

# Customer Orientation and e-WOM in the hotel sector

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## Abstract

Customers frequently engage in electronic Word of Mouth (e-WOM) to share their service experience. This is particularly important in hospitality where the role of front-line employees and their level of customer orientation are critical. However, it has not yet been studied how the Customer Orientation of Service Employees (COSE) influences e-WOM. This study addresses this gap. Qualitative data were collected from family-run hotels through three independent studies with 25 different participants: Focus Group, in-depth Interviews, and an Online Focus Group. This research provides novel findings that contribute to a deeper understanding of how the COSE dimensions play different roles in the three types of customers' e-WOM (positive, neutral, and negative). This investigation also contributes to the literature by identifying new factors that could be incorporated in the COSE model, such as attitude, customisation, and extra role performance. Some managerial contributions regarding COSE and a future research agenda are proposed.

**Keywords:** customer orientation; service employees; front-line employees; electronic word of mouth; hotel sector; highly relational services; attitude; extra-role performance; customisation; family business.

## 1. Introduction

The Internet and social media are becoming more influential in consumers' lives and choices (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). Digital marketing has emerged as an important field to enrol customers in a wide variety of offers that better understand and satisfy their needs. As a consequence of this, firms are having positive results in terms of performance improvement and competitiveness (Shideler and Badasyan, 2012). These structural changes have also affected the hospitality industry in the last decade. Social media, the emergence of tour-operators, and online communities are having a special influence in tourism and in the connection between customers (Yang et al., 2016). This is especially relevant in a scenario where customers are looking for experiences when hiring services and looking forward to sharing them later in online open communities such as Facebook (Annamalai and Varshney, 2019), Twitter, TripAdvisor and Booking (Alboqami et al., 2015).

Twenty years ago, Pine and Gilmore (1998) discussed the importance of experiences in society to build relationships with customers, and also Schmitt (1999) initiated academic discussion and highlighted the importance of experiences of customer experience. However, the relevance of experiences cannot be considered just as a memorable event, but also as something that customers will take into consideration while taking future decisions before they use a service (Ruiz-Alba et al., 2019) and obviously after the service evaluation. That is the moment when factors such as electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) play a crucial role in the dissemination of customer experiences (service experience) through a huge community, such as the Internet and online channels, influencing others' decisions in a positive, neutral or negative way (Vermeer et al., 2019).

The evaluation of service experiences from customers' perspective includes many factors, such as price, location, product and service delivery, etc., and all of them can become potential influencers on customer satisfaction. In highly relational services (HRS) such as the hospitality is in many aspects, the customer experience is influenced by the service delivered by the company. Additionally, due to the intangibility of services, customers consider the behaviour of the front-line employee as a reflection of the quality of the service. Therefore, Customer Orientation of Service Employees (COSE) results to be a critical element in HRS (Morales Mediano and Ruiz-Alba, 2019b) for the subsequent customer assessment of the service and, consequently, the possible recommendation that customers could broadcast after it, making other customers think about the service. Moreover, this evaluation of the service will have an impact on customer-to-customer interactions in social media and other communication channels (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016) combined, in some occasions, with advertising (Armellini et al., 2019) in which e-WOM will also have a critical impact.

A main gap in the literature has been identified, due to the fact that, to our knowledge, COSE and e-WOM have been only investigated in two studies in the context of digital capabilities (González-Porrás et al., 2019) and in a conceptual research (González-Porrás et al., 2018), but the study here presented is researching for the first time on the direct impact that COSE has on e-WOM by means of a qualitative study. Hence, the aim of this research is to investigate COSE and e-WOM. In particular, this investigation addresses the relationships between the COSE dimensions according to Hennig Thureau's (2004) model (technical and social skills, motivation and decision-making authority) and the three main types of e-WOM, positive, neutral and negative (Vermeer, 2019).

In summary, the aim of this research is materialized in the following objectives: (1) to identify what is the role that COSE plays in customers' e-WOM; (2) to observe the way the COSE dimensions affect the different types of e-WOM; (3) to analyse which are the most important dimensions and the repercussions from a) customers' perspective; b) managers' perspective; c) employees' perspective; and (4) to present conclusions for academics and practitioners.

The article is structured in six sections. After the first section with the introductions, a thorough literature review of COSE and e-WOM is presented. Next, the research methodology is depicted, including the sample details. The fourth section offers the results and finding for each one of the three qualitative studies conducted for the article. Following, the discussion and conclusions are elaborated in the section five. The article ends with a presentation of its limitation and future research avenues.

## **2. Literature Review**

### *2.1 Customer Orientation of Service Employees (COSE)*

Historically, since Customer Orientation (CO) was first conceptualised by Saxe and Weitz (1982), it has been studied under several perspectives (Narver and Slater, 1990; Deshpandé et al., 1993; Singh and Koshy, 2012). Despite CO being an old construct in the marketing literature (Kelley, 1992), the study conducted by Hennig-Thurau and Thurau (2003) about customer orientation of service employees (COSE) awoke a new wave of research and literature about the topic (Kim, 2009; Kang and Hyun, 2012; Morales Mediano and Ruiz-Alba, 2019a). Moreover, these and other studies confirmed the validity of the COSE model and extended its use to particular groups of services, such as hospitality services (Gonzalez-Porrás et al., 2019) or HRS (Morales Mediano and Ruiz-Alba, 2019b).

