

The evolving role of pharmacists: balancing sales and customer-orientation in the modern pharmacy landscape

Pedicini Elisa, Pizzi Gabriele, Grandi Benedetta, Cardinali Maria Grazia
Alma Mater Studiorum Università di Bologna, Via Capo di Lucca, 34, 40126 Bologna, Italy
Università degli Studi di Parma, Via J.F. Kennedy, 6, 43125 Parma, Italy

Abstract

Over the years, the role of pharmacists has been almost revolutionised, from medicine-centred to patient-centred for the pharmacist's core activity is no longer the simple dispensing of medicines. Nevertheless, the immediate access to medical information, the presence of informed customers, the increasing strength of online retailers and the multiplication of opportunities to purchase products that used to be offered only in pharmacies, have made the role of the pharmacist more challenging and emphasized the need to develop a relational approach focused on satisfying patients' needs. In this scenario, the academia has started to concentrate on the key role of customer management inside pharmacies even if we are still at an early stage of the research. Drawing on the literature of customer management, marketing and on studies on the sales-orientation – customer-orientation (SOCO) couple, the present work intends to analyse how these elements can impact perceived warmth and competence of the pharmacist, and in turn customer's trust and satisfaction in the retail pharmacy sector. To test these relationships, a structured questionnaire has been administered to a sample of 108 customers. The results of a structural equation model demonstrate the acceptance of all the hypotheses tested, except for the relationship between sales orientation and perceived competence of the pharmacist. Further analysis should be conducted to better understand the phenomenon.

Keyword: SOCO scale, pharmacy, patient management, satisfaction

1. Introduction

The pharmaceutical sector has undergone significant transformations in recent decades. Changes in healthcare policies, advancements in pharmaceutical technologies and evolving consumers' expectations are just some of the factors that have contributed to the progression of pharmacies and of the role of pharmacists (Slepchuk et al., 2022; Jokinen et al., 2020). Whilst up until a few years ago pharmacies were almost exclusively medicines dispensaries – were these with or without prescription –, today they have become a hybrid between multifaceted health and wellness centres and retail stores (Ilardo and Speciale, 2020) for they offer a wide range of both products and services which extend far beyond prescription medications and include nutraceuticals, cosmetics, diagnostic services, and personal care products (Jokinen et al., 2020; Bonnal and Moinier, 2014). This transformation positions pharmacies in a unique space within service marketing, as they simultaneously offer both services and goods, reflecting the broader evolution in service-oriented retail sectors. The increasing harmonisation and liberalisation of the pharmaceutical sector across the European Union have also

contributed to the development of a competitive pharmacy landscape, something that was not plausible at all until a few years ago due to the strict regulations in force regarding the sale of medicines and the management of pharmacies (Castaldo et al., 2015). Suffice it to think that in Italy, with the exception of prescription medicines, it is now possible to find many of the products typically belonging to pharmacies' shelves in other places such as supermarkets or para-pharmacies – whether physical or online (Ilardo and Speciale, 2020). This new dimension of competitiveness has ensured that managerial and marketing principles that were previously precluded to pharmacies have instead begun to be popular in this sector as well, further blurring the lines between retailing and service marketing in this context. This has consequently stimulated a stream of studies that focuses on analysing how concepts such as customer loyalty, trust, satisfaction and the use of marketing mix tactics, to name a few, can be transferred to the pharmacy sector (Mirzaei et al., 2018). Clearly, such an important transformation in the intrinsic nature of these places has begun to raise questions about the evolving role of pharmacists and the potential impact that this change may have on consumers' perceptions and behaviours (e.g., Franke and Park, 2006; Morgall and Almarsdottir, 1999).

Indeed, the role of pharmacists has been almost revolutionised as well. In her study, Kronus (1975) proposes an interesting separation between business and service professions which are usually described as mutually exclusive. If, on the one hand, business occupations are those for which the primary objective is to generate financial gain, on the other hand, service professions are portrayed as moved by altruistic objectives (in the case of pharmacies this is, for instance, the consumer's health). Nevertheless, that of the pharmacist is a rare example of the possible coexistence of these two apparently incompatible aspects. This is even more true today given the duality of products and services that pharmacists have to sell. Nowadays, community pharmacies are torn between the sale of strictly regulated products (namely prescription medicines) and that of both goods and services for which competition is becoming increasingly fierce and which may be subject to multiple marketing strategies (Jokinen et al., 2020). Some authors describe the evolution of the role of pharmacists as a shift from medicine-centred to patient-centred for the pharmacist's core activity is no longer the simple dispensing of medicines, but the almost complete care of consumers' needs (Amara et al., 2023). This development aligns with broader trends in service marketing, where businesses are increasingly focused on delivering value through personalised customer experiences rather than merely transactional relationships.

