

## Employee communication and soft skills influencing tourists' satisfaction

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### Abstract

This paper seeks to study tourists' perceptions of the effect of the communication skills of tourism service providers on soft skills and on satisfaction with the rendered service. Primary data were collected using a structured questionnaire, while the quantitative analysis uses the PLS-SEM method. The results show that communication skills have a positive and significant influence on soft skills. Customer satisfaction is positively impacted by both communication skills and soft skills. The paper offers support to the career development and exploitation of tourism professionals, relying on their developed and improved soft and communication skills.

**Keywords:** employee skills, communication skills, soft skills, satisfaction.

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## 1. Introduction

For many years, the importance of business communication and skills needed for working in the tourism and hospitality industries has been the focus of research. Different authors highlight that soft skills are essential competencies (Raybould & Wilkins, 2006; Weber *et al.*, 2013; Sisson & Adams, 2013) and, among these soft skills, the communication skills of tourism service providers have a substantial importance (Majid *et al.*, 2012; Succi & Canovi, 2019; Tesone & Rici, 2005; Robles, 2012).

Despite soft skills having a significant impact on successful business communication, and vice versa, the importance of soft skills in tourism is poorly developed. This fact is confirmed by different rankings of soft skills need to enter the labour market (Suh *et al.*, 2012; Raybould & Wilkins, 2006; Andrews & Higson, 2008; Huang *et al.*, 2016; Succi & Canovi, 2019). Also, a skill gap is evident in the supply and demand of skills in the tourism market. Tourism service providers are expected to possess an entire array of soft skills needed for them to adequately do their jobs and successfully communicate in their working environment (Tas, 1988), but very often the formal education they receive, focused primarily on developing hard skills, fails to sufficiently prepare them in that respect (Wilks & Hemsworth, 2011; Sisson & Adams, 2013). At the same time, the need for developing soft skills is steadily growing in the tourism market (Testa & Sipe, 2012; Weber *et al.*, 2019; Cuic Tankovic *et al.*, 2023).

Previous scientific research has focused primarily on identifying the skills vital to working in tourism and hospitality (Johanson *et al.*, 2010) and on examining how the importance of such skills is perceived by tourism managers and young people about to enter the labour market (Christou, 2002; Wang & Tsai, 2014; Succi & Canovi, 2019; Marneros *et al.*, 2020; Cuic Tankovic *et al.*, 2022); however, there have been almost no studies concerning tourists' perceptions of the importance of comprehensive and successful business communication affecting tourism service providers' soft skills. While acknowledging that both soft skills and hard skills are important in tourism service providers, Wilks and Hemsworth (2011) and Sisson and Adams (2013) nevertheless describe hard skills as being secondary to soft skills and underscore that soft skills are indeed the key to success. Weber *et al.* (2009) established that the most important skills needed for working in tourism and hospitality are the ability to cooperate well with others and create a positive work environment, to which Wilks and Hemsworth (2011) have added interpersonal skills and the personal qualities of individuals. According to Suh *et al.*, (2012), communication skills are the most important soft skills, while Sisson and Adams (2013) consider the ability to develop good relationships with guests and effective teamwork as the key skills to success in tourism and hospitality.

Earlier studies, however, have perceived and treated communication skills as a one-dimensional construct, inconsistently measured with conflicted or intertwined items, which was a call for the introduction of a comprehensive scale that includes all the necessary communication skills for working in tourism. Several studies have shown that communication is one of the most important predictors of soft skills (Succi & Canovi, 2019; Ruhanita *et al.*, 2014; Suh *et al.*, 2012; Jiang & Alexakis, 2017; Kaburise, 2016). The existing empirical studies dealing with these types of skills are focused on oral and written communication skills (e.g., Jones, 2011; MacDermott & Ortiz, 2017; Jackson, 2014; Lolli, 2013; Ulinski & O'callaghan, 2002). The literature, however, recognizes other important groups of skills, namely listening, digital and non-verbal communication skills (Lamb-White, 2008; Knapp *et al.*, 2014; Guffey & Loewy, 2016). Although proved to be important in tourism, they appear to be neglected in previous research. Moreover, some recent studies, focused on the narrow specialization of soft skills, have excluded communication skills from that cluster (Cuic Tankovic *et al.*, 2023; Caggiano *et al.*, 2020; Dubey & Tiwari, 2020; Dubey *et al.*, 2021).

