

Bridging the Soft Skills Gap: Do Tourists and Hospitality Managers See Eye to Eye?

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Abstract

Soft skills play a critical role in the tourism and hospitality (T&H) sector, shaping service quality, customer satisfaction, and overall competitiveness. While their importance is widely recognized, existing research has largely focused on industry perspectives, leaving a gap in understanding how tourists perceive soft skills – and how their views compare with those of managers. This study addresses that gap by directly comparing the perceived importance of soft skills among 100 tourists and 100 T&H managers. Using a dual-stakeholder survey design, both groups rated the relevance of commonly cited soft skills for frontline employees. Results reveal significant differences that cluster into two broad orientations: tourists emphasize outward-facing interpersonal attributes such as empathy, active listening, and understanding customer needs, whereas managers prioritize inward-facing organizational skills such as adaptability, leadership, and problem-solving. Demographic factors such as age and education further shape these perceptions. The study offers novel insights into employee training priorities and service design, contributing to workforce development strategies that better align internal competencies with evolving guest expectations.

Keywords: soft skills, tourism and hospitality, stakeholder perspectives, workforce development, employee training, customer experience

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1. Introduction

Soft skills encompass the interpersonal, leadership, and conceptual abilities essential for effective job performance across industries (Pranić *et al.*, 2021, 2024; Pranić & Vuković, 2025a). Hard skills, by contrast, are job-specific technical and procedural knowledge (e.g., property-management systems, reservation platforms, safety protocols) (Cimatti, 2016; Weber *et al.*, 2009). In the tourism and hospitality (T&H) sector – where service quality is largely co-created through human interaction – soft skills are indispensable (Raybould & Wilkins, 2006; Andrades & Dimanche, 2017; Youssef, 2017). In front-of-house roles, many soft skills manifest as what the service literature terms customer service skills (e.g., responsiveness, assurance, empathy), and attributes such as emotional intelligence, active listening, and adaptability can significantly influence customer satisfaction, brand perception, and long-term business performance (Burke & Hughes, 2018; Eshetie *et al.*, 2016; Tuan & Linh, 2014). While some soft skills (e.g., empathy) have dispositional underpinnings, the observable service behaviours can still be developed through targeted training and socialisation in hospitality contexts (Balcar, 2016; Weber *et al.*, 2020).

Accordingly, hiring employees with strong soft skills is a strategic priority for T&H businesses. Guest impressions are shaped not only by amenities but by their interactions with staff, which affect whether they return or recommend a destination, hotel, or service provider (Colaco, 2024; Čuić Tanković *et al.*, 2021). However, there is growing recognition that stakeholders differ in how they prioritize soft skills. Managers tend to evaluate them through the lens of team functioning, service consistency, and operational efficiency, whereas tourists assess them based on direct, personal service experiences. This managerial emphasis – foregrounding teamwork, communication, leadership, decision-making, and problem-solving, particularly in front-of-house roles – serves to enable staff to deliver high-quality customer experiences rather than to downplay customer-facing soft skills (Burke & Hughes, 2018; Crawford *et al.*, 2011).

These differing emphases can compromise training priorities, employee readiness, and ultimately guest satisfaction, a risk exacerbated by reward systems that tie incentives to efficiency or cost control rather than the interpersonal qualities customers value most (Raybould & Wilkins, 2006; Wilks & Hemsworth, 2011). In this study, we treat evaluations of soft skills as role-contingent: tourists, as recipients of front-of-house interactions, prioritise encounter-facing behaviours at the moment of service, whereas managers, responsible for team functioning and reliability, prioritise organisation-facing capabilities that sustain consistency across shifts. Both emphases contribute to service quality, but at different loci of control, motivating the two-orientation lens we use in the Results and Discussion.

Although the underlying construct is not new in T&H – long examined under labels such as customer service skills and communication skills (e.g., Wuest *et al.*, 1996; Chen *et al.*, 2013) – the term “soft skills” has gained traction in recent years (e.g., Succi & Canovi, 2020; Pranić *et al.*, 2021, 2024; Pranić & Vuković, 2025a). In this paper, we use it as an umbrella term while acknowledging this overlap. Prior work in T&H has largely emphasized managerial or educational perspectives – what managers expect, what educators teach, or what students believe they need (Weber *et al.*, 2013; Sisson & Adams, 2013; Pranić *et al.*, 2021; Pranić & Vuković, 2025a). Although many studies document tourists’ expectations of customer service, very few directly compare tourists and current managers across a broader soft-skills inventory within a single design; to our knowledge, the only study including tourists (Čuić Tanković *et al.*, 2021) compared tourists with students and focused primarily on communication rather than an expanded soft-skills set or a direct tourists-managers comparison. This absence is striking given the sector’s reliance on alignment between guest expectations and organizational delivery.

This study seeks to address that gap by directly comparing tourists’ and managers’ perceptions of soft skills, using data collected in Croatia as a representative tourism destination. By adopting a dual-stakeholder perspective, the research provides novel empirical evidence on where tourist and manager

expectations converge and diverge. Such insights are critical for informing employee training, service design, and human resource strategies as evolving service models and talent shortages have moved transferable soft skills to the centre of sector policy and workforce planning, and are particularly salient in emerging tourism destinations where competitiveness depends heavily on workforce quality. This study is guided by the following research questions (RQ):

RQ 1: What is the perceived importance of soft skills among tourists and T&H managers?

RQ 2: Are there differences in the perceived importance of soft skills between tourists and T&H managers?

RQ 3: Do demographics influence how soft skills are valued by these two groups?

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: Section two reviews relevant literature on soft skills in the T&H sector. Section three outlines the methodology, including study design and data collection. Section four presents and interprets the findings. Section five discusses practical and theoretical implications, acknowledges study limitations, and suggests directions for future research.

2. Literature review

2.1. Importance of soft skills

Soft skills include social inclinations, linguistic and communication abilities, friendliness, teamwork skills, and other personality traits that characterize interpersonal relationships. Traditionally, they are considered the opposite of hard skills, which relate to the ability to perform specific tasks or activities. Nowadays, companies hire new workers with a greater emphasis on their soft skills than hard ones. To gain and maintain competitiveness in the market, they need to ensure efficient teamwork among employees and a positive work atmosphere (Cimatti, 2016). Nonetheless, hard skills indeed hold some importance and should be taught in schools and universities, although they should not be prioritized over soft skills (Sisson & Adams, 2013).

