

# Restaurants and social media: rethinking organizational capabilities and individual competencies

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – *The research and practice agree that social media are reshaping strategy and organization rules across industries. Nevertheless, how social media can become a source of competitive advantage remains under-investigated and there is no evidence about which capabilities and competencies can effectively and strategically exploit social media. By merging the literature on social media management and hospitality, the authors develop and test a theoretical framework that identifies the most relevant capabilities and competencies for using social media in the food service sector. The paper aims to map them and understand which ones are relevant according to different strategic choices of social media use.*

**Design/methodology/approach** – *The authors adopted a qualitative methodology using semi-structured interviews to managers or owners of 14 restaurants in a big city in Northern Italy.*

**Findings** – *The theoretical framework suggests that social media could be strategically used for different aims by relying on specific capabilities and competencies. The authors tested it and found that, though nowadays restaurant managers mainly focus on a narrow set of social media competencies linked to relational and marketing capabilities, some also rely on social media to promote organizational change and innovation.*

**Originality/value** – *The authors propose a theoretical framework and preliminary evidence on capabilities and competencies declined for the food service sector. The model considers different uses of social media and related capabilities and competencies by mapping them accordingly to their strategic use. The authors preliminarily validate our framework and highlight the competencies possessed by the restaurant managers of our sample and their alignment with the strategic use of social media.*

**Keywords** *Restaurants, Competencies, Capabilities, Social media, Food service sector, Qualitative research*

**Paper type** *Research paper*

## Introduction

"Jamie's Italian" franchise restaurants are facing collapse. Marina O'Loughlin's review of one "Jamie's Italian" restaurant in the Sunday Times was merciless and eight months after, the celebrity chef's eponymous chain went into administration, putting 1,000 jobs at risk. The reasons were many, but one of the most relevant was the bad reviews that "Jaime's Italian" received on online platforms [1].

Such as in the tourism sector, in the food service social media (henceforth SM) technology has resulted in the arise and growth of a myriad of online platforms that share diners' experiences (Munar, 2012). As a result of SM platforms, consumers can now digitalize their experience, with comments or photos and publish them on the web, sharing them with thousands of people around the world. What used to be personal storytelling and word-of-mouth (WOM) communication about restaurant experience has now been transformed into

a potentially global e-WOM (Dellarocas, 2003), thus exponentially increasing the competition for very small restaurants too. Furthermore, these platforms are nowadays highly widespread and the surge of food bloggers and influencers is now a growing trend that further increases the popularity of SM platforms in the food sector (Munar, 2012). Today's complex restaurant environments (because of a multitude of intermediaries, i.e. SM platforms), the extensive competition that not only big restaurant chains but also small restaurants must face and the sharing of food opinions and photos in a constant co-creation process, have made the food service sector particularly challenging. Consequently, restaurants managers now need to rethink their organizational capabilities, competencies and strategic use of SM (Tussyadiah and Fesenmaier, 2009).

Despite the relevance of SM, organizations still do not fully profit from them. This is mainly due to the lack of resources (e.g. time) and necessary capabilities and competencies to effectively use different SM platforms accordingly with the organizational aims and keep up with their constant transformation (Roy and Dionne, 2016). Investigating the gap of capabilities and competencies needed to properly manage SM in the food and beverage sector can be a relevant topic both for academics and practitioners. Indeed, despite the increasing diffusion of SM, managers are still uncertain about how to best exploit them according to their main strategy, thus using them as a source of competitive advantage (Macnamara and Zeffass, 2012).

So far, the hospitality literature has mainly focused on the prosumers' (producer and consumers) use of SM and the reputation spread through them, the comparison among different SM platforms and how and why organizations use SM for marketing or communication (Xiang *et al.*, 2017). However, a savvy and competent use of these platforms and the recognition of those organizational capabilities that are central to the exploitation of SM as a strategic tool could generate value and competitive advantage for hospitality organizations. Furthermore, previous research mainly focused on the use of SM in the tourism sector, while the food and beverage one is still insufficiently investigated (Fox and Longart, 2016). We can assume that there are specific capabilities and competencies strictly inherent to the food and beverage sector, as the products, time management and widespread evaluations are somehow different from *hôtellerie*. To identify them, we propose to merge the capabilities and competencies of the food and beverage sector with the SM ones.

Our research questions are therefore the following:

- Q1. Which capabilities and competencies are needed to exploit SM in the food and beverage service sector?
- Q2. Which capabilities and competencies support different strategic uses of SM?

To answer our research questions, we develop a theoretical framework that shows the possible different strategies of SM use. Each of them requests a specific set of capabilities and competencies.

To provide a first validation of our framework, we performed an exploratory empirical study that involved owners and managers of 14 restaurants. Through semi-structured interviews, we analyzed individual competencies that interviewees declared and perceived as relevant for the strategic use of SM. As we rely on micro and small enterprises, where the restaurant's owner and their few employees are the "core" of the firm, those individual competencies can be transferred to a higher level of investigation, i.e. the organizational level. Organizational competencies are comprised among the components of organizational capabilities (Zehir *et al.*, 2006). In the present work, we attempt to draft a more comprehensive map of the useful capabilities and competencies that restaurant managers need to fulfill their strategic use of SM.

## Theoretical framework

### *Capabilities and competencies in managing social media*

According to the resource-based view, each firm is conceived as a set of heterogeneous specific resources – tangible and intangible – and capabilities (Barney, 1991). The presence of resources, which are unique or rare, valuable, inimitable, not easily transferable or exchangeable, may lead to a sustainable competitive advantage for the firm controlling them (Barney, 1991; Dierickx and Cool, 1989). Capabilities relate to the organizational ability to use, combine and recombine them in creative ways. Organizational capability is defined as a “firm’s ability to repeatedly perform a productive task, which relates either directly or indirectly to a firm’s capacity to create value through effecting the transformation of inputs into outputs” (Grant, 1996, p. 377).

