open, selective and theoretical coding, the data were periodically and continuously reviewed and refined, and a set of similar propositions were gathered around a concept based on the similarities of the data. The concepts that had common meanings were organized in the form of categories that have a more abstract level than concepts. Due to the possibility of re-categorizing of the categories at a higher level, a new category was formed, which finally categorized the categories with similar meaning and content under a particular category called the categorical cluster. Finally, to validate the obtained model, all the concepts and categories were compared with what is mentioned in the literature review. The quantitative analysis also validated it and finally, the model was extracted.
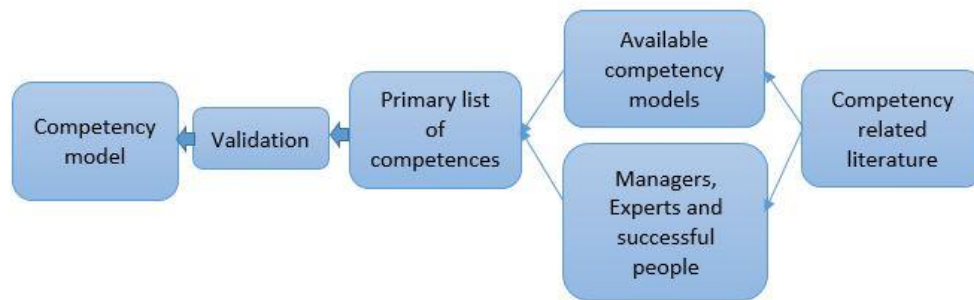
Fig. 4. *The implemented method of the research*

Methodology
Qualitative stage

The necessary steps of the qualitative stage of the research can be classified into three stage of preliminary studies, main studies, and supplementary measures. The initial stage emphasizes the research problem and the expression of the research question, and the researcher seeks to discover the research problems based on his/her research concerns and specialized field. At the stage of the main studies, the data collection sources are classified into two categories: primary sources, which include interviews and observation, and secondary sources, which include personal experiences and existing literature in this strategy of several data collection methods to cover the different dimensions of the phenomenon under study, including observation, interviews, and field notes are used to generate data. One of the essential advantages of the interview is that the collected data are in the context and social background of the interviewee. In these interviews, the interviewer obtained informed consent from participants before their interviews. The interview place of all cases was the offices of the interviewees. Considering the fact that the basis of this study is on the qualitative method and the strategy of grounded theory, the sampling is also subject to the rules of the same method and has been carried out purposefully. The researcher knew the effective managers, and interviewed eight managers whom he had collaborated or interacted with in the past

years. The researcher got to know the study environment closely, listed the initial questions that align with the main research question, and revised them. Therefore, the interview questions have been reviewed and modified gradually based on the obtained feedback.

In the grounded theory method, data analysis means the continuous comparison of data with the purpose of conceptualization, and it includes all steps from coding to classification. In the first coding stage, called "open coding," the hidden concepts are identified by reviewing the collected data sets. Throughout the process, we compare data with data and then data with codes. The next responsibility of the researcher would be comparing and categorizing the extracted concepts from the data, which is done in the following two selective and theoretical coding stages. External frameworks such as axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and theoretical codes (Glaser, 1978) can be useful if they 'earn their way' into the analysis (Charmaz, 2014). Grounded theory coding generates the bones of analysis. Theoretical integration will assemble these bones into a working skeleton (Charmaz, 2006) To screen and reduce a large amount of data from the process of classifying concepts (categorization is used), in other words it is possible to achieve a large number of conceptual labels by using some meaningful and repeated initial codes. At this stage, the codes and concepts determining and arranging each group in similar and common codes will be considered in the form of a single class. By doing so, the data are

reduced to a specific and limited number of classes. Then a conceptual name will be given to each created class which should be more abstract than the concept names.

Regarding the naming of the classes, it should be noted that most of the classes are named by the researcher, but it is better to use local names (used by the interviewee). Some names are derived from the vocabulary of specialized fields, and some are taken from specialized texts and writings. Then it follows the analysis of coded data and continues the process until reaching the saturation point. In the stage of supplementary measures, after getting the saturation point, the researcher tries to present the theory and finally summarizes and validates the obtained results.