In contrast to hard skills, which pertain to an individual's ability to complete a specific task, soft skills are widely applicable (Hendarman & Tjakraatmadja, 2012) and encompass all abilities that are not closely tied to a particular job but are valuable for their contribution to interpersonal relationships (Dogara *et al.*, 2020). Hard skills are typically acquired through formal education and training (Robles, 2012). They are relatively easy to measure, while soft skills are much harder to quantify and evaluate since they stem from individual experiences and personality (Balcar, 2016). The importance of soft skills has been recognized across several areas – i.e. managers and leaders (Boyatzis, 1991), pilots (Damitz *et al.*, 2003), welfare recipients (Holzer *et al.*, 2004), in various cultures (Nonaka & Johansson, 1985), and across different job levels and compensation categories (Strauser *et al.*, 1999), demonstrating that soft skills have become a fundamental competitive advantage in labour markets. It should be noted that while some of the studies cited above are older, they remain foundational in establishing the centrality of soft skills across industries and in tourism and hospitality. At the same time, more recent work demonstrates that soft skills continue to evolve in response to changing workforce and service contexts (e.g., Pranić & Vuković, 2025a).

The modern educational paradigm thus places increasing emphasis on soft skills (Shum *et al.*, 2018), which are sometimes referred to as non-technical skills, employability skills, external employability skills, foundational skills, people skills, personal skills, applied skills, 21st-century skills, generic skills, life skills, transversal skills, or transferable skills (Robinson & Garton, 2008; Robles, 2012). Although both hard and soft skills are necessary for a successful career in tourism and hospitality (Andrades & Dimanche, 2017), soft skills are most often considered more important (Denizci Guillet *et al.*, 2019), mainly as they are relevant to a wide range of jobs (Cassidy, 2006), and their significance is expected to grow in the foreseeable future (Teng *et al.*, 2019). For this reason, identifying critical soft skills that

enhance employability in tourism and hospitality is a valuable theoretical and practical goal (Pranić *et al.*, 2021).

A review of the scientific literature on tourism and hospitality reveals that Sandwith's (1993) *Competency Domain Model* is frequently used as a descriptive tool for identifying, categorizing, and summarizing competencies relevant to a particular job (Chung-Herrera *et al.*, 2003; Pranić *et al.*, 2021; Tsai *et al.*, 2006). It divides skills into (1) conceptual/creative, (2) managerial, (3) interpersonal, (4) administrative, and (5) technical. The conceptual/creative domain encompasses cognitive abilities that enable individuals to comprehend the fundamental aspects of their job (Sandwith, 1993). The managerial domain encompasses skills for communicating and implementing current and new organizational ideas and the ability to involve everyone. The interpersonal domain pertains to how well an individual communicates with colleagues and customers and includes oral, written, and telephone communication skills, conflict management, and negotiation skills (Sandwith, 1993). Regarding the hard-soft skill dichotomy, while technical and administrative skills align with hard skills, skills in the conceptual, managerial, and interpersonal domains align with soft skills (Weber *et al.*, 2009). Sandwith's model is among the most influential and reliable competency models (Millar *et al.*, 2010) and the prevailing model used in hospitality research (Marneros *et al.*, 2020).

Regarding the importance and impact of soft skills in tourism and hospitality as service-oriented sectors, the sought-after skills in tourism and hospitality have changed significantly over the past few decades, with a decrease in the importance of hard skills and an increase in the importance of soft skills (Raybould & Wilkins, 2006). Jobs in such environments are highly interpersonal, manifested through extensive interactions between employees in these sectors and their customers or service users (Schneider *et al.*, 1998), creating a need for developing interpersonal and communication skills. Tourism is primarily a human, social activity involving many service providers whose soft skills enable effective teamwork and service delivery, which is fundamentally essential in satisfaction, loyalty, and positive feedback (Burke & Hughes, 2018). Furthermore, tourism is a recreational social activity, and the soft skills of tourism employees contribute more to the happiness and satisfaction of tourists than the destination itself (Youssef, 2017). In this context, it is necessary to re-evaluate and analyse the views of key stakeholders – tourists as service users and tourism managers as service providers – regarding the importance and role of soft skills in the overall process of delivering tourism services.

2.2. Soft skills in T&H

Research into competencies required for T&H managers has been ongoing since the 1980s (Weber *et al.*, 2013; Weber *et al.*, 2020). In a 1996 study, Tas *et al.* presented a list of 36 essential competencies for management trainees in the United States, categorizing them as crucial, significant, or moderately important. The six most critical competencies were all soft skills vital for building productive relationships with customers and staff. Similarly, a survey by Okeiyi *et al.* (1994) involving U.S. educators, industry experts, and students identified human relations, leadership, communication, and customer relations as the top competencies for food and beverage managers.

Mayo and Thomas-Haysbert (2005) underscored the importance of communication and the ability to lead and motivate employees in the T&H sector. Soft skills in this industry directly influence customer experiences, determining whether impressions are positive, negative, or neutral (Nedry, 2016; Wesley *et al.*, 2017). Key skills like teamwork, communication, leadership, decision-making, problem-solving, self-management, and professional competencies are critical for success in hospitality (Crawford *et al.*, 2011). A study by Johanson *et al.* (2011) observed that competencies such as communication, customer focus, interpersonal skills, and leadership have remained consistently essential for U.S. lodging and F&B managers over the past 25 years. Gursoy *et al.* (2012) highlighted an industry shift in hospitality school curricula priorities, with leadership emerging as the most critical aspect according to a 2009 survey.

Sisson and Adams (2013) reviewed 20 articles on soft skills published from 1994 to 2011, identifying 12 essential soft skills for entry-level managers in various hospitality sectors.