Notwithstanding the impact of soft skills on successful business outcomes, there is still little awareness in the tourism market of the importance of soft skills. A study by Majid *et al.* (2012) exploring students' perception of the importance of soft skills for their education and employment showed that while students were aware of the importance of soft skills, they rated their own soft skills as being below the desired level. Succi & Canovi (2019) investigated whether there are any differences in the way managers and young people about to enter the labour market perceive the importance of skills needed to work in tourism. Their study reported a significant difference in the perceived importance of skills – namely, managers considered work ethics and the ability to adapt to change as the most important skills while students rated conflict management and communication skills as being the most important. Dubey *et al.* (2021) stated that divergent performances of an assigned task are due to the presence or lack of soft skills, even when practitioners have the same qualifications. Gould-Williams (1999) and Sharma & Patterson (1999) found a direct link between the skills of service providers and the satisfaction of tourists with a service rendered. They also highlighted the important roles that good employee performance and effective communication play in building tourists' perceptions of quality, trust and relations with service providers and, in turn, in increasing overall satisfaction with a service. Apart from some findings from other disciplines (e.g., Biglu *et al.*, 2017), however, there is a lack of evidence from the tourism sector related to communication skills and their impact on customer satisfaction.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate tourists' perceptions of the impact of communication and soft skills, which will provide insight into successful business performance. The objectives of this study are to examine the relationship and impact of communication skills and soft skills on satisfaction with tourism services and to propose and test a multidimensional construct, extracted and expanded to cover all types of communication skills: written, oral, digital, nonverbal, and listening.

## **2. Literature review**

### *2.1. Communication skills*

People continue to develop the ability to communicate throughout their entire lives. Communication skills are the ability to exchange opinions and information, ideas and feelings between two or more parties, ensuring that all understand the message (Wesley *et al.*, 2017; Youssef, 2017). Communication key skills include the ability to convey one's ideas and feelings to others so that they are understood correctly, and the skills of listening to and observing others and understanding their messages (Jiang & Alexakis, 2017; Succi & Canovi, 2019).

In tourism, service providers and guests interact on a daily basis through different kinds of communication channels and types. A look at the literature shows their communication skills can be categorised into listening skills (Brownell, 2009), oral communication skills (MacDermott & Ortiz, 2017), written communication skills (Jones, 2011), nonverbal communication skills (Uzun, 2017; Knapp *et al.*, 2013) and digital skills (Van Laar *et al.*, 2017; Guffey & Loewy, 2016).

Oral communication, one of the oldest and simplest forms of communication in business, involves a range of activities such as presenting, public speaking, giving and receiving feedback, negotiating, and tailoring communication to the audience and keeping their attention (Ulinski & O'callaghan, 2002; Gray & Murray, 2011; Jackson, 2014; Morgan, 1997). According to Bambacas and Patrickson (2008), senior HR managers can be effective in interpersonal communication if they focus on their ability to actively listen. Written communication skills refer to skills such as composing documents in a clear and concise manner, and adapting the style and message to different document audiences (Jones, 2011). When speaking, words can be softened by the tone of voice or facial expression, but in written communication this is much harder to do (Bovee & Thill, 2018). Written communication has largely changed due to

technological advancements but still holds a high value (Coffelt *et al.*, 2016), largely due to young workers' lack of written communication skills (Jones, 2011).

Nonverbal communication refers to communication that is transmitted through gestures, eye contact, facial expressions, i.e., the ability to hear what is not being said (Mandal, 2014). Being unintentional, nonverbal cues are much more honest than verbal communication. Knapp *et al.* (2013) classified nonverbal cues into two groups: static nonverbal cues (distance between bodies, body positions, body posture and the physical appearance of the communicator) and dynamic nonverbal cues (bodily contact and touch, facial expression, eye contact, various movements and gestures). As argued by Islam & Kirilova (2020), the perception of services is largely influenced by nonverbal communication, even if cultural identity and collectivism can play a distinctive role (Yu, 2019).

Active listening skills make a distinction between hearing and listening: hearing a message is a physical process while listening involves the process of interpreting and understanding the message (Keyton *et al.*, 2013). In a business environment, listening is considered to be the most frequent and most important communication activity (Keyton *et al.*, 2013), and the responsibility and importance of listening grows proportionately up the levels of the organizational hierarchy (Vikram Bisen, 2009). Using active listening with colleagues and customers helps build better relationships with them (Lolli, 2013; Brownell, 2009).

