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WHAT EMOTIONAL SKILLS MAKE A SALESPERSON EFFECTIVE? A STUDY AMONG FOOD RETAIL PROFESSIONALS

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ABSTRACT

Emotions are a strong psychological force and can influence a salesperson's behavior and performance. The study of emotional competences in food retail sector is still an underdeveloped area, while there are no data regarding this field. From this gap, the current study explores important emotional skills of an effective food retail salesperson, according to employees' and customers' perceptions. A sample of 94 food retail salespersons and a sample of 95 customers of this workplace were asked to complete two self-developed measurement questionnaires, involving closed and open-format items. The closed-format items were structured as scenarios and related to emotional skills (e.g. Emotional Self-awareness). Participants indicated their level of agreement on a five-point Lickert scale. In the open-format questions, participants were asked to propose solutions to hypothetical incidents in their own words. According to the results, both employees and customers believe that the use of emotional skills is essential for food retail professionals. However, the two groups differed in the skills they valued most. Specifically, salespersons revealed that to be effective, they should possess Emotional Self-awareness, Emotional Self-control and Relationship building. Customers, on the other hand, highlighted the importance of Self-awareness, Conscientiousness and Conflict management.

Keywords: Emotional skills, Effective salesperson, Food Retail

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Today's business world is characterized by continuous change and rapid technological and global disruptions. In this environment, the retail sector is experiencing a profound transformation where competitiveness is taking center stage. To face up this unstable environment effectively, sales departments should hire highly skilled salespersons to ensure successful sales (Ingram et al., 2015). Retail sector requires frontline salespersons to handle complex situations, persuade buyers and build trust with customers, while at the same time achieving strategic organizational goals (Franklin & Marshall, 2019). Meanwhile, attitudes and behavior of front-line staff create strong impression on the customer. Building a successful and authentic relationship during the sales process -whether for products or services- depends mostly on the employee. Employees shape the company's image in the customers' mind (Sony

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& Mekoth, 2016) and under these conditions, they experience a level of psychological pressure unlike almost any other job (Kao et al., 2014).

According to Newman and his colleagues (2009), the four axes on which the interaction between employee and customer should be based are (a) perception of the customer's emotional situation and consideration of alternative ways of behaving, (b) self-awareness of personal emotions, (c) choosing the appropriate emotional response in order to communicate with the customer and (d) expressing personal emotions in order to achieve the desired customer response. The employee's behavior can either build trust or push customers away. Emotional Intelligence (EI) skills can be a source of strength and energy, driving both employee's "survival" and effective job performance.

1.1 Emotional Intelligence

According to Goleman et al. (2002), EI is a means of improving an individual's performance; emotional abilities are professional skills and at least some of them should be cultivated, depending on specific workplace requirements. In Goleman's revised model, EI is divided into four groups of competencies, resulting in a total of 20 EI skills (Boyatzis et al., 2000; Goleman et al., 2002). Specifically, the model consists of (a) self-awareness, which includes the ability to perceive personal emotions, identifying personal values and self-confidence, (b) self-management, which includes self-control, starting new things and reliability, integrity, adaptability and conscientiousness, (c) social awareness, which includes empathy, organizational awareness, which has to do with the perception of relationships formed within an organization and service orientation; and finally (d) relationship management skills, which include influencing and motivating others, conflict management, effective communication, leadership and cooperation skills.

Effective emotional management in the workplace fosters work engagement and drives overall productivity (Shanthi & Kannaiah, 2015). Beyond enabling employees to remain focused on their tasks, EI empowers them to participate in problem-solving and adapt to changes within the organization (Wisker & Poulis, 2015). By contrast, low levels of EI can increase workplace deviance and lead to employee withdrawal behaviors (Keskin et al., 2016).