Therefore, the present study assumes the conceptualisation proposed by Hennig-Thurau (2004), since it fits with the design of the research and it counts with a definition that explains the role of the employee in a multi-aspect manner:

These authors define COSE as the characteristic of a service employee that is able to identify and understand their customer needs (Hennig-Thurau and Thurau, 2003; Hennig-Thurau, 2004) and counts with:

- Technical skills: defined as the technical knowledge an employee has to have to deliver the service properly.
- Social skills: refers to the different personal skills the employee can have to satisfy customer needs, and to catch customer perspective (empathy, anticipation, etc.)
- Motivation: a behaviour that follows and attitude of getting satisfy customers and correct job development.
- Decision-making authority: the empowerment that employees can get when taking decisions without asking for permission to supervisors.

All of them act in a way, as to satisfy customer needs. Hennig Thurau´s model considered these four dimensions as drivers to achieve customer satisfaction, customer retention and commitment (Hennig-Thurau, 2004). However, Hennig-Thurau (2004), tested this model only in retail where the intangible and relational offering is not the main characteristic. Therefore, this study contributes to most adequate testing and development of the model due to the fact that the hospitality sector has social peculiarities endemic from relational services with elements of high relationship and, therefore, it is more aligned to the Morales Mediano and Ruiz-Alba (2019b) research perspective.

Thus, Morales Mediano and Ruiz-Alba (2019a; 2019b) stated that Hennig-Thurau´s (2004) model was underexploited because it had been only tested in a transactional services context, in particular in media retailers and travel agencies. In their study, they addressed this gap by developing the concept of HRS and qualitatively testing the COSE model in the private banking service setting, as a foremost example of a HRS and customer-oriented service.

As customer orientation in service organizations has been demonstrated to have a positive impact in terms of customer, employee and organisational outcomes (Lee et al., 2020), the research wants also to link the relationships between the customer´s reactions when the service is delivered, and the feedback or recommendations provided afterwards in the social media.

Hence, in this research, the objective is to observe, from the customer, employee and manager´s point of view, what is the impact that the COSE dimensions have on the different types of e-WOM and the conclusions that can be extracted from the analysis.

## 2.2 *Electronic Word of Mouth (e-WOM):*

Electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) has its origin in the concept of Word of Mouth (WOM), originally defined as “informal communications directed at other consumers about the ownership, usage, or characteristics of particular good and services or their sellers” (Westbrook, 1987, p. 261). Due to the emergence of social media, online channels and the development of the Internet, customers started to share opinions online and the concept (WOM), turned to e-WOM (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Buhalis and Law, 2008). One of the most accepted definitions of e-WOM, due to the adaptability of the definition to the nature of the concept, is the one established by Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004,) that defines e-WOM as “any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via Internet” (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004, p.39).

One of the main considerations when it comes to debating about WOM, is what Berger (2014) defined as the reasons why customers decide to talk about the recommendation of a product or service. The author identified key functions (impression management, emotion regulation, information acquisition, social bonding and persuasion), which are considered psychological factors that enable the appearance of WOM by means of different channels. In the case of e-WOM, customers share their opinions or communications online to obtain information about product/service in advance (Gupta and Harris, 2010; Cheung and Thadani, 2012). Those opinions or communications can, according to Vermeer et al. (2019), be framed in three main types of e-WOM:

- Positive e-WOM (+): reflected as positive recommendations, acknowledgment, or compliment, showing customer satisfaction about the service delivered.
- Neutral e-WOM (N): appears when online reviews aim to comment, suggest, or ask (questions) about the service.
- Negative e-WOM (-): refers to a feeling of dissatisfaction in customers reflected as rejection or complaints in online reviews.

It should be highlighted that the classification of positive and negative e-WOM motivations has been carried out according to Hu and Kim (2018), who established a classification for positive and negative e-WOM motivations specifically for the hospitality industry.

Researchers have focused their attention on e-WOM recently and it has also been researched as Online Customer Reviews (OCRs) (Erkan and Elwolda, 2018) as a potential factor to determine the benefits for customer-company interaction. De Matos and Rossi (2008) also studied e-WOM by dissociating the e-WOM predictors (one-order and second-order). The first one made reference to the hotel facilities, whereas the second related to the service quality perception. The second-order predictors are influenced by the employee behaviour while delivering the service (service quality perception) due to the intangibility of services; therefore, the interaction results are crucial. Hence, in a scenario where customers believe in the experiences of others shared on social media and obtain information about the services or goods they want to consume (Sijoria et al., 2017), social relationships in the service encounter (employee-customer interaction) are expected to have an influence on the future recommendation of the services, as the customer orientation and e-WOM have a positive effect by means of the mediating role of customer satisfaction (González-Porrás et al., 2019).

Hence, the main objective in this research, due to the influence that social relationships play in e-WOM (Hsu and Tran, 2013), is to understand how the different dimensions of

the customer orientation of service employees (COSE) (Hennig-Thurau, 2004) influence the three main types of electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) (Vermeer, et al., 2019). It is important to specify that Hennig-Thurau (2004) tested the construct of COSE considering only the four dimensions. This study includes specifically e-WOM and its corresponding dimensions in the research framework (Figure 1 included in Appendix).

### **3. Research Design and Methodology**

In order to address the objectives and the main gap in the literature, the following research questions are proposed:

RQ1: What are the COSE dimensions that play a higher role in the activation of e-WOM customers' behaviours?

RQ2: How do the different COSE dimensions influence the three main types of e-WOM?

Another research question was added in order to identify the most important dimensions of COSE from the customers' point of view:

RQ3: What are the most important COSE dimensions from a customer's perspective?

Another question is from a manager's point of view, who are in charge of developing the training of the front-line employees:

RQ4: Which of the COSE dimensions receives a higher management effort to be fostered in their employees?

