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SOCIAL SKILLS GAP IN THE BULGARIAN TOURISM INDUSTRY

ABSTRACT

The paper explores the social skills gap in the Bulgarian tourism industry as part of a Pan-European study on digital, social and green skills in tourism and hospitality. It focuses on the current and future required level of 21 social skills and the social skills training of employees in the tourism and hospitality industry. The sample includes respondents from 151 companies and organisations across five tourism subsectors (accommodation, F&B, travel agencies, visitor attractions and DMOs). Research was conducted using mixed methods. The results show that future social skills requirements correlate with current skill levels. *Customer orientation, Foreign language skills, Cultural awareness, Intercultural understanding between hosts and guests, Ethical conduct and respect* as well as *Creativity* will be the most demanded social skills among Bulgarian tourism professionals in the future. The size of the organisation and the industry affiliation have little influence on the current and future competence level and the gaps in social skills. Theoretical, managerial and policy implications are also discussed.

KEYWORDS: *Social skills, soft skills, Bulgaria, tourism industry, social skills gaps*

1. INTRODUCTION

The tourism and hospitality industry is often referred to by managers and researchers as a 'people business' and as such they require a lot of social skills (also referred to as 'soft skills') related to interpersonal communication, cross-cultural understanding, creativity, managing diversity, etc. These skills enable employees to work more effectively and efficiently with other people such as colleagues, managers, subordinates, customers, suppliers, etc. As a result, social skills improve employee performance (Čuić Tanković *et al.*, 2022; Ibrahim et al., 2017) and the economic performance of companies and organisations (Caputo *et al.*, 2019). The acquisition of soft skills increases the employability of graduates (Chan, 2011; Succi, 2019). In contrast to technical, task-oriented skills (Pranić *et al.*, 2021), which are specific to each sector, social skills

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are crucial for personal career development (Sisson & Adams, 2013) and entrepreneurial success (Baron & Markman, 2000) as they are transversal, i.e. social skills that people acquire in one industry or company could be transferred to other industries or companies (Hart *et al.*, 2021).

The tourism industry is fundamentally centred around human interactions and relationships, which include both the dynamics between customers and employees and the communication between employees within the organisation (Guo & Ayoun, 2023). In addition, the nature of international travel, which involves traveling through different countries and engaging with different cultures, increases the importance of cultural competencies and diversity skills, which are crucial for communicating effectively with guests and providing excellent customer service (Li *et al.*, 2023). Social skills in the tourism and hospitality industry contribute to better service and a better experience for tourists (Hassan *et al.*, 2009). Interactions and communication between tourists and employees improve the overall perception and satisfaction of tourists by building relationships and enabling cross-cultural connections (Tanković *et al*, 2019). In the diverse environment of the tourism industry, understanding and embracing diversity and intercultural sensitivity adds value to employee performance and overall customer satisfaction (Čuić Tanković *et al*, 2023). Excellent customer service involves continuous and intensive cultural and social interactions (Koc, 2021) that shape customer perceptions. In this sense, social skills are necessary for the successful accomplishment of complex tasks and especially for the teamwork of tourism employees (Pranić *et al.*, 2021), as they are transversal. Tourism managers recognise the importance of social skills as a criterion for employability and as a driver for the performance and competitiveness of their organisations (Kiryakova-Dineva *et al.*, 2019; Silva *et al*, 2019). This importance of skills has also been recognised at the European Union level. In 2022, the Pact for Skills in Tourism (https://pact-for-skills.ec.europa.eu) was launched, while 2023 was declared the European Year of Skills (https://year-of-skills.europa.eu). As part of this initiative, numerous re-skilling and up-skilling trainings have been initiated by the signatories of the Pact for Skills, which raises another point to explore – whether and how tourism businesses train their employees to acquire the required skills.

The successful operation of a tourism business requires well-developed social skills from managers and employees at almost all levels, including back-office operations, where interactions with customers are comparatively rare. Therefore, managers must be familiar with the current level of social skills present in their companies, identify the necessary social skills they will need in the future, anticipate existing skill gaps and adequately prepare both employees and the company through social skills training. The same applies to policy makers and providers of education and training in tourism – they need to know what skills are currently available in the industry and what the future skills needs will be in order to offer appropriate education and training programs.

