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Exploring the Crisis behind the Employee Experience (EX) in the Greek Hotel Sector: Preliminary Findings from a Qualitative Study

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Exploring the Crisis behind the Employee Experience (EX) in the Greek Hotel Sector: Preliminary Findings from a Qualitative Study

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Abstract. This study examines the current crisis in the Greek tourism and hospitality sector, focusing on employees' experiences amid staffing challenges. Using qualitative methods, including expert interviews and staff focus groups, we investigate the factors behind increased demand for hotel employees and low workforce response. Our preliminary findings reveal a critical situation threatening the reputation of Greek tourism services. The research highlights the importance of strategic crisis management and reputation recovery in post-pandemic Greece, emphasizing the role of both internal and external organizational crisis communication. We propose a comprehensive continuity plan, incorporating risk assessments and business impact analysis, as essential for the sector's resilience. We also emphasize the importance of stakeholder collaboration in adapting to these challenges. This study contributes to understanding crisis management in tourism, particularly regarding labor shortages and their impact on service quality.

Keywords: employee experience (EX); crisis management; qualitative research; tourism and hospitality industry; tourism reputation; reputation recovery

1. Introduction

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The Tourism and Hospitality (T&H) industry is currently undergoing unprecedented changes. The rise of digital technologies (Iranmanesh et al., 2022), global economic instability (Crespí-Cladera et al., 2021), geopolitical conflicts (Kazakova & Kim, 2021), and labor shortages in several countries (Morosan & Bowen, 2022) are among the major forces impacting this significant sector of the global economy. In this context, delivering enhanced customer experiences has become more crucial than ever, as it serves as a key differentiator in an increasingly competitive market (Sugathan & Ranjan, 2019). Furthermore, in an environment marked by economic uncertainty and labor shortages, exceptional service can mitigate operational challenges by fostering positive word-of-mouth communication and encouraging repeat business, ultimately contributing to the long-term sustainability and profitability of the industry (Cetin & Dincer, 2014; Kuppelwieser et al., 2022).

Customer experience (CX) in the T&H industry, significantly influencing guest satisfaction (Gopalan & Narayan, 2010), brand equity (Yang et al., 2015), and financial performance (Klink et al., 2021). As travelers become more discerning and their expectations evolve, the ability of a hotel to deliver personalized and memorable experiences is paramount. Berezina et al. (2016) affirmed that the performance of hotel employees is closely related to customer overall experience and satisfaction. Moreover, in a digital age where online reviews and social media can enhance both positive and negative experiences (Li et al., 2022), the quality of customer service can directly impact a hotel's visibility and appeal in the market.

Building on the importance of CX, it is equally vital to acknowledge that the quality of service provided to guests is deeply intertwined with the experiences of the employees delivering that service. Employee satisfaction can moderate customer satisfaction and purchase intention (Evanschitzky et al., 2011), while the effects of a better customer satisfaction, as a result of a better employee experience (EX), can lead to a more engaging EX (Pine II, 2020). Additionally, when employees are well-supported, motivated, and feel a sense of belonging within their workplace, they are more likely to go above and beyond in their roles, leading to higher customer satisfaction and loyalty levels (Brown & Lam, 2008).

Therefore, investing in strategies that enhance customer experience is not just a competitive advantage but a necessity for long-term growth and resilience in the hotel industry (Ali & Omar, 2014). Thus, the investment in creating a positive employee experience not only enhances operational efficiency but also reinforces the customer-centric focus of the hospitality sector, driving both employee retention and guest satisfaction (Ashton, 2018).

By emphasizing the importance of the impact of EX on CX and vice versa, this paper aims to explore the current developments in the tourism industry, focusing on the increased demand for hotel staff and the low response of the workforce in this sector in Greece, with the corresponding implications for the co-creation of CX and EX. The purpose of the present research is to diagnose and address this crisis phenomenon, along with the consequences for the image and reputation of tourism services in Greece.

In this context, qualitative research was conducted with 10 in-depth interviews with experts from hotels (luxury, resorts, 4-5 stars in Greece, with a range of employee numbers from 14-20,000+ individuals). Subsequently, a focus group was conducted with back- and front-office staff to compare and validate the data collected from the in-depth interviews with industry experts and to draw appropriate conclusions (Yang et al., 2012).

2. Literature review

2.1 Crisis Communications in Tourism

The term "crisis" comes from the Greek word "krisis," which translates to "turning point" or "decision." According to Santana (2004), a crisis is something that disrupts the normal cycle. In the context of a disaster, well-being is closely tied to the provision of basic needs, such as food, water, shelter, and security (Finsterwalder, 2010; Henderson, 2007). Elements of well-being may also include the absence of negative effects such as tension, fear, pressure, and anxiety (Kuppelwieser & Finsterwalder, 2016). Tourism and recreation play an important role in economic activity. In recent years, tourism has emerged as one of the most significant economic sectors for job creation and global socioeconomic and cultural development. It serves as a sustainable alternative approach for long-term economic viability and diversification in key sectors, as well as for sound government policies (Alnoor et al., 2020; McCabe & Qiao, 2020).