Through a survey of U.S. HR professionals, Weber *et al.* (2013) identified 33 soft skill competencies necessary for entry-level hospitality managers, including team building, coaching, conflict resolution, problem-solving, and influencing others. Rivera Jr and Lee (2016) emphasized the importance of diversity awareness and emotional intelligence, highlighting how adapting to diversity can improve company profitability in the hospitality industry. Gross *et al.* (2017) identified five critical learning outcomes for hospitality students: service and experience, interdisciplinary skills, collaboration, problem-solving, and professional responsibility. In a recent systematic literature review, Pranić *et al.* (2021) analysed 77 peer-reviewed publications from 1990 to 2021, identifying 30 essential soft skills relevant to entry-level positions in various T&H industry sectors. However, they noted a gap in the educational perspective, specifically regarding opportunities for students to develop soft skills during their academic studies. Pranić *et al.* (2024) developed and validated a scale to measure soft skills integration in T&H college curricula, comprising two dimensions: conceptual/creative and leadership/interpersonal.

While the research reviewed here is valuable and contributes significantly to the literature, there remains a need to expand the scope to compare the views of tourists and T&H managers on the importance of soft skills. Managers often view soft skills from a strategic, operational perspective, emphasizing qualities like adaptability, leadership, and innovation that contribute to team cohesion and service consistency (Crawford *et al.*, 2011; Denizci Guillet *et al.*, 2019). On the other hand, tourists value interpersonal soft skills such as friendliness, communication, and attentiveness, which impact their immediate service experience (Andrades & Dimanche, 2017).

Reviewing previous literature reveals that, despite the emphasis on assessing soft skills in T&H, extant studies have focused primarily on the managerial perspective. Meanwhile, scholarly research on soft skills from tourists' perspective is scarce. Moreover, limited research examines which specific skills (e.g., conflict resolution vs. active listening) each group prioritizes differently. Additionally, few studies analyse whether tourist and manager perspectives vary across cultural or demographic contexts. More studies examining these nuanced views could inform better-targeted employee training and add valuable insights into how cultural or situational factors shape soft skill expectations. Recent research has further highlighted how the digitalization of service encounters (Carlisle *et al.*, 2023), the changing nature of tourist-employee interactions (Čuić Tanković *et al.*, 2023), and the integration of soft skills into tourism curricula (Pranić *et al.*, 2024; Pranić & Vuković, 2025a) are reshaping how soft skills are conceptualized and prioritized in the sector. These developments underline that soft skills remain a highly relevant and evolving research topic, particularly in light of post-pandemic workforce challenges and the growing need for digital, intercultural, and educationally embedded competencies.

3. Methodology

The research was conducted using two survey questionnaires written in Croatian and distributed to two distinct groups. The first group consisted of T&H managers, defined as individuals in leadership roles such as employers, department heads, and branch managers. The second group comprised tourists, represented by Croatian-speaking individuals who had undertaken at least one tourist trip in the past. Each group included 100 respondents. This sample size was determined based on a priori power analysis, which indicated that 100 participants per group would provide sufficient power (above 0.80) to detect medium effect sizes using t-tests and ANOVA. According to Cohen (1988), a sample size of 64 per group is typically adequate to detect medium effects ($d = 0.5$) at $\alpha = 0.05$ with 80% power; our sample size exceeds this threshold, ensuring statistical robustness. Equal group sizes were also maintained to ensure balanced comparisons and minimize potential statistical bias. While the round number may raise

concerns of arbitrariness, it was practically motivated and statistically grounded – allowing for efficient comparison and reliable interpretation without inflating Type I error due to unequal variances. The study took place in Croatia, an emerging Mediterranean tourism destination characterised by coastal concentration and strong seasonality, with the largest volumes along the Adriatic Sea counties; in 2024 the country recorded around 21.3 million arrivals and 108.7 million overnight stays, the vast majority on the Adriatic coast (Croatian National Tourist Board, 2025).

The survey questionnaires were distributed through a survey link shared via WhatsApp or e-mail. The initial respondents in both groups were personal contacts of the authors, who were instructed to complete the survey and forward the link to others meeting specific criteria. For the T&H managers' group, the initial recipients were informed that the survey was intended exclusively for individuals in T&H leadership positions (not general staff) and should only be shared with others who fit this profile. Conversely, the initial contacts in the tourist group were advised that their survey was intended solely for individuals who were not in leadership positions within T&H, had taken at least one tourist trip, and should likewise be shared only with suitable candidates. This chain-referral process followed the snowball sampling method. While this approach limits randomization, it ensures access to respondents with relevant first-hand experience. This chain-referral approach often results in higher completion rates than random sampling, since respondents recruited through trusted contacts are generally more motivated to participate fully (Ting *et al.*, 2025). In our study, this process yielded a slightly larger number of responses, but only fully completed questionnaires were retained; data collection was closed once each group reached 100 responses. Because the survey link was distributed via anonymous snowball sampling and we did not collect employer identifiers, venue type, firm size, and specific region were not recorded. This design choice minimised respondent burden and protected anonymity. The survey was conducted from July 15 to July 25, 2024, and participation was anonymous.

The survey questionnaires consisted of two parts. The first section presented 21 soft skills identified through a review of relevant literature (Al-Tokhais, 2016; Hassan *et al.*, 2009; Kalargyrou, 2005; Kapera, 2012; Kay & Russette, 2000; Kostić-Bobanović & Gržinić, 2011; Pranić *et al.*, 2024; Pranić *et al.*, 2021; Raybould & Wilkins, 2006; Weber *et al.*, 2013). These items were synthesized from validated competency frameworks and prior T&H studies, with overlapping or redundant terms consolidated into a single representative item. The resulting set ensured coverage of interpersonal, managerial, and conceptual domains of soft skills, consistent with Sandwith's (1993) Competency Domain Model and subsequent hospitality research (e.g., Weber *et al.*, 2013; Pranić *et al.*, 2021). Each skill was presented as a clear, standalone statement to facilitate comprehension by both tourists and managers. The full item wordings and response scales for both survey versions are provided in the Appendix. To ensure internal consistency, Cronbach's Alpha was calculated separately for each group. The 21-item soft skills scale demonstrated high reliability for both samples ($\alpha = 0.926$ for T&H managers; $\alpha = 0.833$ for tourists), consistent with recommended thresholds for social science research (Hair *et al.*, 2019).