However, having resources and capabilities is not enough to guarantee the firm’s success. Competitive advantage derives from distinctive resources or capabilities that the firm controls, as they allow the firm to excel in a certain domain in comparison with its competitors (De Saa-Perez and Garcia-Falcon, 2002).

Capabilities are not synonymous of competencies, namely, competencies refer to knowledge, skills, abilities, attitudes, motives, traits and characteristics desirable or necessary for individuals to perform a job. For example, in the hospitality industry crucial competencies are interpersonal skills, supervisory skills, planning, organizing and controlling (Johanson *et al.*, 2011; Suh *et al.*, 2012). Competencies can pertain both to a person and to an organization (Hamel and Prahalad, 1990). Organizational competencies combine knowledge and skills and capture the sum of knowledge across individual skill sets and organizational units (King *et al.*, 2001).

The concept of “capability” refers to the organizational level and is more comprehensive than “competence”, as, besides the latter, it includes strategy orientation and the connection between resources and skills (Zehir *et al.*, 2006). Capabilities can be classified in ordinary or “zero-level” capabilities – those that permit a firm to “make a living” in the short term – and dynamic capabilities, i.e. those that operate to extend, change or create ordinary capabilities (Barreto, 2010). A “dynamic capability” is “the firm’s ability to integrate, build, and reconfigure internal and external competencies to address rapidly changing environments” (Teece, Pisano and Shuen, 1997, p. 516). It is “the capacity of an organization to purposefully create, extend or modify its resource base” (Helfat *et al.*, 2007, p. 1). Organizations can thus rely both on ordinary and dynamic capabilities and the related resources, skills and competencies as a source of competitive advantage. Nevertheless, they should carefully choose and implement those capabilities that are the most relevant for their strategic purpose and learn to reconfigure existent capabilities to deal with changes (King *et al.*, 2001; Teece, 2007).

Nowadays, in the digital economy, firms conceive their role less within industries and more within business ecosystems, where organizations and customers work together to create and sustain markets and products (Teece, 2017). Digital platforms, which include SM, are tools that enable the development of digital ecosystems where organizations, users and firms’ stakeholders virtually meet, influence each other and co-evolve. Consequently, the evolution of the organization’s capabilities is necessary to manage their digital ecosystem and to effectively exploit SM platforms. Such a change of contextual conditions surrounding companies entails the revision of the organization’s ordinary and dynamic capabilities. In particular, dynamic capabilities are relevant for managing platforms and their associated ecosystems because they may help in anticipating changes and adjusting business models (Teece, 2017).

To our knowledge, it is not clear, which capabilities, both ordinary and dynamic, are the most useful for the full exploitation of SM platforms according to their strategic role for the organization strategy. For the present study, we resort to research that considers some

capabilities as appropriate for the effective use of SM platforms. However, to our knowledge, there is no study that organically maps all the capabilities useful for a strategic use of SM, especially in the food and beverage sector. Furthermore, as capabilities include individual competencies, resources, practices, strategy orientation and the ability to exploit competencies and resources to accomplish goals (Aral and Weill, 2007; Zehir *et al.*, 2006), we rely on the few studies about individual competencies to manage SM to understand how these can be used to build capabilities and thus, obtain a competitive advantage in the digital ecosystem.

Therefore, to develop ordinary and dynamic capabilities it is important to develop employees' competencies. Following the theory and coherently with the goal of this study, we focus not only on capabilities but also on the workers' specific competencies in the efficient use of SM.

Table 1 is a summary of the capabilities and the related individual competencies that the literature highlights as the most relevant to SM as strategic tools.

Among digital capabilities, the ownership, protection and utilization of technological assets are key differentiators among firms and a source of competitive advantage (Teece *et al.*, 1997). Key digital capabilities in SM management (henceforth SMM) are related to three main areas, namely:

1. search engine optimization (SEO) activities, that is, the process of increasing the quality and quantity of website traffic and visibility in a search engine (Baye *et al.*, 2016);
2. big data analytics, requiring IT-specialists, e.g. big data specialists and data scientists (Gandomi and Haider, 2015); and
3. SM features. Regarding the latter, a savvy use of SM platforms can be a key differentiator, but managers should be aware that SM platforms are not a unique entity.

On the contrary, they differ in features and potentialities (Dossena, 2012), for example, forums enable a more bi-directional communication than social bookmarking platforms. Therefore, firms should develop online social networking skills specific for the digital platform in use. Online social network skills consist in:

- understanding the technological properties that specifically enable social interactions; and
- knowing the practices that increase interactivity (Hsieh, 2012).

Several authors highlight the relevance of having adequate relational capabilities and communication and listening competencies such as the ability to create buzz through viral messages, for example, with short lists of very popular topics (Kirby and Marsden, 2006). In literature, listening competencies are mainly explored in two research fields. One strand focuses on competencies and personality traits describing a good listener; Maben and Gearhart (2018) concentrate on empathic listening behaviors (Bodie, 2011) such as giving pertinent responses, elaboration, offering advice and opinions and answering/asking questions. On the other hand, IS literature explores the IT tools that support web monitoring (Francesconi and Dossena, 2012).

SM are also frequently related to marketing purposes (Felix *et al.*, 2017). Marketing capability is defined as the "integrative process designed to apply the collective knowledge, skills and resources of the firm to the market-related needs of the business, enabling the business to add value to its goods and services and meet competitive demands" (Zehir *et al.*, 2006, p. 111). Among others, competencies in search engine marketing (SEM) are particularly useful (Dou *et al.*, 2010). SEM is a form of online marketing that involves the promotion of websites by increasing their visibility in search engine results pages (SERPs) primarily through paid advertising. Other useful competencies are related to