Following an abductive approach (Dubois and Gadde, 2002) back and forth, as contradictory and surprising findings were aroused, then a new RQ was proposed:

RQ5a : What are the main barriers for employees' decision-making authority?

RQ5b: What demotivates employees the most?

The previous questions have been addressed in an interview protocol used for interviews to managers, employees and customers from the industry, since managers and employees are knowledgeable about the situation of the online user-generated content, and also they are experienced in serving customers on their daily basis. Customers, on the other hand, are the ones publishing the content (profiles included in Appendix).

To answer the proposed research questions, a grounded theory approach was adopted using different sources of data (Glasser and Strauss, 1967) to understand inductively how the COSE dimensions influence e-WOM. For that purpose, three qualitative studies were designed, conducted and integrated by means of the development of a Focus Group, in-depth Interviews and an online Focus Group. The period of the research encompassed from January until March 2020. The collection of data by using different sources provides more consistency to the investigation (Yin, 2014) and allows triangulation.

Participants were selected using a purposive sampling method following similar criteria used in the hotel sector (Wang, 2012) and hotels and individuals were carefully selected. Finally, the sample consisted of a total 25 different informants: four in the focus group, 15 in the in-depth Interviews and six in the online Focus Group, all of them from family businesses. Amongst the participants, there were top executives, front-line employees and customers from hotels on the Costa del Sol (Spain).

Each one of the three studies had their own research objectives and purposes for contributing to the general research, then results were integrated. The software used to conduct the analysis of the data produced by the in-depth Interviews was NVivo 12, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) extensively used in qualitative research (Schmieder, 2014).

### *3.1 Study 1. Focus Group*

Study 1 consisted of a face-to-face focus group that had the main objective to identify the main barriers and drives of the influence of COSE on e-WOM. In particular, this study aimed to understand what are the COSE dimensions that play a higher role in the activation of e-WOM in customers' behaviours and what are the main themes related to COSE and e-WOM. Another aim was to prepare the main questions that would be included in the interview protocols involving in-depth Interviews in the subsequent Study 2.

Focus Groups have been widely used in marketing research to capture the insights from experts' discussion about one very selected theme (Flick, 2010). A pool of 10 experts was preselected and all of them were invited to participate. Five of them accepted, but finally one of them could not attend; therefore, four experts in total participated in the focus group. Heterogeneity was assured (Bell, 2014) in our case with expertise in the hotel sector and, in particular, in the role of customer orientation of front-line employees and their influence on customers' e-WOM. It was also assured that a limited number of topics was discussed (Neuman, 2014). The moderator was the first author of this study and used a protocol for the session that was previously designed and discussed with the rest of the members of the research team. The session lasted 90 minutes and was audio recorded and manually transcribed. The thematic analysis was done manually by the moderator.

### *3.2 Study 2. Interviews*

Study 2 consisted of in-depth Interviews. This qualitative methodology was chosen due to the nature of the study aimed at capturing the perspective of different individuals involved in the hotel industry (Yin, 2014).

A total of 15 participants took part in the interviews: five managers, five front-line employees and five customers of hotels. Following a similar approach of other studies, such as Wang and Brennan (2014), involving the activity interactions between management, employees, and customers (Easterby-Smith et al., 2002), the same set of semi-structured interview questions was used (Yin, 1994).

The five managers each had a minimum of 10 years of professional experience in the hotel sector in the Costa del Sol and represented these functions: HR, Marketing and General Management. The five front-line employees had a minimum of six years of professional experience in hotels also of the Costa del Sol. The five customers were carefully selected with these criteria: a) they stayed in a hotel at least four times per year and b) their last stay at a hotel took place less than two months before the interview. The choice of participants was intended to cover specific perspectives about the purpose of the study (Flick, 2010). All of them, when answering questions, were asked to respond thinking of a hotel from the Costa del Sol.

The questions for the interview and the interview protocol were carefully formulated based on the results from Study 1 and complemented with the relevant academic literature. This helped the interview to have an overarching purpose that persistently and

progressively sought new knowledge around the main research question (Arsel, 2017). The final questionnaire consisted of a total of seven questions which formed two main themes: a) questions related to COSE dimensions and e-WOM and b) questions related to specific traits of employees and management approach to employees' training.

Each interview lasted between 40-50 minutes. Participants were informed about ethical considerations related to confidentiality, anonymity and storage/deletion of the audios after the transcription. All interviews were transcribed by the same person who conducted the interviews. The two other members of this investigation proceeded to the coding and sub coding process of the data using NVivo 12 software. Codes and sub codes can be found in Table 2 (See Appendix 2).

### *3.3 Study 3. Online Focus Group*

Studies 1 and 2 showed diverse interesting findings, but, in particular, there were three findings that we considered in need of a deeper investigation. For that reason, we developed an online Focus Group following Stewart and Shamdasani (2017). This research method allows data collection from expert sources that normally are more difficult to meet physically together. The online Focus Group also has the advantage that it facilitates a more sincere response due to the fact that, in some cases, it can guarantee anonymity (Johnston, 1999). In total, six participants were selected from amongst a pool of 12 potential participants, 10 were invited and six agreed to contribute. Google Groups was the online tool used for this purpose.

The aspects that constituted the research objective of Study 3 were: a) social skills is the COSE dimension that generates a more direct (positive and negative) on e-WOM; b) employees' attitude was the second factor that generated e-WOM; c) employees' demotivation plays an important role in customers' e-WOM; and d) the surprising finding that empowerment normally is not dealt with at the senior management level.