Digital communication skills are applied in classical communication tools, involving complex motor, cognitive, social and emotional skills (Eshet-Alkalai, 2004). Two-way communication at three levels is allowed in modern communication media: one to one, one to many and many to many (Jensen, 2010). These skills have to go beyond technical and computer skills (Eshet-Alkalai, 2004; Van Laar *et al.*, 2017), where classical communication tools are becoming interactive due to the transformation in adapting to contemporary media (Guffey & Loewy, 2016; Siddiq *et al.*, 2016). Information technology has affected all ways of communication, so it is crucial to achieve new digital competences and skills that have become vital for working in the information-intensive tourism industry (Carlisle *et al.*, 2021). The use of digital technologies requires a form of literacy referred to as interactive communication skills (Adoni & Galit, 2020). The significance of digital communication skills will grow considerably in the future, meaning that a higher level of competency will be needed (Johanson *et al.*, 2011; Carlisle *et al.*, 2021).

Previous research has investigated the correlation between service satisfaction and service providers' empathy (Tuan & Linh, 2014). Rao & Sahu (2013) concluded that service providers have to strengthen their communication skills, and training should be provided for them to achieve customer satisfaction (Eshetie *et al.*, 2016). As service providers possess skills to manage guests' requests, they can be a predictor for assurance of service quality (Minh *et al.*, 2015). Jani & Han (2014) stated that having well-qualified service providers is the way to achieve customer satisfaction. Research so far has proven that interpersonal communication skills during the tourism encounter increase organizational commitment (Bambacas & Patrickson, 2008; Cuic Tankovic *et al.*, 2021) while communication with customers requires interpersonal skills that enable communication, thus influencing satisfaction with the service encounter (Nikolich & Sparks, 1995; Truong & King 2010). Therefore, the following hypothesis is set:

*H1: Communication Skills positively influence Customer Satisfaction*

Communication skills have been previously interlinked with soft skills in a tourism context, and their effect on self-perception has been analysed and explored (Castro & Ferreira, 2019). Communication is one of the most important predictors of soft skills (Succi & Canovi, 2019; Ruhanita *et al.* 2014; Suh *et al.*,

2012; Jiang & Alexakis, 2017; Kaburise, 2016). When communication skills are excluded from the soft skills cluster (Cuic Tankovic *et al.*, 2023; Caggiano *et al.*, 2020; Dubey & Tiwari, 2020; Singh Dubey *et al.*, 2021), we are inclined to examine the relationship between these two constructs. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

*H2: Communication Skills positively influence Soft Skills*

### 2.2. Soft skills

The competencies required to do a certain job can be described as the set of knowledge, skills, abilities and habits that individuals possess (Hayes, 2002). The concepts of *hard skills* and *soft skills* can be linked to this categorisation, with hard skills corresponding to technical and administrative knowledge skills while soft skills are typically linked to interpersonal, conceptual and leadership skills (Weber *et al.*, 2013; Hendrawan *et al.*, 2021).

Unlike hard skills, which generally require the acquisition of knowledge (Ciappei & Cinque, 2014), soft skills are difficult to measure or prove because they are closely linked to an individual's attitudes and are the result of psychological traits, preferences and experience (Balcar, 2016), and value and habits that include ethics, communication, leadership, interpersonal skills and collaboration (Wilks & Hemsworth, 2011).

Soft skills are useful not only in the professional lives of people but also in their private and social lives, whereas hard skills are limited to one's professional life and job. Soft skills are also seen as very transferable, meaning they do not lose their importance through career change, while, in the case of hard skills, career change often entails additional education (Sisson & Adams, 2013). Different names have been used for these skills, such as life skills (WHO, 2003), social skills (Deming, 2017), generic skills (Johnson *et al.*, 2002; Raybould & Wilkins, 2006), people skills (Levasseur, 2001; Testa & Sipe, 2012), interpersonal skills (Hayes, 2002), and twenty-first-century skills (Moore & Morton, 2015) but, essentially, they all refer to the same set of skills.

Soft skills refer to an individual's attributes, attitudes and abilities, to everything that characterises human relations (Moss & Tilly, 1996; Huang *et al.*, 2016). As such, soft skills encompass a wide spectrum of interpersonal and social competencies and qualities (Hurrell, 2016). These skills are typically linked to competencies that are not tied directly to work tasks but rather to people-to-people relations and are focused on the emotional side of human beings. Soft skills are related to goal-directed behaviour (Hayes, 2002) and used in interaction with others to achieve a desired goal. Also, soft skills encompass all the non-technical traits and behaviours individuals need for them to successfully manage their careers and which enable them to effectively apply their technical abilities and knowledge (Klaus *et al.*, 2007).