**Table 1** Main capabilities and competencies related to social media management

<i>Capabilities</i>	<i>Competences</i>	<i>Description</i>
Technological/digital capabilities	-Technological skills -Understanding of SM goals, features and functionalities	-Ability to use SEO and other tools -Understanding of technological properties of the different social media -Ability to coherently use different and specific social media in accordance with the company's goals
Relational capabilities	-Communication (both written and oral) -Listening -Web monitoring	-Content development/writing and ability to create viral messages -Information synthesis -Subject/content knowledge -Empathetic listening -Familiarity with web monitoring tools -Use of web monitoring as a listening tool and to answer coherently
Marketing and customer relationship management capabilities	-Marketing and digital marketing skills -Customer relationship management -Modelling/analysis for strategic marketing	-Ability to use Search engine marketing (SEM) and other marketing competences -Ad hoc communication with customers and general advertisement communications -Analysis and interpreting data shared within online communities for a strategic marketing management
Upper management capabilities	-Strategic decision-making ability -Leadership skills -Project management ability -Online reputation management -Time management	-Ability to define the major strategic moves of a firm -Ability to manage uncertainty -Flexibility, adaptability, problem solving open mind -Teamwork/collaboration skills -Online event management -Crisis management and negotiation -Reputational risk management and e-WOM management
Business and strategic capabilities	-Modelling/analysis -Critical thinking -Knowledge exploration and exploitation -Business understanding	-Problem-solving, analysis skills and strategic thinking -Integrate knowledge shared within a social community -Creativity, intellectual curiosity, flexibility, adaptability and an open mind to interpret trends in an original and unexpected way -Rigor and attention to details to efficiently exploit SM -Improving strategy, products/services and processes -Ability to integrate social media in the business strategy for gaining a competitive advantage
Innovation capabilities	-Innovativeness -Continuous learning and social learning -Knowledge co-creation -Knowledge sharing, exploration and exploitation -Absorptive capacity	-Ability to rapidly develop and introduce new and differentiated products and services -Creativity and intellectual curiosity -Flexibility, adaptability and open mind -Anticipate and recognize changes, create, acquire and share knowledge
Dynamic capabilities	-Knowledge reconfiguration -Change management -Absorptive capacity	-Adjust the business model and reconfigure and integrate current capabilities -Anticipate and recognize changes, create, acquire and share knowledge

communication and modelling/analysis activities. Communication competencies are particularly useful for the customer relationship management (McGowan *et al.*, 2001). The modelling/analysis competencies are related to the ability to interpret data shared within online communities for strategic marketing management (Cravens and Piercy, 2006).

Upper management capability refers to strategic decision-making, i.e. defining the major strategic moves of a firm (Zehir *et al.*, 2006). It relies on leadership and on competencies such as the ability to manage uncertainty, flexibility, adaptability, problem-solving and open-mindedness (Evans, 1991). Among management capabilities, project management

capabilities are mostly related to event management, teamwork and collaboration skills (Tench and Moreno, 2015). Online reputation management, which requires adequate competencies in crisis management and reputational risk management (Berthon *et al.*, 2012), is another critical issue (Dijkmans *et al.*, 2015). Indeed, the internet facilitates the virulent diffusion of negative comments and opinions about a firm's reputation (Wiedmann *et al.*, 2007).

Regarding the strategic area, the literature mainly focuses on the integration and exploitation of SM for gaining a competitive advantage. Critical thinking or its related concepts – i.e. problem-solving, analysis skills and strategic thinking – are crucial for strategic SMM (McCleneghan, 2006). Modelling/analysis competencies and critical thinking are also pivotal for the integration of knowledge shared within a social community in business processes, as they enable organizations to understand and interpret trends and link them to business (Tench and Moreno, 2015; D'Angelo, 2010). On the one hand, these analytic capabilities require creativity, intellectual curiosity, flexibility, adaptability and an open mind to interpret trends in an original and unexpected way (exploration activities). On the other, a deep understanding of the business, methodological rigor and attention to details are needed to efficiently exploit the new knowledge for improving strategy, products/services and processes.

To reach a competitive advantage, organizations also need innovation capabilities. Product/service capabilities emerge from different functions, resources, skills and expertise of the firm. The ability to rapidly develop and introduce new products and services is a source of competitive advantage (Zehir *et al.*, 2006). In this sense, SM enable the monitoring of competitors' products and services, as well as customers' needs (He *et al.*, 2013), thus becoming a useful tool to support innovation capabilities. Knowledge exploration and exploitation, innovativeness and absorptive capacity (Cohen and Levinthal, 1990) are core competencies related to innovation capability, as suggested in the literature on open innovation and crowdsourcing (Ooms *et al.*, 2015). Indeed, in open innovation and crowdsourcing activities firms exploit shared knowledge and online communities to improve their innovation capabilities (Svetlik *et al.*, 2007). However, to efficiently exploit knowledge sharing firms should develop suitable levels of absorptive capacity, as described in the previous paragraph. Many authors explore the processes and mechanisms behind social and cooperative learning within an online community and the related issues of knowledge collaboration and co-creation (Faraj, Jarvenpaa and Majchrzak, 2011).

When firms are able to constantly change their resource-base through the exploitation of the digital ecosystem, they own dynamic capabilities (Teece, 2017) directed at effectively manage SM platforms. The strategic use of SM may lead to the anticipation, recognition of changes, creation, acquirement and sharing of knowledge to respond to opportunities and threats arising and spreading on the SM and may finally enable the adjustment of the business model and the reconfiguration and integration of current capabilities.

### ***Capabilities and competencies in the hospitality sector: a framework proposal***

In the hospitality context, research aimed at identifying the relevant capabilities and competencies started during the 1990s and adopted different frameworks (Sandwith's, (1993), competency-domain model). However, studies about the relevant capabilities that the hospitality firms, especially restaurants, can use to effectively exploit SM as a tool for competitive advantage are scarce and not systematized. Ayeh *et al.* (2012) explored Hong Kong practitioners' perceptions of SM in the tourism industry concluding that organizations apply a variety of strategies in day-to-day management, namely, they use a range of SM platforms to maintain high exposure toward potential and existing customers, they continuously update the company's account to ideally raise the users' interest, they assign a staff member to deal with enquiries and comments and they post good reviews to maintain a positive image and online reputation. However, the capabilities, competencies and

personal attributes, which are useful for the adoption of an informed specific strategy in managing SM remain unclear.

