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EVALUATING THE IMPORTANCE OF SOFT SKILLS VS. TECHNICAL SKILLS IN THE EMPLOYABILITY OF HOTEL MANAGEMENT GRADUATES

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: *The relative significance of technical skills and soft skills in determining the employability of hotel management graduates is assessed in this study. It examines how these skills, together with industry demands, influence perceived employability in the hospitality industry.*

Methodology: *The quantitative research design involved a survey of 355 hospitality industry respondents. EFA and CFA were applied using SPSS and AMOS to establish the factor structure and confirm the model fitness for justification. Hypothesis testing of technical skills, soft skills, industry expectations, and perceived employability relationships was conducted through Structural Equation Modeling (SEM).*

Findings: *The findings emphasize the aspect that soft skills are more relevant to perceived employability than technical skills. Confirmatory factor analysis validated a well-fitting model with significant measures like CFI = 0.966 and RMSEA = 0.048. Discriminant validity was confirmed, presenting all the constructs as different yet related. The results show that technical skills are significant but that soft skills play a greater role in employability outcomes.*

Originality of work: *This research contributes to hospitality management knowledge by empirically examining the employability relationship between technical and soft skills. The study avails stakeholders within the hospitality industry with knowledge about skills that support graduates' career development, while highlighting the importance of combining both sets of skills properly in curricula.*

Keywords: *Employability Skills, Soft Skills, Technical Skills, Hospitality Industry Expectations, Structural Equation Modeling, Hotel Management Graduate*

INTRODUCTION

Employability has been defined as an important measure in the competitive hospitality industry about the graduation dates to meet industry's expectation. According to **Yorke (2006),** employability is defined as the possession of knowledge, skills, and attributes that make an individual able to get and hold employment. For hotel management graduates, employability is shaped by the integration of technical skills—such as front office operations, culinary expertise, and revenue management—and soft skills, including communication, teamwork, and adaptability. As the industry evolves to prioritize guest satisfaction and personalized experiences, the importance of soft skills has grown significantly **(Robles, 2012).**

Technical skills provide for operational efficiency and fulfill the requirements of specific tasks. Hence, they are the foundation of professional competence in a graduate **(Baum, 2002).** However, in the highly interactive environment of the hospitality sector, soft skills are increasingly seen as pivotal in terms of managing interpersonal relations, attending to the needs of guests, and fostering team cohesion **(Hurrell et al., 2013).** What the employers look forward to be emotionally intelligent candidates who can analyze and navigate complex social situations toward organizational success. **(Goleman, 1998).**

Despite the knowledge of both skills' importance, their comparative role in influencing employability outcomes has increasingly been a topic of debate. Curricula in higher education institutions and organizations fail to keep pace with the changing needs of hospitality sector skills. As reported by some researchers, technical skills are the hard core of the competence required for entry into service industries; however, soft skills are what differentiate exceptional employees from the ordinary ones at work **(Andrews & Higson, 2008).**

This study aims to determine the relative significance of soft skills and technical skills in determining the employability of hotel management graduates. It aims to use industry expectations and perceptions to generate actionable recommendations toward curriculum development and professional training programs that will better prepare graduates for their multifaceted service roles within the hospitality industry.

OBJECTIVES

- To measure the relative weight of soft skills and technical skills in determining the employability of hotel management graduates.
- To analyze the effect of soft skills on the employability of hotel management graduates.
- To analyze the role of technical skills in the employability of hotel management graduates.
- To explore the mediating effect of perceived industry expectations on the relationship between skills (soft and technical) and employability.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The demand for employing qualified and capable graduates has now become a crucial concern not only for educators but also for employers in the global hospitality industry. Hospitality graduates from hotel management courses are expected to enjoy a holistic combination of skills that correspond with contemporary hospitality business operations. Traditionally, these have been broad generic categories of soft and technical skills. Understanding the relative significance of these skills has been a subject of research for quite some time, as the hospitality sector places great emphasis both on personal interaction and operational efficiency **(Baum, 2007).**

Soft skills, often termed interpersonal or "people" ski ls, are generally known to be important for service-oriented industries like hospitality. The ability to communicate effectively, coordinate work teams, solve problems, and maintain a relationship with customers has been repeatedly mentioned as important to professional success **(Robles, 2012; Weber, Finley, Crawford, & Rivera Jr., 2009).** According to **Baum (2015),** the hospitality industry is driven by human interaction, and skills such as communication, teamwork, adaptability, and emotional intelligence are very essential.

Moreover, several studies **(Andrews & Higson, 2008; Wilks & Hemsworth, 2011)** show hospitality industry employers place more emphasis on soft skills when evaluating the employability of graduate students compared to technical skills. According to their study, employers believe that factors like customer service orientation and teamwork are major indicators for determining whether a graduate can easily blend in with the organizational culture or be able to fit in with the service standards of the industry.