## **4. Results and Findings**

### *4.1 Results from Study 1. Focus Group.*

As previously indicated, the aim of this study was threefold: a) what COSE dimensions activate e-WOM and how the COSE dimensions influence e-WOM; b) what are the main themes related to COSE and e-WOM; c) to identify the main questions for the interview protocol. Regarding what COSE dimensions activate e-WOM and how they influence the different types of e-WOM, one of the main findings from the Focus Group is that social skills is the dimension that most activate customers' e-WOM for good and for bad. Which means that, when the presence of social skills is very outstanding, this then triggers customers to go to social media to share their experience with positive comments. And for bad, because when employees' behaviours show a low level of social skills, this activates customers' intention to share their experience in social media, but with a negative tone. In that sense, one participant (FG Participant 1) manifested: "I will say that e-WOM is mainly activated by the social skills and by empowerment. Because for the case of technical skills, they are taken for granted."

Indeed, the idea that technical skills do not activate positive e-WOM was agreed. In this sense, one of them (FG Participant 3) said: "Customers will not review the hotel online in the case of technical skills, because nobody is going to comment about how quick the check-in was, or how good the bellboy carried the luggage, that is given."

In relation to the main themes regarding COSE and e-WOM, one of the findings was that employees' empowerment is not normally dealt with at senior management level and something similar happens with the main factors that demotivate employees.

A very important factor that was mentioned by more than half of FG participants was the customisation of the service. To illustrate this, one participant (FG Participant 4) manifested: "What I think that is going to make a guest or customer happy is when the customer feels that the treatment they receive is different from other hotels in which they have already been, and they feel important for that reason. This clearly has to do with the social skills and motivation of the employee, because it is the social component of the behaviour of the employee that can make the difference in the service." We could suggest that service customisation can have as antecedents, amongst others, social skills and employees' motivation.

Employees' attitude was another important theme that was highlighted by most of participants. In that sense, one manager (FG Participant 2) indicated: "I would consider the attitude a more important factor than the knowledge of the employee, especially in our industry, where emotions are more than important."

Another factor that has emerged as relevant is 'extra mile' or something similar to what some academics have described as extra role performance (MacKenzie et al., 1998; Hughes et al., 2019). In this sense, one (FG Participant 1) expressed: "I think these relationships work under the premise that, for having good comments online you need an extra, because when the service has been properly delivered, it already meets the expectation of the customer. Due to that fact, having good comments is more difficult than having bad comments online."

This finding can suggest that a service failure due to technical skills can easily generate a negative e-WOM; however, in order to generate positive e-WOM due to technical skills, the employee needs to go an extra mile and exceed the customer's expectations.

Some best practices to promote customers' online engagement were shared. As such, one participant indicated: "When our customer accesses WIFI in our hotel there is a link to share their experiences in social media. And also, after the check out, we send an email to our customers with a link asking them to share their experience on TripAdvisor and Booking" (FG Participant 1).

A third group of contributions was related to the questions for the interview protocol.

## *4.2 Results from Study 2.*

### *4.2.1 Technical skills and e-WOM.*

Participants manifested that, when training the employees, the dimension that received more effort, by far, was the technical skills. Technical skills have been found to be important, but not to generate positive e-WOM, as they are taken for granted.

As such, one customer indicated: "When I go to a hotel and I observe employees' behaviour, I don't expect to be surprised by the level of technical skills as I normally assume that they need to be professionally competent" (Customer 1). A similar comment expressed the same idea: "I expect the employee to have technical skills enough to accomplish whatever job they are supposed to do. Could be classified as a must" (Customer 3) and "technical skills are considered as known by the employee, with no special relevance" (Customer 5).

Also, from the managers' perspective, the level of technical skills of front-line employees is not regarded as a crucial element in the influence of customers' e-WOM. In that sense, "We are commonly accustomed to deal with employees' training and technical skills (the knowledge to develop the job) is assumed and it can be considered as given when we recruit them. This is not normally our main concern in relation to the impact on online reviews from our customers" (Manager 2).

#### 4.2.2 Social skills and e-WOM.

Social skills was the dimension that was found to have the highest impact on e-WOM by the majority of the participants, particularly the customers.

Managers perceive that social skills have a great influence on e-WOM: "More than 50% of the reviews are focused on the service and treatment, thus it means it still has more relevance than other aspects" (Manager 1). And managers take seriously the social skills in the recruitment processes: "During our recruitment process, our main focus is on the soft skills such as social skills, character or personality traits, attitudes, social intelligence and emotional intelligence" (Manager 4). Also, implicitly, another manager referred to the selection process in saying: "Employees can gain technical skills once they are trained; however, being genuine, empathetic and positive attitude cannot be taught, you either have it or not" (Manager 3). Managers also dedicate efforts to measure and develop social skills of their front-line employees: "Social skills have a huge influence in the way we connect with customers, either in a positive or negative way. They will be key metrics that the customer will consider when assessing your service" (Manager 2). A manager expressed: "In an era where people are looking for 'experiences', soft skills such as social skills, character or personality traits, attitudes, social intelligence and emotional intelligence are key to connect with the customers" (Manager 4).

Customers also find a strong relationship between social skills and e-WOM, to illustrate this: "I am impressed by the skills of the employees and, in most cases that I have written an online review positive or negative, it was due to social skills of contact employees of the hotel" (Customer 5).

"I would say that social skills and motivation, are, by far, the most important factors that will have influence in customers' e-WOM" (Employee 2).

"The feedback expressed by customers will be related to the expectations that the customer has when consuming the service, and the final service delivered to them. That is why the social component will be crucial above the rest of the components of COSE when activating e-WOM" (Customer 3).