Nevertheless, pharmacists and pharmacies are not the only ones undergoing abrupt change. Consumers too are evolving in multiple ways. First of all, there is easier and more immediate access to medical information online, which has given rise to what some practitioners call the 'google doctor'. The central consequence of this phenomenon is that informed customers, or consumers who assume they are so, will not go to the pharmacy to be advised but rather to confirm what they think to know already (Ilardo and Speciale, 2020). This adds a further difficulty to the pharmacists' job who have to be even more efficient in adopting an adaptive behaviour to fulfil the expectations of their customers in order to succeed in gaining their trust or at least their satisfaction (Periatt et al., 2004; Franke and Park, 2006). Second, the multiplication of opportunities

to purchase products that used to be offered only in pharmacies has undoubtedly created greater pressure for pharmacists to be able to focus on consumer retention and satisfaction, much like in more traditional retail environments, thereby increasing the pressure to differentiate through service excellence (Ilardo and Speciale, 2020).

The combination of these changes has resulted in an increasing interest of the academia in the role that customer management has begun to play in pharmacies. However, research in this regard is still relatively in its infancy and it is for this reason that, with the present paper, we aim to contribute to the understanding of this subject. Specifically, since to the extent of our knowledge this has not yet been done in the context of pharmacies, we draw on the literature of customer management, marketing and on studies on the sales-orientation – customer-orientation (SOCO) couple to study how these elements can shape the interaction between the pharmacist and the consumer outlining, in fact, the nature of the proposed service and the resulting impact it will have on customer's trust and, consequently, satisfaction.

In the next section we will explore the theoretical background that led us to the development of our research model. Then, we will present the methodology and the data analysis, as well as the results, of our paper. Finally, we will conclude by exploring the contributions and the limitations of our work.

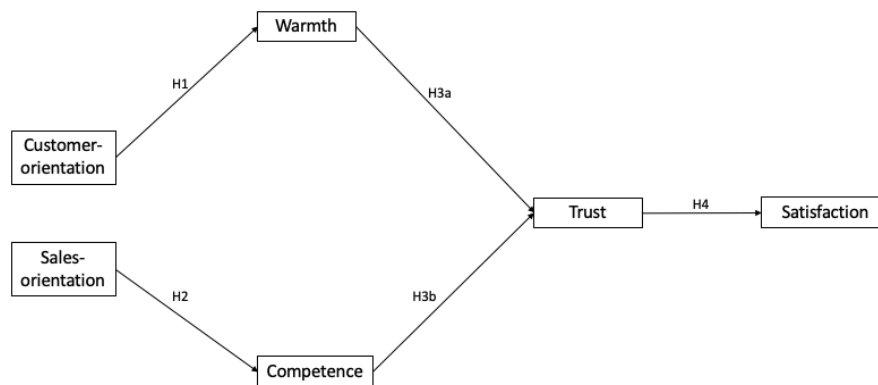
2. Theoretical background

The evolution which has characterised pharmacies during the last decades has divided the public opinion on several levels. First of all, there is decreasing clarity as to what the role of pharmacists actually is. While, on the one hand, there is the idea that pharmacists today have become figures who devote more and more attention to patients, on the other hand, some scholars have studied a pharmacist who has left his role as the doctor's right-hand man to become a true salesperson (Ilardo and Speciale, 2020). These two opposite images of today's pharmacist can be conceptualised using the sales-orientation – customer-orientation (SOCO) couple, a well-established construct in sales and marketing literature (Balkansky et al., 2019; Jokinen et al., 2020). The SOCO framework postulates that it is possible to classify salespeople – in this case pharmacists – according to their approach to customer interactions. On one side, we have those who prioritise making immediate sales to boost their own short-term profits are considered sales-oriented. Instead, at the other extreme, we have customer-oriented salespeople who invest time and efforts in understanding their customers' requirements and developing tailored solutions, hence demonstrating a focus on meeting others' needs (Kushwaha et al., 2021).