However, despite these acknowledged specificities of the relevance of soft skills, several issues arise in implementing these effectively in formal education. While technical skills are easy to gauge through test instruments, soft skills are much more subjective and difficult to quantify. This mismatch between training requirements in industry and training support from institutions has made educators reassess what is being taught in training hospitality graduates in hotel management competency performance **(Harvey, 2000).**

Technical skills have been described as the specific knowledge and ability applied to perform operational tasks in the hospitality industry, including knowledge and use of property management systems, financial management, food and beverage service, housekeeping management, as well as health and safety laws. According to **Ladkin (2011),** technical knowledge is that which basically frames the efficient operation in hotels, and without this, graduates are likely to lack the core competencies to deliver on most of the basic job requirements in the hospitality industry.

According to **Wang (2016),** although soft skills are important, technical skills equally become significant. For example, while applying more sophisticated reservations systems, it is very crucial that the employees are skilled with those technologies. Thus, for instance, since increasingly complex reservation systems are being adopted by the hotels, the hotel employee needs to develop appropriate skills for such systems **(Enz & Siguaw, 2000).** The other important aspect is competency in food and beverage management as well as financial

controls. These are always to be found in supervisory and managerial positions to make data-informed decisions that affect the bottom line **(Jones, Hillier, & Comfort, 2016).**

Whereby many hospitality programs focus more on technical training, the gap between academic programs and employers' expectations still exists. According to studies, most graduates have been found to be ill-equipped for the technical requirements of their jobs, which may represent a disconnection between educational institution needs and industry requirements **(Knight & Yorke, 2004).**

The literature suggests that both technical and soft skills are important for hospitality employability, although the balance between the two can be role-specific and level-dependent. A recent study conducted by **Raybould and Wilkins (2006)** posits that in entry-level roles, technical skills must take precedence for a hotel to remain operational efficiently, but managerial roles require stronger proportions of leadership, communication, and problem-solving skills.

Indeed, research shows that it could become more important as professionals progress into the organization and take on less technical tasks and more managerial roles **(Brown, 2007).** In this regard, employability can be considered as something in constant flux, adapting to the employee's work development and the shifting requirements of the industry **(Yorke, 2006).** This dynamic relationship between soft and technical skills is also manifested in how the industry sees workplace readiness. According to a survey conducted by the World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC), in 2017, employers now more than ever look for graduates who embody a blend of both skill sets—those who can adjust to new technologies while continuing with high standards of customer service. Perceptions of industry expectations serve as a crucial mediator in the soft versus technical skills and employability. Rather, hospitality graduates have shaped their own skill development based on their perception of what employers' value most, as viewed by **Hesketh and Fleetwood (2006).** For instance, there can be a feedback loop whereby the students are more concentrated on one aspect, be it the soft skills or technical skills, in accordance with the perceiver's perceived importance of the same to the industry.

Baum (2019) cites those technical skills, especially in IT systems, are overemphasized by most students, whereas the value of emotional intelligence and customer interaction skills is underestimated. Studies reveal that inclusion of internships and industry exposure in the academic program makes graduates line up skill development with the actual demands of the industry **(Zopiatis & Theocharous, 2020).**

Secondly, employer expectations in hospitality operations have also changed with technological advancements. The widespread application of automation and AI-driven systems stresses the requirement from graduates to both master advanced technical knowledge and manage human hospitality. In turn, there is a dual need for such skills to be possessed **(Ivanov & Webster, 2019).**

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

a) Human Capital Theory: Human capital theory, which was firstly propounded by Becker in 1964, suggests that investments in education, training, and skills have impact on personal and career development which in turn makes an individual more employable and productive. In this respect, soft skills (communication, teamwork, emotional intelligence) and technical skills (financial management, property management system, food and beverage service) are different types of human capital making a graduate more capable to be employed.

Human capital theory is the concept which postulates that graduates who have both skill sets are more likely to find employment and succeed in their careers within the hospitality industry. This is because these skills serve as qualities that can positively enhance organizational efficiency, guest satisfaction, and profit. Thus, graduates who effectively develop their human capital through both education and training in soft and technical skills better meet the demands of the industry **(Schultz, 1971).**

b) Employability Framework: Employability is a construct that refers to the knowledge, skills, and personal qualities of an individual that make it of interest for employers **(Yorke, 2006). Harvey (2001)** described employability as acquiring a job, but also as maintaining and progressing in the workforce. The three

important elements of this concept are knowledge and skills, which comprise technical competencies; personal attributes, which include soft skills; and contextual factors, comprising industry expectations and work experience.

Employability frameworks highlight on the significance of transferable skills, such as communication and leadership capabilities, which guides graduates adjust to role changes. Since hospitality jobs vary enormously among organizations, a strong skill set is essential for graduates to survive the test of time in their careers **(Knight & Yorke, 2004).** According to the framework, graduates who have a well-balanced mix of technical skills and interpersonal skills will have a greater likelihood of finding employment.

c) Skills Mismatch Theory: In this regard, the theory of skills mismatch attributes the gap between the skills of graduates and the required skills among employers. This particularly holds in hospitality as employers have mainly expressed discrepancies between the skills possessed by graduates when they graduate and those required in the workplace **(Allen & van der Velden, 2001).** As such, it may be that an employer may look at the priority between technical skills (such as software proficiency for hotel management systems and revenue management) and soft skills such as customer service and adaptability, which are essential for operations to succeed in most hospitality positions.