These dynamics facilitate seamless team operations and mitigate interpersonal conflicts among team members. Given that teamwork is an integral component of modern organizations, recent research focuses on team EI and emotionally intelligent organizations (Ashkanashy & Daus, 2002). According to the literature, an EI-driven organizational culture promotes collaboration, empathy, and effective communication among its employees (Obradovic et al., 2012). At the same time, researchers suggest that higher levels of EI among employees, lead to higher customer satisfaction (Kafetsios & Zampetakis, 2008).

1.2 Salesperson's personal skills and performance relation

Customer buying behavior has dramatically changed over recent years, shifting how retail works. Today, a salesperson's effectiveness on customer's buying behavior creates value within modern organizations (Zhang et al., 2013). Therefore, researchers have been interested in the relationship between salespersons' personal characteristics and job performance for several decades. According to studies, six key factors are responsible for high sales

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performance, which include skills, skill level, personality, personal factors, motivation, and role perception (Churchill et al., 1985; Verbeke et al., 2011). More recently, Herjando and Franklin (2019) identified five categories of factors that boost salesperson effectiveness: personal factors, organizational factors, co-worker factors, buyer factors, and situational factors.

Personal factors are critical for building strong relationships with buyers and between colleagues (Muir, 2007). A salesperson's personality and personal traits, act as a driving force in facing challenges in the workplace (Avila & Fern, 1986). They influence the salesperson's emotional states, attitudes, and behavior during buyer-seller interaction (Bartkus et al., 2011). Specific traits including adaptability, attention to detail (Ahearne et al., 2008), creativity (Olalekan, 2009), empathy (McBane, 1995), politeness (Mulki et al., 2007), consistency (Burroughs & White, 1996), boldness, obedience (Olalekan, 2009), and feelings of confidence or insecurity (Wallace & De Chernatony, 2009), are elements that help sales professionals understand customers' needs.

In addition, motivation (John et al., 2012), driven by personal ambition or salary, heavily influences a salesperson's behavior (Snow, 2010). Moreover, willingness to work and overall effort, serve as catalysts for better job performance (Gneezy, 2002). Self-esteem has also been validated as essential to job performance optimization (Noor et al., 2001). A positive perception regarding a salesperson's appearance, communication skills, and credibility (Ahearne et al., 1999), along with the ability to read the buyer's mood (Deeter-Schmelz & Sojka, 2003), boosts their morale and goal focus. Salespeople who are enthusiastic about their work are more likely to improve their performance (Swenson & Herche, 1994).

EI also affects a salesperson's behavior and performance (Sojka & Deeter-Schmelz, 2008). Emotional stability enables salespersons to adapt and emotionally fit the context of each sale (Vinchur et al., 1998), avoiding emotional exhaustion (Rutherford et al., 2011). EI skills such as self-awareness and self-management, can support their role, leading to higher levels of work engagement (Riordan & Shore, 1997). Thus, emotionally intelligent salespeople are able to protect both themselves and others from workplace stressors, minimizing the risk of negative emotions in their environment (McBane, 1995). At the same time, salespersons' EI reduces buyers' anxiety and makes them trust the professionals more (Huggins et al., 2015; Luccini et al., 2016).

For individuals who strive to be successful in sales, strong interpersonal skills are needed too (Huitt & Dawson, 2011). Salespersons who interact effectively with others can clearly understand buyer needs (Kihlstrom & Cantor, 2011) and maintain better behavioral control during the sales interaction (Goleman, 2006). Well-developed interpersonal skills lead to positive relationships among colleagues (Park & Deitz, 2006), thereby improving organizational performance.

Beyond all these, a salesperson to be effective should possess specialized knowledge regarding sales (Ingram et al., 1992). Empirical evidence indicates that the most successful salespeople utilize sophisticated sales techniques, such as consultative selling, while demonstrating strategic thinking (Burroughs & White, 1996) and business acumen (Cron & Slocum, 1986). It is worth noting that their workplace behavior is anchored in a strictly customer-centric

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philosophy (Schwepker & Good, 2011) and strongly oriented toward service quality (Keillor et al., 2000).