By synthesizing the available literature and the studies of various authors (Tas, 1988; Tesone & Ricci, 2005; Raybould & Wilkins, 2006; Andrews & Higson, 2008; Weber *et al.*, 2009; Cheung *et al.*, 2010; Wilks & Hemsworth, 2011; Robles, 2012; Suh *et al.*, 2012; Testa & Sipe, 2012; Sisson & Adams, 2013; Weber *et al.*, 2013; Wang & Tsai, 2014; Huang *et al.*, 2016; Succi & Canovi, 2019; Weber *et al.*, 2019; Kraljic *et al.*, 2020; Hendrawan *et al.*, 2021), some of the most important sets of soft skills, essential parts of business communication, are identified. These are communication skills, interpersonal skills, emotional intelligence and professionalism. Burns (1997) underscores the importance of the human element and soft skills in the tourism and hospitality industries, considering that tourism service providers are a component of the final tourism product. Notwithstanding the constant changes taking place in the tourism and hospitality industries and the considerable increase in the level of complexity and

competitiveness in these industries (Raybould & Wilkins, 2006), the study by Tas (Tas, 1988) is seminal (Baum, 1990) and considered to be one of the most innovative (Christou and Eaton, 2000) studies of the skills needed for working in tourism (Kraljic *et al.*, 2020).

Most studies focus on identifying the key skills needed to perform well as well as the types of skills managers are looking for in their employees. Raybould & Wilkings (2006) claim that skills relating to interpersonal relations are more desirable than technical competencies, with the most important skills being conflict-resolution skills and the ability to maintain professional and ethical standards. Staton-Reynolds (2009) stresses the importance of emotional intelligence for workers in the tourism industry. According to Cho *et al.* (2002), at a time when technology is changing from day to day, communication skills are essential for success. Chung-Herrera *et al.* (2003) developed a soft-skills model consisting of two dimensions: the first dimension refers to self-management, which comprises work ethics, time management and adaptability, and the second, to strategic positioning, which involves awareness of the needs of others, empathy, focus on results and concern for the community. Soft skills make employees more effective, and guide them toward goals (Ranade *et al.*, 2010) while enabling them to better understand how to work with others (Muzio & Fisher, 2009). Defined as characteristics and abilities for adaptive and positive behaviour that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life, these skills help to enhance the general quality of life, improve interpersonal relations, and raise levels of professional competencies (Succi & Canovi 2019; Dogara *et al.*, 2020).

In the tourism sector, specialized skills are more required than general ones in accommodation facilities for specific job positions (Varra *et al.*, 2021). Soft skills in tourism, despite this remarkable impact on tourist satisfaction, are very often interpreted as a part of the natural order of things (Burns, 1997) which substantially increase customer satisfaction (Pretko, 2018). Customer satisfaction in hospitality is influenced by food and beverages (Chu & Choi, 2000), room quality (Min & Min, 1997), and safety and security (Nunkoo *et al.*, 2019). Interaction with employees, their experience (Ko & Pastore, 2007), quality of the front desk service (Hartline & Jones, 1996), and problem-solving skills (Czepiel *et al.*, 1985), all of which can be considered as part of soft skills, have also been analysed. Therefore, the following hypothesis is defined:

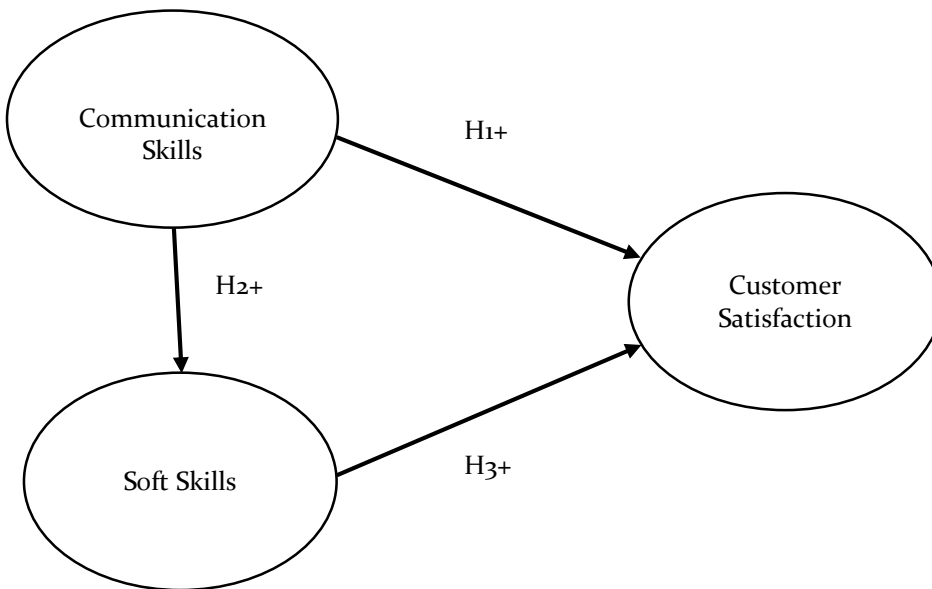
*H3: Soft Skills positively influence Customer Satisfaction*