This juxtaposition between sales and customer orientation has been extensively studied over time since it has been observed that there is a non-negligible relationship between selling behaviour and the sale effectiveness (Saxe and Weitz, 1982). Nevertheless, in recent years, there has been a new wave of interest in this dichotomy of orientations particularly in contexts characterised by a high degree of personal interaction, where the relationship between the salesperson and the consumer is pivotal in ensuring the success of this contact (Castaldo et al., 2015). Studies have shown that customer-oriented practices in such settings not only enhance perceived service quality but also improve customer trust and loyalty, therefore highlighting the relevance of these

constructs in contemporary marketing research (Ilardo and Speciale, 2020; Doucette et al., 2012). The metamorphosis that the pharmacy panorama has undergone in the past decades, thus, provides a unique environment to study the role that the pharmacist's orientation can play in shaping customer satisfaction which is, de facto, the primary objective of the present article. For this purpose, we will construct a research model that allows us to study some of the antecedents (Figure 1) that, in our opinion, are useful in explaining how consumers' perceptions are formed regarding their pharmacists' orientations and, at the same time, to understand how the sales-orientation – customer-orientation couple can be inscribed within a theoretical and practical context such as that of the Relationship Marketing Paradigm (Anderson and Mittal, 2000).

Figure 1: Research model



2.1 Sales-orientation and customer-orientation

The transformation of a product-centred into a customer-centred market has shifted the attention of marketing and management researchers to the set of factors that gravitate around building a fruitful relationship between salesperson and consumer (Thomas et al., 2001). This gave rise to new research fields – such as that of relationship marketing and customer management to name a few – which scrutinise the dynamics of such relationships in order to better understand which elements influence the achievement of a successful interaction between a customer and salesperson (Ganesan, 1994; Castaldo et al., 2015).

Studies conducted in this field have shown that obtaining a profitable relationship with a consumer depends as much on material elements external to the actors involved (e.g., place, price, product...) as on a complex interplay of more subjective and personal characteristics proper of the seller and/or the consumer (Anderson and Mittal, 2000). Elements such as trust, communication quality, perceived expertise, emotional intelligence, satisfaction with the interaction, and knowledge exchange, for instance, are some of the factors that have been analysed for their involvement in the formation of more or less lasting relationship between customer and seller (Garbarino and Johnson, 1999). The salesperson's approach to these interactions, particularly his or her

orientation toward sales or customer needs, has emerged as a crucial determinant of relationship quality and long-run business success (Franke and Park, 2006)

The culture of salesperson's orientation has been enriched over the years by the numerous contributions made by those academics who have focused on the analysis of the sales- versus customer-orientation dichotomy (e.g., Tadepalli, 1995; Brown et al., 1991; Daniel and Darby, 1997). As we have previously mentioned, sales-orientation and customer-orientation are seen as the two opposite sides of the same coin. A sales-oriented approach is characterised by a prioritisation of selling products regardless of whether customers' needs are met. It involves employing persuasive – some may say manipulative – ploys that put obtaining immediate results before cultivating customer satisfaction on the long-run. (Saxe and Weitz, 1982; Kushwaha et al., 2021). On the other hand, customer-orientation is based on the sellers' use of both empathy and work ethics (Kushwaha et al., 2021) to build strong and long-lasting relationships with their customers. The fulfilment of consumers' needs is central to this approach since the ultimate goal is to be able to cultivate long-term customer satisfaction (Franke and Park, 2006). In a customer-oriented approach, thus, the seller must have the consumer's best interest in mind in order to "adjust his/her service to take account of the circumstances of the customer" (Daniel and Darby, 1997). These two orientations have been studied in various fields via the SOCO scale which was initially developed and tested by Saxe and Weitz (1982) precisely to investigate how much salespeople apply marketing principles in their work, or more specifically, to assess to what extent a salesperson implements a customer-oriented selling as opposed to a sales-oriented one. Since its inception, this diagnostic tool has been widely adopted and refined across various fields, which resulted in the SOCO scale gaining quite a bit of notoriety among researchers (Thomas et al., 2001).