Research has indicated that most graduates put more emphasis on technical skills and less on interpersonal skills. **Baum, 2019** reported that studies by **Zopiatis & Theocharous, 2020** also supported the opinion that in the hospitality industry, employers are more interested in other soft skills when they recruit for customer-facing positions. However, technical skills are important in specific areas such as hotel operation, IT management, and revenue optimization where efficiency in operation is key point.

d) Social cognitive career Theory: According to Social Cognitive Career Theory, **Lent, Brown and Hackett (1994),** self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal goals are strong determinants of career development. Within the SCCT framework, graduate confidence in their own ability, soft as well as technical, determines their decision-making over career and career success/ failure. If the graduates have confidence with their skills of communication, flexibility, and technical skills, they would move to challenging jobs and interview processes and hence become more employable.

Industry expectations-perceived play an important role in SCCT as these impact graduates' outcome expectations. For example, if a student thinks that the hospitality industry places more value on technical skills, he may concentrate more on the development of those skills, influencing his self-efficacy and making him opt for such careers.

e) The theory of work adjustment: According to the Theory of Work Adjustment, **Dawis and Lofquist (1984)** assert that an individual's employability would depend on the correspondence of his skills to those demanded in that job. In the hospitality scenario, this implies that hotel management graduates must adjust to the technical as well as interpersonal demands of their respective jobs. They are likely to succeed in their jobs because, besides being equipped with the soft skills, they also possess the technical skills required by them to meet both the expectations of their employers and the customers whom they serve.

The theory also introduces work satisfaction and a phenomenon closely tied to employability. Graduates who are best prepared for their roles in terms of technical and soft skills would often experience job satisfaction, leading to better performance and career success.

METHODOLOGY

His study is quantitative research design that investigates the relationship of technical skills, soft skills, industry expectations, and perceived employability within the hospitality sector. It used a descriptive and causal approach. The descriptive one assists in analyzing the respondent's demographics and sample characteristics. A causal approach was adopted for establishing and validating the relationship among the variables by employing Structural Equation Modeling (SEM).

The target population was composed of hotel management professionals, graduates, and students who belong to different educational and professional backgrounds within the hospitality industry. A non-probability convenience sampling method was applied to collect data from the respondents who were available and willing to participate in the study. The study succeeded in attaining a sample size of 355 respondents with enough representation of the population based on age, gender, educational qualifications, and work experience.

The structured questionnaire was developed to collect primary data. Data was supplemented by insights from secondary sources. The questionnaire was divided into two sections: demographic questions to profile respondents and scale-based questions to measure the constructs. To score the technical skills, soft skills, industry expectations, and perceived employability, an inventory of 5 Likert scale was used whose values run from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree." Measured scales were adapted from pre-research validated instruments and tailored toward a hospitality industry context.

After finalizing the survey through different means to ensure accuracy and relevance with correct procedures, the data process could undergo several stages to gain sound credibility. Descriptive statistics will summarize the demographic information; for the identification of the underlying factor structure of the constructs, the Exploratory Factor Analysis EFA was conducted using the principal axis factoring of the SPSS and then rotation on Promax. Later, the Confirmatory Factor Analysis is performed using the tool called AMOS to validate the factor structure as well as to check the reliability and validity of the measurement model. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was then applied to test the hypothesized relationships among variables and to check the mediating role of industry expectations. Model fit was assessed using indices like RMSEA, CFI, and GFI to establish the robustness of the structural model.

Five hypotheses directed at testing for the direct influences of technical and soft skills on both the industry's expectations and respondents' employability perceptions were tested with a view of exploring for mediating effect of the industry's expectation on outcome of employability. Results for the hypothesis-testing informed insight into the salient predictors of employability in hospitality. All the research procedures followed ethical considerations. The participation was strictly voluntary, and respondents were well informed about the purpose of the study. Personal information was kept confidential, and the data was used only for academic purposes. Respondents also had to give their consent before filling up the questionnaire. This research methodology encompasses systematic and rigorous approaches, thus ensuring credible and reliable insights into the nature of technical skills, soft skills, and industry expectations towards perceived employability in the hospitality industry

DATA ANALYSIS

Certain parameters like age, gender, educational qualification and work experience were used to examine the demographic profile of 355 respondents. The following table explains the parameters with their frequencies and percentages.

