

Developing Interpersonal Skills towards the Sustainable Employability of Hospitality Management Students in the First District of Albay

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Abstract:- The Tourism and Hospitality Industry—one of the world's fastest growing and most competitive sector—considers interpersonal communication an important skill (Lansangan-Cruz, 2018; Al-Ababneh, 2017; Loreto, 2020). In the Philippines, however, two-thirds of employers find it hard to locate and hire employees who are proficient in this skill (Acosta, Igarashi, Olfindo, & Rutkowski, 2017). Hence, the purpose of this research is to develop the interpersonal skills of fourth-year hospitality management students in the first district of Albay towards their sustainable employability, through the help from the viewpoints of industry professionals. The study used a mixed method research design to determine the perceptions of both students and employers, while Kendall's Coefficient of Concordance was utilized in order to appraise whether there is a significant relationship between the two perspectives. The analyzed data revealed that the students believed they 'often' exhibit interpersonal skills in terms of communication skills (3.30), decision-making skills (3.28), cross-cultural and diversity competence (3.47), and emotional intelligence (3.40). Meanwhile, the employers claimed that all the interpersonal indicators used in this study are 'always' important for employability. Furthermore, all the above-mentioned variables were tabulated t at 1% had a value of 2.58 which clearly indicates a significant relationship between the two perspectives. Therefore, the degree of interpersonal skills as perceived by the students is in line with what businesses consider to be necessary for employees to possess. However, since the students only perceived their skills as 'often', further development is still needed to facilitate their long-term career success and help them adapt to the changing needs and expectations of the industry.

Keywords:- Social Science, Communication, Interpersonal Skills, Sustainable Employability, Hospitality, Mixed Method.

I. INTRODUCTION

Tourism and Hospitality is one of the world's largest and most rapidly expanding sectors. It makes a significant contribution to the expansion of economies all around the world (Lansangan-Cruz, 2018). In addition, the said industry is known as a service-oriented and labor-intensive sector. (He, Morrison, & Zhang, 2019). The hospitality industry faces intense competition; thus, service quality offers a wonderful opportunity for businesses to set themselves apart from others

by providing a superior experience for customers. As such, it is seen as a pivotal notion crucial to the success of the hospitality sector (Al-Ababneh, 2017) which is why firms require employees with a great potential and an aim toward the future in order to accomplish their organizational goals (Boštjančič & Slana, 2018).

To be successful in today's extremely competitive job market, individuals must possess attributes that distinguish them from other candidates with comparable skills (Kovac & Sirkovic, 2017). Employers frequently seek candidates with a certain set of talents that correspond to those required to accomplish a given job. These skills may vary depending on industry requirements (Kenayathulla, Ahmad, & Idris, 2019).

Murtiningsih, Kristiawan, & Lian (2019) defines interpersonal communication as the interaction between two individuals in which they engage physically and provide mutual feedback. Loreto (2020) likewise argued that interpersonal communication is considered as one of the most important skills in the hospitality industry. In a hotel, for instance, managers, in addition to their other responsibilities, spend between half and ninety percent of their time engaging with employees, guests, and other members of the hotel staff (Davronov, Radjabov, Nurov, & Yuldashev, 2021).

In the Philippines, there are several studies exploring interpersonal communication skills of students such as those which focused on interpersonal and written/oral communication skills as essential selection criteria for education, job, and adult success (Villaber & Gonzaga, 2018) and those that associated it with job indecision (Tolentino, 2018).

Despite these, a survey conducted by World Bank revealed that two-thirds of employers in the Philippines are having difficulty finding employees who possess the required interpersonal and communication skills, and that employers want to hire people with specific skills, but they are hard to find. These skills are mostly socioemotional, such as having interpersonal and communication skills and a strong work ethic (Acosta, Igarashi, Olfindo, & Rutkowski, 2017). Furthermore, a tracer study on the employment profile of graduates from a State University in the Bicol Region revealed that the unemployment rate was 10.39%. The study attributed this rate to factors such as insufficient work experience, a limited number of job openings, and personality factors (Deblois, 2021).