Based on the evidence provided above, the theoretical model of the study is set and depicted in Figure 1.

### **3. Methodology**

An empirical study was conducted using the survey method to investigate tourists' attitudes towards the effect of soft skills on the business communication of tourism service providers. A structured questionnaire was used as a measurement instrument. In order to collect information from participants and ensure a response rate, an online survey was conducted from February to April 2020. In order to represent a larger population and to ensure replicability and validity of the collected data, the sample was drawn using the simple random sampling method. The questionnaire was distributed via email and social media to a random sample of tourists in Croatia, which is considered a popular, fast-growing summer destination in the European Mediterranean (Mikulić *et al.*, 2018) and one of the most developed destinations in the Mediterranean (Šerić *et al.*, 2016). At the beginning of the questionnaire, all participants were informed about the topic and the purpose of the study. A screening question asked whether respondents from Croatia had used a tourism service in the last 12 months. After adjustment

for errors and missing values, a total of 427 correctly completed questionnaires were used for further analysis.



**Figure 1.** *Theoretical model of the study*

The design of the measurement instrument was based on the relevant literature and scientific research in the field, and the questions were adapted to the needs of this study. The questionnaire consists of four groups of structured questions arranged according to the funnel principle. The questionnaire begins with general questions about tourism services, followed by a series of questions about the soft skills and communication skills of tourism service providers. In the third part, respondents rated their level of satisfaction with the tourism services provided. The questionnaire ends with questions to collect socio-demographic data. Five-point Likert scales, anchored at 1 = not at all important/strongly disagree and 5 = very important/strongly agree, were used in rating levels of agreement with items.

Statements taken from Testa & Sipe (2012) were used to measure the level of importance that tourists give to specific soft skills of tourism service providers, as well as to learn which of the skills tourists consider as being more important for successful business communication (Cuic Tankovic *et al.*, 2021). Tourist satisfaction with the rendered tourism service was tested with statements taken from Chi & Gursoy (2009) and Siu *et al.* (2012).

The items that were used to measure the study constructs, and the supporting literature from which the items were adapted, are provided in Table 1.

Descriptive analysis was conducted to investigate the sample profile of the study. The majority of the participants were female (82%), while 18% were male. The age spread was as follows: more than 60% of the participants were aged 16 - 35; 34.8% were aged 36-55; and 4.9% of the respondents were 56 or more years old. Almost 57% of the respondents are employed, and 70% hold a bachelor's or master's degree. Partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) was used to analyse the survey results, i.e., to estimate the research model, using SmartPLS statistical software, version 3.

**Table 1.** Latent constructs and reflective indicators

Construct	Indicator	Measurement items	Supporting literature
Soft Skills	SOFT1	Conflict resolution	Cuic Tankovic et al. (2021); Testa & Sipe (2012)
	SOFT2	Building relationships with guests and other employees	
	SOFT3	Building trust	
	SOFT4	Respect	
	SOFT5	Integrity	
	SOFT6	Kindness	
	SOFT7	Responsibility	
	SOFT8	Social skills	
	SOFT9	Positive attitude	
	SOFT10	Professionalism	
	SOFT11	Work ethic	
Communication Skills	COMM1	Written communication skills	Cuic Tankovic et al. (2021)
	COMM2	Oral communication skills	
	COMM3	Communication skills listening	
	COMM4	Digital communication skills	
	COMM5	Nonverbal communication skills	
Customer satisfaction	SAT1	The staff provided me with the service exactly as I requested	Chi & Gursoy (2009); Siu et al. (2012)
	SAT2	The staff quickly rendered me a service	
	SAT3	The staff is always ready to help	
	SAT4	I felt comfortable talking to the staff	
	SAT5	I am satisfied with the overall tourist service	