Table 1: Demographic profile

Parameter	Categories	Frequency	Percentage
Age	18 to 30 Years	59	16.6
	30 to 40 Years	114	32.1
	40 to 50 Years	144	40.6
	Above 50 Years	38	10.7
Gender	Male	264	74.4
	Female	91	25.6
Educational Qualification	MASTERS	13	3.7
	BACHELORS	325	91.5
	DIPLOMA	5	1.4
	OTHERS	12	3.4
Work Experience	Less than 1 Year	195	54.9
	1 to 5 Years	89	25.1
	5 to 10 Years	61	17.2
	Above 10 Years	10	2.8

The demographic profile of the respondents points out several salient features. There is a maximum percentage, 40.6% of people are found between 40 to 50 years of age. The next significant percentage is of those between the ages 30 to 40 years with 32.1% respondents, and 16.6% respondents are within the bracket of 18 to 30 years. The last proportion of respondents is 10.7% above the age of 50. The gender distribution reveals that 74.4% of the sample is male, and females compose only 25.6%, which means there is a large gender imbalance. From the qualitative analysis of educational qualifications, most of the respondents, 91.5% hold a bachelor's degree, which is dominant. The proportion who has a master's degree is 3.7%, while 3.4% fall under the category "others", and only 1.4% of the respondents have a diploma. Thus, it can be assumed that most of the sample is educated with a strong focus on undergraduate qualifications. In terms of work experience, a significant proportion of the respondents have less than one year of experience, at 54.9%, which suggests that they are within their early years of service. Those with 1 to 5 years of experience go at 25.1%, and 17.2% have 5 to 10 years of experience. Only 2.8% of the respondents have served more than 10 years. This highlights that the sample primarily comprises individuals who are either new to the workforce or have limited professional experience. Generally, the data shows the workforce to be predominantly represented by well-educated male youth in the early phase of their careers and are significantly middle-aged and between 30 and 50 years.

The data analysis was conducted in three stages: First step involved a preliminary analysis of the scale using Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) with Principal axis factoring and Promax rotation in SPSS. Second step focused on validating the factor structure obtained from the EFA by performing a Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) in AMOS. Third step assessed the structural model and tested the hypotheses using AMOS.

STEP 1

In the first step an exploratory factor analysis was done using Principal axis Factoring extraction method with Promax rotation to identify the total number of factors that can be extracted from the data set. The results of the exploratory factor analysis are explained through the tables displayed underneath.

Table 1: KMO and Bartlett's Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		**.927**
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	8172.717
	df	378
	Sig.	.000

The latent structure for identifying the key drivers of technological adoption was analyzed using Principal Axis Factoring (PAF) with Promax rotation. An initial examination of the R matrix revealed a significant number of coefficients above 0.30. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure was 0.927, surpassing the recommended threshold of 0.6 (Kaiser, 1970). Additionally, Bartlett's Test of Sphericity (Bartlett, 1954) was statistically significant ($X^2 = 8172.717$, $p < 0.001$), confirming the suitability of the data for factor analysis. The latent structure for ascertaining the underlying factors driving technological adoption was analyzed through PAF with Promax rotation. Initial Review of the R matrix revealed a large number of coefficients above 0.30. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure was .927, which exceeded the suggested threshold of 0.6 (Kaiser, 1970). Bartlett's Test of Sphericity (Bartlett, 1954) was also statistically significant at $X^2 = 8172.717$, $p < 0.001$, which assured the acceptability of the dataset for factor analysis.

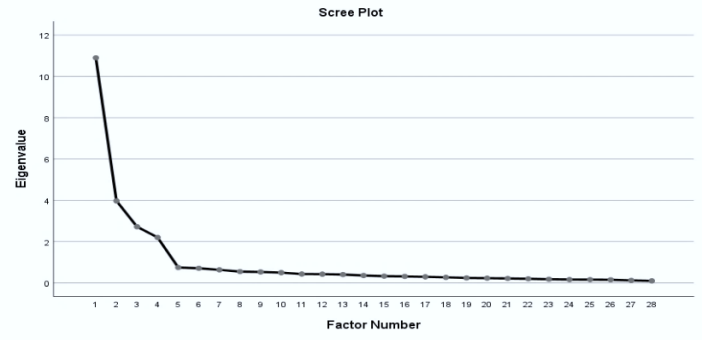

Figure 1

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The four factors with eigenvalues greater than 1 account for 38.931%, 14.183%, 14.183% and 7.858% of total variance. However, from the scree plot in Figure 1 it is visible that after the first factor there was a clear break followed by second factor at 4, so in order to understand the importance of technical skills against soft skills for employability of hotel management graduates it is suggested four factor solution. Further to confirm the factors explored out of exploratory factor analysis, confirmatory factor analysis was undertaken.

STEP 2

A confirmatory factor analysis was conducted using the factors obtained through exploratory factor analysis through AMOS version 26. The initial model was developed based on the factors obtained through exploratory factor analysis. It is graphically represented in the diagram below.