Quantitative stage

The considered tests in this research are: Descriptive statistics, to classify and examine the characteristics of the respondents and the statistical community, Cronbach's alpha test to check the reliability of the questionnaire, Kolmogorov-Smirnov test to check the normal distribution of variables, Confirmatory factor analysis to determine the validity of constructs with the help of pls software and Structural equation techniques, including path analysis to test research hypotheses.

Analysis and Results

Data analysis has particular importance in answering the research questions; in this section, firstly, the concept categorizing that were formed from the extracted statements from the interviews, categories formation and their classification is explained, and then the categories are defined. Then the qualitative section output will describe the analysis of the obtained result from the completed questionnaire. In the first part, we will perform a descriptive analysis and draw graphs and tables and in the second part, we will have the inferential analysis.

Description of categories and classes

The result of categorizing the categories from the total 172 initial concepts of the interviews in the qualitative section formed the final executive model of the research, as follows:
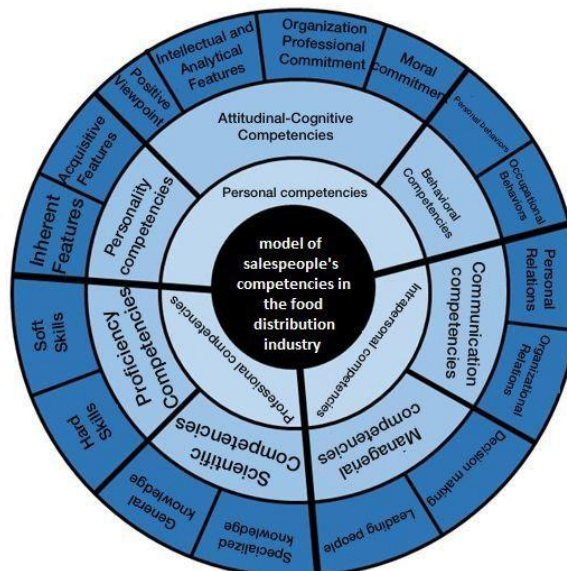

Fig. 5. *The final model of salespeople's competencies in the food distribution industry*

The following part will refer to the definition of the category clusters:

Personal competencies

Personal competencies refer to a set of personal characteristics that are manifested in the form of attitudes, behavior and personality traits of people. A major part of these features is a result of learning and the rest are inherent. These elements greatly affect the performance of people in different jobs.

According to the quality of the primary codes and their organization in the form of concepts and categories, individual competencies are divided into 8 categories at the first level and 3 categories at the second level.

Interpersonal skills

The Concise Oxford English Dictionary defines 'skill' as 'the ability to do something well. The second cluster of salespeople's competencies in food distribution industry is identified in this research. These competencies are categorized in two categories of communication competencies and managerial competences. In this study, the communication competencies are considered as a communication type that salespeople establish with individuals, groups and units within and outside the organization. By considering this explanation, each of these two categories will be discussed below.

Interpersonal interactions are an important part of managers' work because without it they will not be able to plan, organize, direct and control. Effective communication is the most powerful tool for managers to inspire employees to accept responsibility and perform tasks effectively (Dubrin, 2011).

Professional skills

Professional competencies relate to a set of skills that people need to have in order to be more effective in their career. This group of competencies is classified in two categories of skill competences that are related to the field of activities and people's duties and scientific competences, which in all careers is a tool for further and faster growth as well as better realization of other competences.

Table 1.
Descriptive measures of research variables' mean and standard deviation

	Skewness	Kurtosis	Mean	Standard deviation
Behavioral competencies	-0.673	0.023	14.12	1.474
Attitudinal- cognitive competencies	-0.345	0.128	25.87	2.623
Personality competencies	-0.351	-0.087	12.69	1.606
Personal competencies	-0.424	0.252	52.69	4.591
communication competencies	-0.562	0.523	13.71	1.541
Managerial competencies	-0.641	0.672	13.89	1.516
Intrapersonal competencies	-0.742	1.126	27.60	2.719
Scientific competencies	-0.535	0.529	13.64	1.543
Proficiency competencies	-0.387	0.139	13.41	1.568
Professional competencies	-0.493	0.657	27.06	2.789