Current literature presents two approaches to crises and disasters in the hospitality industry and at the level of individual hotels. One approach focuses on business efforts to maintain operations during transformative events related to crises and disasters. Specifically, for hotel businesses, maintaining operational functions during a disaster or crisis is often described through the lens of resilience (Brown et al., 2017). Many of the narratives about the operational aspects of hotel services refer to disaster recovery plans, which are typically published as operational guides and best practice manuals distributed through professional associations (Lagiewski & Čović, 2022).

As crises alter social structures (Buckley, 2008), participants shape and are shaped by the crisis and subsequent interactions. Changing business conditions present both challenges and opportunities to continue serving customers (Niemimaa et al., 2019). Siomkos & Shrivastava (1993) argue that since crises impact virtually all aspects of businesses, a comprehensive and multidimensional response is desirable. To assess the effectiveness of business responses to crises, we define "success" as the recovery from crisis conditions with minimal damage to the organization's resources, goals, and image. By incorporating issues such as equal opportunities for employees, environmental protection, charitable support, and fair treatment of minorities (McWilliams & Siegel, 2001), a company could shield itself from crises, as the reputation built from CSR may protect the company's image.

According to (Sausmarez, 2007a) crises can be categorized into three time periods:

- Potential Crises: These are threats that may arise in the future but are neither currently evident nor existing. Identifying and considering these threats is essential for preparation should they materialize.

- Latent Crises: These are ongoing critical situations that exist but have not yet caused measurable negative effects.

- Acute Crises: These are situations where the destructive impact is clearly visible and measurable.

Laws and Prideaux (2005) further proposed a regional typology of crisis:

- At the regional level, a crisis primarily impacts the local area and possibly extends to the nation.

- At the national level, the effects become significant for the entire tourism industry of a country.

Crisis management can be either active or reactive. Active crisis management involves proactively predicting potential crises, implementing preventive measures, and preparing an action plan for future crises. In contrast, reactive crisis management focuses on addressing crises that are already occurring, latent, or acute, by managing their negative effects with appropriate crisis management tools (Waller et al., 2014).

Crisis management involves several phases (pre-crisis, during a crisis, and post-crisis) and functions (prevention, response, and recovery) (Coombs, 2021). Effective communication is vital, as how crisis-related information is shared among stakeholders impacts public opinion, market sentiment, and individual decisions (Coombs, 2021; Sellnow and Seeger, 2021).

Crises can occur due to various factors, including political unrest, terrorism, wars, natural disasters, public health threats, employee mistakes, poor management decisions, industrial accidents, strikes, and service failures, among others (Sonmez et al., 1999).

2.2 The Role of Employee Experience Management

The concept of Employee Experience Management (EXM), as outlined by Abhari et al. (2008), is pivotal in understanding the dynamics between employee satisfaction and organizational success. EXM is underpinned by three key systems: rewards, training, and empowerment, which collectively lead to outcomes such as brand experience management and experience innovation management. The empowerment of employees fosters an environment where they can respond swiftly to customer requests, leading to increased job satisfaction and more innovative contributions. This empowerment translates into warm, enthusiastic customer interactions and promotes customer loyalty (Bowen & Lawler III, 2006). Recognition systems, which aim to incentivize desirable employee behavior, constitute another critical component of EXM. These systems are closely linked with internal marketing strategies aimed at enhancing job satisfaction (Cheng, 2020; Park et al., 2020).

Employee well-being is also a significant EXM aspect, contributing to a positive EXM (Kaufman, 2008). Furthermore, research conducted by IBM Corporation and Globoforce Ltd (2016) indicates that managing EX effectively motivates employees by providing them with the necessary training and support to continuously innovate.

Workplace practices that influence EX include the environment, work, and interpersonal relationships. A supportive work environment, characterized by positive coworker relationships, enhances EX by fostering a sense of belonging and camaraderie. The concept of "meaningful work" is equally important; it refers to work that aligns with the organization's core values while allowing employees to develop their skills and talents (IBM Corporation ("IBM") and Globoforce Ltd. ("Globoforce"), 2016). Practices such as regular feedback, recognition, and opportunities for growth further enhance the EX by making employees feel valued and motivated. Giving employees a voice in the workplace and the freedom to engage in non-work activities contributes to a more positive EX.

The design of an EX strategy should be rooted in the organization's overall strategic goals, with clear, measurable objectives. It is crucial for the EX strategy to be directly linked to the organization's broader goals, including customer satisfaction, innovation, employee health and safety, and process effectiveness.

A driving force for employee performance is the clear definition of their expectations, which must be aligned with the company (expectations alignment), which is a cause of employee engagement and yields the desired results of fulfilling its goals. Each contract consists of three sub-contracts (transactional contract, psychological contract, brand contract), while all three together determine the quality of the EX (Maylett & Wride, 2017).

2.3 Demographics and Cultural Factor Influences on Employee Experience

Understanding the demographic and cultural factors that influence EX is critical for organizations aiming to optimize their workforce management strategies. According to Meyers et al. (2016) from the Deloitte Center, effectively managing EX involves segmenting employees based on demographics, roles, and performance. This segmentation allows organizations to create tailored experiences that resonate with different employee groups, thereby driving engagement and productivity. Demographic factors such as age, gender, education level, and household income can significantly influence employee experiences.

Research by Kim et al. (2010) and Mak et al. (2012) indicates that these sociodemographic factors play a role in shaping customer experiences, which can vary widely across different demographic groups. For instance, knowledge, motivations, and personality traits can significantly influence how employees interact with customers, which in turn affects the quality of the customer experience.