Studies subsequent to that of Saxe and Weitz (1982) have consistently demonstrated that customer-orientation yields more positive outcomes than sales-orientation in terms, among other things, of job satisfaction (Franke and Park, 2006), long-term customer satisfaction (Brown et al., 1991), and perceived quality of the interaction (Daniel and Darby, 1997).

Moreover, the original 24 items have been declined over the years so that more facets of this dimension can be analysed (Thomas et al., 2001). Initially, the SOCO scale was built to self-assess the salesperson's orientation. In this sense, it was the sellers themselves who stated how their approach to a specific customer had been more biased towards consumer care or more sales-driven (Saxe and Weitz, 1982). Later on, Brown and his colleagues (1991) transformed this tool so that it could collect directly the consumers' point of view. These two opposing and yet complementary visions of the SOCO scale were then replicated in fields such as the real estate industry (Dunlap et al., 1988), the insurance sector (Howe et al., 1994), or even the healthcare system (Daniel and Darby, 1997). Expanding on previous studies, we expect to observe that the choice of a more customer-oriented approach rather than a sales-oriented one has a positive influence on the outcomes of the interaction between consumers and pharmacists. In particular, we expect to observe a direct and significant impact of this dimension on two recurring aspects of both marketing and customer care management research, namely the salesperson's warmth and the perceived competence.

2.2 Warmth and Competence

Warmth and competence are two dimensions that have often played a central role in justifying how people and situations are perceived (Cuddy et al., 2011). This is because interaction between two people or between social groups provides immediate access to these aspects (Cuddy and Fiske, 2002). Although some studies have analysed these two variables as being mutually exclusive – hence being warmth-oriented precludes the possibility of being competence-oriented and vice versa (Bales, 1950) – over time, research on this topic has proven to be more flexible and has captured more nuances of the role that both warmth and competence play in shaping consumers' attitudes and behaviours (Cuddy et al., 2011). Warmth can be intended as a combination of different factors such as, for instance, one's level of empathy, friendliness, and kindness (Cuddy et al., 2011). A more comprehensive definition of this concept was provided by Güntürkün and his colleagues (2020): “the warmth dimensions refers to the judgements of a service provider's social and moral attributes”. Previous studies have highlighted the existence of a correlation between the salesperson predisposition for a customer-oriented approach and his or her displaying of greater empathy (Daniel and Darby, 2015; Mill, 1986). Similarly, Franke and Park (2006) have demonstrated that there is a direct link between the use of a customer-oriented approach and the development of the warmth dimension. This is because a customer-cantered selling approach involves studying and focusing on consumer preferences as a starting point for the construction of any interaction. This results in the creation of a relationship that is empathetic and based on the enhancement of dimensions such as warmth and competence (Franke and Park, 2006).

Research has also proved that there exists a relationship between warmth and trust. In particular, it has been found that, if employed to the right extent, warmth and empathy (which we have seen to be two very close concepts) can strengthen trust in various contexts such as that of relationships with co-workers (Oleszkiewicz and Lachowicz-Tabaczek, 2016), of human-computer interactions (Kulms and Kopp, 2018), and – most importantly for our study – of consumers behaviours (Güntürkün et al., 2020). Moreover, it has been proved that the employ of a customer-oriented approach – and consequently of an increased warmth – contribute to the creation of greater value and trust for consumers since their needs are better understood and fulfilled (Saxe and Weitz, 1982). In light of these previous findings, we propose the following hypotheses:

H1: the pharmacist's predilection for a customer-orientated approach will increase the perceived warmth

H3a: a high level of the pharmacist's warmth will result in greater customer trust

The theory suggests that the second dimension, that of competence, may also play a role to that of warmth within our research model. Indeed, these two variables are the result of the same mechanism of judgement as to what extent a person's actions are pursuing a self-interest purpose rather than the customer's one (Cislak and Wojciszke, 2008). Competence can be defined as a person's capability to act on their intentions (Cuddy et al., 2011). In the present study, competence (or a lack of it) will be a

characteristic of the pharmacist and will encompass various nuances such as, for example, efficiency, intelligence and being prepared to solve the problems presented by the customer.

In literature, sales-oriented salespeople use prescribed methods in order to maximize the chances of completing the task in the shortest time possible (closing the sale), showing a low inclination to discover alternative paths (Locander et al., 2023). Their opportunistically driven approach, with little concern for the needs of customers, and their tendency to take procedural shortcuts and neglecting tasks they deem inconsequential may negatively affect the perceptions of the customers regarding their role and skills (Lau & Bin, 1999).