The issue in interpersonal skills and employability is very timely, especially since according to Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE), the pandemic displaced about 12,000 tourism workers in over 700 enterprises, which means that the Philippines has tourism labor shortages (Rocamora, 2022). Moreover, tourism and hospitality education were disrupted by COVID-19; therefore, curricula and delivery methods must be revised, modified, and refreshed to reflect the changing industry skills and expectations (Sigala, 2021). Hence, in order to address the present, as well as possible issues in tourism and hospitality employment in the future, this study aims to fill in the gap between interpersonal skills and its impact on the employability of Hospitality Management (HM) students in the first district of Albay, with help from the perspectives of the said industry's employers. Ultimately, the researcher will come up with a strategic communication and interpersonal development program to aid the said issue, towards to a more competitive hospitality professionals who will further strengthen the tourism and hospitality industry.

II. METHODOLOGY

A. Respondents of the Study

This study used a mixed method approach while using a purposive sampling technique to gather two sets of data. The first set of data were from a total of 102 fourth-year level students who are currently enrolled in the Bachelor of Science in Hospitality Management program from two Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the first District of Albay. Subsequently, a total of 5 employee-respondents answered the second set of questionnaires. These are the managers, owners, and/or human resource staff who are currently responsible for recruiting or selecting new employees at primary and secondary tourism enterprises that are accredited by the Department of Tourism (DOT) and are found in the same locality.

B. Research Instrument

This research instrument was derived from the Technical Education and Skills Development Authority's (TESDA) updated checklist of Basic Competencies Integrated with 21st Century Skills, year 2019 while the emotional intelligence variable was based on Gerald Miller's Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire – Self-Assessment. The electronically generated survey questionnaire will then be distributed to the student-respondents through Google Forms, for ease of access and retrieval of data. Consequently, the employer-respondents will be given a printed survey questionnaire for the quantitative data with an attached interview guide for the qualitative part. Furthermore, the researcher conducted a face-to-face structured interview using open-ended questions for the qualitative data. This will provide a deeper insight of their responses on the survey questionnaire and will be used to support the quantitative data gathered.

C. Data Gathering Procedure

The researcher sought permission from concerned offices, through a formal letter, to gather significant information. This starts with the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) Region V for the list of higher education institutions offering Bachelor of Science in Hospitality Management (BSHM)

programs in the first district of Albay. The data gathering started as soon as permission was granted, and all concerned are informed of the research intentions. After gathering sufficient data, the responses were analyzed and statistically assessed.

D. Statistical Treatment

The respondents were asked to rate the level of their agreement with each statement in the survey questionnaire to analyze and quantify their perceptions using the Likert Scale. The collected data are then tabulated and statistically evaluated using the Weighted Mean. Finally, Kendall's Coefficient of Concordance (Kendall's W) was used to appraise whether hospitality students' interpersonal communication skills and employers' interpersonal communication requirements for employment are related. A t-test was used, and results were tabulated at 1% to identify whether the null hypothesis (i.e., No significant relationship between the two perspectives) is rejected or accepted.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

A. Perceived Level of Communication and Interpersonal Skills of Hospitality Management Students

Table 1 shows the Hospitality Management students' perceived level of interpersonal skills across four variables: (1) Communication Skills measured 3.30 weighted mean which is interpreted as 'Often'. This implies that fourth year level students in the first district of Albay already often exhibits good communication skills. This is comparable to the results of a cross-sectional study that was carried out by Pazar (2017) where it was found that the communication skills of the university students had a significant difference across their classes. This indicated that communication skills improved in the students' final year of schooling.

In the same table, Decision-Making Skills is computed with a 3.28 weighted mean, which confirmed that the students perceived they often possess the necessary decision-making skills. This is supported by Garrecht, Bruckermann, & Harms (2018) when they stated that students must learn to make good decisions to handle socio-scientific challenges. They further argued that socio-scientific sustainable development requires decision-making for information processing and action. Also, increasing decision-making skills can have a positive effect on people's lives since understanding and strengthening interpersonal decision-making can minimize social vulnerability and enhance life quality (Khemka & Hickson, 2017).

Meanwhile, the cross-cultural and diversity competence of the students obtained a 3.47 weighted mean implying that the respondents were able to respect, communicate and interact with other individuals despite their differences. Ting-Toomey and Dorjee (2018) supported this notion when they stated that individuals must learn to cross cultural boundaries in a flexible and adaptable manner since globalization has made foreign travel normal and convenient.