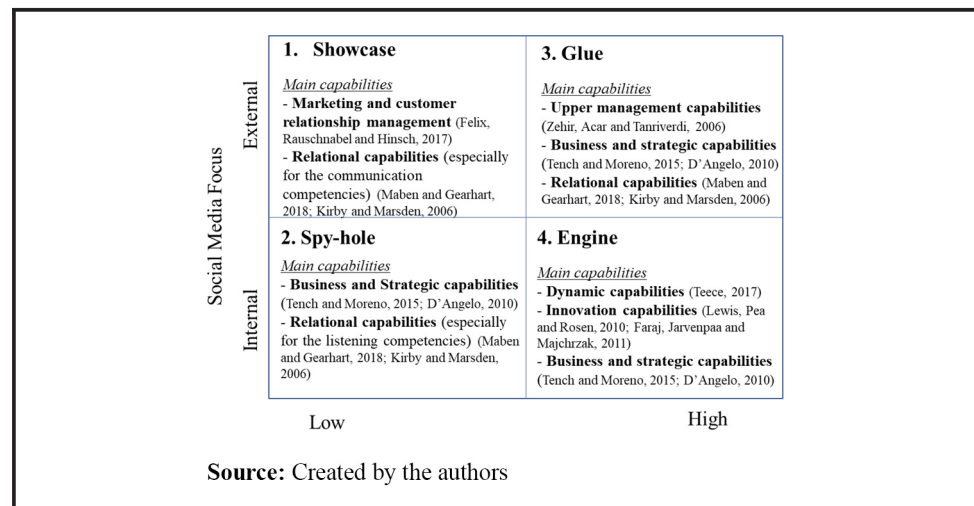
Therefore, we review research about SM use in the hospitality sector and the associated capabilities and propose a framework that can contribute to systematize the relevant capabilities for a strategic use of SM (Figure 1).

In our framework, we consider two main dimensions, namely, the first is the SM focus, which can be mainly internal – i.e. to fulfill internal purposes such as exploiting customers' suggestions for improving the restaurant offer or e-recruiting processes – or external such as spreading a culinary culture on a new cooking technique (e.g. molecular gastronomy). The second dimension refers to how central SM are in restaurant strategy. The alternatives for this dimension are, therefore, either high, if the restaurant strategy and source of competitive advantage rely on SM or low, if the restaurant owners consider SM a complementary asset. Four combinations stem from the intersection of these two dimensions.

The first combination, labeled “showcase”, refers to restaurants using SM with an external focus and as a tool with low strategic importance for the firm’s competitive advantage. In the literature, authors explore the use of SM especially for customer-relations and for marketing purposes (Baird and Parasnis, 2011). Supplier-related studies in the tourism and hospitality sectors (Schmallegger and Carson, 2008) have closely concentrated on the role of SM in supporting marketing capabilities – especially promotion (Leung et al., 2011) – and communication capabilities, both internal and external to the organizational boundaries (Pantelidis, 2010). Hence, in this category, the capabilities used, besides the technological ones, are those related to communication and marketing.

The second combination, labeled “spy-hole”, refers to restaurants that mainly adopt a passive role in SM use. By analyzing comments on online communities such as TripAdvisor, organizations can better understand what their guests like and dislike about them and their competitors besides monitoring the competitors’ strategy and behavior. In this case, SM are relegated to a monitoring role and used as a benchmarking tool. SM are not a source of competitive advantage and the focus is internal, as companies acquire information to gain insights into how they could improve their business by also taking into consideration the competitors’ strategy. Although the literature does not specify the most relevant capabilities involved, we could hypothesize that strategic capabilities are needed to enable organizations to understand and interpret trends and link them to their business (Tench and Moreno, 2015; D’Angelo, 2010). In this case, web monitoring and analysis/synthesis

**Figure 1** Framework



competencies are pivotal, as a fast identification of the most significant information among the vast amount of web contents is important (Francesconi and Dossena, 2015).

In the third combination, labeled “glue”, restaurants use SM with an external focus, but their relevance for the firm success is very high. When firms recognize the digital ecosystem as crucial for their success, they spend a lot of time and resources (i.e. dedicated people) in creating and managing long-term relationships with their “digital stakeholders”. In this case, the restaurants use SM to create a strong online community around the firm or around a topic (e.g. a specific type of cooking, a regional cuisine, etc.). The upper management capability and strategic capabilities – and the related competences (especially leadership, critical thinking and time management) – seem useful to exploit SM as a tool to engage current and potential customers, suppliers and competitors. Therefore, relational capabilities are essential too. Restaurants should also take care of adequate individual characteristics – i.e. ethics and integrity, tolerance for change and openness to new ideas – related to these capabilities (Chung-Herrera *et al.*, 2003; Suh *et al.*, 2012).

Finally, in the fourth combination, SM are used as a strategic “engine”, as organizations analyze information and exploit shared knowledge across different online communities, internalize it and consistently organize and improve their internal processes or create new products/services. As SM effect changes in the creation process of online content – from organization controlled content to content, which is an expression of the users’ interaction and participation (Munar, 2012) – they can be used as knowledge sharing tools allowing for the combination of internal capabilities (i.e. those possessed by the firm) with external ones. In particular, socialization through SM can facilitate the exchange of tacit knowledge through joint activities, namely, exchanging thoughts, brainstorming and sharing experiences. Socialization takes advantage of customers and suppliers’ tacit knowledge. Through internalization, explicit and tacit external knowledge is shared throughout the organization and converted into or combined with internal tacit knowledge (Nonaka *et al.*, 2000). Shamim *et al.* (2017) emphasized the usefulness of SM platforms for knowledge sharing (both internal and external) and they highlighted other core capabilities needed to effectively exploit SM as a strategic “engine”. These are knowledge-oriented leadership, innovation capability, ability to share information. To enhance the process of knowledge sharing and innovation capability, hospitality firms need to use SM to convert the tacit knowledge of employees into organizational knowledge by transferring it into the organizational memory (Shamim *et al.*, 2017) and to internalize external knowledge within organizations. Crowdsourcing is a good example of how firms can gain advantage from the knowledge shared within an online community to nourish and strengthen their innovation capabilities (Feller *et al.*, 2012). When innovation and constant change are at the core of competitive advantage, firms can also develop dynamic capabilities. In this case, SM become relevant tools to obtain a competitive advantage as they can help to constantly change the business and effectively take advantage of both internal and external resources. The use of dynamic capabilities can support organizations in exploiting SM to notice changes, share, acquire and create knowledge by combining organizational and users’ knowledge, by integrating and reconfiguring resources to exploit market-based opportunities or overcome possible threats (Teece, 2007).