T&H managers rated each skill based on how important they perceived it to be for their employees to possess these skills while performing their job responsibilities. Tourists rated each skill based on how important it is for tourism employees to have these skills while providing services to them (the tourists) during travel. This design captures two distinct yet complementary stakeholder perspectives on the same employee role. Rather than imposing a hypothetical shared perspective (e.g., asking both groups what tourists value), we retained each group's natural vantage point – one as service provider, the other as service recipient. This approach mirrors well-established methods in hospitality and service quality research, where consumer and provider views are compared to identify perception gaps.

Respondents rated each skill's importance on a six-point scale ranging from 1 (not important at all) to 6 (extremely important). Using a six-point scale ensured that respondents could not select a neutral

midpoint, thus encouraging them to express a clear stance on the importance of each skill (Huang *et al.*, 2016; Pranić & Vuković, 2025b). This design promotes more precise measurements by forcing respondents to deliberate on each item. The second part collected demographic information, including gender, age, and highest level of education attained. Age categories (18-27, 28-37, 38-47, 48-57, 58+) were grouped in 10-year intervals to provide adequate granularity while ensuring sufficiently large group sizes for statistical analysis. For the tourist group, this section also included a question about employment status, making this the sole difference between the two questionnaire versions. For tourists, employment status was captured as a binary indicator (0=not employed; 1=employed). 'Employed' included both full-time and part-time work; 'not employed' encompassed students, retirees, homemakers, and those currently unemployed. This consolidation was chosen to ensure adequate subgroup sizes for inferential tests.

The collected data were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistical methods. Arithmetic means and standard deviations were calculated to summarize the data. Additionally, an independent t-test with a significance level of 5% ($\alpha=0.05$) was performed to compare mean scores between the two groups. Demographic data for each group are presented alongside the statistical results in tabulated form. A t-test for independent samples was also used to test the differences in the perception of the importance of soft skills, considering gender (and employment for tourists). In contrast, analysis of variance (ANOVA) with post-hoc tests was used to test the difference in perceived soft skills importance considering age and education level. While some variables showed moderate deviations from normality, most skewness and kurtosis values fell within generally accepted thresholds (± 1 for skewness; ± 2 for kurtosis). Given the sample size ($n = 100$ per group), the use of parametric tests is justified under the Central Limit Theorem. This decision was further supported by a priori power analysis and supplementary non-parametric testing (Mann–Whitney U and Kruskal–Wallis), which produced highly consistent results across analyses. Only a negligible discrepancy was observed in one of the 21 variables in two of the four tests, further reinforcing the robustness of our parametric approach.

4. Results

4.1. Respondent profile

An overview of the demographic characteristics of tourists and T&H managers is provided in Table 1.

Table 1: *Respondent profile and demographics.*

Variable	Tourists	T&H managers
	n	n
<i>Gender</i>	(N=100)	(N=100)
Male	51	58
Female	49	42
<i>Age</i>	(N=100)	(N=100)
18-27	24	10
28-37	25	29
38-47	21	23
48-57	19	24
58 +	11	14
<i>Highest level of education attained</i>	(N=100)	(N=100)
High school	33	27
Associate degree	11	10
Bachelor's degree	25	22
Master's degree	23	31
Doctoral degree	8	10
<i>Employment (tourists only)</i>	(N=100)	
Employed	65	
Unemployed	35	

Employed includes full-time and part-time; Not employed includes students, retirees, homemakers, and currently unemployed.

4.2. Importance of soft skills among tourists and T&H managers

Throughout the Results section, we interpret tourist–manager differences as role-linked emphases rather than absolute judgments: tourists evaluate skills from the service-encounter vantage point, while managers respond through team functioning and operational demands. Table 2 summarizes mean importance ratings for each soft skill by tourists and T&H managers. The groups converge on several high-priority items (e.g., understanding customers’ wishes and needs; controlling one’s emotions; identifying and solving problems at the outset) and both de-emphasize persuasion. Differences cluster by emphasis: tourists place relatively more weight on encounter-facing interpersonal skills (e.g., receiving criticism), whereas managers place more weight on learning/adaptability and teamwork that enable consistent service delivery (e.g., speed of adaptation to changes; active collaboration). Full item-level means appear in Table 2.

4.3. Differences in the importance of soft skills between tourists and T&H managers

In the far right column of Table 2, the values obtained by an independent t-test are listed, and they indicate that for all the listed soft skills, there is a statistically significant difference in the viewpoints of the two groups with a significance level of 5%, except for the following soft skills: workplace creativity, active listening, controlling one’s emotions, empathy towards other people and intercultural tolerance. The most significant differences are observed in the matter of the following soft skills, where the mean values for the group of T&H managers are significantly higher, i.e. these soft skills are considerably more critical to T&H managers than they are to tourists, and it is about the development of new ideas, the speed of adapting to changes, the desire to acquire new knowledge, speed of acquiring new knowledge and accurately restating key points accurately (paraphrasing / providing feedback). On the other hand, the data indicate that there are also specific soft skills with higher mean values in the group of tourists: understanding the customers’ wishes and needs, understanding other people’s emotions, and receiving criticism.

Table 2: Differences in the importance of soft skills between tourists and T&H managers

Variable	Tourists		T&H managers		t-test ($\alpha=0.05$)
	Mean	St. Dev.	Mean	St. Dev.	
Understanding the customers’ wishes and needs	5.68	0.548	5.49	0.732	2.078*
Receiving criticism	5.51	0.673	5.30	0.810	2.279*
Controlling one’s emotions	5.51	0.689	5.40	0.888	0.994
Identifying and solving problems in the beginning	5.37	0.747	5.64	0.704	-2.631*
Active listening	5.31	0.720	5.28	0.877	0.264
Understanding other people’s emotions	5.07	0.728	4.76	0.854	2.763*
Coping with stress	4.90	0.732	5.36	0.811	-4.211*
Empathy towards other people	4.79	0.715	4.71	0.957	0.669
Active collaboration	4.76	0.740	5.49	0.759	-6.887*
Creating positive relationships with people at work and outside of work	4.74	0.705	5.13	0.928	-3.346*
Workplace creativity	4.65	0.783	4.68	0.973	-0.240
Speed of adaptation to changes	4.57	0.756	5.49	0.732	-8.743*
Intercultural tolerance	4.52	0.969	4.56	1.038	-0.282
Coping with failure	4.28	0.805	5.09	0.866	-6.851*
Desire to acquire new knowledge	4.07	0.868	5.07	0.807	-8.438*
Non-verbal communication skills	3.99	0.959	4.51	1.021	-3.712*
Critical thinking	3.89	0.952	4.77	1.014	-6.327*
Speed of acquiring new knowledge	3.82	0.925	5.19	0.751	-11.498*
Accurately paraphrasing	3.80	0.876	4.82	0.881	-8.210*
Power of persuasion	3.75	0.833	4.48	1.011	-5.573*
Development of new ideas	3.61	0.973	5.27	1.014	-11.812*
Σ	4.60	0.795	5.07	0.877	-3.971*

*Significant at the 5% level

Finally, an independent t-test was also performed on the mean values for all observed soft skills together. The result indicates that in this sample, there is a statistically significant difference between all soft skills, at a significance level of 5%. The mean value is higher for the T&H managers group, indicating that, on average, T&H managers place more importance on soft skills than tourists.