TABLE 1. STUDENTS' PERCEIVED LEVEL OF INTERPERSONAL SKILLS

Indicators	Weighted Mean	Adjectival Interpretation
1. Communication Skills	3.30	Often
2. Decision-Making Skills	3.28	Often
3. Cross-Cultural & Diversity Competence	3.47	Often
4. Emotional Intelligence	3.40	Often
Average Weighted Mean	3.36	Often

Legend: 3.50-4.49 Always, 2.50-3.49 Often, 1.50-2.49 Sometimes, 0.50-1.49 Never

However, this was contradicting to a Northeastern U.S. study of forty participants from two institutions which found that most online instructors lacked pedagogical skills in designing cross-cultural collaborative online learning frameworks to meet the needs of diverse learners in online learning classrooms, particularly their ability to consider the students' cultural differences and incorporate them into the frameworks (Kumi-Yeboah, 2018).

Finally, since the average weighted mean of Emotional Intelligence is 3.40, this also suggested that most of the time, the fourth-year students appreciate and understand other people's emotions, as well as recognizing their own. Hajibabaei, Farahani, Ameri, Salehi, & Hosseini's (2018) supported this notion when they argued that the participants' levels of empathy grew with the number of years that they had attended college and that as empathy scores increase, so do emotional intelligence ratings. On the contrary, McKee (2018) claimed that since emotional intelligence is associated to brain and psychological development across a lifetime, it would be difficult to develop it.

Based on the data presented above, the findings for the first objective of this study suggested that fourth year hospitality management students in the first district of Albay perceived that they already possess the interpersonal skills. However, since all four variables were only perceived as 'Often', these skills may still be improved further. The results contradict the study of Yunizar, Yusuf, & Syukur (2020) who stated that a considerable number of individuals still lack strong communication skills, which made communication critical in the corporate world. Furthermore, another study claimed that only 30% of interviewees are selected in a job because they are not fluent in English and does not possess the employability skills currently required by the industry (Nisha & Rajasekaran, 2018), which may indicate that these skills were disregarded (Rizwan, et al., 2019).

B. Employers' Perception on their Required Communication and Interpersonal Skills for Sustainable Employment

Table 2 demonstrates the employers' views on their required interpersonal skills when hiring new employees. The industry employers were surveyed using the same variables as the student-respondents to get their perspective on the most important interpersonal skills they are looking for. In addition to this, a structured interview was conducted to support the quantitative data obtained from them. The employer-respondents consist of two (2) resorts, two (2) hotels, and 1

restaurant which are all currently DOT-accredited enterprises situated in the first district of Albay.

TABLE 2. EMPLOYERS' PERCEPTION ON THEIR REQUIRED INTERPERSONAL SKILLS FOR SUSTAINABLE EMPLOYMENT

Indicators	Weighted Mean	Adjectival Interpretation
1. Communication Skills	3.69	Always
2. Decision-Making Skills	3.58	Always
3. Cross-Cultural & Diversity Competence	3.67	Always
4. Emotional Intelligence	3.51	Always
Average Weighted Mean	3.61	Always

Legend: 3.50-4.49 Always, 2.50-3.49 Often, 1.50-2.49 Sometimes, 0.50-1.49 Never

Based on these results presented (Table 2), it may be argued that the employers perceived Communication Skills as a requirement in terms of employability since the average weighted mean obtained was 3.69. This was also evident in the answers of the employers in a structured interview where they were asked about their opinion on which variable of interpersonal skills among the four presented above has impacted their organization the most. 3 out of 5 replied that communication is the most impactful.

Respondent No. 1 said, *"Listening attentively and correctly interpret or understand information or instructions. I think this statement has impacted the company if the employer is not a good listener because it causes customer complaints."*

Respondent No. 2 likewise stated that *"Communication is the most practiced interpersonal skills of the employees."*

Meanwhile, Respondent No. 4 mentioned, *"For me, it's communication because this will help the employees, managers, and guests, to understand each other. This will help them to communicate with one another, to face what they are, and carry their personal interactions with confidence."*

These results coincide with the findings of the study conducted by Briones, Apat, III, Loric, and Valenzuela (2021), which states that employers place the most emphasis on communication, along with leadership and interpersonal skills. Coffelt, Grauman, & Smith (2019) also concluded that managers expected college graduates who could establish and sustain relations through communication, listen and express ideas to/from customers and colleagues, and communicate professionally, clearly, and effectively. Ting, Marzuki, Chuah, Misieng, & Jerome (2017) agreed to this when they said that employers value communication skills over competency when hiring graduates. They believe that University graduates with strong communication skills stand out in interviews and that English proficiency is essential for customer service, frontline service, marketing, and global firms.