## Methodology

We adopted an exploratory research approach consistent with a qualitative method (Trauth, 2001). The interpretative qualitative method was used because of its strengths in providing insights into individual experiences and life settings (Walsham, 2006). In particular, a case study research strategy was used (Yin, 2017) and was motivated by the aim to increase the empirical knowledge on capabilities, competencies and individual characteristics needed for SMM in the food service sector. The empirical investigation took place in 14 restaurants in Milan, one of the most well-known Northern Italian cities in the key tourism generating



markets (De Carlo *et al.*, 2009). In Italy, most of the food service sector businesses are SMEs. Therefore, a sample of SMEs was recruited to investigate whether and how they approach SM (Table 2). We sent an invitation to the interview to 57 restaurants, which had agreed to participate in a previous research on their customers' habits in using SM for choosing a restaurant. Among these, 57, 14 accepted to take part to the interview. Even though this auto-selection may generate biases, we believe this sample can be useful for our research aims. As we were interested in understanding the relevant organizational capabilities and individual competencies used or perceived as useful to manage SM, it was consistent to involve a sample of restaurant managers and owners who use SM for their business, albeit with different strategies. Hence, we focus only on restaurants that are interested in SM use for their business activity.

All the restaurants are in the same geographical area and are, thus, comparable in terms of customers, location and expenses. By analyzing *ex post* the SM pages of these restaurants (i.e. TripAdvisor, Google rating, Facebook, Just Eat, Deliveroo), we found that all the 14 were sufficiently active online – with an institutional account on at least three different digital platforms – and sufficiently successful in terms of online reputation [with feedback ratings higher than 4 (out of 5) on Google Ratings, Facebook, Tripadvisor, Just Eat and Deliveroo and higher than 8 (out of 10) on TheFork].

The main data sources are semi-structured interviews. All interviews took place face-to-face and were performed from April to May 2019. The interviews were digitally recorded and fully transcribed. We interviewed one person for each restaurant, either the owner or the restaurant manager who, etc, are in charge of managing the restaurant SM pages. Table 2 shows information about each restaurant (type of cuisine, average cost, number of employees, main SM used) and data about the interviewees (role, age, gender). The average age of the interviewees is 45, with a minimum of 30 and a maximum of 66.

The interviews lasted between 12 and 28 min. Respondents were asked about their familiarity with SM platforms, their use of SM, the competencies that they think allow them to best exploit SM and changes in their SM activity. These questions allowed us to understand their perceptions about SM and the capabilities and individual competencies that they value the most, by interpreting both what they explicitly declared and implicitly revealed when answering questions not strictly related to SM capabilities.

To analyze the semi-structured interviews, we adopted Gioia's methodology to assess qualitative rigor (Gioia *et al.*, 2013) and to aggregate the concepts in macro themes and dimensions. In addition, we performed a frequency analysis of the first-order concepts to understand, which competencies are perceived as relevant according to the different SM strategic use.

## Results and discussion

Table 3 illustrates the systematization of the interviews by showing the capabilities and competencies the interviewees revealed as fundamental in effectively exploiting SM for their business. We unified the capabilities, which emerged from the interviews in seven aggregate dimensions corresponding to the main capabilities found in the literature (Table 1). Furthermore, Table 3 shows the frequency analysis of the first-order concepts, thus identifying which capabilities and competencies are perceived as the most relevant to be a successful restaurant.

### *Technological/digital capabilities*

All the restaurant managers and owners acknowledged technological/digital capabilities, at least at a basic level, as necessary to use SM effectively. Interviewees highlighted the need to have basic knowledge about the functionalities of different SM platforms and were aware

**Table 2** Sample

Name	Typology	Organization			Digital platforms used	Role	Interviewed			Duration
		Average cost (dinner)	No. of employees				Age	Gender	Education	
$\alpha$	Vegan cuisine	€25-50	Less than 10		Facebook, Tripadvisor, Google ratings and The Fork	Account manager	54	M	Marketing and sales school	21 min
$\beta$	French creperie	€10-25	Less than 10		Facebook, Tripadvisor, Google ratings, The Fork and Deliveroo	Owner	49	M	Meitré crepiere graduate	18 min
$\gamma$	Italian restaurant	€25-50	Less than 10		Facebook, Tripadvisor and Google ratings	Owner	34	F	Degree in law	19 min
$\delta$	Italian restaurant	More than €50	Between 11 and 25		Facebook, Tripadvisor, Google ratings and The Fork	Owner	52	M	Middle school	16 min
$\varepsilon$	Italian restaurant	€25- 50	Less than 10		Facebook, Tripadvisor and Google ratings	Owner	66	M	Degree in finance	19 min
U	Regional cuisine	€25- 50	Less than 10		Facebook, Tripadvisor and Google ratings	Owner	61	M	Graduation in programmer RPG II	23 min
$\zeta$	Pizzeria	Less than €10	Less than 10		Facebook, Tripadvisor and Google ratings	Owner	52	M	scientific high school	18 min
$\eta$	Ethnic cuisine	€10-25	Less than 10		Facebook, Tripadvisor, Google ratings and The Fork	Owner	48	M	Degree in economics	28 min
$\theta$	Italian restaurant	More than €50	Between 11 and 25		Facebook, Tripadvisor, Google ratings and The Fork	Owner	30	M	NA	15 min
$\iota$	Italian restaurant	€25-€50	Less than 10		Facebook, Tripadvisor, Google ratings, The Fork and Just Eat	Owner	37	M	Degree in economics (marketing)	13 min
$\kappa$	Italian restaurant/pizzeria	€10-25	Between 11 and 25		Facebook, Tripadvisor and Google ratings	Owner	48	M	Master in business management techniques	12 min
$\lambda$	Pizzeria	Less than €10	Less than 10		Facebook, Tripadvisor, Google ratings, Just Eat and Deliveroo	Owner	31	M	Master in management and business consulting	17 min
My	Gourmet cuisine	€10-25	Less than 10		Facebook, Tripadvisor, Google ratings and Deliveroo	Owner	31	M	Degree in economics	17 min
Ny	Pizzeria gourmet	€10-25	More than 26		Facebook, Tripadvisor, Google ratings and The Fork	Restaurant manager	NA	M	Graduation in technical expert for tourism	15 min