4.4. Demographics and importance of soft skills among tourists and T&H managers

Each sample was further analysed to determine whether demographic factors influenced perceptions of soft skills. Demographic patterns are read within each role (tourist vs manager). Where significant, effects likely indicate which facets of the two orientations (encounter-facing vs organisation-facing) different subgroups weight more – not superiority of one skill over another. Independent samples t-tests were used to examine gender-based differences, while one-way ANOVA was conducted to assess differences by age, education, and – among tourists only – employment status. Table 3 presents the test statistics and corresponding p-values for both tourists and T&H managers.

Table 3: Differences in the importance of soft skills by gender, age, education, and employment

Variable	By gender		By age		By education		By employment
	Tourists	T&H Managers	Tourists	T&H Managers	Tourists	T&H Managers	Tourists
Critical thinking	-1.35; 0.181	-1.59; 0.114	7.91*; <.001	1.34; 0.261	1.24; 0.299	0.65; 0.631	0.84; 0.404
Development of new ideas	-0.43; 0.666	-1.66; 0.099	15.05*; <.001	0.63; 0.644	2.41; 0.055	1.64; 0.170	1.19; 0.240
Speed of adaptation to changes	-0.02; 0.985	-1.01; 0.315	2.53*; 0.046	0.73; 0.576	0.71; 0.589	3.35*; 0.013	0.29; 0.769
Understanding the customers' wishes and needs	0.48; 0.633	-1.62; 0.110	3.88*; 0.006	0.45; 0.774	2.99*; 0.023	1.42; 0.233	-0.30; 0.759
Workplace creativity	-0.81; 0.423	-2.49*; 0.015	0.97; 0.427	1.18; 0.327	0.82; 0.519	0.52; 0.721	0.07; 0.948
Active collaboration	0.61; 0.547	-1.57; 0.121	7.38*; <.001	0.61; 0.659	1.39; 0.243	0.13; 0.970	0.94; 0.349
Power of persuasion	1.64; 0.105	-3.92*; <.001	4.69*; 0.002	0.61; 0.655	1.47; 0.219	0.92; 0.455	1.58; 0.119
Active listening	0.05; 0.958	-1.51; 0.134	1.59; 0.184	0.54; 0.705	0.18; 0.948	0.88; 0.479	-0.23; 0.822
Identifying and solving problems in the beginning	-0.77; 0.442	0.56; 0.574	0.51; 0.728	1.82; 0.131	0.50; 0.735	1.80; 0.134	-0.26; 0.798
Creating positive relationships with people at work and outside of work	0.64; 0.523	-2.18*; 0.032	1.56; 0.190	0.45; 0.769	3.59*; 0.009	1.40; 0.241	0.57; 0.569
Coping with stress	-0.25; 0.807	-0.76; 0.448	0.63; 0.640	0.18; 0.950	1.35; 0.257	0.58; 0.675	-0.40; 0.691
Coping with failure	-0.57; 0.573	-1.54; 0.126	6.72*; <.001	0.06; 0.993	1.09; 0.364	0.14; 0.968	0.05; 0.962
Understanding other people's emotions	-1.27; 0.208	-2.19; 0.031	0.75; 0.563	0.36; 0.840	0.46; 0.762	0.79; 0.532	-0.11; 0.914
Controlling one's emotions	0.58; 0.565	-0.80; 0.426	1.16; 0.335	0.99; 0.416	0.42; 0.796	2.17; 0.079	-1.37; 0.177
Desire to acquire new knowledge	-0.36; 0.720	-2.76*; 0.007	6.87*; <.001	0.84; 0.501	1.67; 0.164	0.26; 0.900	2.14*; 0.037
Speed of acquiring new knowledge	-0.61; 0.544	-0.29; 0.773	3.62*; 0.009	0.83; 0.509	2.83*; 0.029	0.22; 0.928	1.17; 0.248
Receiving criticism	-1.37; 0.176	0.67; 0.506	4.19*; 0.004	0.68; 0.606	0.38; 0.822	0.69; 0.601	-1.23; 0.222
Accurately paraphrasing	0.05; 0.964	-1.52; 0.132	5.62*; <.001	0.50; 0.734	2.63*; 0.039	0.97; 0.428	0.00; 1.000
Empathy towards other people	-2.38*; 0.019	-4.95*; <.001	0.43; 0.784	0.47; 0.755	0.62; 0.652	0.31; 0.871	-0.19; 0.847
Intercultural tolerance	-0.94; 0.352	-4.54*; <.001	4.74*; 0.002	1.48; 0.215	1.50; 0.209	1.75; 0.146	0.17; 0.868
Non-verbal communication skills	-0.94; 0.351	-5.09*; <.001	9.11*; <.001	0.87; 0.483	2.25; 0.069	1.43; 0.230	1.75; 0.085

Columns show test statistic; p value. For Gender: t; p. For Age, Education, and Employment: F; p; * p<.05.

With regard to gender (0=male, 1=female), there are generally no significant differences in how tourists perceive the importance of soft skills, with one exception: female respondents place significantly greater importance on empathy toward others than male respondents. In contrast, gender-based differences are more pronounced among T&H managers. Among T&H managers, several items differed by gender, spanning creativity/persuasion, relationship-building, emotional/intercultural competencies, and self-development; men consistently rated these lower than women. Full item-level statistics appear in Table

3. Additionally, a difference at the 10% significance level was observed for the skill of developing new ideas, with men again assigning it lower importance than women.