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Outer model evaluation

The outer model or measurement model of the reflective construct is evaluated in four steps: indicator reliability, construct reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity (Henseler *et al.*, 2016). In the first step, the reflective constructs, i.e., the external loadings of the variables, were analysed. As can be seen in Table 2, all reflective indicator loadings are above the required value of 0.708, which ensures valid item reliability (Hair *et al.*, 2019). The second and third steps involved assessing construct reliability and convergent validity, as these measures are also measures of internal consistency. The high estimated values in Table 2 indicate good reliability of the reflective construct, as composite reliability (CR) is greater than 0.7. Results between 0.70 and 0.95 indicate "satisfactory to good" reliability values (Sarstedt *et al.*, 2014). When estimating convergent validity, all AVEs of the latent constructs are greater than the recommended minimum value of 0.50.



**Table 2.** Results of the reflective construct assessments

Constructs/Indicator	Mean	Std. Deviation	Outer Loadings	Cronbach's Alpha	rho_A	Composite Reliability	AVE
Soft Skills				0.926	0.927	0.937	0.576
SOFT1	4.59	0.651	0.764				
SOFT2	4.45	0.729	0.786				
SOFT3	4.56	0.648	0.791				
SOFT4	4.75	0.556	0.785				
SOFT5	4.42	0.720	0.708				
SOFT6	4.72	0.565	0.774				
SOFT7	4.79	0.510	0.832				
SOFT8	4.31	0.775	0.726				
SOFT9	4.39	0.764	0.726				
SOFT10	4.76	0.521	0.708				
SOFT11	4.54	0.711	0.739				
Communication Skills				0.834	0.850	0.883	0.603
COMM1	4.20	0.769	0.739				
COMM2	4.63	0.596	0.847				
COMM3	4.54	0.634	0.846				
COMM4	4.08	0.773	0.733				
COMM5	4.05	0.802	0.704				
Customer satisfaction				0.897	0.920	0.923	0.705
SAT1	4.12	0.799	0.810				
SAT2	4.12	0.808	0.835				
SAT3	4.10	0.829	0.875				
SAT4	4.20	0.816	0.848				
SAT5	4.19	0.782	0.829				

**Table 3.** Discriminant validity analysis

Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT)			
Latent Construct	Soft Skills	Communication Skills	Customer satisfaction
Soft Skills	<b>0.759</b>	0.793	0.346
Communication Skills	0.707	<b>0.776</b>	0.327
Customer satisfaction	0.334	0.302	<b>0.840</b>

Fornell-Larcker criterion

Note: above the diagonal are the HTMT test values, the diagonal (in bold) shows the square roots of AVE for each construct, and below the diagonal are the Fornell-Larcker test values

When estimating convergent validity, all AVEs of the latent constructs are greater than the recommended minimum value of 0.50. Finally, the fourth step was to determine whether the reflective constructs and indicators meet two additional criteria (i.e., the Fornell-Larcker criterion and the

heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT)) that were found to be informative for discriminant validity (Henseler *et al.*, 2016). Looking at the results in Table 3, which shows the HTMT test scores above the diagonal, the square roots of AVE for each construct in the diagonal (in bold), and the Fornell-Larcker test scores below the diagonal, it is clear that the measures of the three reflective constructs have a high degree of discriminant validity.

#### 4.2. Inner model evaluation

The results presented in Table 4 show no collinearity problem with respect to the predictor constructs, as all VIF values are well below the recommended value of 5 (Hair *et al.*, 2017). Without collinearity problems, one of the most important parts of the structural model evaluation is the assessment of the coefficient of determination ( $R^2$ ). As can be seen in Table 4, the  $R^2$  values are weak to moderate. Our case suggests that the two constructs, i.e., communication skills and soft skills, together explain 12% of the variance in the endogenous construct, i.e., customer satisfaction. The same model estimation also shows that the  $R^2$  for the construct communication skills explains 50% of the variance of soft skills in our PLS-SEM model. The Stone-Geisser  $Q^2$  values obtained by blind folding are greater than 0 and 0.25, indicating low and medium predictive accuracy of the PLS path and the relevance of the model (Hair *et al.*, 2017). Finally, the standardised squared residual (SRMR) value of the saturated (measured) model is 0.060 and the SRMR value of the estimated (structural) model is 0.060 ( $< 0.08$ ).