1.3 Retail's emotional demands

In the retail sector, the use of EI skills is considered highly critical to the sales process (Huda Ben Amor, 2019). According to Deeter-Schmelz and Sojka (2003), the contemporary way of selling no longer rely on differentiation of products or services. Today, customers face a plethora of purchasing options with nearly similar characteristics, making it challenging for organizations to differentiate their products (Sojka & Deeter-Schmelz, 2002). As a consequence, organizations' profit increasingly depends on the quality of their frontline service staff, driving firms to build a competitive advantage in this area (Huda Ben Amor, 2019).

Based on the above, the retail store environment, including its service staff, can positively influence customers' emotional states (Lloyd et al., 2011). According to the literature, salespersons' EI is directly linked to performance outcomes (Jennings & Palmer, 2007). Specifically, empathy enables sales professionals to understand the customer's situational context and adapt their approach during face-to-face interactions (Sojka & Deeter-Schmelz, 2002). As a result, salespeople can sense a customer's concerns by reading both verbal and non-verbal communication.

Furthermore, emotional self-management enables employees to focus on their work and solve problems with customers. Self-control allows them to show the right emotions toward the customer, so they can do their job successfully (Wong & Law, 2002). Salespersons have the ability to adjust their behavior, irrespective of their real feelings at that moment (Grandey, 2000). While body language and facial expressions are vital dimensions in customer-facing environments (Zhang & Glynn, 2015), Hochschild (1983) notes that this often creates psychologically challenging conditions for employees, as it requires shutting down of authentic feelings. Professionals such as healthcare employees, cashiers, and frontline service staff are required not only to regulate their internal emotions during working hours, but also to visibly reflect their feelings through face and body (Hochschild, 1983). It is worth noting that it is important for them to make a real change to their feelings instead of just pretending or hiding what they feel (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002; Brotheridge & Lee, 2003).

Managing social relationships is also an important skill in work environments characterized by intense social interaction, not only between employees and customers but also among co-workers. According to Groth and Grandey (2012), stress and negative behavior among employees can lead to interpersonal conflicts, which can harm organizational performance.

Finally, anxiety and risk associated with a retail purchase often make customers feel uncertain, a common phenomenon across the retail industry (Diallo, 2012). Customers may be worried about product safety or quality (Lloyd & Luk, 2011). They also feel this way when they have limited information about products (Twing-Kwong et al., 2013), or when institutional frameworks fail to protect them from high-risk situations (Dahlstrom & Nygaard, 1995). Under these conditions, customers constantly seek cues that reduce this discomfort (Jayawardhena & Farrell, 2011). Although the relationship between customers and frontline service employees still lacks theoretical and empirical research (Eastlick & Lotz, 2011), existing literature highlight trust as an important issue for retail customers (Too et al., 2001) and for every

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interaction between salesperson and buyer (Ball et al., 2004). According to Moorman et al. (1992), trust is defined as a willingness to rely on an exchange partner. Researchers agree that the main goal in these relationships is for employees to be perceived as highly reliable (Wong & Sohal, 2003), as this trust is what finally shapes customer's buying behavior (Twing-Kwong et al., 2013).

1.4 The present study

The aim of this study was to investigate the EI skills considered essential for effective job performance among food retail employees. In particular, this research sought to examine (a) whether employees and customers within this sector deem EI skills, such as Self-management, Empathy and Conflict management, important for salespersons in this field, and (b) which of these skills are perceived as most critical in relation to the current workplace's demands.

2.0 METHOD

2.1 Participants

2.1.1 Employees The employees' sample included a total of 94 food retail professionals. 38 of these were store managers while 56 were their subordinate employees in service and cashier. Of the employees' group, 81 were women (86,2%) and 13 were men (13,8%), with a mean age of M=35,6 years (SD= 7,8). Regarding their educational level, 4 employees (4,3%) were secondary school graduates, 37 (39,4%) were high school graduates, 21 (22,3%) were post-high school graduates, 31 (33%) held a university/technical college degree while 1 (1,1%) employee held a master's or doctoral degree.