This paper explores the social skills gap in the Bulgarian tourism industry as part of the Next Tourism Generation Alliance (NTG) project (https://nexttourismgeneration.eu) – a Pan-European study on digital, social and green skills in tourism and hospitality in eight EU countries participating in the Alliance (Bulgaria, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain and the UK). The project ran from 2018 to 2022 and measured the current and fthe current and required future proficiency levels of the digital, social and green skills in five tourism sub-sectorsin five tourism sub-sectors (accommodation, F&B, travel agencies, visitor attractions and DMOs) and the corresponding training offered by tourism and hospitality companies. The tourism sub-sectors were determined by the scope of the project. The results of the project's empirical research served as a springboard for the elaboration of the Blue Print Sectoral Strategy in Tourism for the development of digital, social and green skills, the NTG Skills Toolkit and the elaboration of training materials for upskilling the tourism workforce. This paper focuses exclusively on the outcomes related to social skills in the Bulgarian tourism industry. In addition, it assessed the impact of a company's characteristics (size and sector affiliation) on social skills gaps and training in order to identify. The findings related to the digital and green skills gaps in the Bulgarian tourism industry and in the Alliance countries are reported elsewhere (Carlisle *et al.*, 2022; Carlisle, Ivanov & Dijkmans, 2023; Carlisle, Ivanov & Espeso-Molinero, 2023; Ivanova *et al.*, 2021, 2022) and are beyond the scope of this paper.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Social (soft) skills as a concept

The term 'social skills' (or 'soft skills') refers to the competencies for efficient collaboration and building good relationships with colleagues, clients and other stakeholders (Cimatti, 2016). These skills are highly valued by employers as they are easily transferable to different sectors. Excellent communication, teamwork, problem-solving or adaptability are universal to any industry and profession. Therefore, these skills are considered transversal skills (Economou, 2016).

Soft skills have also proven to be important for technical professions such as engineers (Srivastava & Kuri, 2020), as they bring additional benefits such as competitiveness, effective teamwork and a collaborative work environment (Cimatti, 2016). Unlike hard technical skills, which are easier to measure, teach and define, soft skills are closely related to personality and social intelligence, making them much more difficult to quantify and learn.

2.2. Social skills in tourism
Tourism as a sector is characterised by a plethora of interactions, communication and relationships that are crucial to its operations (Guo & Ayoun, 2023). As a service-intensive industry, the quality of the tourism product lies to a large extent in its intangible components, with service and interactions being the most important (Luka, 2015; Baily & Lene, 2013). Therefore, competent employees with the appropriate soft skills to provide this exceptional service to guests (Luka, 2015) are an important prerequisite for excellence in the tourism and hospitality industry. Nevertheless, it is difficult to precisely outline the exact soft skills requirements in tourism. A recent review of publications dealing with the need and availability of social skills in tourism and hospitality resulted in a classification of the 30 most important soft skills among more than 1180 competences studied (Pranić et al., 2021). As expected, the most valued social skills focus on interpersonal, leadership and conceptual/creative skills, e.g. efficient communication, emotional intelligence, problem-solving, negotiation skills, critical thinking, the ability to understand "the big picture", but also a range of skills related to dealing with conflict and overcoming problems, adapting innovations and improvements, considering customer needs and knowing how to create memorable experiences (Pranić et al., 2021). A survey of tourism professionals in several EU countries confirmed the need for foreign language skills of tourism employees, but also emphasised the need for other social skills such as teamwork, presentation skills, leadership skills, cooperation skills and intercultural competences (Luka, 2015). Finally, the positive effects of social skills also extend to employee wellbeing - fluid interactions between customers and employees fulfil employees' social needs and curiosity (Guo & Ayoun, 2023), thus increasing their overall satisfaction and motivation.

2.3. Training of social skills
In the highly dynamic world of new job creation, the extinction of professions, the need for constant improvement and strong competition, social skills are crucial due to their transferability, personal engagement and continuous improvement throughout life

(Moura et al., 2020). Typical of soft skills is that the individual plays a fundamental role in the development of soft skills, as these skills are difficult to define and therefore also difficult to assess and certify. Therefore, employees should be aware of their personal skills and competency gaps and proactively seek appropriate training or opportunities to improve them (Cimatti, 2016). In this regard, employers rarely require certificates to prove that employees or job applicants have these skills. However, soft skills require conscious effort, perseverance and commitment to self-improvement (Grigoliene et al., 2023).