**Table 4.** Effect size and predictive relevance

Endogenous Variables	$Q^2$	$R^2$	Exogenous Variables	Effect Size $f^2$	Inner VIF Values
Communication Skills	0.291	0.500	Soft Skills	0.998	1.000
Customer satisfaction	0.074	0.120	Soft Skills	0.033	1.998
			Communication Skills	0.010	1.998

The path coefficient (Table 5) is essentially a standardised regression coefficient ( $\beta$ ) whose sign and absolute magnitude can be evaluated. Following Hair *et al.* (2017), we used the orthogonalisation approach, which is an extension of the product indicator approach (Little *et al.*, 2006), to operationalize interaction terms with maximum prediction.

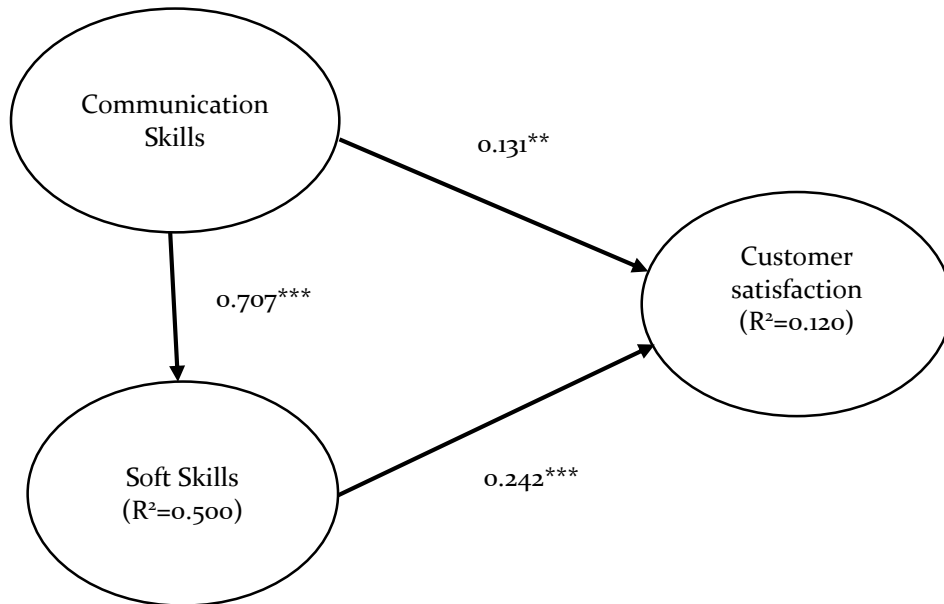
#### 4.3. Hypotheses testing

According to the bootstrapping test procedure (5000 path coefficients), it can be seen that communication skills have a positive and significant influence on customer satisfaction ( $\beta=0.131$ ;  $p=0.036$ ) and soft skills ( $\beta=0.707$ ;  $p=0.000$ ). Moreover, soft skills have a positive and significant influence on customer satisfaction ( $\beta=0.242$ ;  $p=0.002$ ). The results of the tests confirm the acceptance of all three hypotheses (Table 5).

**Table 5.** Model Path Coefficients

Hypothesis/ Relationships	Path Coeff	Total Effect	t Values	p Values	95% Confidence Intervals (BC)	Supported ( $p<0,05$ )?
H1: Soft Skills → Communication Skills	0.707	0.707	16.407	0.000	[0.010, 0.251]	Yes
H2: Soft Skills → Customer satisfaction	0.242	0.334	3.091	0.002	[0.617, 0.784]	Yes
H3: Communication Skills → Customer satisfaction	0.131	0.131	2.096	0.036	[0.083, 0.390]	Yes

Figure 2 shows the results of the structural equation modelling.



**Figure 2.** Results of structural equation modelling

## 5. Conclusion and discussion

### 5.1. Theoretical implications

Soft skills refer to the attitudes, habits and abilities which characterise how an individual interacts with other people. These skills are not linked directly to work tasks but rather to human relationships and focus on the emotional side of human beings. Communication is the process of exchanging information, ideas and feelings, the basis for human relationships, which is present in every aspect of people's lives. It is an essential part of any organization and involves the transmission of messages, and the exchange and processing of data, either within or outside of the organization and with employees, business partners and the public. This paper aimed to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on communication skills and soft skills by empirically investigating their influence on customer satisfaction. Previous studies have focused on emphasizing the importance of communication as part of soft skills (Wesley *et al.*, 2017; MacDermott and Ortiz, 2017), whereas this study considers communication skills as a separate, comprehensive construct, extending the previous application of these concepts and examining their relationship with customer satisfaction.