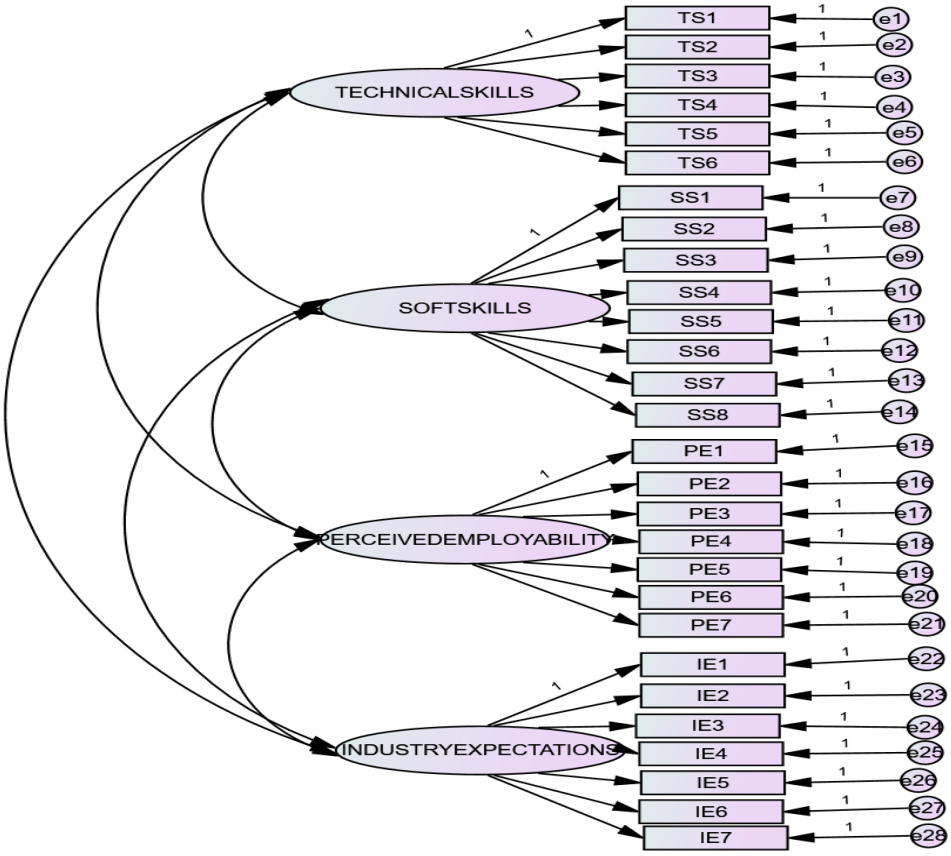

Figure 2: Initial CFA Model

STEP 3

The model was checked for determination of the model fit. The final model was obtained using standardized estimates. The output implies that the model is a good fit as evident from the value of x^2/df =1.811, which lies in the permissible range (<3), which indicates a satisfactory fit. RMR is 0.031, and it is small; hence it indicates a good fit as the residuals between observed and predicted values are small. The GFI value is 0.894, close to the threshold value of 0.90; the AGFI value is 0.871, so an acceptable model fit seems plausible. PGFI 0.733 sets a balance between fit and parsimony. All fit indices of the Normed Fit Index, Relative Fit Index, Incremental Fit Index, Tucker-Lewis Index, and Comparative Fit Index are over 0.90 (NFI = 0.928, RFI = 0.919, IFI = 0.967, TLI = 0.962, and CFI = 0.966), which shows an excellent fit of the default model compared to the independence model. The RMSEA is 0.048, with 90% confidence interval from 0.042 to 0.054, and well within the threshold of 0.08, indicating a good fit. The value of PCLOSE is 0.712 supporting the hypothesis of close model fit.

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Table 2: Reliability and Convergent validity

Variables/ Constructs	Items	Standardized Factor Loadings	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted	Maximum Shared Variance
Technical Skills	TS1	0.647	0.901	0.647	0.198
	TS2	0.858			
	TS3	0.786			
	TS4	0.786			
	TS5	0.778			
	TS6	0.81			
Soft skills	SS1	0.802	0.942	0.671	0.376
	SS2	0.873			
	SS3	0.877			
	SS4	0.902			
	SS5	0.852			
	SS6	0.773			
	SS7	0.708			
	SS8	0.744			
Perceived Employability	PE1	0.719	0.912	0.601	0.376
	PE2	0.822			
	PE3	0.854			
	PE4	0.791			
	PE5	0.857			
	PE6	0.644			
	PE7	0.712			
Industry Expectations	IE1	0.764	0.934	0.669	0.198
	IE2	0.871			
	IE3	0.836			
	IE4	0.867			
	IE5	0.807			
	IE6	0.775			
	IE7	0.801			
Model Fitness: X2= 603.091, df= 333, X2/df= 1.811, RMSEA= 0.048, RMR= 0.031, GFI= 0.894, CFI= 0.966					