But high levels of competence contribute to the development of more favourable responses (both in terms of brands and products) (Halkias and Diamantopoulos, 2020). Moreover, competence has been classified as a key factor in the pharmacy environment to achieve overall customer trust (Güntürkün et al., 2020). Drawing on existing literature, we therefore propose what follows:

***H2:** the pharmacist's predilection for a sales-orientated approach will decrease the perceived competence of the pharmacist*

***H3b:** a high level of perceived competence will result in greater customer trust*

2.3 Trust and Satisfaction

These two dimensions are part of the literature that has developed over the past decades concerning relationship marketing. Previous studies have indeed shown that there is a direct relationship between these elements (e.g., Garbarino and Johnson, 1999). Since, as we mentioned earlier, the increasing liberalisation of the pharmaceutical sector has contributed to the emergence of strong competition between pharmacies, studying how customer satisfaction can be achieved may prove to be extremely important in this sector. The relationship between trust and satisfaction has been explored bidirectionally: on one side, there are studies that view trust as an antecedent of satisfaction (e.g., Han et al., 2021), on the other, there is a stream of research that consider this variable as a mediator between customer satisfaction and loyalty (e.g., Al-Ansi and Han, 2019). For the present study, with rely on the findings that view trust as a predictor of satisfaction (e.g., Singh and Sirdeshmuckh, 2000).

In Ganesan's words (1994), trust is the "willingness to rely on another party based on recognition of that party's ability, reliability, and benevolence". For its part, customer satisfaction refers to the level of contentment that a person has after buying and using a product or service. This contentment is measured according to whether or not the person's experience with the product or service has exceeded his or her previous expectations (Han et al., 2018). Research on the role that trust has in shaping long-term customer satisfaction is copious. Indeed, it has been shown in various settings how strategies focused on building trust result in greater favourable attitudes towards a product, a service, a brand and/or a salesperson (Wei et al., 2017). Evidence proves that strengthening trust helps enhance satisfaction (Martinez, 2015). Similarly, we expect to observe that a greater trust toward the pharmacist will result in the customer's satisfaction with either that specific pharmacist or the pharmacy more broadly.

H4: an increase in consumer trust will result in greater satisfaction.

3. Methodology

3.1 Study design and sample characteristics

In order to test our research model, we developed a questionnaire by using the online tool Qualtrics. The survey was then distributed online from the 29th of August to the 2nd of September 2024. During this period, 108 viable answers were collected which indicates that our effective response rate is 100%.

The descriptive analysis performed on the collected (Table 1) data shows that 56.48% of our respondents are women, 42.59% are men, while one person (0.93%) preferred not to specify their gender. The average age of the participants to our study is 48 years old – 48.30 if we don't round it up. The investigated population mostly consists of people who go to the pharmacy on average once a month or less and they do so mainly to buy prescription drugs, non-prescription drugs, and supplements or other vitamins.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics

Item	Frequency	Percent age	Mean	Std. deviation
<i>On average, how often do you visit a pharmacy?</i>			4.19	0.98
Every day	2	1.85		
Every week	6	5.56		
Every two weeks	13	12.04		
Every month	36	33.33		
Less than once a month	51	47.22		
<i>Which category of products do you purchase most often in pharmacies? (More than one choice was possible)</i>				
Prescription drugs	64	59.26		
Non-prescription drugs	38	35.19		
Over-the-counter medicines	16	14.81		
Personal hygiene products	11	10.19		
Supplements and/or vitamins	25	23.15		
Other	5	4.63		
<i>What is the gender you identify with?</i>			0.67	0.51
Male	46	42.59		
Female	61	56.48		
Non-binary/third gender	0	0		
Prefer not to say	1	0.93		
<i>Can you please indicate your age in number?</i>			48.30	16.18

<i>What is the highest degree you have completed?</i>		3.5	1.06
No degree	0	0	
High school diploma	20	18.52	
Bachelor's degree	35	32.41	
Master's degree	38	35.18	
Professional degree	9	8.33	
PhD degree	6	5.56	