Cultural factors also play a significant role in shaping employee experiences. According to McColl et al. (2022), cultural factors influence the way service experiences are encoded and recalled, affecting the interpretation of these experiences. For example, cultural values and personality traits can shape the emotional responses of customers during service interactions, particularly in culturally diverse environments such as the hospitality industry (Jani & Han, 2015; Wen et al., 2018). This understanding of cultural influences is essential for organizations aiming to create a more inclusive and effective EX, which ultimately contributes to better customer service and satisfaction. Moreover, a customer's perception is shaped by various factors, including their personality traits, age, birthplace, mobility, and socio-economic background (Pigram & Dunn, 1976).

The IBM and Globoforce Ltd. study (2016) showed that employees with a high experience index are more likely to exhibit high levels of job performance. Additionally, employees with a positive EX are more likely to demonstrate significantly higher levels of discretionary-extra effort. More specifically, a positive EX can contribute to greater motivation to put in extra effort at work beyond conventional responsibilities and duties. Furthermore, employees with positive experiences are less likely to leave their jobs.

2.4 Employee Experience & Communication in Tourism Crisis Containment

According to several reports, the tourism sector in Greece is facing a crisis. Despite an 8.2% increase in international air arrivals from January to July 2024, with over 14.4 million tourists visiting the country, the situation in the hotel industry and local economy is less promising. Hotels have experienced low occupancy rates and uncertainty, leading to discounts and offers, as well as lower per capita tourist expenditures (INSETE, 02/09/2024, https://www.fortunegreece.com/article/ellinikos-tourismos-2024-oi-prosdokies-ton-esodon-kai-i-skliri-pragmatikotita/).

The level of customer-employee interaction is particularly important in high-contact industries, where employees play a direct role in shaping the CX. Wolter et al. (2019) reinforce this by showing that high levels of customer-employee contact amplify the impact of employee satisfaction on customer satisfaction. Customer and employee satisfaction are mutually reinforcing each other, creating a positive feedback loop where satisfied employees provide better service, leading to higher customer satisfaction, which in turn boosts employee morale (Zablah et al., 2016). Understanding and meeting employees' needs is therefore crucial for enhancing service quality and customer satisfaction. Satisfied employees are more likely to treat customers well, provide high-quality service, and contribute to a positive CX (Ahmed & Rafiq, 2003; Berry et al., 1976).

The psychological contract between employees and their organization is another key factor influencing customer service quality. When employees perceive that their organization is fulfilling its promises and obligations, they are more likely to exhibit high levels of customer orientation, empathy, and enthusiasm in their interactions with customers (Harris et al., 2014). This, in turn, enhances CX, leading to increased customer satisfaction and loyalty.

By understanding and optimizing EX, organizations can create a more engaged, motivated workforce that is better equipped to deliver exceptional customer service.

According to the literature review, the crisis in the Greek tourism sector, can be characterized as an acute, national-level crisis. It can be addressed through: (a) Employer Branding based on internal crisis communication, and (b) Tourism Stakeholder Collaboration Network based on external marketing communication. Both represent Reactive crisis management strategies.

2.4.1 Resilience and Recovery Strategies

Employer Branding

Internal crisis communication is crucial for building trust with employees, fostering a positive work culture, and improving job satisfaction and performance (Jo and Shim, 2005).

Employer branding (EB), combined with human resource management (HRM) practices, plays a vital role in enhancing organizational performance. EB helps create an appealing employer value proposition, differentiating a company from its competitors, while HRM practices integrate this brand internally to attract and retain talent (Zografou & Galanaki, 2024). EB reduces turnover and minimizes risks, particularly important in the hospitality sector, where talent supply is limited (Kravariti et al., 2022). Key HRM practices—such as selective staffing, training, and performance appraisals—support EB by fostering high employee commitment (Marescaux, De Winne, and Forrier 2019). In addition, strategic EB investments, like social media presence and storytelling, effectively boost company image and attract socially-conscious talent (Kemp et al., 2023) and/or enhance personal connections and performance (Partanen et al., 2008).

Tourism Stakeholder Collaboration Network

External communication during crises involves sharing information and resources from the organization to external stakeholders, such as government bodies, activists, and rescue forces. It helps coordinate the crisis response and ensures all stakeholders have a common understanding of the situation by providing accurate information (Reilly, 1998).

Carty (2021) introduces a framework for collaboration among tourism businesses and organizations to improve crisis preparedness and management through a Continuity Plan. This plan centers on building a network of stakeholders strengthening the community and tourism industry's resilience during crises.

Key crisis management strategies include Business Continuity, Emergency, Crisis Management, and Recovery Plans, tailored to the tourism sector's needs and focused on risk assessment, impact analysis, and recovery strategies.

The framework also highlights the importance of risk assessment, allowing businesses to identify and adapt to potential threats. Teams in communication and marketing ensure reliable public updates and destination promotion, fostering trust among stakeholders.

2.4.2 The Importance of Corporate Listening | VOE

Internal communication within an organization focuses on change, stress management, training, coordination, and decision-making during a crisis. It helps identify the necessary information and resources to address the situation (Lockwood, 2005). Downward communication enforces control over employees, while upward communication allows lower-level employees to provide updates and suggestions to higher management during the crisis (Reilly, 1998).