**Table 3** Relevant competencies for restaurants managers and frequency analysis

Frequency	First order concepts	Second order themes	Aggregate dimensions
6	Ability to use the most common social media (Facebook, LinkedIn and Tripadvisor)	Awareness about the characteristics and differences of social media	Technological/digital capabilities
10	Appropriateness in using different social media depending on the purpose and content to share		
10	Different communication style is needed depending on the social media used	Language coherency	Relational capabilities
1	Coherency of content among different social media		
4	Different communication style is needed depending on the type of customer addressed (e.g. informal communication with millennials)	Message efficacy	
4	Different communication depending on the content of the message		
2	Different communication depending on the typology of the restaurants (e.g. Fastfood, Haute cuisine)		
13	Communication must be clear, strict to the point, brief, linear		
3	Communication must show sincerity and transparency	Storytelling	
2	Communication must attract consumers with charm and charisma		
1	Ability to create valuable and useful contents for users	Listening	
2	Communicate the story of the restaurant		
1	Create a story about the restaurant that could be not only informational but also emotional	Customers understanding	Marketing and customer relationship management capabilities
12	Widespread web monitoring (consumers and suppliers) to improve answer consistency		
2	“Diplomatic” communication to manage customers’ issues	Customers management processes	
6	Segment customers in different typologies to better communicate with them		
6	Understanding the needs and will of different customers	Brand identity	Upper management capabilities
2	Use of CRM		
1	Building brand identity among employees	Time management	
3	Spreading brand identity		
1	Awareness about the restaurant distinctive strengths	Leadership	
2	Time scheduling of posts		
2	Timely update of information and replies on social media	Online reputation management	
3	Cultural change to promote the use of SM as a strategic tool		
2	Open mind and flexibility to manage SM and to promote their use among employees	Knowledge integration	Business and strategic capabilities
2	Appropriately and politely answer to negative comments		
11	Ability to detect and reveal fake reviews obtaining competitive advantage		
2	Strategic use of comments and reviews to improve internal competencies		

*(continued)*

**Table 3**

<i>Frequency</i>	<i>First order concepts</i>	<i>Second order themes</i>	<i>Aggregate dimensions</i>
3	Interpret new trends concerning food, service and location displayed by competitors or consumers and adapt to them	Interpreting and managing trends	
1	Ability to recognize competitors' best practices on social media	Recognition of best practices	Innovation capabilities
1	Ability to imitate and copy the social media strategies the best restaurants are implementing	Implementation of best practices	
6	Attentiveness to food and service quality because of comments and pictures	Food and service quality and creativity	
2	Effort to obtain the "aha effect" and surprise		
4	Effort to realize visually creative plates		
2	Redesign processes by looking at reviews and comments	Organizational change	Dynamic capabilities
2	Managing internal interdependencies		

that choosing the appropriate SM for the restaurant and communication goals is essential to exploit the specific technological differences among SM:

Basic knowledge about how different SM work is the base to manage them, they have different technical tools and different audiences (e.g. Instagram is for Gen Z, while Facebook for Millennials and Baby Boomers), so you have to take that into account when using them (Mi):

### *Relational capabilities*

Respondents considered communication as a core competency, in particular they focused on language coherency and message efficacy.

Language coherency refers to the attention paid to the use of different communication styles according to the SM platform, the content of the message and the customers who will read it. For example, the use of LinkedIn is associated with formal communication, as it mainly reaches professionals, while Facebook is used for more informal communication, e. g. to promote new menus or deals. Different SM and language styles involve different jokes, slogans and photos. It also depends on the type of restaurant, namely, an elegant restaurant usually adopts a more formal type of communication than a fast-food one.

There are different ways to communicate. When you use Instagram stories you have to adopt a more relaxed and informal type of communication, when you use LinkedIn posts you have to use a more formal language. The language style impact the strength and appropriateness of the message (Beta).

Restaurant managers are aware that coherent information needs to be published on their SM pages. However, sometimes they struggle to achieve information consistency.

One of the first things to do is update all the SM platforms, and be coherent with the information given (Theta).

Respondents also mentioned the ideal characteristics of effective messages, namely, clarity, linearity, sincerity and transparency, charisma and surprise. Moreover, the message must contain valuable information.

It is better to write truthful messages, to show transparency and avoid possible critics (U).

Furthermore, listening capabilities were also relevant for the interviewees, in particular, monitoring SM pages can improve the understanding of customers and suppliers' needs and increase the ability to respond consistently.

Lastly, some restaurant managers highlighted the need of good storytelling about the restaurant and its activity, not only to improve the informational communication but also the emotional one.

Communication does not mean only giving useful information, but also relying on emotions to increase our relationship with customers. We need to be able to tell a good story about our restaurant and what we do every day (Alpha).