Moreover, our sample is constituted of people who evaluate as quite important all of the factors we have proposed in order to understand what motivates the choice of a pharmacy over another. Specifically, geographical proximity with a pharmacy appears to be the main driver for the selection of the pharmacy (mean 7.83, st.dev. 2.89 on a scale from 0 to 10) closely followed by the more “human” aspects: staff competence (mean 7.48, st.dev. 2.97) and good relationship with the pharmacist (mean 7, st.dev. 2.97). Marketing levers obtained the lowest score: assortment (mean 6.83, st.dev. 3.07) and favourable prices (mean 6.11, st.dev. 3.45). This set of questions was added in a second moment, therefore we don’t have the same number of respondents as for the rest of the questionnaire.

3.2 Measurements

All the items presented in the questionnaire were assessed through the adaptation of variables already consolidated in the literature. Specifically, to measure the two aspects customer-orientation and sales-orientation we utilised the SOCO scale. Since we considered more pertinent to our research, we decided to employ the version proposed by Brown et al. (1991) instead of the original one (Saxe and Weitz, 1982). The items were evaluated via a 10-points Likert scale as originally suggested by Saxe and Weitz. Warmth and competence are two dimensions belonging to the same construct developed and tested by Wu and colleagues (2017). This variable is assessed through a 7-points Likert scale from 1 to 7 rating from “Strongly disagree” to “Strongly agree”. This study refers to the scale proposed by Magi (2003) to assess satisfaction. As for the SOCO scale, the items of this variable were assessed using a 10-point rating scale ranging from “Very dissatisfied/Very satisfied” to, “Not at all/Completely” to “Not at all close/Very close” depending on the formulation of the items.

Trust includes six items adjusted from the measurement scale proposed by Bansal et al. (2004) while, in order to assess loyalty, we adapted the items formulated by Lichtenstein and colleagues (2004). Both these variables are evaluated through a 7-points Likert scale (the classical version consisting of 1-“Strongly disagree” / 7-“Strongly agree”).

4. Data analysis and results

This study applies the structural equation modelling (SEM) method of analysis to verify the hypotheses previously formulated. In order to be able to perform the set of statistical

manipulations necessary for our purpose, we used the statistics programmes IBM SPSS and SmartPLS.

We first conducted a confirmatory factor analysis on our measurements to check that the validity of these constructs also applied to our data. This analysis was performed by using the principal axis factoring with an Oblimin rotation and it yielded more than satisfactory results for almost all of our measurement scales, with the exception of customer-orientation. This revealed an ambiguity in three items in particular – CO3, CO5, and CO10 – which were removed in order to improve the quality (both the reliability and validity) of our scale (Table 2).

Table 2. *Reliability of the constructs*

Construct	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability	AVE
Sales-orientation	0.957	0.883	0.656
Customer-orientation	0.888	0.702	0.374
Warmth	0.901	0.883	0.655
Competence	0.924	0.868	0.622
Trust	0.747	0.910	0.716
Satisfaction	0.886	0.894	0.741

Once completed this first phase of our statistical analysis, we proceeded to test our model to examine which of the paths hypothesised from theory were actually significant. In order to do so, we utilised the basic CB-SEM algorithm method proposed by SmartPLS to compute the model. As it is possible to see in Table 3, this first analysis shows that customer-orientation significantly and positively affects warmth (p-value = 0.000; β coefficient = 0.374), thus sustaining our hypothesis 1. The same thing happens for the subsequent effect of warmth on trust (p-value = 0.009; β coefficient = 0.250) and competence on trust (p-value = 0.000; β coefficient = 0.632) which gives validation also to our third hypothesis. The relationship existing between sales-orientation appears to be negative but, alas, it is not statistically significant at the 5% level (p-value = 0.069; β coefficient = -0.079) which brings us to the rejection of hypothesis 2. Contrary to this finding, the path analysis on the impact of trust on satisfaction generated satisfactory results, highlighting a positive and significant relationship between these variables (p-value = 0.000; β coefficient = 1.667) hence providing support to our last hypothesis.