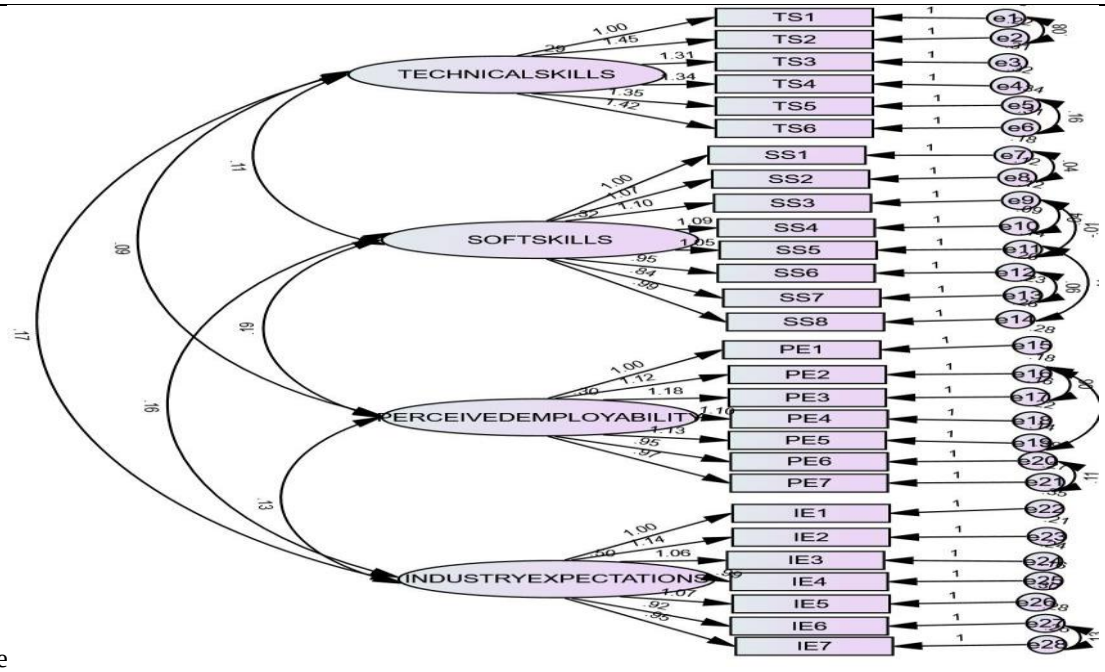

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Figure 3. Final CFA Model

Table 4 shows the discriminant validity assessment of the constructs using the Fornell-Larcker (1981) criterion. The square root of the average variance extracted (AVE) for each construct is along the diagonal values and the correlations between the constructs are along the off-diagonal values. Discriminant validity is established through the square root of AVE for each construct being higher than its correlations with all other constructs, proving that each construct is unique and represents a different concept within the model.

Table 4: Discriminant validity

Constructs	PERCEIVEDEMPLOYABILITY	INDUSTRYEXPECTATIONS	SOFTSKILLS	TECHNICALSKILLS
PERCEIVEDEMPLOYABILITY	0.775			
INDUSTRYEXPECTATIONS	0.343	0.818		
SOFTSKILLS	0.613	0.411	0.819	
TECHNICALSKILLS	0.315	0.445	0.356	0.78

The results confirm that discriminant validity is achieved for all constructs in the model based on the Fornell-Larcker criterion. The square root of the average variance extracted (AVE) for each construct is more significant than its correlations with any other construct, indicating that every construct is more strongly related to its own indicators rather than to the indicators of other constructs. The square root of AVE of Perceived Employability is 0.775, more than its correlation with Industry Expectations being 0.343, Soft Skills being 0.613, and Technical Skills being 0.315. Similarly, the square root AVE of Industry Expectations is 0.818, which exceeds the correlations with Perceived Employability at 0.343, Soft Skills at 0.411, and Technical Skills at 0.445. A similar pattern occurs for Soft Skills and Technical Skills, whose square root AVE values are 0.819 and 0.780, respectively, both of which exceed their inter-construct correlations. This would indicate that the constructs are distinct from each other and that the measurement model exhibits strong discriminant validity.

TESTING OF HYPOTHESIS

The relationship between technical skills, soft skills and perceived employability was made through Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) with AMOS path analysis. Here, the factor scores resulted from CFA were fed into AMOS. As a mediator, industry expectations were applied as part of the hypothesis testing process. The graphical representation of the structural model is presented in the figure below, and the results of the analyses are provided afterwards.

The fit results of the models demonstrate that the Default model and saturated model fit the data very well as the perfect values appear in several fit indices. Both models present a CMIN value of 0, which reflects no model-data disparities. On the contrary, the very poor fit is observed for the Independence model with the much larger CMIN value of 366.241.

Similarly, the Default and Saturated models yield RMR at 0 indicate a perfect fit, whereas the Independence model has an RMR of 0.111, a poor fit. The GFI for the Default and Saturated models is also perfect at 1.000, while the Independence model has a much lower GFI at 0.631. The value of the CFI is also perfect for the Default and Saturated models 1.000 while that of the Independence model is as poor as 0.000. Meanwhile, RMSEA for the Default and Saturated models is 0.000 which suggests a perfect fit while RMSEA for the Independence model is as high as 0.412, thereby pointing to a poor model fit.