And also, to illustrate the importance that customers give to social skills: "Social skills are and will be the most important trait to be evaluated by us. I consider that hotels sell experiences, and an experience must be thought and planned based on the possible emotions we think the customer wants to live and feel" (Customer 4).

The capacity of empathy was highlighted by participants as a key aspect within social skills: "In my opinion to be an open-minded, understanding and empathic worker is an important aspect to consider" (Customer 2). A similar finding mentioned by customers was kindness: "From my point of view being kind, but at the same time confident and strong, is much more necessary when resolving issues and giving advice to clients" (Customer 5). In that sense, one manifested: "If more than one employee in my journey would be nice to me, I would surely leave positive feedback spontaneously on the booking website or service provider website" (Customer 1). This sociability has been mentioned

in many cases as an element that triggers a positive e-WOM: “A sociable employee, who shows a greater interest in interacting with the customer, generates greater confidence and comfort in myself, as a guest. A more pleasant treatment is a differentiating element that I reflect in my recommendations or reviews and, as a consequence, I keep in mind when booking one hotel or another” (Customer 4).

Also, while social skills on their own are important, some participants manifested, however, the importance of a combination of social and technical in order to generate positive e-WOM: “The combination between social and technical skills is the most important one for me to receive a service with quality and to share that experience online” (Customer 3).

Although this might sound obvious, one manager explained: “Overall, it could be stated that e-WOM gets mostly triggered in the case of a positive or negative experience, whereas if the experience has been neutral, e-WOM may be less likely” (Manager 2). And also related to customer experience, it was also expressed that neutral experience normally does not generate an e-WOM behaviour: “I hold the view that e-WOM is mostly provided when customer experience is exceptionally good or bad” (Customer 3).

#### 4.2.3 Empowerment.

Participants expressed that empowerment is the least important COSE dimension leading to e-WOM, as customers can understand that a particular employee may not have the capacity to solve an issue. However, they expect that this employee should quickly escalate the problem in the line management chain to get a fast solution. Therefore, the speed becomes crucial. One customer expressed: “Decision-making authority. For me this is the least important of the four dimensions because employees can always check important decisions with managers or workmates, although this will derive into slower reactions” (Customer 4). In that sense, another customer indicated: “I do not care much either if the employee knows who to address my claim or my personal situation as long as someone is able to provide a quick solution” (Customer 5).

The speed of the solution is again very important in the context of decision-making authority: “I am honoured when staff are allowed to make decisions on their own, because I have seen so many times when employees are prohibited from making important decisions or do not have the courage to do it. It is extremely important that a worker can resolve any necessity in a moment because it shows their confidence and expertise. I understand that they do not have permission to decide about everything, which is totally fine, but, as a customer, I can waste a lot of time waiting for them to consult their doubts to managers or people in charge of the business. Nevertheless, as an employee I know that they need to consult some things as they cannot be held responsible for mistakes” (Customer 2).

A manager expressed: “Due to many surveys done related to the expectations in hotels ‘stays, one of the main guest desires is to have a pleasant stay without a problem. Therefore, one of the solutions to avoid simple complaints is to empower the employee to make right and quick decisions if needed.” (Manager 1). Expanding on the previous comment and also related to speed: “I do not expect the first person I find to solve all my problems, but at least I expect him to address them quickly to the adequate person above” (Customer 3).

It was interesting to find that empowerment does not only have a positive impact on customers, but on employees themselves: “By feeling empowered and knowing their

limits, the employee will feel motivated and will have the confidence that he/she needs to transform those negative or neutral feedbacks into positive ones” (Manager 4).

#### 4.2.4 Motivation and e-WOM

Motivation is regarded as a crucial element, but mainly from customers’ perspective. In that sense, a participant (Customer 3) manifested: “What I value most of a worker besides kindness, understanding and professionalism, is motivation.” Another participant (Customer 5) said: “Social skills and motivation will always be a driver for e-WOM (either positive or negative).”

From the employees’ perspective, motivation is also the most important factor: “I would say that motivation would be the most important factor that will have influence in e-WOM” (Employee 3).

Although managers also give importance to employees’ degree of motivation, surprisingly, they tend to focus more on skills and are mainly concerned in motivation as long as it affects directly on other skills, but not directly on customers’ satisfaction and e-WOM. One manager manifested: “When a service employee is not motivated nor doesn’t care about customers’ needs, it is going to null the other two COSE dimensions (technical skills and decision-making authority)” (Manager 4).

#### 4.2.5 Demotivation

As has been discussed, motivation plays an important role in e-WOM, but it was also highlighted the importance of not demotivating employees. As such, a manager expanded this idea: “A positive feedback can boost the team’s morale whilst a negative one can destroy their morale. It is up to the company to monitor this closely as it can have a huge impact on your business” (Manager 5). A similar comment was: “Even if the services are good, a demotivated worker overshadows it” (Manager 3).

Also, customers are very sensitive to demotivated employees, but demotivation only influences online reviews when it affects the service experience: “If the motivation is completely absent and there is a clear lack of unwillingness to help the client or not caring attitude, this will impact the reputation of the company and its reviews” (Customer 4). Similarly: “To me an unmotivated employee has a problem himself. But it does not affect my perception of the service unless all employees I will find during my stay at the hotel behave in the same manner” (Customer 3)

#### 4.2.6 Customisation

One of the new themes that emerged in the focus group and was addressed in the interviews was customisation. Indeed, participants stressed how customisation of the service is a way of making the customers feel special. To illustrate this, one participant said: “Social skills are an enhancing factor since they can help the guest to feel understood, well cared for and trusted. Small details like saying something in their own language or remembering how they liked the coffee makes a huge difference” (Manager 1).