2.1.2 Customers The customers' sample consisted of 95 individuals. 65 of these were women (68,4%) and 30 were men (31,6%), with a mean age of M=42,2 years (SD= 10,8). Regarding their educational level, 2 individuals (2,1%) were primary school graduates, 7 (7,4%) were secondary school graduates, 33 (34,7%) were high school graduates, 18 (18,9%) were post-high school graduates, 32 (33,7%) held a university/technical college degree while 3 (3,2%) held a master's or doctoral degree.

2.2 Instruments

2.2.1 Employees' assessment tool for important EI skills in food retail This is a self-developed tool that was designed based on Goleman's EI framework (Goleman et al., 2002). It uses hypothetical scenarios inspired from food retail's every day working life and examines which EI skills are considered as necessary for effective job performance, according to employees' view. The scenarios were discussed by researchers and experts on EI and the tool was tested in a pilot study, before being used in the current study.

The assessment tool contains 12 items, consisting of 10 close-format and 2 open-format questions. Out of the 10 close-format questions, one examined whether "Technical knowledge and product information are enough for an employee in order to be successful". The remaining 9 close-format questions related to emotional skills such as Reliability, Organizational awareness, Emotional awareness, Adaptability, Teamwork, Conscientiousness, Emotional management, Conflict management, and Empathy.

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Specifically, there was one scenario related to Reliability: “When trying to achieve high sales, you often have to hold back the full truth regarding a product. This is necessary to succeed in the food retail business.”

Another scenario related to Organizational awareness: “If you're working in a food retail store and cannot handle a customer who is upset, would you agree that passing the problem to the store manager is the best move?”.

There was a scenario addressing Emotional awareness: “Nick works at a food retail store. He can read a customer's mood just by customer’s body language. This is a great skill, but how much does it actually help in a job like this?”.

Another scenario concerned Adaptability: “Your store recently hired a new employee who has already proven to be highly responsible and hardworking. However, colleagues avoid giving the newcomer tasks traditionally handled by more experienced staff. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this practice?”.

A question concerned Teamwork: “Argy has been working as a picker at a food retail store for five years. One night, after failing to contact the store manager, the security company calls Argy to report an attempted break-in. Argy, who was at a kids' party with his family, refuses to go to the store, feeling it’s the manager’s job, not his. To what extent do you agree with his attitude?”.

Another question concerned Conscientiousness: “Kostas is an experienced butcher in a food retail store. Recently, a customer wanted to buy steaks. Even though there were actually some available, Kostas told the customer they were out of stock because he knew the meat had been cut several days ago. He preferred not to sell it, and he does this quite often. How much do you agree with his tactic?”.

Another question concerned Emotional Self-management: “Paul is a food retail employee. He was having a terrible day and showed up to work stressed out. Due his bad mood, he couldn't focus properly and ended up arguing with a colleague over a silly reason. To what extent do you consider Paul's behavior management acceptable?”.

Another question concerned Conflict management: “Imagine waiting in line at a food retail store when a man bypasses the line to stand right in front of you. The cashier smiles and serves him anyway, despite witnessing what happened. Do you agree with her approach as a way to avoid making a scene?”.

Finally, one question concerned Empathy: “You are shopping in a food retail store after having a rough day and it's clear you're not in a good mood. The employee responsible for weighing your vegetables is very chatty and keeps trying to start a conversation with you. How appropriate do you think this behavior is under the given circumstances?”.

For the close-format items, employees had to answer whether they agreed with each statement, based on a five-point Likert scale (1 = I strongly disagree and 5 = I strongly agree)

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Regarding the open-format questions, one of them asked employees to "List 3 skills that you consider essential for a professional in food retail", while the other question focused on Service orientation ("A dissatisfied customer returns a bottle of premium organic olive oil purchased from the store. They claim it is spoiled—bitter taste—even though the product is of high quality and premium pricing. Give 3 ways you would handle this incident").