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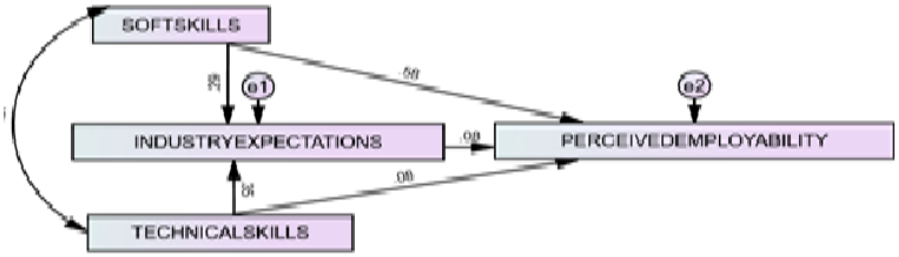

Figure 4: Measured model of hypothesis testing

Table5: Regression weights

Hypothesis	Paths			Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P
H1	PERCEIVEDEMPLOYABILITY	<---	SOFTSKILLS	0.548	0.043	12.706	***
H2	PERCEIVEDEMPLOYABILITY	<---	TECHNICALSKILLS	0.082	0.047	1.737	0.082
H3	INDUSTRYEXPECTATIONS	<---	SOFTSKILLS	0.35	0.058	6.035	***
H4	INDUSTRYEXPECTATIONS	<---	TECHNICALSKILLS	0.46	0.063	7.351	***
H5	PERCEIVEDEMPLOYABILITY	<---	INDUSTRYEXPECTATIONS	0.059	0.038	1.573	0.116

The regression weights in this model reveal some insights into the linkages between the constructs. The relationship of Technical Skills with Industry Expectations is strong and highly significant at 0.460 coefficient with critical ratio (C.R.) of 7.351, indicating that greater technical skills correspond to higher expectations in the industry. Similarly, Soft Skills also have a positive effect on Industry Expectations with a coefficient of 0.350 and a C.R. of 6.035, but the effect is somewhat softer compared to technical skills. The relationship of Industry Expectations to Perceived Employability, however shows not to be statistically significant; with the estimate at 0.059, along with its C.R. at 1.573, the result boasts a p-value of 0.116 that lies strictly above the common significance limit at 0.05. This suggests that Industry Expectations have no strong direct impact on Perceived Employability within this model. However, Soft Skills portray a very significant and positive effect on Perceived Employability with a coefficient of 0.548 and C.R. of 12.706, meaning that those who have stronger soft skills will be viewed to be more employable. Technical Skills, as well, are positively related to Perceived Employability, though not as strongly; in fact, the relationship is marginally significant with an estimate of 0.082 and a C.R. of 1.737, and a p-value of 0.082, which is just above the .05 threshold but below the .10 threshold. In all, while technical skills affect Perceived Employability mainly through Soft Skills, technical skills have a relatively weak impact, and Industry Expectations does not affect Perceived Employability in this model directly.

MEDIATION ANALYSIS

The soft skills and technical skills formed the independent variables, whereas perceived employability was the dependent variable. Industry expectations and other needs of the businesses are the mediator. Based on the classical approach put forward by Baron and Kenny (1986) indirect effects were studied. The mediation analysis was done using bootstrap procedures with 2000 samples and bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals at 90%. The results for the study can be represented in the following table.

Table 6: Mediation Analysis

Hypothesis	Path	Total Effect	Direct Effect	Indirect Effect
H6	Soft Skill → Industry Expectations → Perceived Employability	.601 *	.579*	.022
H7	Technical Skill → Industry Expectations → Perceived Employability	.108 *	.081	.027

*Indicates significance (p value <.05)

Through mediation analysis, the hypotheses related to perceived industry expectations as a mediator between soft skills, technical skills, and perceived employability are further understood. For H6, the findings show that although there is a significant total effect of soft skills on employability ($\beta = 0.601$, $p < 0.05$), a significant direct effect also exists ($\beta = 0.579$, $p < 0.05$); meanwhile, the indirect effect through perceived industry expectations is relatively minimal ($\beta = 0.022$) and hence not significant. Therefore, the perceived industry expectations do not significantly mediate the soft skills-employability relationship. In this case, the direct pathway from soft skills to employability is mainly non-influenced by graduates' perceptions of industry expectations. Hence, H6 cannot be supported. In the case of H7, mediation analysis indicates that technical skills have a significant total effect on employability, $\beta = 0.108$, $p < 0.05$. However, the direct effect is somewhat weak and insignificant ($\beta = 0.081$), as well as the indirect one through perceived industry expectations ($\beta = 0.027$) and thus not significant. These outcomes indicate that the mediating role of perceived industry expectations in how technical skills influence employability is quite limited. The relationship between technical skills and employability apparently seems to be modest, being mainly direct, with the mediating effect of industry expectations only irrelevant. Consequently, H7 is not supported by the analysis.