The Voice of Employees (VOE) is linked to employee engagement, satisfaction, loyalty, retention, and productivity (Bashshur, 2015; Ruck et al., 2017). VOE focuses on human resource management (Conway et al., 2016), organizational communication (Edmondson, 2007), and organizational behavior (OB), serving as a means for employees to communicate as a group with the organization's management (Freeman and Medoff, 1984). Moreover, Warner (2017) suggests that if businesses want to listen to their customers' voices, they must also listen to their employees' voices.

From the perspective of capturing employee insights, the HR department uses annual employee engagement or satisfaction surveys, communication platforms, and the PR department, or internal communication staff responsible for newsletters use employee events, and intranets. Additionally, accelerator teams play a key role where employees are invited to contribute to innovation in scrums (meetings) as part of "agile" management (Hobbs and Petit, 2017).

The value derived from understanding the voice of customers, stakeholders, and employees is reflected in the conversion rate of detractors to passives and promoters (NPS), increased customer

satisfaction with customer service and telephone support, and reduced complaints. Additionally, the percentage of employees staying with the company increases, leading to lower recruitment and training costs for new hires. Through effective and active corporate listening and information dissemination within the organization, insights, understanding, and engagement are achieved, which, in turn, lead to trust, commitment, and sustainable relationships. The organization functions as a whole, integrating both internal and external communications (Cornelissen, 2017, p. 4).

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods qualitative research design, incorporating both in-depth interviews with industry experts and a focus group with hotel employees. These two methods were used to explore the factors influencing customer and employee experiences in the Greek hotel sector, as well as their interaction.

The in-depth interviews aimed to gather insights from managerial-level professionals, while the focus group was designed to collect data from front-line employees who directly interact with both customers and management. Together, these methods enabled a comprehensive exploration of the research questions, allowing for the triangulation of data and a deeper understanding of the phenomena under study. The thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) were used to analyze the data from the interviews and focus group, respectively, with Atlas.ti software assisting in the coding process. The questionnaire for the in-depth interviews consisted of twelve questions (Appendix 1).

3.2 In-Depth Interviews with Industry Experts

Sample

The first study involved in-depth interviews with 10 managers from luxury hotels and resorts (4-5 stars) in Greece (Table 1). These hotels employed between 14 and 20,000+ employees, and the managers held positions at the supervisory or managerial level. The purposive sampling method was used to select participants based on the following criteria:

- Employment in international or local hotels and resorts in Greece.

- Managerial or supervisory roles within the hotel hierarchy.

The sample size was determined based on data saturation, achieved when interview responses began to repeat, offering no new insights (Francis et al., 2010).

Table 1. In depth interviews sample characteristics

ID	Job Position	Gender	Number of Employees	Type of Hotel
1	Social & Corporate Events Manager	Female	10,001+ employees	5-star - Group of hotels and resorts
2	HR Manager	Male	640 employees	5-star
3	FnB Manager	Male	200 employees	Resort (part of a hotel group)
4	HR Director	Male	1,001-5,000 employees	Resort Group
5	Front Office Manager	Female	100 employees	4-star
6	HR Manager-Resident Manager	Male	6,100 employees	Group of luxury hotels and resorts
7	Front Office Manager	Female	14 employees	4-star
8	General Manager	Male	60 employees	5-star Resort
9	Assistant Manager	Male	15,000 (referring to a hotel unit in the group)	Resort
10	Business Consultant, Vice President of the Board	Male	30 employees	4-star Resort

Data Collection

The interviews were conducted between March 2024 and July 2024, averaging 40 minutes each. The interviews were conducted via phone, with participants located both in Athens and on various Greek islands. The interviews followed a semi-structured format with 12 open-ended questions, allowing for flexibility in rephrasing questions when necessary to clarify responses. Interviews were conducted in Greek, with English terms used where appropriate.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to identify key patterns and themes across the interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The data were coded using Atlas.ti software, and word clouds were generated to visualize recurring terms and concepts (Vrain & Lovett, 2020). Data saturation was achieved when no new themes emerged.

3.3 Focus Group with Hotel Employees

Sample

The second study consisted of a focus group involving front-line employees from various roles in the hotel industry, such as waiters, maids, receptionists, and grooms. These employees were selected to represent different operational departments, including both back-office and front-office functions, to ensure a diverse range of perspectives. Table 2 outlines the key demographic characteristics of the focus group participants. The questionnaire was consisted of seven questions (Appendix 2).

Table 2. Focus group sample characteristics

Job Position	Gender	Age	Education Level	Years of Experience	Marital Status	Resident of
Front office agent	Female	30-39	TEI	3-4	Single	Local community
Groom	Male	20-29	University (AEI)	1	Single	Local community
Front office agent	Female	30-39	Master's Degree	8	Single	North Aegean
Housekeeper	Female	40-49	Vocational School (IEK)	7	Divorced	Local community
Front office agent	Female	40-49	Vocational School (IEK)	7	Divorced	Local community
Restaurant Supervisor	Male	30-39	Vocational High School (Tourism)	10	Married with 2 children	Athens
Front office agent	Female	30-39	TEI	3-4	Single	Local community

Waiter	Male	30-39	Vocational High School (Tourism)	10	Married with 2 children	Athens

Data Collection

The focus group interview took place in August 2024 and lasted 164 minutes. The participants were encouraged to recall and share their personal experiences and interactions with employers and customers. Confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed throughout the process. This group interview allowed for the cross-validation of data collected in the earlier in-depth interviews.