2.2.2 Customers' assessment tool for important EI skills in food retail A self-developed tool that was designed based on the use of EI skills as described in Goleman's EI model (Goleman et al., 2002), was used in customers' sample too. The tool involves hypothetical scenarios inspired from food retail's every day working life and examines which EI skills are considered as necessary for effective job performance, according to customers' view. The scenarios were discussed by researchers and EI experts and the tool was tested in a pilot study, before being used in the current study.

The tool contains 10 items, consisting of 9 close-format and 1 open-format question. Out of the 9 close-format questions, one examined whether "Technical knowledge and product information are enough for an employee in order to be successful" and 8 close-format questions related to emotional Self-management, Communication skills, Service orientation, Conflict management, Empathy, Reliability, emotional Self-awareness and Conscientiousness.

Specifically, there was one question related to emotional Self-management: "Like everyone else, food retail employees are allowed to have a bad day, and it's understandable, even if it affects customer satisfaction".

Another question related to Communication skills: "Being polite and smiling doesn't always win over customers. Most people are just doing their shopping and don't pay attention to such details".

There was a scenario addressing Service orientation: "Imagine entering a food retail store for the first time and asking an employee, who is stocking shelves, where the baby products are. They give you directions but keep working without even making eye contact with you. To what extent do you consider this unprofessional and poor customer service?"

Another scenario concerned Reliability: "You ask an employee for advice about a product. After giving details, the salesperson encourages you to buy a higher-quality, but more expensive product from the same category. Would you trust the salesperson's honesty and buy it?".

Finally, the questions regarding Conflict management, Empathy, Emotional awareness, and Conscientiousness were the same as those described in the employees' assessment tool.

For the close-format items, customers had to answer whether they agreed with each statement, based on a five-point Likert scale (1 = I strongly disagree and 5 = I strongly agree).

Regarding the open-format question, customers were asked to "List 3 skills that you consider essential for an employee in food retail".

2.3 Process

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The questionnaires were individually and anonymously completed. The average completion time was approximately 12 minutes for employees and 5 minutes for customers. For staff, this took place during breaks or shift changes, while customers gave their answers during their visits to the stores.

2.4 Data analysis

For the close-format questions, means and standard deviations were calculated. In order to analyze the open-format questions, a content analysis was used. All statistical analyses were performed using SPSS.

3.0 RESULTS

Both food retail employees and customers consider the use of EI skills in the current work environment to be moderately important. Their views were almost similar, with employees scoring general importance at M=2,06 (SD=1,07) and customers at M=2,12 (SD=1,20). Looking closely at the specific skills, employees and customers have quite different priorities.

Regarding the employees' sample, the most important EI skills are Emotional awareness (M=4,55, SD=0,72) and Self-management (M=4,47, SD=0,95). They also attached great importance to Organizational awareness (M=4,13, SD=1,13), followed closely by Conscientiousness (M=3,86, SD=1,22) and Teamwork (M=3,71, SD=1,44). Slightly lower but still at high levels follow Conflict management (M=3,60, SD=1,48) and Adaptability (M=3,59, SD=1,25). Finally, according to the data, Empathy (M=2,66, SD=1,34) and Reliability (M=2,43, SD=1,31) constitute qualifications of moderate importance for professionals, as they appeared at the bottom of the employees' ranking. Employees' EI skills scores, are presented in the first column on Table 1.

Table 1: Means and Standard Deviations of EI skills scores of Employees' and Customers' closed-format questions

	Employees	**Customers**
EI skills	**M** **SD**	**M** **SD**
Reliability	2,43 1,31	3,19 1,30
Organizational awareness	4,13 1,13	-
Emotional awareness	4,55 0,72	4,28 0,94
Adaptability	3,59 1,25	-
Teamwork	3,71 1,44	-
Conscientiousness	3,86 1,22	4,48 0,94

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Self-management	4,47 0,95	2,21 1,35
Conflict management	3,60 1,48	3,63 1,38
Empathy	2,66 1,34	2,62 1,08
Communication skills	-	3,66 1,36
Service orientation	-	2,54 1,40