Table 7: Summary of hypothesis

H.No.	Statement	Status
H1	Soft skills have a significant positive impact on hotel management graduates' employability.	Supported
H2	Technical skills have a significant positive impact on hotel management graduates' employability.	Not supported
H3	Soft skills have positive and significant impact on industry expectation.	Supported
H4	Technical skills have positive and significant impact on industry expectations.	Supported
H5	Industry expectations influence hotel management graduates' employability.	Not supported
H6	Perceived industry expectations mediate the relationship between soft skills and employability.	Not supported
H7	Perceived industry expectations mediate the relationship between technical skills and employability.	Not supported

DISCUSSION

The results of the study will give insights into the determinants of employability among graduates of hotel management programs focusing on technical skills and soft skills, industry expectations, and their interrelation. Demographic analysis reveals a predominantly young and educated workforce that obviously signifies the importance of undergraduate education as the first pathway in the hospitality industry. This finds support from previous studies highlighting that higher education plays a pivotal role in equipping individuals for service sector professions **(Naderiadib Alpler, N., et al, 2021).**

Demographic changes also imply the need to engage graduate groups through targeted training and development programmes to transition them into work (. Factor analyses succeeded in ascertaining the constructs studied had validity and reliability. Clear distinctions between technical skills, soft skills, industry expectations, and

perceived employability could be established. As by **Clarke (2018),** such high reliability scores were supported with established discriminant validity in literature. These results provide a robust base for understanding associations between the constructs in the model.

Structural equation modelling showed that soft skills have a significant, almost profound, impact positively on perceived employability. This essentially reflects their important function in the hospitality industry, where communication skills, flexibility, and problem-solving attitudes are highly desired by employers **(Jauhari & Bharwani, 2017).** While technical skills also had a positive impact on employability, their impact was comparatively weaker, suggesting that they are requirements for baseline level. This is in line with the viewpoint that soft skills often act as an essential differentiator in a competitive job market **(Andrews & Higson, 2008).** The study also investigated industry expectations as mediator between skills and perceived employability. Both technical and soft skills showed considerable influence on industry expectations, and these also reflected the balanced skill set the hospitality industry values. Hence, the mediation effect of the industry expectation was not significant, perhaps meaning that there is a misalignment between what academic institutions focus on about employability and how employers judge job seekers.

This finding shows how assessments for employability are subjective, which calls for improved alignment between academic curricula and industry demands-a problem also argued by **(Jackson, 2016).** The study is therefore contributory to the theoretical aspects of employability discourse through an assertion that underscores the pivotal position of soft skills, more especially in industries of service. From educators to policymakers, it becomes very apparent the relevance of adding soft skills development alongside the acquisition of technical skills within the curriculum, thereby readying the graduate workforce and catering for employers' needs.

This attitude of the employers would need to be changed so that there is a more robust stress on the interpersonal abilities of a candidate rather than on the technical ones so that the gap between education and employment would further be bridged through fostering stronger partnerships of academic institutions with industry stakeholders **(Singh Dubey, R., et al, 2022).** In addition, organizational culture and regionalism could be discussed more in depth to help to provide a better understanding of employability processes in the hospitality industry.

This paper is important because it brings the technical and soft skills to bear on employability issues and gives actionable information for academia, industry, and policymakers.

CONCLUSION

The relative weight of soft versus technical skills in employment chances of graduates in hotel management has thus been explored through this study, citing perceived industry expectations. The findings underline the fact that soft skills positively affect employability, and the study identifies some of the most important attributes in the hospitality industry such as communication, teamwork, and emotional intelligence-that would be so significant in achieving effective guest satisfaction through personal relationships. Though technical skills formed the core and were instrumental for the operational efficiency, their impact on employability was rather weaker.

This shows that the role of industry expectations was a mediating one, which was only minimal between skills and employability skills and, hence, showed a lack of alignment between academic curricula and those priorities in industry. Furthermore, it emphasizes that hospitality education programs need to include enhanced training in soft skills while aligning these with the operational technicalities required in the field.

This study is, therefore, a contribution to the general employability discourse by focusing attention to the way soft skills might influence the career outcomes of hospitality graduates. To academic institutions, it serves to buttress the need for a holistic development of technical and social competencies. From the perspective of industry stakeholders, findings point to cooperation with education providers to correct training inadequacies and better prepare graduates for the requirements of the workplace.

Thus, future research would include these dynamics- longitudinal studies and tracking changes in the perceptions of employability over time and extending demographic diversity with a view to realizing the industry perspective better. These gaps addressed will enable stakeholders to further facilitate the creation of a responsive workforce to emerging challenges in the hospitality sector

LIMITATION

A limitation in this study exists within multiple factors. Among them, there lies a disadvantage of having self-reported data with inherent biases from social desirability and mistakes in self-perception. Due to the cross-sectional design, causation cannot be evaluated, and the sample is focused on geography and demographics to limit generalization. The indwelt subjectivity in assessing soft skills made it challenging to maintain consistency in measurement and the study did not consider variability of needs across different segments of hospitality industry. Additionally, overemphasis on perceived industry expectations and failure to receive direct employer feedback might result in a disparity between perceptions and priority issues of employers. Lastly, the study failed to consider regional and cultural variables, which would greatly influence employability criteria for the hospitality industry. Such deficiencies should be addressed in future studies to provide much better insight into the topic.

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