Data Analysis

The data from the focus group were analyzed using grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1998; Glaser and Strauss, 1967). This inductive method was chosen due to its effectiveness in focus group settings (Goulding, 1998). The narrative interpretative method was also employed to interpret the implicit messages in the participants' responses. This approach facilitated a deeper understanding of the phenomena by considering both explicit and implicit insights from the employees.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

For both studies, participants' anonymity and confidentiality were ensured. Informed consent was obtained before each interview, and all participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time. No identifying information was used in the analysis or presentation of results.

3.5 Research Instruments

The primary research instrument for the in-depth interviews was a semi-structured interview guide with 12 open-ended questions designed to explore the factors influencing customer and employee experiences. For the focus group, the same topics were covered, but the format allowed for group discussions, facilitating the sharing of stories and collective insights. Both instruments were designed to encourage detailed responses and provide flexibility for further probing.

4. Findings

4.1 In-depth interviews

The data analysis revealed three core themes: Customer Engagement, Factors, and Outcomes, each contributing significantly to understanding the dynamic relationship between employee experience (EX) and customer experience (CX) in the hotel industry. Figure 1 presents a graphical illustration

of the relationships between the themes and the codes generated through the thematic analysis.
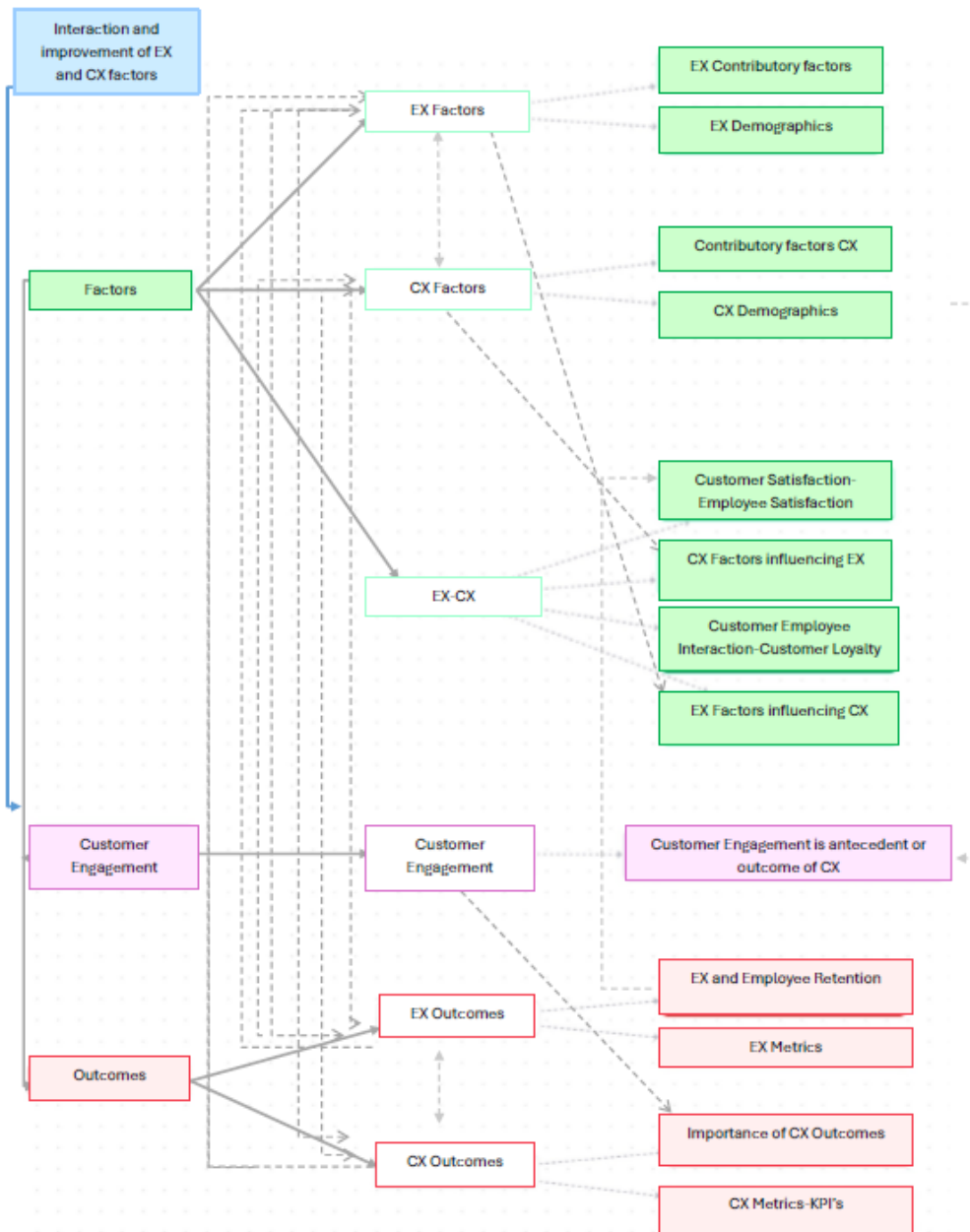
Figure 1. Code analysis from in-depth interviews

Theme 1: Factors Shaping Employee and Customer Experience

The first theme, Factors, encapsulates the elements that influence both employee experience (EX) and customer experience (CX), as well as the interaction between the two. The subthemes identified were:

1. Employee Experience Factors (EX)

2. Customer Experience Factors (CX)

3. EX-CX Interplay, which focuses on how employee and customer experiences influence each other.

Employee Experience Factors emerged as a complex interplay of organizational support systems, leadership, and work conditions. Participants highlighted the importance of employee support in creating a positive EX, emphasizing the significance of fair wages, professional development, work-life balance, and good working conditions. One respondent, underscoring the necessity of organizational commitment to employee well-being, noted:

> […] Work-life balance and support from the organization are critical factors in shaping my experience as an employee […] (Male, HR Manager).