With regard to age, ANOVA showed no significant effects for T&H managers (Table 3), whereas among tourists age explained differences on over half the items. Tukey HSD (Table 4) indicated a skill-specific pattern: younger tourists (18-27) rated multiple learning-, interaction-, and communication-oriented skills higher than older cohorts, whereas the oldest cohort (58+) rated adaptability (speed of adaptation to changes) higher. One exception concerned coping with failure, where 28-37 < 38-47 ($p < .05$). This pattern aligns with an encounter/learning orientation among younger tourists and an adaptability orientation among the oldest cohort (see Table 4 for pairwise contrasts). For managers, no age effects emerged at the item level (Table 3).

Table 4: Tukey HSD pairwise differences by age (tourists only)

Soft skill	Higher –Lower (age groups)
Critical thinking	18-27 –older groups
Development of new ideas	18-27 –older groups
Understanding customers' wishes/needs	18-27 –older groups
Active collaboration	18-27 –older groups
Power of persuasion	18-27 –older groups
Desire to acquire new knowledge	18-27 –older groups
Speed of acquiring new knowledge	18-27 –older groups
Receiving criticism	18-27 –older groups
Accurately paraphrasing	18-27 –older groups
Intercultural tolerance	18-27 –older groups
Non-verbal communication	18-27 –older groups
Speed of adaptation to changes	58+ –younger groups
Coping with failure	18-27 –older; 38-47 –28-37

Note: All listed pairs significant at $p < .05$; Columns show direction only for significant Tukey HSD contrasts ($p < .05$). Full ANOVA statistics are in Table 3; item means remain in Table 2.

Regarding education, the ANOVA results (Table 3) suggest that it does not significantly influence how tourists or T&H managers perceive the importance of soft skills overall. However, a few notable differences were observed. Among tourists, significant differences emerged in the perceived importance of several skills: understanding the customers' wishes and needs, creating positive relationships at and outside of work, speed of acquiring new knowledge, and accurately paraphrasing (all significant at the 5% level), as well as development of new ideas and non-verbal communication skills (significant at the 10% level). For T&H managers, education level influenced the perceived importance of speed of adaptation to changes (5% level) and controlling one's emotions (10% level).

Education (Tukey HSD; Table 5) showed targeted differences. Among tourists, undergraduates > postgraduates for developing new ideas; community college > undergraduate for understanding customers' needs; and high school < undergraduate for relationships, speed of acquiring new knowledge, accurately paraphrasing, and non-verbal communication. Undergraduates also > graduates for relationships. Among managers, graduate/postgraduate > high school for speed of adaptation to changes (all $p < .05$ unless noted). Education-linked contrasts similarly track the two orientations (Tables 4-5), indicating where stakeholders with different educational backgrounds place emphasis within each role.

The tourist sample was further analysed using an independent samples t-test to assess whether employment status (employed vs. not employed; the latter including students, retirees, homemakers, and currently unemployed) influenced perceptions of soft-skill importance. As shown in Table 3,

employment status did not significantly affect tourists' views overall. The only notable difference was found for the skill desire to acquire new knowledge, with unemployed respondents rating it as more important than their employed counterparts.

Table 5: Tukey HSD pairwise differences by education

Soft skill	Tourists	
	Higher –Lower (education groups)	
Development of new ideas	Undergraduate –Postgraduate	
Understanding customers' wishes/needs	Community college –Undergraduate	
Creating positive relationships (at/ outside work)	Undergraduate –High school; Undergraduate –Graduate	
Speed of acquiring new knowledge	Undergraduate –High school	
Accurately paraphrasing	Undergraduate –High school	
Non-verbal communication	Undergraduate –High school	
Soft skill	T&H Managers	
	Higher –Lower (education groups)	
Speed of adaptation to changes	Graduate/ Postgraduate –High school	

Note: All listed pairs significant at $p < .05$; Table shows direction only for significant Tukey HSD contrasts ($p < .05$). Full ANOVA statistics appear in Table 3; item means remain in Table 2.

5. Discussion

5.1. Stakeholder orientations in soft skills

Tourists and T&H managers agree that soft skills are critical in shaping service quality, but they prioritise different aspects of these competencies.

5.1.1 Tourist orientation: encounter-facing skills

Tourists emphasise encounter-facing interpersonal skills that we measured—understanding customers' wishes and needs, active listening, empathy, non-verbal communication, receiving criticism, and creating positive relationships – which directly shape satisfaction during service encounters. These emphases align with the item means in Table 2 and the role-linked patterns summarised in Tables 4–5.

5.1.2 Manager orientation: organisation-facing skills

Managers place more weight on organisation-facing competencies – teamwork (active collaboration), leadership, adaptability (speed of adaptation to changes), and problem-solving (identifying and solving problems at the outset) – that underpin team functioning and reliable front-of-house delivery. Importantly, problem-solving spans both perspectives: tourists value early issue identification/resolution within the encounter, while managers emphasise it for service reliability and operational consistency.

These role-linked emphases are consistent with recent hospitality evidence in post-pandemic contexts, highlighting intensified demand for transferable soft skills and reconfigured work practices (Huang *et al.*, 2021; Liu-Lastres *et al.*, 2023; Stangl *et al.*, 2024; Tigu, 2025). Studies also highlight that communication, adaptability, and emotional intelligence are particularly valued (Čuić Tanković *et al.*, 2023; Jiang & Alexakis, 2017; Succi & Canovi, 2020). Despite this recognition, a persistent skills gap remains: formal education often emphasises technical skills at the expense of interpersonal competencies (Raybould & Wilkins, 2006; Sisson & Adams, 2013; Wilks & Hemsworth, 2011). Employees who exhibit strong engagement – often driven by an internal locus of control and passion – tend to leverage their soft skills more effectively, enhancing both tourist satisfaction and managerial efficiency (Turksoy & Tutuncu, 2021).