Data analysis

The statistical description of the related scores to the competencies of salespeople in the food distribution industry, including the skewness and kurtosis along with the mean indicators and the standard deviation of the scores are presented in Table 2. Based on the obtained information, the average behavioral competencies are equal to 14.12, attitudinal-cognitive competencies are equal to 25.87, personality competencies are equal to 12.69, personal competencies are equal to 52.69,

communication competencies are equal to 13.71, managerial competencies are equal to 13.89, interpersonal competences are equal to 27.60, scientific competences are equal to 13.64, proficiency competences are equal to 13.41 and the average of professional competences is equal to 27.06. Also, considering the fact that skewness and kurtosis value of the data are between +2 and -2, the data have a normal distribution at the level of 0.05.

Data normality test

Before testing the hypotheses, the normality of the data distribution should be tested. This helps the researcher to choose the appropriate statistical test for examining the hypotheses. For this purpose, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was used to determine the data distribution type. For this purpose, the distribution of related data to the research variables at the significance level of 0.05 have been investigated.

Table 2.
The results of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test for examining the normal distribution of the score

Variable	Z Kolmogorov-Smirnov	Significance level
Behavioral competencies	0.945	0.334
Attitudinal-cognitive competencies	0.695	0.720
Personality competencies	1.346	0.053
Communication competencies	0.980	0.292
Managerial competencies	0891	0.405
Scientific competencies	1.176	0.126
Proficiency competencies	1.187	0.120

Based on the listed results in the above table, the significance level of the calculated statistic for all variables is greater than 0.05, so the assumption of normal distribution of scores is accepted.

Tool reliability

A valid and reliable tool is a tool that has repeatability and reproducibility, which means, it can be used in many cases and produce the same results in all cases. Reliability of the present study is calculated by Cronbach's alpha coefficient.

Table 3.
 The results of Cronbach's test for examining the internal consistency of the questionnaire questions

Component	Number of questions	Cronbach's alpha
Personal competencies	8	0.751
Intrapersonal competencies	4	0.778
Proficiency competencies	4	0.810
Total	16	0.888

An alpha value more than 0.9 is excellent, between 0.8-0.9 is good, 0.7-0.8 is acceptable, 0.6-0.7 is debatable, 0.5-0.6 is poor and less than 0.5 is unacceptable (DeVellis, 2011). In general, the reliability results of the used questionnaire showed that the calculated Cronbach's alpha coefficients for all components are acceptable.

Research Questions

1. What are the components of the salespeople's competencies in the food distribution industry?

Based on the conducted research on the competency model of Iranian food distribution companies' salespeople, after extracting the competencies in the qualitative part, the confirmatory factor analysis was used in the quantitative part to determine the final components of the model. This model consists of 3 categorical clusters of personal, interpersonal and professional competencies, and 7 categories. The confirmatory factor analysis was used to determine the components that make the salespeople competencies in the food distribution industry. The obtained results are presented below.
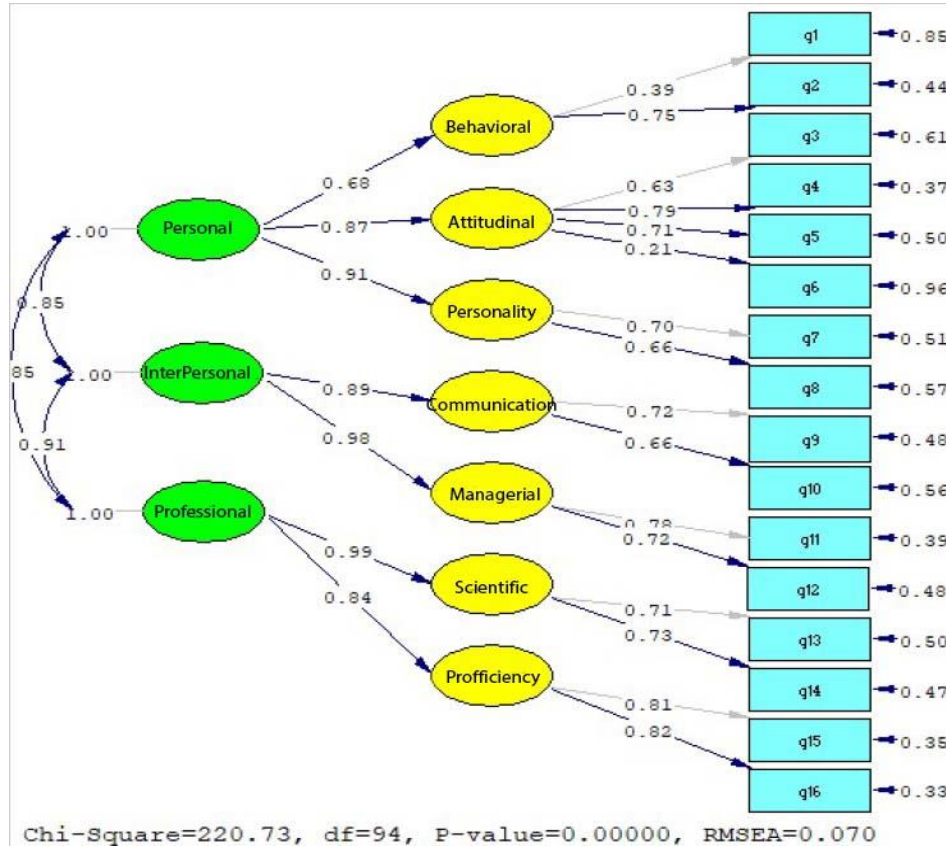