Table 3: *Paths coefficients of the research model (total sample)*

	Parameter estimates	Standard errors	T values	P values
Customer-orientation → Warmth	0.374	0.098	3.832	0.000
Sales-orientation → Competence	-0.079	0.043	1.836	0.069
Warmth → Trust	0.250	0.094	2.665	0.009
Competence → Trust	0.632	0.138	4.584	0.000

Trust → Satisfaction	1.667	0.168	9.909	0.000
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Considering the fit of our model, the ratio between the χ^2 and the degrees of freedom is – as it should – close to 1 and smaller than the threshold of 3 (ChiSqr/df = 1.993). Moreover, other indexes such as the CFI are close to the conventional threshold of 0.9 indicating, overall, quite an acceptable fit of our model (0.809).

Curious to understand if the relationships observed among the variables of our model could be influenced by the type of products bought by consumers in pharmacies, we pushed a little bit further our analysis. We split our data in two categories of respondents: on one side, we grouped the individuals who indicated in the questionnaire that they only buy products for which a doctor's prescription is not required – these include non-prescription drugs, over-the-counter medicines, personal hygiene products, supplements and/or vitamins, and other types of products – on the other side, we gathered all the participants who have selected “prescription drugs” at this specific question of the survey. After this division of our population, we proceeded with a new test of our model. This analysis has brought out interesting results.

The model considering exclusively respondent who buy non-prescription products (Table 4) shows a significance of the impact of competence on trust and of trust on satisfaction (respectively: p-value = 0.002 and 0.000; β coefficient = 0.908 and 1.855).

Table 4: *Paths coefficients of the research model (products without prescription)*

	Parameter estimates	Standard errors	T values	P values
Customer-orientation → Warmth	0.272	0.186	1.462	0.151
Sales-orientation → Competence	0.023	0.046	0.492	0.625
Warmth → Trust	0.048	0.106	0.457	0.650
Competence → Trust	0.908	0.270	3.366	0.002
Trust → Satisfaction	1.855	0.326	5.691	0.000

However, if we look at what happens when we analyse people who buy prescription medicines, the results are very different and the data provide support to the totality of our hypotheses (Table 5).

Table 5: *Paths coefficients of the research model (medicines with prescription)*

	Parameter estimates	Standard errors	T values	P values
Customer-orientation → Warmth	0.384	0.114	3.356	0.001
Sales-orientation → Competence	-0.130	0.065	2.004	0.049
Warmth → Trust	0.403	0.142	2.834	0.006
Competence → Trust	0.515	0.175	2.944	0.005

Trust → Satisfaction	1.600	0.206	7.778	0.000
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5. Conclusions and managerial implications

Drawing on the literature of customer management, marketing and on studies on the sales-orientation – customer-orientation (SOCO) couple, the present work intended to analyse how the pharmacist orientation can impact perceived warmth and competence and in turn customer's trust and satisfaction in the retail pharmacy sector. The results obtained considering the overall sample show a positive impact of customer-orientation on warmth, warmth and competence on trust and trust on satisfaction. Otherwise, no significant impact of sales-orientation was found on perceived competence of the pharmacist. However, if we consider a pharmacy in its most traditional sense – namely a place where one has access to medical care – the dynamics that find their foundations in the literature are confirmed while, if we deviate from this view to include the more ‘retailing’ aspect that pharmacies have acquired in recent years, our model almost totally loses its validity and significance. This result can be explained by the nature of the purchase and the patients’ expectations regarding the level of services, warmth and competence provided during the shopping experience, since they are linked to the level of complexity and importance of the products. Ultimately, our findings show that pharmacists perceived as being customer-oriented – namely those who take their patients' problems to heart and try to solve them to the best of their ability even at the risk of not completing a transaction – are associated by consumers with greater warmth. Conversely, although to a less significant extent, the adoption of a more sales-orientated approach is likely to make the pharmacist less competent in the eyes of consumers. This distinction highlights the importance of the relational aspect of customer service, particularly in sectors like pharmacies where trust and care are fundamental to provide a valuable consumer experience.

The present study makes interesting contributions both to theory and practice. First, to the extent of our knowledge, the SOCO scale – and in particular the version proposed by Brown et al. (1991) where consumers are the ones responsible for the assessment of these dimensions – had never been applied to the context of pharmacies. Although there are a few examples of its utilisation in the healthcare field (Daniel and Darby, 1997), pharmacists were never taken into consideration in these studies. In this sense, we contribute to the literature on this subject showing that both customer-orientation and sales-orientation can play a significant role in shaping aspects such as perception of competence, warmth, and ultimately, customer satisfaction. These findings are particularly relevant in the context of service marketing, where customer relationship management and the personalisation of services are critical to the success of the exchange between the salesperson and the consumer. Furthermore, our findings enrich the knowledge on consumer behaviour in healthcare retail setting, an area that has gained increasing interest during the last decades due to the important change that pharmacies have brought about. By doing so, we provide new insights into the relational dynamics of pharmacists-customers interactions, underlining the importance that service quality has in shaping customer perceptions and behaviours even in this underexplored context.