One customer manifested: “I will be able to forgive a mistake if I perceive a sincere and honest approach from the staff to me in particular if I am treated like a unique customer” (Customer 3).

#### 4.2.7 Extra role performance

Another important theme that emerged from the focus group and was addressed in the interviews was what is termed extra role performance. This basically refers to those situations in which an employee performs beyond their role and exceeds what is expected from them. Several participants mentioned this phenomenon and they were convinced that this plays a very positive role in generating positive e-WOM.

A customer mentioned that: “Anticipation to customers’ needs, and surprising them with details implies a positive assessment and has positive implications in their online recommendations of our hotel” (Customer 2). Another customer indicated that they expected all employees to go an extra mile if needed: “It is essential that they try to resolve whichever problem I have. At the end of the day, this is what I do in my daily job, why shouldn't I expect this from them?” (Customer 4).

Employees are aware of the importance of their extra role performance: “Being kind with our guests and understanding their needs, and caring about them is the main value that a company like ours can offer them, so the e-WOM in this case will be always positive” (Employee 2). In a similar vein: “The guests may experience this motivation as long as the employees are exceeding their expectations. Otherwise, they will be fulfilling the service expected” (Employee 1).

For managers, extra role performance is also a critical element to foster e-WOM. Implicitly, this comment from a manager is about extra role performance: “If your employees just comply with all COSE dimensions without excelling in them, your company only could aim for neutral e-WOM” (Manager 3). Another manager manifested: “Problem solving is nowadays one of the most crucial skills when it comes to customer service and time saving. Therefore, in my case, having an employee who is capable of going the extra mile to sort out an issue in the quickest possible way, seems to be enough ground for a client to reward that employee, and, therefore, the company which that employee belongs to” (Manager 3). A manager implicitly mentioned the service recovery paradox in the context of extra role performance: “At the hospitality sector, we constantly stress the importance of effective and high-quality customer service above everything else. I always say to the employees that a customer with a complaint or suggestion should turn out to be our most loyal customer”. (Manager 4).

#### 4.2.8 Attitude

A third new theme that emerged in Study 1 and that has been addressed in Study 2 was employees’ attitude. Participants manifested that the front-line employee’s attitude has an influence on positive e-WOM and that it is mainly mediated by a positive customer experience. In that sense: “Customers are looking for experiences rather than conventional services, and social skills are important for that” (Manager 3). One employee explained that: “The desire to fulfil customers’ needs is directly linked to the customer experience” (Employee 5).

Customers also value employees’ attitude as an important factor that influences e-WOM. In that sense: “Being kind, but at the same time confident and strong, is much more necessary when resolving issues and giving advice to clients” (Customer 2). Similarly: “If employees have a positive attitude towards my query, I will probably write a positive review about the service” (Customer 3).

Managers are also aware of the critical role of the front-line employee's attitude. Although they agree that a positive attitude can have a positive influence on customers' experience and, subsequently, on a positive e-WOM. Conversely, one manager manifested: "I have seen cases in which a not caring attitude had a negative impact on company's reputation and its reviews" (Manager 2). Therefore, managers dedicate effort to identify a positive attitude in the candidates during the recruitment process. In that sense, one said: "During our recruitment process, our main focus is on the soft skills, such as social skills, character or personality traits, attitudes, social intelligence and emotional intelligence" (Manager 3).

#### *4.3 Results from Study 3.*

The first theme that the six participants of Study 3 discussed was the impact of social skills on e-WOM. In fact, the majority of participants confirmed the influence of social skills in general on e-WOM, but there was not a consensus about what specific social skills were more important. Kindness was highlighted by one third of participants as the most important one, while the other two thirds considered that empathy was the most influential on e-WOM. Other social skills that were highlighted were: teamwork, assertiveness, flexibility and active listening. One participant manifested: "I think that empathy is the most important skill that the contact employees should have, as this facilitates that they can customise the service and make the customer feel special. This feeling of being treated as a unique customer is the most powerful driver for customer engagement in online positive reviews" (OFG Participant 4).

In relation to the influence of employees' attitude on e-WOM, most of participants agreed that the attitude has an important influence on e-WOM. However, despite the importance of employee's attitude, one participant indicated: "Attitude is something that employees should bring from home. There is not much we can do from the firm: once they are working with us it is very difficult to develop or improve their personal attitude. Therefore, the critical moment is the recruitment process. But how to be able to identify an employee's attitude in the recruitment interviews is something very complex. This is an unresolved matter that should require more investigation" (OFG Participant 2). Another participant manifested: "For me, the most important indicator of an employee's attitude is a permanent and sincere smile. Few things like the smile have such a positive effect on customers' experience and they mention it very frequently on their online reviews with positive comments" (OFG Participant 6). This comment from the participant, who is an expert on social media and is the community manager of a company with several hotels, was responded by the comment of another participant who is a managing director: "I totally agree that a smile is a power tool to generate positive e-WOM, and don't forget that smiling is very cheap" (OFG Participant 1).

Regarding demotivation, the main elements that demotivate employees are lack of recognition for their work, weak management practices when they perceive that some unfair decisions have been taken, and the lack of empowerment to make decisions of benefit of the customer. In this regard, one participant said: "I have found very demotivated employees, and this has a direct negative impact on customers' online reviews. The main reason for demotivation is us, our behaviour as managers. But even though, most of the time, it is our fault, we need to act quickly and try to redirect the situation before it is perceived by our customers" (OFG Participant 2).