Meanwhile, Decision-Making Skills obtained an average weighted mean of 3.58 which indicated that employers always require and/or expect decision-making skills from new or aspiring employees. This is supported by the study of Martínez, Sánchez, Linares, & Cosculluela (2021) who concluded that communication and decision-making were the top soft skills for enhancing employability among 74% of counselors who participated in their study. In fact, one of the participants pointed out that decision-making entails action and being proactive, and those who can make acceptable decisions are more likely employed and/or keep their job more easily. Therefore, 21st-century job seekers must be able to handle problems logically and make excellent decisions to compete in business and life (Suarta, Suwintana, Sudhana, & Hariyanti, 2017).

The data presented on Table 2 also measured an average weighted mean of 3.67 for Cross-Cultural and Diversity Competence which implied that the employers always need this skill in their respective companies. This is because today's employees connect with culturally diverse colleagues, clients, and supply chains more than ever before due to information and communication technology (Akdere, Hickman, & Kirchner, 2019). This is also congruent with the study of Korzilius, Buckner, and Beerlage (2017), who discovered that employees with high cultural intelligence demonstrated more innovative workplace behavior.

Finally, an average weighted mean of 3.51 for Emotional Intelligence was found. It can therefore be said that employers always require or look for people who exhibits Emotional Intelligence. Aziz & Pangil (2017) supported this notion when they found that students who can better control their personal attributes are more likely to find a job and that agreeable students adapt well to any work environment, making them more employable. In addition, Chand, Kumar, & Mittal (2019) stated that Emotional intelligence partially affects employer satisfaction and employability skills.

The findings of this study revealed that employers generally perceived communication and interpersonal skills as very important in their respective organizations since all four variables garnered were interpreted as always required. Subsequently, when the employer-respondents were asked how important it is for them for their employees to have strong communication and interpersonal skills, Respondent No. 1 expressed that: *"Interpersonal and communication skills are important to encourage customers in the company."*

Respondent No. 2 stated: *"Interpersonal skills are the behaviors and tactics a person uses to interact with others effectively and that skill is very important since we are in the food industry. Many people/customers we encounter every day with different attitudes so as a worker in Food Industry, we must have communication and interpersonal skills to handle any situation."*

Respondent 3 likewise added, *"It is important because interpersonal skills reflect an individual's character. In this kind of industry, showing good character and excellent communication skills is very important."*

Meanwhile, Respondent 4 mentioned that *"It is important for employees in our company to have interpersonal and communication skills of to share the ideas and thoughts that we have to have a better relationship with one another."*

Respondent 5 said, *"It is very important because it is easy to work with and can help our company to have a good service which is needed especially when it comes to serving our customers."*

Hendon, Powell, & Wimmer (2017) agreed to these when they stated that employers are interested not only with technical skills, but also with communication skills and emotional intelligence, as seen by the increasing presence of soft skills in hiring requirements. The argument of Chan, Ahmad, Zaman, & Ko (2018) also supported this idea when they said that all employers, regardless of size, consider interpersonal and thinking skills, together with personal attributes, to be significant.

C. The Relationship Between the Students' and Employers' Perspectives

Based on the findings presented in Table 3, the computed t of Communication Skills is at 12.6, Decision-Making Skills is at 8.8, Cross-Cultural and Diversity Competence got 14.4, and Emotional Intelligence is 13.4. Subsequently, all variables mentioned obtained a 2.58 tabulated t at 1% which indicates that the null hypothesis is rejected. This means that there is a significant relationship between employers' and students' perception of communication and interpersonal skills in all indicators and how those skills translate into sustainable employment for the students.

This suggests that the required communication and interpersonal skills of the employers are aligned with the level of the said skills as perceived by the students. The study of Yorke (2006) contradicted this when he argued that employers typically perceive a graduate's subject-related achievements as essential but insufficient for their recruitment. Bauer-Wolf's (2018) study was likewise opposed to these results when he mentioned that the National Association of Colleges and Employers surveyed 4,213 graduating college seniors and 201 employers where it revealed that employers disagreed with the students' perception. According to him, while almost 80% of students reported being proficient in oral and written communication as well as critical thinking, only 42% and 56% of employers perceived that students possess the said skills respectively.