Second, from a managerial point of view, knowing which sales approach produces better results in terms of performance and consumers' response allows, among other things, to refine one's sales tactics. In this perspective, thus, our results prove useful on several layers. At the level of the pharmacy owner and/or its manager – who in Italy must necessarily be a pharmacist due to the regulations in force and who, therefore, is directly affected by our results –, understanding which type of selling approach is the most effective in satisfying consumers and fostering their return allows for a more efficient use of the training efforts of employees in one rather than the other direction (i.e., sales- or customer-orientation). At the level of pharmaceutical companies, understanding whether a more sales-oriented approach is in fact detrimental in terms of quantity and quality of sales can be applied to improve the segmentation and categorisation of goods in order to favour a greater horizontal integration of products belonging to the same range (i.e., make them complementary by encouraging the purchase of more than one of the products in the range). This could simultaneously increase the consumers' intuitive and automatic purchase of this merchandises and reduce the efforts pharmacists need to make in terms of promotion, which could be seen as an important improvement especially by those customers who are somewhat warier of the commercial aspect of pharmacies.

6. Limitations and future research

This study pays particular attention to the direct role that customer-orientation and sales-orientation have in shaping perceptions of the pharmacist's warmth and competence, and to the indirect effect that one orientation rather than the other can have in fostering greater customer trust and satisfaction. In order to do so, we utilised variables that are so well established in the literature that they have virtually become a cornerstone of the research on customer care and both service management and marketing (e.g., Thomas et al., 2001). The SOCO scale, specifically, has been applied to numerous contexts and it has been declined during the years giving light to multiple versions of this measurement. Still, despite all the differences of application and form we have witnessed, this scale has always proven to be reliable. In this respect, our results diverge somewhat from the performance expectations of this measurement particularly with regard to the first 12 items, namely those assessing the pharmacist's customer orientation. One plausible explanation for this phenomenon has to be found in the composition of our sample. The questionnaire was, in fact, distributed first and foremost to our acquaintances. However, a large proportion of these people work in the medical and pharmaceutical sectors, which implies that they have a different knowledge and perception of the pharmacist's role towards the consumer. Future research should consider to retest our model on a larger and more varied set of individuals in order to understand if our results are indeed biased due to the presence of experts in our sample or if they are actually a true representation of the more “unaware” population.

For our study, we focused on sales-orientation and customer-orientation as being the two antecedents of our model. In this vision, they are directly responsible for variations in warmth and competence and, through this, they are helpful in determining customers trust and satisfaction with the pharmacists. This approach aligns with service marketing

principles, where the relational dynamics between service providers and customers are key to shaping trust, perceived value, and satisfaction to name a few. However, we did not consider the origins of these two opposite approaches in our study. Future research should extend the present model to investigate which are the antecedents of the salesperson's orientation and of the way this is perceived by consumers. Specifically, we think that both relational and situational elements (e.g., the store layout) could shape differences in the evaluation of a salesperson's orientation made by consumers.

Moreover, we hypothesised a negative relationship between sales-orientation and perceived competence. However, in some contexts, a high sales orientation combined with deep product knowledge could be seen as a form of competence, especially if the salesperson successfully demonstrates expertise in how the product meets customer needs. Thus, the analysis can be developed in different retailing contexts and pharmacy format.

Finally, as it is alas often the case in this kind of studies, asking people to recall the last experience with a pharmacist paves the way for a greater risk of having biased responses compared to if the same study was offered on site (in this case at the exit of pharmacies for example). Although this approach has its bright sides because it allows for a 'cold' evaluation of the experience and thus a more long-term view of the effects that the analysed variables have on each other, in the future, we suggest that this study should be replicated in loco in order to avoid the recalled experience bias and to reduce as much as possible any forgetting and/or overlapping of memories by the respondents.

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