### ***Marketing and customer relationship management capabilities***

Most of the respondents stressed the importance of having adequate marketing and customers relationship management (CRM) capabilities. Some restaurant managers rely on external SM managers or a SM agency for marketing purposes, while others internalize the SMM activities. Even though the strategies (internalization and externalization) are alternatives all restaurants managers agreed on the relevance of these capabilities. Some of them argued that, given the relevance of SMM activities, they prefer to manage them personally; others, on the contrary, admitted to relying on professional partners, as they do not possess the adequate marketing and CRM capabilities. Additionally, few restaurants also use CRM tools. The majority of restaurants are aware of the necessity to segment customers and use SM in a different way accordingly.

Furthermore, few of them recognized the need to have diplomatic and negotiation abilities to better manage customer-related issues and requests.

You have to learn how to deal with customers in a diplomatic way so not lose customers or potential customers who can decide to avoid your restaurant based on your disrespectful behavior and online communication (Eta).

### ***Upper management capabilities***

Our sample identified online reputation management as a core-competency to resolve conflicts smoothly, detect fake comments and reviews, provide polite answers to discrediting fake reviews, thus, obtaining visibility and competitive advantage.

It is important to recognize fake reviews. They are usually very general or they report facts that we do not remember or meals that we do not have on the menu. Then, it is important to answer and demonstrate that those reviews are unreliable (Alpha).

Some of the interviewees were also aware that there are tricks related to time management that can increase the visibility of posts. One is, for example, posting at a specific time or carefully plan the frequency of a new post.

Time scheduling of posts on SM is something that you have to plan in advance if you want to use them effectively (Heta).

To engage potential customers, it is essential to know the restaurant's distinctive strengths and how to promote them. Consequently, managers need to build a strong brand identity so that customers can easily recognize it. This also helps them to engage and retain employees and strengthen inclusion in the organizational culture. Building and spreading a strong brand identity, coherent among different SM, is a way to use SM as relevant and strategic tools for restaurants.

It is essential to be aware about the restaurant's strengths (e.g. appealing location, particular food.) and be able to show and communicate them to the customers (Beta).

We have built a strong brand identity and we are aware of the importance of communicating it outside the restaurant and sharing it with the customers. However, it is also important to constantly re-state it within our team (Mi).

Lastly, leadership is perceived as fundamental to the promotion of SM strategic use, as a leader should promote a culture that is open and flexible to the use of new technologies, allowing employees to use and experiment with SM and considering platforms as a possible source of competitive advantage and not as a mandatory requirement.

SM should not be seen as something that we have to use because everyone does and we have to keep up with our competitors, we -as restaurant managers- have the power to change these narrow-minded visions and promote the use of SM as a strategic tool for the entire organization (Kappa).

### ***Business and strategic capabilities***

SM can be used strategically to improve the business by interpreting new trends concerning food, service and location displayed by competitors or customers and by adapting to them. Moreover, SM provide comments and reviews for internal purposes, which are useful to improve competencies such as product developments. Thus, SM are considered a source of knowledge and are used to integrate this new knowledge into the restaurant's knowledge-base.

By carefully reading comments and reviews, we are able to understand our weaknesses and improve the quality of our products and service. Customers are now experts about restaurants because they use them more frequently and they follow famous chef TV shows, so they can have a competent discussion and share knowledge (Ni).

### ***Innovation capabilities***

In a constantly changing environment where customers' needs and desires change rapidly, also at the pace of "haute cuisine" TV shows, the ability to offer a constantly updated service is perceived as really significant, especially in the competitive area of Milan. The high level of competition among restaurants on SM leads some of them to improve their plating aesthetic while pushing their creative content. However, competitors could also be an inspiring source of knowledge and innovative outcomes. Notably, one manager stressed the importance of using SM to understand who the best players on the market are so that they can internalize, imitate and be inspired by them. Attention to food creativity, service, location and constant plates innovation are promoted by a savvy use of SM.

I only need to recognize the other restaurants' best practices in dealing with SM effectively. Once I have identified them, I simply try to replicate them in my restaurant (Beta).

### ***Dynamic capabilities***

SM could be used to manage restaurants and promote constant organizational change too, as they become useful sources of information for knowledge exploration and exploitation (Francesconi *et al.*, 2013). Restaurants with a high absorptive capacity efficiently explore and exploit knowledge shared on SM. This occurs when they acquire, recognize and assimilate valuable reviews that are then used and transformed to improve their offer. In accordance with this perspective, some managers considered SM as useful tools to acquire new knowledge that, combined with the internal one, promotes organizational change and redesigns internal processes. Customers' comments and reviews reflect the customers' evaluation and suggestions, which can be internalized to promote constructive changes in organizing activities and managing team interdependencies.

I review the comments posted on SM platforms with the staff in order to understand what went wrong and if we can change something in our way of working or in the product to meet higher standards (Kappa).

Our results confirmed the main capabilities in SMM predicted in the literature. Nevertheless, the main related competencies do not align: Table 4 compares the competencies in the literature with our results.

Most of the competencies reported in the literature are also cited by respondents as crucial for SMM activities. However, restaurants managers do not perceive modelling/analysis competencies, strategic decision-making ability and critical thinking as particularly relevant.

The results do not provide new competencies as crucial for SMM activities.

Table 5 presents the positioning of the restaurants involved in our qualitative study within the theoretical framework we have hypothesized. We positioned every restaurant following their strategic use of SM platforms and the competencies involved as it emerged from the semi-structured interviews.

It is worth noting that the four combinations in our framework can coexist, i.e. a restaurant can concurrently pursue different strategies and, therefore, develop capabilities and competencies that are related to two or more combinations of our framework. A restaurant could simultaneously use some SM for their internal focus – e.g. using LinkedIn for recruiting – and other SM for their mainly external focus – e.g. using Facebook for benchmarking activities. A restaurant can both attribute a low level of importance to some SM – e.g. a restaurant can perceive the website as a simple way for customers to reach it – and assign a strategic role to others – e.g. the restaurant's forum can be a useful way to engage customers and opinion leaders.