5.2. Differences in the perceived importance of soft skills

Building on 5.1., our results show a systematic, role-linked pattern. Tourists place greater weight on encounter-facing interpersonal behaviours (e.g., understanding customers' wishes/needs, active listening, empathy), whereas managers emphasise organisation-facing capabilities that support reliable delivery (e.g., teamwork/active collaboration, adaptability [speed of adaptation to changes], leadership, and early problem identification/resolution) (Table 2). This pattern is consistent with prior work in which customers highlight interpersonal responsiveness and managers stress professionalism and problem-solving (Sisson & Adams, 2013; Succi & Canovi, 2020). The Job Demands-Resources lens (Turksoy & Tutuncu, 2021) helps explain the mechanism: autonomy and passion fuel engagement, which amplifies the effectiveness of both streams of soft skills. Related studies similarly show tourists' emphasis on interpersonal service quality, versus managers' focus on adaptability, leadership, and conflict resolution (Marneros *et al.*, 2020; Suh *et al.*, 2012).

A balanced approach develops both streams in parallel: (a) encounter-facing behaviours that shape the guest's immediate experience (e.g., empathy, active listening, understanding customer needs, non-verbal communication, constructive handling of criticism) and (b) organisation-facing capabilities that sustain consistent delivery (e.g., adaptability, teamwork, early problem identification/resolution, leadership). In practice, pair scenario-based service training and feedback/coaching on emotional regulation with modules on adaptability and collaborative problem-solving, and use mentoring/peer coaching to integrate both streams across teams (see 5.5. for operational detail). This aligns with recent evidence linking soft-skill development to guest satisfaction and service quality in hospitality settings (Čuić Tanković *et al.*, 2023; Carlisle *et al.*, 2023). Taken together, the data support the two-orientation lens introduced in 5.1. (encounter-facing vs organisation-facing), which we use to align training with both sets of expectations.

5.3. Demographics and the perceived importance of soft skills

Demographic factors influence how individuals perceive and value soft skills. Younger respondents in the study emphasized problem-solving, adaptability, and acquiring new knowledge, whereas older respondents prioritized leadership, emotional control, and coping with failure. These findings suggest that experience and professional maturity shape the perception of essential soft skills, a trend that aligns with previous research indicating that early-career professionals focus on learning agility and responsiveness, while more experienced individuals emphasize interpersonal management and leadership development (Guffey & Loewy, 2019; Van Laar, Van Deursen, Van Dijk, & De Haan, 2017). Consistent with life-stage and learning-agility perspectives, we interpret these age contrasts as correlational patterns: earlier-career cohorts place greater weight on growth- and interaction-oriented skills, whereas later-career cohorts emphasize leadership, emotional regulation, and coping capacity shaped by accumulated experience. In hospitality specifically, evolving expectations among Gen-Z customers and employees further accentuate interactional and digital communication competencies (Seyfi *et al.*, 2024; Huang *et al.*, 2021; Magalhães *et al.*, 2022).

Education level also played a role; respondents with higher education qualifications placed significantly more importance on skills such as developing new ideas, creating positive relationships, and acquiring new knowledge. These findings align with research indicating that individuals with higher academic exposure tend to value cognitive and social intelligence skills more highly (Cimatti, 2016; Succi & Canovi, 2020). Employment status was additionally examined within the tourist sample, based on the rationale that employed individuals may have more practical, workplace-based perspectives on soft skill relevance. Although few differences were found overall, unemployed tourists placed greater value on the desire to acquire new knowledge, possibly reflecting job-seeking priorities or a stronger focus on personal development. While the influence of cultural background was not directly measured in this study, existing literature suggests that cultural norms affect expectations regarding communication and

interpersonal interactions (Knapp, Hall, & Horgan, 2013; Yu, 2019). Future research could further investigate how cultural diversity influences soft skills prioritization among both tourists and industry professionals.

5.4. *Theoretical implications*

This study expands the theoretical discourse on soft skills in the tourism and hospitality sector by introducing a stakeholder comparison that has been largely absent from existing research. While prior studies have explored soft skills from the perspectives of managers, students, or educators (e.g., Weber *et al.*, 2013; Pranić *et al.*, 2021; Pranić & Vuković, 2025a), few have considered how tourists - the primary recipients of service - evaluate these competencies. Moreover, studies that have included tourists or future professionals tend to treat these groups independently or compare them to students, not to current managers (e.g., Čuić Tanković *et al.*, 2021). To our knowledge, this is the first empirical study to directly compare tourists' and current T&H managers' perceptions of soft skills within a unified framework.

This contribution is particularly relevant in light of prior findings that underscore the impact of soft skills on service quality and customer satisfaction (Eshetie *et al.*, 2016; Tuan & Linh, 2014). It also builds on studies that have emphasized the enduring value of communication, adaptability, and emotional intelligence in hospitality contexts (Jiang & Alexakis, 2017; Succi & Canovi, 2020). However, these earlier works focus on either internal organizational perspectives or single stakeholder groups, limiting their ability to identify gaps in expectation between service providers and recipients.

By adopting a dual-stakeholder perspective, this study provides novel empirical evidence on where tourist and manager expectations converge and diverge. The findings reveal statistically significant differences in how tourists and managers prioritize specific soft skills, suggesting that each group's role within the T&H system shapes its valuation of competencies. Tourists emphasize relational and service-oriented attributes, such as empathy and understanding customer needs, while managers favour operational and strategic skills like adaptability and leadership. These insights build on and extend existing competency models, such as Sandwith's (1993) Competency Domain Model, by validating the relevance of soft skills across stakeholder groups and demonstrating the need to align internal training priorities with external service expectations.

In doing so, this study contributes to theory in several important ways. First, it reframes soft skills as a multi-stakeholder construct, rather than one understood solely from an internal or managerial perspective. Second, it introduces comparative empirical data that highlight perception gaps between service providers and recipients – gaps that may otherwise remain unrecognized. Third, it offers a foundation for theory-building that more explicitly incorporates stakeholder alignment as a key component in understanding soft skill effectiveness, particularly in high-contact, experience-driven service industries such as T&H.

5.5. *Practical implications*

Given that managers rated leadership and adaptability significantly higher than tourists, development efforts should balance these internally valued competencies with the guest-facing abilities tourists prioritise (e.g., empathy, understanding customer needs). To that end, T&H businesses should design programmes that develop both streams and align hiring accordingly – using structured assessments of interpersonal skills alongside adaptability and problem-solving, and favouring candidates with a clear interpersonal orientation.