This finding supports the model proposed by Abhari et al. (2008), which outlines the critical role of reward, training, and empowerment in enhancing employee satisfaction and performance.

Moreover, demographic factors, such as education level, prior experience, and cultural background, were found to significantly impact the employee experience. One interviewee emphasized that:

> […] religion, location, and language can directly influence an employee's ability to integrate into the work environment and impact their satisfaction […] (Female, Social & Corporate Events Manager).

This observation aligns with Meyers et al.'s (2016) findings, which advocate for the segmentation of employees based on demographics to better understand and meet their needs.

Theme 3: Outcomes of Employee and Customer Experience

The third theme, Outcomes, focuses on the mutual benefits derived from enhancing both EX and CX.

Outcomes of EX were found to include higher levels of employee engagement, retention, and performance. One manager mentioned:

> […] The higher the employee satisfaction, the lower the employee turnover. For this reason, a well-being employee survey is carried out regarding his satisfaction, if he is overwhelmed by work, if he feels tired, if he has received negative behavior from another employee or customer, if he has enough days off, if the food and accommodation benefits are satisfactory , if he lags cognitively in relation to others […] (Male, HR Manager).

This observation is consistent with research by IBM and Globoforce (2016), which found that employees with positive experiences are more likely to go above and beyond in their roles, contributing to better organizational outcomes.

Ultimately, these findings contribute to the growing body of literature that stresses the importance of a holistic approach to managing employee and customer experiences, ensuring that both internal and external stakeholders benefit from a positive, well-supported organizational environment.

4.2 Focus groups

The findings from the focus group are consistent with those from the in-depth interviews, revealing critical factors that influence EX. Employees confirmed that key determinants of EX include working conditions and adherence to the terms of agreement by the employer (salary, working hours, benefits, accommodation, and communication), along with opportunities for development, objective employee evaluations, and inter-departmental collaboration. As one employee noted, regarding the essential for a positive employee experience:

> […] adherence to agreed terms (salary, extra-salary benefits), corporate climate, sense of belonging, possibilities for development, relationship with colleagues […] (Female, 30-39, Front office agent).

The corporate environment, including the sense of belonging, relationships with colleagues and management, and recognition of services by customers, also plays a vital role in shaping EX (Yang et al., 2012).

Question 1

Regarding recent developments in the tourism sector, it was reported in the spring of 2024 that there are 80,000 job vacancies (in hotels and catering). According to the Hellenic Federation of Food, Tourism, and Related Professions (POEET), one of the deterrents to employment in the tourism sector is the intensification of work (from last season), which discourages workers from returning to the sector this year. In 2023, according to a study by the Institute of Tourism Research and Forecasts (ITEP) conducted for the Hellenic Chamber of Hotels, approximately one in five positions in Greek hotels remained unfilled. Most employees clearly state that they are looking for work elsewhere, with equal or even lower wages but with significantly better working conditions. Even businesses that comply with labor standards and collective agreements are struggling to find employees.

Testimonies from employees who participated in the focus group confirm this publication:

> [...] wages are low, the five-day work week has been abolished, there are no insurance contributions, working hours are not respected, and conditions for food and

accommodation are deplorable. There is no critical care and protection for employees, few workers are available, and there is a lot of work [...] (B)

[...] There is worker exploitation, especially in high-tourism destinations. Conditions are poor, and work experiences are negative. The seasonality, fixed-term contracts, and the need for business owners to hire staff for short periods increase workers' insecurity, especially on islands like Santorini and Mykonos, where burnout, low wages, lack of set hours, and poor conditions are also observed [...] (C)

[...] I have changed hotels twice due to unmet agreements regarding salary and unpaid overtime, as I was placed in roles beyond the one I was hired for due to staff shortages. Even in 5-star hotels, there is low customer quality due to reduced tourism. The quality of clients has decreased—I judge the standard from the waste they leave. In seasonal hotels, workers are affected by the quality of the food provided to them, and there are no days off or breaks. Whereas in Four Seasons hotels, such benefits are provided [...] (D)

[...] After the quarantine period, the situation deteriorated; we were laid off with a subsidy of €500, so workers sought alternative jobs. An eight-hour job elsewhere lacks the special demands of each customer. The collective agreement wage of €880, which eventually reaches €1,000, is not enough; I worry about providing for my home. Salary, client interaction, and working conditions are challenging; the new generation lacks patience and avoids conflicts with colleagues or customers, preferring "smart jobs" or remote work. Additionally, service quality is low in all-inclusive hotels. The selection of providers depends on experience since wages are low [...] €

Question 2

Another issue raised in the focus groups was the factors that would lead employees to remain at a hotel. From the participants' responses and the qualitative analysis, the following factors emerged, which confirm the findings from the previous in-depth interviews with experts in the tourism industry:

- Working conditions and adherence to contract terms (salary, benefits, days off, pleasant environment, food, training, merit-based advancement, objective employee evaluation)

- Corporate culture (relationship with colleagues, sense of belonging, understanding, mutual respect, behavior of colleagues and management, sense of security).