**Table 4** Comparison between competencies in the literature and in our sample

<i>Capabilities</i>	<i>Main competencies in literature</i>	<i>Main competencies identified by interviewees</i>
Technological/digital capabilities	Technological skills	X
	Understanding of SM goals, features and functionalities	X
Relational capabilities	Communication (both written and oral)	X
	Listening	X
Marketing and customer relationship management capabilities	Marketing and digital marketing skills	X
	Customer relationship management	X
	Modelling/analysis for strategic marketing	
Upper management capabilities	Strategic decision-making ability	
	Leadership skills	X
	Project management ability	X
	Online reputation management	X
Business and strategic capabilities	Time management	X
	Modelling/analysis	
	Critical thinking	
	Knowledge exploration and exploitation	X
Innovation capabilities	Business understanding	X
	Innovativeness	X
	Continuous learning and social learning	X
	Knowledge co-creation	X
	Knowledge sharing, exploration and exploitation	X
	Absorptive capacity	X
Dynamic capabilities	Knowledge reconfiguration	X
	Change management	X
	Absorptive capacity	X

**Table 5** The positioning of the restaurants in the framework

	<i>Showcase</i>	<i>Spy-hole</i>	<i>Glue</i>	<i>Engine</i>
$\alpha$	X	X	X	
$\beta$	X		X	X
$\gamma$	X		X	
$\delta$	X		X	
$\varepsilon$	X			
$U$	X		X	
$\zeta$	X	X	X	
$\eta$	X		X	
$\theta$	X		X	
$\iota$	X		X	
$\kappa$	X	X	X	X
$\lambda$	X	X	X	
$Mi$	X		X	
$Ni$	X		X	X

All the restaurants use SM platforms as a “showcase”, as they are essentially considered as communication and marketing tools that help them promote the restaurant and give information to the customers. Therefore, restaurants mainly rely on relational and marketing capabilities and customer relationship management ones. The interviewees focused on language coherency, message efficacy and web monitoring. In this case, SM are considered as complementary assets that help increase the business visibility to the external environment.

SM platforms are also used as “Glue” tools by most of the restaurants. These restaurants, in particular, use negotiation and leadership competencies and the ability to manage conflicts when dealing with negative or fake reviews. Furthermore, SM allow them to promote honesty and transparency in their organizational environment. They also use SM to externally promote engagement (e.g. with online initiatives such as ‘photo contests’) by developing a strong brand identity.

Only few restaurants also considered SM as a valuable tool to monitor customers, suppliers or competitors’ behaviors, thus exploiting SM as a “spy-hole”. Such information could enable the organization to evolve, but, at the moment, the restaurants in our sample seemed to remain more passive in the monitoring function, thus not fully exploiting SM, as they do not act upon the collected suggestions. In this case, SM maintain a low level of importance, although the focus is internal. Relational capabilities are perceived as essential in this combination. Only few restaurants perceive web monitoring as a critical issue.

Lastly, there are few interviewees that use SM as an “Engine” to promote organizational change and improvement. For instance, by examining comments and posts, managers can review, which work processes failed and redesign them. These restaurants evaluate suggestions and knowledge shared by the customers with the aim of internalizing them thus innovating and proposing more creative dishes and services. Lastly, they are able to recognize the best practices in using SM and effectively adopt them and exploit them.

Only one restaurant in our sample fully exploits SM by using them in all their possible functions. The SM’s potential has thus not been fully discovered by restaurant owners and managers yet, but there are signs of improvement (four restaurants use SM in at least three ways, namely, showcase, spyhole and glue).

## Conclusions

Our study has both theoretical and managerial implications. By merging the literature on SMM and on the hospitality industry, we developed and preliminary tested a theoretical



framework aimed at identifying the relevant capabilities and related competencies for the successful use of SM according to restaurants' strategic purposes. Our framework could both enrich the literature on the SM capabilities and competencies in the food service sector, which have not been sufficiently investigated and answer the call for more evidence on how to manage communication within SM in this sector (Fox and Longart, 2016). Indeed, the framework identifies the most relevant capabilities and related competencies for successfully dealing with SM in the food and beverage service sector, thus enriching both the SM and hospitality literature. From a managerial perspective, we aim to give restaurant managers and owners some useful suggestions about which capabilities and competencies they should develop according to the strategic purpose they attribute to SM. Integrating all the approaches to SM – showcase, glue, spy-hole and engine – means exploiting the full potentialities of these platforms. new can assume that not all the restaurants can invest in all the SM functions. However, we believe that restaurants could benefit from pursuing consistency among the capabilities and competencies they have, the importance they give to SM and the main strategic focus they pursue.

Finally, our study offers a contribution through the comparison between the main competencies found in the literature and the competencies that restaurant managers perceive as useful.

Although the present study proposes a systematization of competencies and capabilities, which are useful to exploit the SM potential in accordance with different strategic priorities, it is nevertheless exploratory and it involves a small number of restaurants, which does not allow for generalizability. Furthermore, the sample is composed of people who gave permission to be interviewed, so there is a high chance of auto-selection biases. Thus, our results are limited to a restricted number of restaurants that seem to be interested in the use of SM for business purposes and in acquiring more competencies to fully exploit them. This allowed us to involve respondents who have some degree of “digital capabilities” and can exploit capabilities and competencies to manage SM. Restaurants in the sample are also located in the same Italian city. This enabled a comparison, but future research should include restaurants from other locations. Finally, we have derived capabilities from the analysis of main related competencies. We are aware that besides competencies there are other elements (i.e. strategy orientation and the connection between resources and skills) that are essential ingredients for obtaining capabilities. Hence, future research could hopefully include these elements to draw more comprehensive evidence on how restaurants can develop capabilities to exploit SM successfully. Finally, we plan to investigate in future studies, which capabilities and competencies can be outsourced, also according to their strategic relevance for SM.

## Note

1. O'Loughlin, “Restaurant review: Marina O'Loughlin on Jamie's Italian, Westfield Stratford. Table Talk: a crisis in Jamie's kitchen and on the balance sheet”, September 16 2018, *The Times*, retrieved May 22, 2019

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