The results of this study enabled the verification of all three research hypotheses. The research results reveal the importance of the ability of tourism service providers to communicate successfully. This finding on the importance of communication skills is consistent with previous research (Clokic & Fourie, 2016; Jackson, 2014), in particular with regard to oral communication skills that are recognized as the most important skills in assuring guest satisfaction (Jiang & Alexakis, 2017). The findings of the current study indicate that communication skills positively affect other types of soft skills, ultimately leading to increased customer satisfaction. These results support previous findings on the importance of soft skills (Robles, 2012; Jiang & Alexakis, 2017). The adopted methodology measures the importance

of possessing specific communication and soft skills for working in tourism. By examining the tourists' perspectives, it can be used to assess their awareness of the importance of those skills in achieving greater satisfaction, which is crucial in building loyalty. This study contributes to developing awareness of the importance of communication and soft skills by providing a better picture of the skills that tourists perceive as the most important for tourism service providers. Given the poorly developed awareness of the importance of soft skills among prospective tourism employees prior to their assignment to the workplace (Jackson, 2014; Hartman & McCambridge, 2011) and the fact that little attention has been paid to the influence of soft skills on tourist satisfaction, the research findings confirm the influence of soft skills on tourist satisfaction and emphasize the important soft skills of tourism service providers such as responsibility, professionalism and respect.

### *5.2. Managerial implications*

Underlying the practical contribution of the paper, these results provide clear guidance to managers as to which skills should be focused on. In today's tourism business, tourism workers are faced with challenges that they can no longer address only through their technical knowledge and job competencies. The work-intensive nature of service industries such as tourism and hospitality calls for direct communication in working with people, and the quality of communication between tourists and tourism service providers helps to add value to each tourist experience. This paper proves that good communication enables tourists to receive greater emotional value, thus enhancing their satisfaction with the service rendered. The tourism product is increasingly becoming an experience for tourists and, as an essential part of that product, tourism service providers are expected to be courteous, understanding and friendly, and capable of recognising and making on-the-spot decisions about what they believe will please people and create positive emotions, thus enhancing the satisfaction of tourists with communication and the overall tourism service.

This work provides managers with the opportunity to improve their employees' communication skills and soft skills in order to develop a deeper understanding of front-line work and interaction with colleagues and guests, filling the gap in communication literature (Cuic Tankovic *et al.*, 2022). Hence, tourism managers can gain a clearer picture of the relevant skills of candidates while universities can benefit from this study and adapt the proposed curricula to better prepare students for the work market. Despite the recommendations deriving from the research, it should be noted that soft skills and communication skills are subject to personal perceptions. Therefore, employers in tourism must themselves possess soft skills and communication skills if they are to recognize and reward employees who possess those same skills.

### **6. Limitation and future research**

Although the primary purpose and objectives of the study have been met and the information obtained is current and relevant, when considering the research results it is necessary to take into consideration certain limitations that are present and that affect the ultimate outcome of research results. By conducting research on a random sample, that is, a sample obtained through random selection of parts of the population, the data collected could be more representative and the drawn conclusions, more relevant. Furthermore, by using other sampling methods, such as face-to-face interviews or telephone surveys, the data collected could be more accurate as it would be possible to clear any potential misunderstandings of respondents thus avoiding incorrect responses or dissuading respondents who want to stop filling in the questionnaire. In addition, the equal representation of respondents with regard to gender and age should be ensured, and data should be collected from as large a sample as possible to ensure research results are wholly representative. On the other hand, it would be interesting to investigate whether there are generational differences in the perception of the impact of

communication skills and soft skills. In addition, further research and testing in more or less developed tourist destinations is strongly recommended. This may provide deeper insights into the validity of the applied framework and increase the generalisability of the results.

The findings of the study provide insight into the perceptions of tourists regarding the importance and influence of communication skills and soft skills for successful interaction in the context of the service offered. Considering the relevance of the topic of the study and given the study's limitations, future research should expand the scope of the study by introducing new factors and indicators as well as incorporating breakthroughs in the field. In addition, further research should explore in more detail the proposed factors that influence tourists' perceptions and satisfaction with the service provided. As for the methodological part, although the scales used have been successfully validated, it is an exploratory contribution that requires additional empirical effort in terms of further testing and improvement. Furthermore, the perception of other stakeholders, such as employers and employees, could be examined. Finally, future research could investigate and compare the perception and evaluation of communication skills and soft skills with respect to an individual's level of awareness of such skills.

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