Some soft skills – especially compassion and empathy – have dispositional components, which partly explains why they're harder to quantify and evaluate (Balcar, 2016). At the same time, hospitality

practice points to trainable behaviours: perspective-taking and role-play for service encounters, feedback and coaching on emotional regulation, and structured conflict-handling drills can improve guest-facing communication and consistency (Weber *et al.*, 2020; Shum *et al.*, 2018). Curriculum-embedded scaffolds and digital micro-learning further support transfer to the floor (Pranić *et al.*, 2024; Carlisle *et al.*, 2023). Sustained gains require practice, feedback, and supervisor modeling.

Additionally, structured mentoring and peer coaching – pairing experienced employees with new hires – operationalise the dual focus identified in our results: mentors model guest-facing behaviours (empathy, active listening, intercultural and non-verbal communication) while coaching adaptability and problem-solving. As Tables 4 and 5 show, age- and education-linked contrasts cluster around these two streams (interaction/learning vs adaptability), motivating a parallel development approach. Evidence from hospitality links mentoring/peer coaching to improved newcomer job crafting/integration and lower turnover intentions via organizational and occupational embeddedness (Jiang *et al.*, 2025; Yang *et al.*, 2019). Post-pandemic scholarship also underscores transferable and digital communication competencies; training should therefore include digital and conflict-resolution skills (Carlisle *et al.*, 2023; Liu-Lastres *et al.*, 2023; Țigu, 2025). Combined, mentoring and targeted training align employee competencies with managerial expectations and evolving tourist preferences.

5.6. Limitations and future research

This study was conducted using a Croatian sample, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. However, given the lack of prior research directly comparing tourists' and managers' perspectives on soft skills, the results offer novel insights that may be relevant to other tourism and cultural settings with similar stakeholder dynamics. This study has several additional limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. While sufficient for the present comparative analyses, the sample size may limit power to detect small effects and generalizability. Future studies should target larger samples – on the order of 150-200 respondents per stakeholder group to detect small-to-moderate between-group effects ($d \approx .30$) with 80% power at $\alpha = .05$, and 350-400 per group for very small effects ($d \approx .20$) (Cohen, 1988). To broaden external validity, future research should stratify by region (e.g., Adriatic vs. Continental Croatia), venue type (e.g., accommodation, food & beverage, travel intermediation, attractions/experiences, transport, events/MICE, short-term rentals, wellness/spa, and cruise/maritime), and firm size to test for subgroup differences, with sufficient cell sizes for subgroup analysis.

Moreover, the use of snowball sampling introduces the possibility of sampling bias. Because participants were recruited through personal and professional networks, the sample may overrepresent certain social clusters while underrepresenting others. This limitation is inherent in non-probability designs and means that results should be interpreted with caution when generalizing to the wider population. Nevertheless, snowball sampling was considered appropriate for this exploratory study, as it facilitated access to eligible respondents with direct experience of tourism services (tourists) and workforce leadership (managers), which might have been more difficult to achieve through conventional random sampling. Additionally, the binary employment indicator used for tourists may mask heterogeneity among non-employed subgroups (e.g., students vs. retirees).

Additionally, while this study explored various aspects of soft skills beyond communication, future research could further examine the relative importance of specific soft skills, such as leadership, adaptability, and problem-solving. Cross-cultural comparisons could also determine whether these findings hold across diverse tourism markets. With larger samples, future research should disaggregate employment status (e.g., full-time vs. part-time; student vs. retired; currently unemployed) to test for subgroup differences in soft-skill priorities. Finally, longitudinal studies could provide deeper insights into how perceptions of soft skills evolve over time among both tourists and managers. Examining

whether structured soft skills training enhances not only employee job retention and professional mobility but also improves tourist satisfaction and service expectations would provide a more holistic understanding of soft skills development in the T&H sector (see also Liu-Lastres *et al.*, 2023; Tigu, 2025). One alternative design worth exploring in future research is to ask both tourists and managers to rate soft skills from the same projected viewpoint – for example, by asking both groups what they believe tourists value in service employees. While our study prioritizes ecological validity by eliciting direct, stakeholder-specific evaluations, a shared-perspective design could provide further insight into perceived misalignments and attribution biases. Comparative studies using both approaches may help clarify whether observed gaps stem from differing priorities or misperceptions about the other group's expectations.

6. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that tourists and managers prioritize soft skills differently, reflecting outward-facing service expectations versus inward-facing organizational needs. By directly comparing stakeholder groups, we provide actionable guidance for training design, recruitment, and service delivery – balanced between empathy/communication for guest experience and adaptability/leadership for operational resilience. Future work should test these patterns across contexts and with finer demographic distinctions to inform sector-wide skills development strategies.

Appendix.

Survey items and response scales

Overview: Both questionnaires were administered in Croatian; English renderings are provided for transparency. Apart from the role-specific stem (tourist vs manager) and the employment item (tourists only), the two instruments were identical.

Role-specific stems:

Tourists. On a scale from 1 to 6, please rate each soft skill according to how important it is for tourism employees to have this skill while providing services to you during travel. (1=not important at all; 6=extremely important)

T&H managers. On a scale from 1 to 6, please rate each soft skill according to how important you perceive it to be for your employees to possess this skill while performing their job responsibilities. (1=not important at all; 6=extremely important)

Soft-skills (items common to both versions):

- Critical thinking
- Development of new ideas
- Speed of adaptation to changes
- Understanding the customers' wishes and needs
- Workplace creativity
- Active collaboration
- Power of persuasion
- Active listening
- Identifying and solving problems in the beginning
- Creating positive relationships with people at work and outside of work
- Coping with stress
- Coping with failure
- Understanding other people's emotions
- Controlling one's emotions
- Desire to acquire new knowledge

Speed of acquiring new knowledge
Receiving criticism
Accurately restating key points (paraphrasing / providing feedback)
Empathy towards other people
Intercultural tolerance
Non-verbal communication skills

Demographic items:

Asked of both groups

Gender: Male / Female

Age: 18–27; 28–37; 38–47; 48–57; 58+

Highest level of education: High school; Community college; Undergraduate degree; Graduate degree; Postgraduate degree

Tourists only

Employment status: Employed / Not employed

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