Empowerment was also widely debated in the online focus group. The most surprising result from Study 3 was that the managers of the hotel and the senior managers of the

company did not even have in their agendas the theme of empowerment. One participant said: “It is quite shocking to see that, in my hotel and in all the hotels where I have worked, there were no policies at all related to empowerment. This generates a lot of uncertainties in the day-to-day running of our hotels. In my case, as managing director, I need tools and rules in order to provide my employees with clear guidance about what specific decisions they can take on behalf of our customers” (OFG Participant 1). This comment reflected very well the general sense of all the participants of the online focus group. Therefore, the surprising finding was confirmed, but it remained unclear why hotel managers fail to address this important matter.

## **5. Conclusions and Contributions**

This paper has identified a relevant gap in the academic literature about customer orientation, which is the lack of studies investigating the impact of COSE on e-WOM. This paper addresses this gap and offers interesting insights about the main themes, barriers and drivers to understand how the different COSE dimensions influence e-WOM. In particular, this study offers a conceptual model (see Figure 1) based on Hennig-Thurau (2004) and Vermeer et al. (2019) that will allow future empirical investigations.

One of the main conclusions from this investigation is that, amongst the COSE dimensions, technical skills per se do not generate positive e-WOM and, normally, are just considered as an element taken for granted from a customer’s perspective. However, a deficiency of front-line employees’ technical skills will directly generate negative e-WOM. Indeed, when training the employees, the dimension that received more management effort, by far, was the technical skills. Therefore, without abandoning their efforts to develop technical skills, they should reinforce their resolution to substantially improve employees’ social skills.

As proposed by Poulston (2008), another important conclusion is that customers give high importance to social skills; however, managers do not dedicate enough efforts to training employees, on social skills: their main efforts go into training technical skills. Therefore, one contribution to practitioners could be that, if managers want to facilitate the increase of customers’ positive e-WOM, they should concentrate on promoting social skills as the presence of technical skills per se will not generate positive e-WOM. A practical implication could be to dedicate more time and effort to develop social skills in their employees, in particular with workshops that could cover some of these areas: smiling, empathy, service customisation, active listening, initiative, teamwork, assertiveness and flexibility.

Another finding from a customer’s perspective is that employees’ motivation plays an important role in a customer's positive e-WOM. However, this motivation is highly influenced by the labour conditions. We also found that what generates demotivation in employees is managers’ behaviours, a sense of unfairness and also the lack of empowerment and of other resources to solve customers’ problems.

One of the findings regarding empowerment is that the main barrier for empowerment from an employees’ perspective is the psychological barrier, as they perceive a high risk of making decisions without previous line management’s concern. Managers also give limited attention to empowerment of their employees; in fact, it is not present in most management agendas. Therefore, practitioners could include the importance of employees’ empowerment, confirming similar findings of Crowley et al. (2014), in their strategies for staff development and in creating clear rules and policies that give clear

tools to hotel managers, so that front-line employees have the capacity to make quick decisions to solve customers' problems.

Service customisation (Zhang and Zheng, 2020) is an important factor that generates an active and positive e-WOM. This study shows that possible antecedents of service customisation could be social skills and employees' motivation. This is important, as most customers who go to a hotel are looking for experiences.

## **6. Limitations and Future Research**

The main limitation of this study is that it has been conducted in the hotel sector of the Costa del Sol (Spain). Although it is one of the main tourist destinations in Europe, it could be interesting to expand the study to other regions and also to other sectors. A qualitative investigation can be subject to some limitations (Creswell, 2014) and our study is not free of some of them, for instance, researcher's presence may bias responses, for that reason we also included an online focus group and the integration of different studies within the same investigations would help to mitigate intrinsic limitations of any qualitative research.

One of the possible areas of future research is how to develop service customisation (Pallant et al., 2020; Zhang and Zheng, 2020) in order to promote positive e-WOM. In that sense, this study found that social skills and employees' motivation can be a solid antecedent of customisation. Based on other findings of this research, it could also be investigated why senior managers of the hotel sector normally do not have in their agendas the need to empower front-line employees to allow them to make quick decisions in the customers' interest, in line with Humborstad (2014). This is important because empowerment has been found to facilitate giving quick solutions to customers' problems.

Employees' attitude has been discovered as being one of the main factors influencing the relationship between COSE and e-WOM. As such, future research could consider the incorporation of attitude (Xiong and King, 2019) to the COSE model and also to investigate the possible moderating and/or mediating effect of attitude in the relationship between COSE and e-WOM. In particular, it has been clearly highlighted in this study that there is a weakness in the recruitment processes of hotels when it comes to identifying employees' attitudes. This is something that also deserves being researched.

It could also be investigated how extra role performance (Hughes et al., 2019) can be triggered by COSE, and consequently, what relation definitively exist between the 'extra mile' and e-WOM. Finally, this theoretical framework could be empirically tested using quantitative methods.