Regarding the open-format question about which skills are essential for a food retail professional, a total of 286 responses were received, concerning both emotional and non-emotional skills. Following a content analysis, the employees' responses were grouped into 2 categories. Specifically, 186 responses (65%) relate to communication and emotional skills, while 100 responses (35%) refer to other non-emotional skills. In detail, most employee responses (e.g. "politeness", "smile", "communication", "speaking with respect") relate to Communication skills (32,2%). Regarding the remaining responses concerning EI skills, most of them (e.g. "self-control", "patience", "persistence" and "cooperation", "teamwork", "obedience to a supervisor") mentioned Self-management and Teamwork and share the same rank (11,5%). The next important skill is Service orientation ("service") (5,9%), followed at much lower levels by Conscientiousness ("conscientiousness", "honesty", "integrity", "being fair", "trust") (2,8%). At the absolute bottom of the ranking are Empathy ("empathy") (0,7%) and Conflict management ("crisis management") (0,4%).

Regarding the second open-format question, where employees suggest ways to handle an incident involving a dissatisfied customer, a total of 209 responses were received. These were divided into two categories: the "emotional handling" category, included 43 responses (e.g. "listen to the complaint", "politely apologize and replace the product") (20,6%), where the employee manages the incident by deploying their EI skills, and the "non-emotional handling" category, gathered the majority with 166 responses (79,4%). Here, the employee either does not focus on customer service, does not hesitate to confront them, (e.g "tell them they are wrong", "check the product myself") or handles the irritated customer effectively by strictly following their formal duties, without using any emotional skill (e.g. "replace product").

Regarding customers, the most important EI skills for a food retail professional are Conscientiousness (M=4,48, SD=0,89), followed immediately by Emotional awareness (M=4,28, SD=0,94). They also place considerable emphasis on Communication skills (M=3.66, SD=1.36), while Conflict management is found at high levels (M=3,63, SD=1,38) too. Lower in their ranking, but at moderate-to-high levels, follows Reliability (M=3,19, SD=1,30). At the bottom of the customers' list at a moderate to low level are Empathy (M=2,62, SD=1,08), Service orientation (M=2,54, SD=1,40) and Self-management (M=2,21, SD=1,35). Customers' EI skills scores, are presented in the last column of Table 1.

Regarding the open-format question about the skills that customers consider as essential for food retail professionals, a total of 272 responses were received. Out of these, 200 responses (73,6%) relate to communication and emotional skills, and 72 responses (26,4%) refer to non-emotional skills. Most customer responses focus on Communication (e.g. "politeness",

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"smile", "communication", "speaking with respect") (35,3%). For the answers that relate to EI skills, most mention Self-management (e.g. "patience", "good mood", "courage", "persistence") (12,1%), followed closely by Service orientation (10,3%). The next positions are occupied by Teamwork (e.g. "teamwork", "ability to cooperate") (8,9%) and Reliability (e.g. "reliability", "ethics", "responsibility", "honesty", "trust") (5,9%). Finally, Empathy (e.g. "understanding", "discretion") (1,1%) occupies the last position in the customer ranking.

4.0 DISCUSSION

Several studies in the past argued that hard work is the key to high performance in sales. However, many failed to clearly identify the specific salesperson actions that foster a strong seller-buyer relationship (Huda Ben Amor, 2019).

The findings of the present study demonstrate that employees perceive Emotional awareness and Emotional Self-management as critical determinants of job effectiveness. Consistent with this, Self-awareness and Self-management foster salespersons' professionalism and role commitment (Riordan & Shore, 1997). Specifically, emotional self-control relies on Self-awareness as individuals cannot effectively control or express emotions without first recognizing them. Conversely, Self-management enables staff to display appropriate emotional responses to customers, allowing them to work effectively (Wong & Law, 2002), even when dealing with negative feedback (Brown et al., 1998).