The Employability Theory is anchored to these results, which holds that employability exceeds fundamental competencies, is practical, and aligns with university purpose statements (Knight & Yorke, 2002). This theory states that employers prefer graduates with good generic skills like "imagination and creativity, adaptability and flexibility, a

willingness to learn, independence and autonomy at work, attention to detail, teamwork and cooperation, planning, coordination and organization, and the ability to work under pressure." Despite the results, it is important to note that

learning is a continuous process, and that employability is not merely an attribute of graduate students; rather, it is something that emerges from more complex learning; and is a broader term than "core" and "key" skills (Yorke, 2006).

TABLE 3. COEFFICIENT OF CONCORDANCE ON THE PERCEPTION OF THE TWO GROUPS OF RESPONDENTS ON COMMUNICATION AND INTERPERSONAL SKILLS

Indicators	Computed t	Tabulated at 1%	Remarks
1. Communication Skills	12.6	2.58	$H_0 = \text{Rejected}$
2. Decision-Making Skills	8.8	2.58	$H_0 = \text{Rejected}$
3. Cross-Cultural and Diversity Competence	14.4	2.58	$H_0 = \text{Rejected}$
4. Emotional Intelligence	13.4	2.58	$H_0 = \text{Rejected}$

D. A Strategic Communication and Interpersonal Development Program for Sustainable Employability

To achieve the intended research goals, which is to sustain hospitality management students' employability, a strategic communication and interpersonal development program is necessary. The program will determine the crucial interpersonal and communication variables that contribute to the study's desired outcome. Moreover, the said plan is tailored to address each of the essential aspects of interpersonal and communication skills. Ultimately, the program's efficacy as applied to the participants will be measured.

The target beneficiaries of the proposed strategic developmental program are hospitality management students in the first district of Albay in order to boost their interpersonal and communication skills since it boosts organizational productivity, employee performance, and management graduates' chances of employment and development (Okoro, Washington, & Thomas, 2017). Furthermore, Wikaningrum & Yuniawan (2018) stated that effective communication is critical to the job satisfaction among employees. They argued that sustainable employability is not only about how happy they are communicating to their co-workers; it's also about how happy they are with their jobs.

The focus of the program will cover all the four indicators of interpersonal skills namely: communication, decision-making, cross-cultural and diversity competence, and emotional intelligence. This is due to the fact that employers perceived all these as always required for hiring an employee however, students only perceived them as 'Often' present in themselves and not 'Always'. This may be justified by the study of Sharma (2018) which stated that from the moment they start working, employees must demonstrate a wide range of skills. These soft skills, along with technical skills, give businesses a sustainable competitive edge, ensuring both business and employment sustainability (Nusrat & Naz, 2018).

In addition to this, the need for a strategic development program is supported by the Social Constructivism Theory of Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934). This notion emphasizes that most learning occurs in collaborations, that social interaction and support influence learning. The mind selects, makes sense of, and reproduces occurrences, and subjective and contextual factors contribute to knowledge (Lohman, 2021).

IV. CONCLUSION

The research found that fourth-year hospitality students in the first district of Albay perceived to possess good level of interpersonal skills that are necessary for sustainable employability, wherein Decision-Making Skills obtained the lowest mean. Nevertheless, since all indicators were interpreted as 'Often', further development is needed. Similarly, hospitality and tourism employers viewed all variables of interpersonal skills as always essential to their businesses, overall making it a significant factor in the sustainable employability of hospitality management students.

Meanwhile, all indicators of interpersonal skills used in this study had a tabulated t at 1% value of 2.58, indicating that the null hypothesis is rejected. This indicates that the perceptions of students are shown to have a significant correlation with the requirements of employers across all given indicators. Hence, it can be concluded that the skills of hospitality management students match the expectations of employers, which may lead to their sustainable employment.

Finally, a strategic communication and interpersonal development program will lay the foundation of the sustainable employability of Hospitality Management students in the first district of Albay. This is based on Lev Vygotsky's (1896-1934) Social Constructivism Theory, which emphasizes that most learning takes place through collaborations and that social interactions and support impact learning.

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