Fig. 6. *Second-order confirmatory factor analysis of the components that make up the salespeople's competencies in the food distribution industry in the form of standard coefficients*

Figure 6 illustrates the second-order confirmatory factor analysis model of the salespeople's competencies components of the food distribution industry in the form of standardized coefficients. The estimated parameter value for each of the variables indicates the strength of the factor load of each variable on the related factor to it.
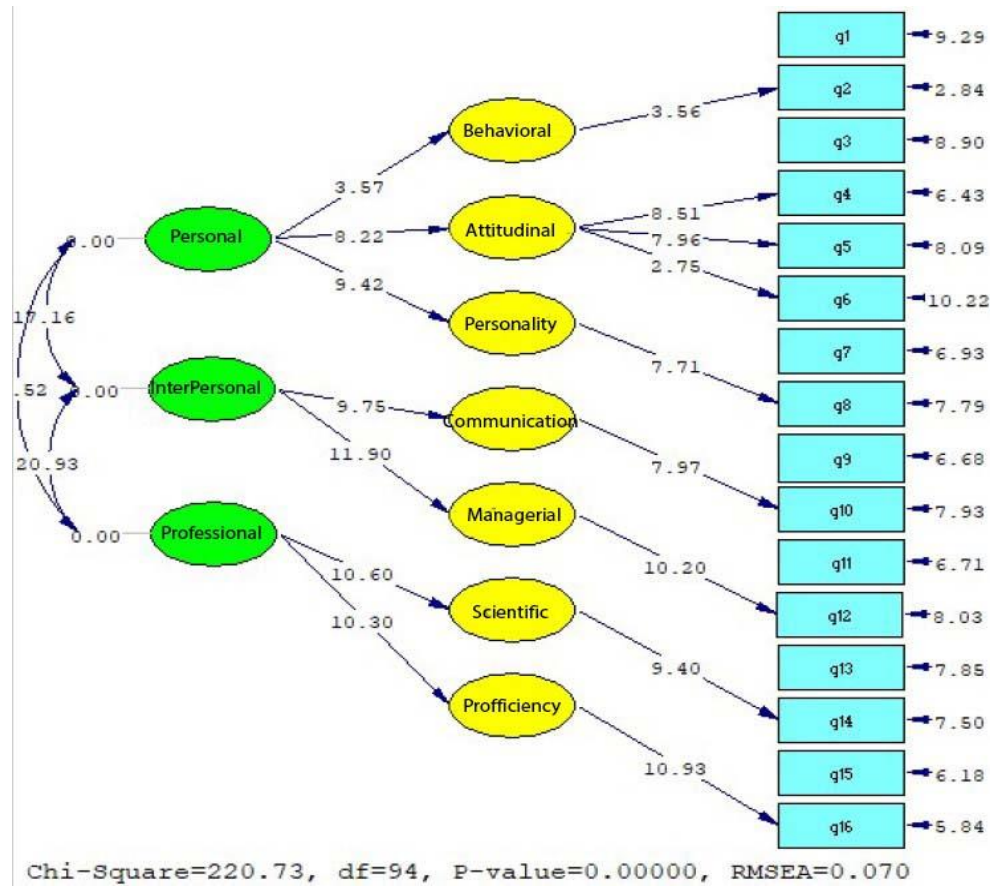
Fig. 7. *Second-order confirmatory factor analysis of the components that make up the salespeople's competencies in the food distribution industry in the case of significant coefficients*