Regarding Organizational awareness and Teamwork, the participants in the present study rate them as quite important. The literature suggests that a clear understanding of the sales role helps work overload (Jones et al., 2017), while teamwork fosters better collaboration among colleagues and drives cross-departmental sales (Workman et al., 2003).

Conscientiousness is also a vital skill for the professionals in this study. This is confirmed by Twing-Kwong et al. (2013), who note that an employee's honesty and integrity influence the relationship between salesperson and customer and, consequently, shape buyer behavior. Furthermore, participants identified Adaptability as essential, supporting other researchers' view that flexible behavior helps in understanding buyer needs (Ahearne et al., 2008).

Finally, based on the employees' view, Empathy and Trust are considered moderately important. This outcome differs from prior studies. According to them, understanding the customer's emotional state and choosing the right way to behave is considered a key part of buyer-seller interaction (Newman et al., 2009), while trust is widely recognized as a major factor for the customers in retail (Too et al., 2001).

In open-format question, employees assigned low importance to Trust. According to the data, being honest at work is not an essential characteristic for their professional role. Moreover, data regarding how employees handle an angry customer reveal that employees do not manage such incidents using EI skills, even though they consider EI important at work. In conclusion, although employees recognize the value of EI skills for their professional environment, they fail to apply them, either due to a lack of capacity or an absence of practical training.

On the other hand, while customers in this study share certain perspectives with employees, they place greater emphasis on the role of Conscientiousness regarding the effectiveness of

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food retail professionals. Specifically, food retail customers consider Communication skills, such as politeness and smiling, to be important along with Trust, a skill that employees, as previously shown, tend to underestimate. Consequently, food retail customers wish professionals to act as trusted, polite shopping advisors, rather than just transaction handlers. This is confirmed by the literature, which suggests that this is how customers cope with the feeling of uncertainty frequently associated with the retail shopping experience (Diallo, 2012).

In their open-format responses, customers focus on emotional self-control and service quality right after communication skills. They believe that professionals in this sector must exhibit a specific behavior without emotional outbursts or impulsive reactions, always aiming for customer satisfaction. Only a few customers highlighted the importance of Teamwork, likely because they perceive it as relevant to the food retail's internal operations rather than a factor that directly impacts their shopping experience.

5.0 CONCLUSION

Since emotions are an essential part of the workplace (Sony & Mekoth, 2016) and emotionally "intelligent" behavior is paramount for success in sales and customer service roles (Huda Ben Amor, 2019), this study examines how food retail employees can become more effective by using EI skills at work. Specifically, the research aims to identify the EI skills required to optimize performance in this sector. As the current study is original, its empirical findings can only be compared to existing literature concerning retail sales professionals in general.

According to the findings of the current study, EI skills are essential for maximizing job performance and effectiveness within the food retail environment. EI dimensions such as Self-awareness, Self-management, Conscientiousness, Collaboration, and Empathy play a critical role in this workplace. As a consequence, employees who try to build a sustainable competitive advantage and unlock advanced career opportunities, have to develop specific EI aspects.

6.0 LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE SUGGESTIONS

One of the main limitations of this study has to do with the geographical location where it was conducted. Given that the study was carried out in semi-urban areas of Greece, the conclusions are influenced by particular social and economic contexts, which may constrain their generalizability.

Another limitation concerns the research instruments. Specifically, EI skills were examined using an improvised tool, which may affect the validity of the findings. Furthermore, the study relied only on one research method (questionnaires) and did not use any other tools (interviews), which could have added valuable data.

Regarding suggestions for the future, this study can serve as a valuable benchmark both for food retail employees and organizations. On the one hand, these empirical results can help employees update their professional profile in order to adapt more effectively to their job's emotional demands. On the other hand, for organizations aiming to cultivate an emotionally intelligent culture and secure long-term competitive advantages, these findings can encourage them in staff EI skills training. Furthermore, the present study can be a stepping stone for designing and implementing EI training programs tailored to the food retail sector.

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