The following employee testimonies illustrate these points:

[...] adherence to agreements (salary, benefits), corporate climate, sense of belonging, advancement opportunities, relationship with colleagues […] (A)

[...] objective employee evaluation, merit-based advancement, employee training, sense of security, salary, and working hours […] (A)

[...] salary, working conditions, accommodation, food, benefits, workspace, collegiality, communication, collaboration across departments, hours […] (C)

[...] salary, days off, understanding, food, mutual respect, behavior of colleagues and management […] (D)

According to the literature, employee turnover is classified into two categories: voluntary and involuntary turnover (Wanous, 1979). Reasons for voluntary turnover typically involve salary, employee benefits, and the work environment. Employee departure constitutes a loss in human capital, relational capital, and expertise for the organization.

The causes of voluntary employee turnover fall into five main HRM categories:

1. Inadequate recruitment process (Lo and Lam, 2002; Pizam and Thornburg, 2000),

2. Inappropriate job placement (Lo and Lam, 2002),

3. Dissatisfaction with salary, benefits, and job opportunities (Cho et al., 2006; Lo and Lam, 2002),

4. Inadequate HR management (Kim et al., 2010; Cho et al., 2006; Lo and Lam, 2002),

5. Work-related stress, pressure, and burnout (Chalkiti and Sigala, 2010; O'Neill and Xiao, 2010; Shani and Pizam, 2009).

Research on employee turnover in the tourism sector in both island and mainland Greece showed that factors such as unemployment rates, the variety of tourism offerings, seasonality, individual employee attitudes within tourism, and career advancement influence employee turnover rates (Chalkiti and Sigala, 2010). Yang (2010b) argued that factors like stress, burnout, organizational socialization, and job autonomy could impact job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and employees' intent to leave.

Pizam and Thornburg (2000) found that personal dissatisfaction with compensation policies, unmet job expectations, work-family conflict, and limited interpersonal relationships with colleagues affect employee turnover. Motivating factors, such as career development and empowerment, can be helpful in reducing employee turnover (Martin et al., 2006). This research approach aligns with the study by Chiang and Jang (2008), who applied Vroom's Expectancy Theory, demonstrating that intrinsic motivators, such as career progression and employee recognition, have a positive impact on job performance and employee satisfaction.

In this context, George and Gronroos (1989) proposed internal marketing strategies, including:

1. Management support for staff and encouragement of market-oriented behaviors,

2. Training and skill development for employee growth,

3. Internal coordination and communication,

4. Integration of HR with marketing for employee retention and reward,

5. External marketing communication.

Work needs are met through training, development, and motivation, enabling employees to communicate and contribute to the company's objectives for enhancing service quality. Such initiatives help employees provide high-quality services to customers.

Question 3

The following testimonies from the focus group with hotel industry employees confirm the above and shed light on their reasons for leaving other hotels in the past:

> […] Due to a negative experience in the past, I left a hotel business because of a lack of communication at all levels of work. There were no opportunities for advancement; you gave a lot but received nothing in return […] (A)

> […] Yes, due to a negative experience during a season in the XXX area, because what was agreed upon was not followed through, the accommodation was unsatisfactory, so I left […] (E)

Question 4

In response to a question (to the employees) about evaluating and describing a positive and a negative experience, some respondents answered as follows:

> […] A positive experience is my current experience at this particular hotel; I give and receive, there is room for growth and support. A negative experience I can mention from the past was where there was no communication at all levels of work, you gave but did not receive, and there were no opportunities for advancement […] (A)

> […] A positive experience is the friendships and connections with colleagues, and a negative experience is that I was blamed for a mistake made by another department […] (B)

> […] A positive experience is the teamwork with staff, even under a heavy workload, which leads to high performance through collaboration. Tourism is about people! I have very fond memories of good teamwork. A negative experience is dealing with customers. It's emotionally draining. When a customer realizes you are providing a service, they tend to make demands. They exploit the fact that the hotel provides services and ask for additional perks […] (C)

5. Discussion

The qualitative analysis reveals a deterioration in working conditions since the pandemic. The workforce supply in the sector has declined, necessitating action to restore and enhance the industry's reputation to attract skilled employees at both the business level and within the broader "tourismscape" (van der Duim 2007). In this context, this study highlights the significant challenges facing Greece's tourism and hospitality sector, particularly in relation to employee experience (EX) in the context of persistent labor shortages. The findings highlight the crucial link between EX and customer experience (CX), showing how inadequate workforce conditions not only harm service quality but also compromise the sector's overall resilience. This connection emphasizes the need for strategic risk management approaches, as the sustainability and reputation of the industry depend on maintaining stable and satisfied workforces capable of delivering high service standards.