Figure 7 illustrates the second-order confirmatory factor analysis model of the salespeople's competencies components in the food distribution industry in the form of significant coefficients. The numbers on the paths indicate the t-value for each path. It is necessary for the t value of each path to be higher than 1.96, so that the factor loadings can be significant. Based on the obtained results, the related t values to all questions were higher than 1.96.

Table 4.
The factorial model for index of fit

Index of fix	Accepted domain	Observed amount	Index of fit evaluation
X^2/df	≤ 3	2.34	Appropriate
IFI	> 0.9	0.96	Appropriate
RFI	> 0.9	0.92	Appropriate
RMSEA	< 0.08	0.070	Appropriate
SRMR	< 0.08	0.069	Appropriate
CFI	< 0.09	0.96	Appropriate
NFI	< 0.9	0.94	Appropriate

Chi-square divided by the degrees of freedom (X^2/df) confirms the fit of the model. X^2/df, which is less than 3, means the model is fit with the data. The root mean square error

of approximation (RMSEA) is equal to 0.072 and the square root of the mean residual square (SRMR) is equal to 0.064, which is smaller than the criterion value (0.08) and thus confirms the fit of the model. And finally, IFI, CFI, NFI and RFI indices are also greater than the desired criterion (0.9). In total, and considering the sum of the calculated fit indices, the fit of the model and the validity of the career competencies of food distribution industry salespersons model are confirmed.

In the following, the related factor loadings to the questions of each component are presented in the form of standard coefficients, along with the t-statistics and the significance level for each.

Table 5.

Factor loadings of related questions to the personal competencies components

	Question number	Nonstandard coefficient	Standard coefficient	T statistics	Significance level
Behavioral competencies	1	0.41	0.39	-	-
	2	0.64	0.75	3.56	0.01
	3	0.66	0.63	-	-
Attitudinal-cognitive competencies	4	0.73	0.79	8.51	0.01
	5	0.59	0.71	7.96	0.01
	6	0.21	0.21	2.75	0.01
Personality competencies	7	0.72	0.70	-	-
	8	0.60	0.66	7.71	0.01

The results of the related factor loadings to the questions of the personal competencies components are presented in the above table in the form of standard coefficients along with the t-statistics and the related significance level to each of the questions. According to the presented results, all factor loadings are significant at the alpha level of 0.01.

Table 6.

Factor loadings of related questions to the intrapersonal competencies components

	Question number	Nonstandard coefficient	Standard coefficient	T statistics	Significance level
communication competencies	9	0.59	0.72	-	-
	10	0.63	0.66	7.97	0.01
Managerial competencies	11	0.64	0.78	-	-
	12	0.60	0.72	10.20	0.01

In the above table, the results of the related factor loadings to the questions of intrapersonal competence components are presented in the form of standard coefficients along with the t-statistics and the related significance level to each of the questions. According to the presented results, all factor loadings are significant at the alpha level of 0.01.

Table 7.

Factor loadings of related questions to the intrapersonal competencies components

	Question number	Nonstandard coefficient	Standard coefficient	T statistics	Significance level
Scientific competencies	9	0.59	0.71	-	-
	10	0.70	0.81	-	-
Proficiency competencies	11	0.64	0.78	-	-
	12	0.69	0.82	10.93	0.01

In the above table, the results of the related factor loadings to the questions of the professional competences components are presented in the form of standard coefficients along with the t-statistics and the related significance level to each of the questions. According to the presented results, all factor loadings are significant at the alpha level of 0.01.