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## 8. Appendices

### 8.1 Appendix 1

Table 1: Profile of the participants in the three studies

<b>Focus Group</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Number of Employees</b>	<b>Years in Company</b>	<b>Department</b>
FG Participant 1	Male	43	200	8	Marketing
FG Participant 2	Male	52	200	5	HR
FG Participant 3	Female	50	200	10	General Manager
FG Participant 4	Female	48	200	2	Marketing
<b>In-depth Interviews</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Number of Employees</b>	<b>Years in Company</b>	<b>Departmen/Positiont</b>
Customer 1	Male	27	n/a	n/a	n/a
Customer 2	Male	29	n/a	n/a	n/a
Customer 3	Male	27	n/a	n/a	n/a
Customer 4	Female	33	n/a	n/a	n/a
Customer 5	Male	29	n/a	n/a	n/a
Employee 1	Male	32	200	1.5	RD*
Employee 2	Female	35	200	2	F&B*
Employee 3	Female	45	200	6	FO*
Employee 4	Male	34	150	14	FO*
Employee 5	Female	33	200	1	HK*
Manager 1	Male	38	42	3	General Manager
Manager 2	Male	51	1.700	20	Digital Marketing Manager
Manager 3	Male	48	1.300	5	Head of Marketing
Manager 4	Male	45	350	3	Managing Director
Manager 5	Female	40	150	4	Head of Marketing

<b>Online Focus Group</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Number of Employees</b>	<b>Years in Company</b>	<b>Department</b>
OFG Participant 1	Male	55	45	12	Managing Director
OFG Participant 2	Male	46	185	15	Managing Director
OFG Participant 3	Female	36	120	6	Digital Marketing Director
OFG Participant 4	Female	42	240	11	HR Director
OFG Participant 5	Female	32	90	7	International Sales Director
OFG Participant 6	Female	28	350	5	Community Manager and Customer Experience

(\*) HK: House Keeping, FO: Front-Office, F&B: Food and Beverage, RD: Rooms Division.

## 8.2 Appendix 2

Table 2: Codes and subcodes

Name	Files	References
1.1. COSE influence on e-WOM	9	12
1.2. Technical skills influence	0	0
1.2.1. TS – e-WOM	10	17
Negative e-WOM	11	17
Neutral e-WOM	7	8
Positive e-WOM	5	5
1.2.2. Reason - Connection	9	9
1.3. Social skills influence	0	0
1.3.1. SK – e-WOM	8	14
Negative e-WOM	6	11
Neutral e-WOM	3	3
Positive e-WOM	12	19
1.3.2. Reason - Connection	11	17
1.3.3. SK elements	0	0
Personality	1	1
Adjustment	4	4
Agreeableness	4	4
Extroversion	2	2
Perspective taking	7	9
1.4. Motivation influence	0	0
1.4.1. MO – e-WOM	9	11
Negative e-WOM	8	10
Neutral e-WOM	4	5
Positive e-WOM	10	15
1.4.2. Reason - Connection	12	18
1.4.3. MO elements	3	3
Consequences valence	2	2
Reward expectation	1	1
1.5. Empowerment influence	0	0
1.5.1. EM – e-WOM	8	9
Negative e-WOM	7	7
Neutral e-WOM	5	5
Positive e-WOM	10	14
1.5.2. Reason - Connection	9	12
1.5.3. EM elements	0	0

Name	Files	References
Organisation structure	5	6
Self-perception	3	3
2.1. Most important COSE dimension	0	0
2.1.1. Technical skills	11	13
2.1.2. Social skills	12	14
2.1.3. Motivation	3	4
2.1.4. Empowerment	3	3
2.2. Most trained COSE dimension	0	0
COSE dimensions	2	2
2.2.1. Technical skills	13	15
2.2.2. Social skills	9	11
2.2.3. Motivation	4	5
2.2.4. Empowerment	6	7
Recruitment	2	2
I. Service customization	1	1
II. Employees' attitude	4	11
III. Extra mile	2	4

8.3 Appendix 3.

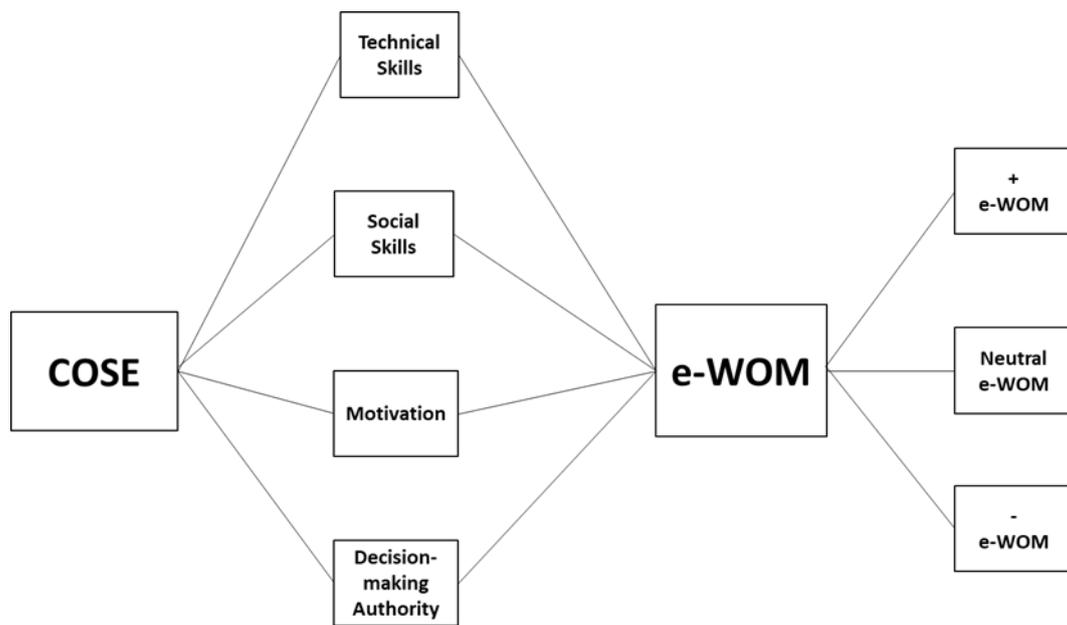


Figure 1: COSE and e-WOM. Own elaboration adapted from Hennig-Thurau (2004) and Vermeer et al. (2019)