The study identifies core issues related to workforce management in the sector. First and foremost, fair compensation, improved working conditions, and organizational support systems emerged as essential for fostering a positive EX. Employees reported that inadequate pay, extended working hours, and substandard living conditions are primary deterrents to staying in the sector. Addressing these basic needs aligns with crisis management principles by reducing employee turnover risk and fostering workforce retention, which is crucial for maintaining operational continuity. The link between EX and CX, as noted in the literature, highlights that a satisfied and empowered workforce is more likely to engage in enthusiastic and high-quality service interactions with customers (Bowen & Lawler, 2006). Thus, improving EX not only enhances CX but also serves as a risk management strategy, reducing reputational damage and financial losses stemming from poor service experiences.

Additionally, the study reveals the cyclical issues of seasonality and short-term contracts in Greek tourism, which intensify workforce instability. This cyclic nature leads to higher turnover rates and disrupts service continuity, presenting a significant operational risk for hotels. Establishing more stable employment practices—such as offering fair wages, long-term contracts, and career development opportunities—would mitigate these risks and align with effective crisis management approaches by enhancing workforce stability and readiness to manage peak demand periods. The findings suggest that fostering a positive organizational culture that values mutual respect, inter-departmental collaboration, and inclusivity can serve as an additional risk mitigation tool. A cohesive corporate culture strengthens employee loyalty and reduces turnover, contributing to a resilient work environment that is better equipped to handle operational disruptions.

Moreover, in terms of risk management, the bidirectional relationship between EX and CX is particularly relevant. The study confirms that a positive employee experience directly impacts CX, which in turn affects customer loyalty and reputation. From a risk management perspective, this feedback loop represents an opportunity for organizations to use EX improvements as a lever to control reputational risk. Satisfied employees contribute to positive customer interactions, which

enhance the sector's image, particularly in high-demand and high-competition tourist destinations. Additionally, employee training and empowerment should be integral components of a risk management framework, ensuring that staff are equipped to adapt to dynamic customer demands, even during periods of operational strain. The findings also stress the value of implementing proactive crisis management strategies, including continuity planning, to enhance sector resilience. Given the high turnover and labor shortages currently facing the sector, continuity plans that incorporate regular risk assessments and business impact analyses are critical. Such measures would enable hotels to anticipate workforce shortages and implement proactive solutions, reducing the risk of service interruptions and reputational damage.

6. Conclusion

This study's findings underscore the need for structural changes within Greece's tourism and hospitality sector, highlighting risk management as an essential tool for addressing labor shortages and maintaining service standards. By prioritizing a positive EX, addressing working conditions, and fostering a supportive organizational culture, hotels can mitigate the risks associated with employee turnover and service quality. Additionally, investing in workforce development through training and support systems empowers employees to manage customer demands effectively, reducing operational vulnerabilities and enhancing resilience.

In a broader sense, the study suggests that incorporating a comprehensive crisis management strategy—one that integrates EX improvements as part of risk management—will be key to the sector's sustainability. Engaging stakeholders across government, industry, and education can further support collaborative solutions to the workforce challenges identified in this study, promoting a resilient tourism ecosystem in Greece. Future research might explore quantitative assessments of EX and CX in other tourism regions, contributing further comparative insights into effective crisis management practices within the global hospitality industry. These findings collectively advocate for a proactive, employee-centered risk management approach as a means of sustaining service quality and strengthening Greece's tourism reputation in a competitive international market.

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Appendix

Appendix 1. In-depth interviews questionnaire

In-depth interviews with experts in hotel industry in Greece

1. Do you believe that Employee Experience (EX) affects Customer Experience (CX) and vice versa?
2. When is this relationship strong? (Referring to contributing factors)
3. Can you identify factors of Employee Experience (EX) that affect Customer Experience (CX) (EX -> CX) and factors of Customer Experience (CX) that affect Employee Experience (EX) (CX -> EX)?
4. If we consider that employee satisfaction is a factor in customer experience (from the previous question), does employee satisfaction affect customer satisfaction?
5. What do you consider to be the contributing factors in shaping the customer experience?

6. Is customer engagement a contributing factor to customers' experience, or is it a result of the experience they are having?

7. Results of customer experience are considered to be loyalty, satisfaction, engagement, intention to revisit, repurchase, word-of-mouth (WOM), intention to co-create, and customer citizenship behavior intention. Which of these do you focus on? How do you measure them?

8. How important is the customer-employee interaction in shaping customer experience and customer loyalty? Do you recognize the contribution of servicescape and experiencescape in shaping customer experience?

9. How much do demographic characteristics affect the customer experience?

10. How much do demographic characteristics affect the employee experience?

11. What are the contributing factors of employee experience?

12. How do you measure employee experience?

Appendix 2. Focus group discussion guide

Focus group questionnaire

1. It is mentioned in the press that since the spring of 2024 there are 80,000 job vacancies in the industry. What is your opinion on this? What could be the cause of this?

2. What factors do you consider that contribute to employee satisfaction that would lead to employees' retention in a hotel?"

3. Have you resigned from/ left other hotels in the past? Would you like to mention the reasons?

4. Can you describe a negative experience and a positive experience you have had as an employee in the tourism industry?

5. How does a positive/negative Employee Experience (EX) affect Customer Experience (CX)?

6. How does a positive/negative Customer Experience (CX) affect Employee Experience (EX)?

7. Describe a customer's behavior with positive/negative Customer Experience (CX) and how you handle them.