2. What is the prioritization of the components that make up the salespeople's competencies in the food distribution industry?

Friedman's test has been used to prioritize the components that make up the salespeople's competencies in the food distribution industry. The results are presented below.

Table 8.
Results of Friedman's test to determine the priority of competence components

Rating		The rating mean
1	Behavioral competencies	5
2	Managerial competencies	4.71
3	communication competencies	4.42
4	Scientific competencies	4.26
5	Proficiency competencies	3.85
6	Attitudinal-cognitive competencies	2.96
7	Personality competencies	2.80
	Friedman's test X^2	229.365
	Sig	0.001

Based on the obtained results, from the respondents' point of view, behavioral competencies, managerial competencies, communication competencies, scientific competencies, proficiency competencies, attitudinal-cognitive competencies, and personality competencies are the most important components which are related to the salespeople's competencies in the food distribution industry.

3. How are the relationships between the components of salespeople's competencies in the food distribution industry?

Pearson's correlation test was used to investigate the relationship between the components of salespersons' competencies in the food distribution industry.

Table 9.
Matrix of correlation coefficients between the salespeople's competencies in the food distribution industry

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1.Behavioral competencies	1						
2.attitudial-cognitive competencies	0.428 **	1					
3.personality competencies	0.315 **	0.551 **	1				
4.communication Competencies	0.387 **	0.494 **	0.530 **	1			
5.managerial competencies	0.309 **	0.540 **	0.503 **	0.583 **	1		

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
6.Scientific competencies	0.378 **	0.531 **	0.492 **	0.490 **	0.649 **	1	
7.Proficiency competencies	0.322 **	0.561 **	0.423 **	0.472 **	0.565 **	0.608 **	1
*Significant in level 0.05				** Significant in level 0.01			

Table 10 illustrates the results of the correlation between the salespeople's competencies in the food distribution industry. Based on the obtained results, all of the calculated correlation coefficients are positive and significant at the alpha level of 0.01 ($p < 0.01$). The positivity of the obtained coefficients indicates that there is a direct relationship between individual, interpersonal and professional competencies among the salespeople of the food distribution industry.

Summary and Discussion

After analyzing the findings of this research in the fourth chapter, the research questions will be answered in this chapter based on the obtained results.

In the following table the components that make up the salespeople's competencies in the distribution industry are presented along with the prioritization of the obtained from the quantitative work:

Table 10.
Friedman test results for determining the priority of competence components

Rating		The rating mean
1	Behavioral competencies	5
2	Managerial competencies	4.71
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4	Scientific competencies	4.26
5	Proficiency competencies	3.85
6	Attitudinal-cognitive competencies	2.96
7	Personality competencies	2.80
	Friedman's test X^2	229.365
	Sig	0.001

Finally, by using the Pearson's correlation test, it was determined that there is a direct relationship between salespeople's personal, interpersonal and professional competencies in food distribution industry.

Conclusion

The main goal of the researcher was to design the salespeople's competency model in the food distribution industry. In this regard the dimensions of the studied topic were discussed in detail. Now the final chapter will discuss the conclusion. Some executive and theoretical suggestions will be presented for future researches, and limitations will be pointed out.

Executive implications

1. Using the model as a basis for defining the qualification conditions for recruiting salespeople in the food distribution industry.
2. Using the model as a basis for assessing training needs, preparing training programs and evaluating the trainings of the salespeople in the food distribution industry.
3. Using this model as a basis for evaluating the salespeople performance

Theoretical implications

1. Designing different tools to measure each of the model's competencies
2. Considering the increasing importance of the salespeople's expertise, special models can be designed for salespeople in different

sales channels of the food distribution industry.

Limitations

There were several limitations in implementing this research. Some of the most important ones can be summarized as follow:

1. Although many competency models are designed within organizations, usually the do not document or publish their model design process and methodology.
2. The existing library sources explain more about the related concepts to competence and do not mention the methods of designing and obtaining competence models. Therefore, a noticeable limitation can be seen in this context.
3. Access to the managers and experts of the distribution companies in the industry is very difficult due to their busyness and this makes the interviewing process difficult and sometimes with a long delay.

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