Hospitality graduates are often expected to be responsible for acquiring the required soft skills (Zekry et al., 2023) – either during their education or through practise and experience (Grigoliene et al., 2023). Probably for this reason, most work dealing with social skills training focuses on students as the target population (e.g. Alexakis & Jiang, 2019; García et al., 2016; Nghia et al., 2022). In any case, employers strongly recommend a more serious inclusion of social skills in educational institutions' programmes (Singh & Jaykumar, 2019), a stronger emphasis on communication skills (Alexakis & Jiang, 2019; Singh & Jaykumar, 2019) and the use of e-learning (García et al., 2016) to close the gap between employers' expectations and graduates' skill levels. Employers are also involved in skills training through various short training courses (Carlisle, Ivanov & Espeso-Molinero, 2023).

The review of the literature reveals the importance of social (soft) skills for the successful operation of tourism and hospitality businesses and the employability of employees in the tourism and hospitality sector. However, there is a gap in measuring the actual social skills present in tourism and hospitality organisations, the level of these skills that organisations currently have and will need in the future. Furthermore, there is insufficient research on the role of organisational factors (e.g. size and sector affiliation) in relation to the level of soft skills currently possessed and those required in the future and the gap between them can help determine the target groups for social skills training (e.g. large, medium and/or small enterprises, accommodation providers, F&B, travel agencies, visitor attractions and/or DMOs). This paper attempts to partially fill these gaps in the literature.

3. METHODOLOGY

The study on social skills in Bulgaria was conducted as part of the Next Tourism Generation Alliance in January-March 2019. Mixed methods research was used. The data was collected via an anonymous on-line questionnaire and semi-structured interviews (both in Bulgarian), as the advantages of one of the data collection tools balanced the disadvantages of the other. The questionnaire enabled the collection of quantitative data that could be analysed using appropriate statistical methods, while the interviews provided in-depth answers to the questions and rich data, which was not possible with the questionnaire. In addition, the use of two different data collection tools enabled triangulation of the data, which improved the validity and reliability of the results (Altinay *et al.*, 2016). Ethical approval was granted by the Ethics committee of one of the Alliance partners, Cardiff Metropolitan University, UK (Ref. 2019S0001).

The questionnaire collected data on the current level of social skills in the company/organisation (measured on a 5-point scale, with 1 indicating the absence of the skill in the organisation and 5 indicating the expert level), the required future level of skills (measured on the same scale and with a time horizon of 2030) and the social skills training offered to employees. The managers of the companies and organisations self-assessed the skill level of their employees, similar to previous studies (Castro & Ferreira, 2019), as they were the most knowledgeable respondents. A total of 21 social skills were considered, divided into personal skills, communication and cultural skills, and diversity skills. The list of skills was determined by the NTG Alliance partners based on an extensive review of academic literature (e.g. Weber *et al.*, 2013; Wesley *et al.*, 2017), policy documents (e.g. OECD, 2015) and trade press publications (e.g. McKay, 2017). The list is not exhaustive, but it reflects the skills commonly cited in such publications and documents as important for tourism and hospitality employees. The NTG Alliance partners limited the list of social skills to a manageable number, as the questionnaire included questions on digital and green skills in addition to soft skills, and each skill had to be assessed twice – the current skill level and the required future skill level. Therefore, adding many skills meant a longer questionnaire and a lower response rate (Altinay *et al.*, 2016).

The interviews were conducted online by the authors and comprised five groups of questions. The first group asked some basic background information about the interviewees and the companies they represent. The second group asked about the interviewees' views on the tourism industry, the tourism market and their company in 2030. The third, fourth and fifth groups contained questions on digital, green and social skills. In this article, the results on social skills are summarised using questions such as:

- What do you consider the most relevant and important social skills for people working in the tourism industry?
- How important will these skills be around 2030? Which ones will be most important?
- Can you think of more / other social skills that might be important around 2030?
- What changes do you expect for your organisation about necessary social skills in the future (2030) compared to today?
- Does your company provide training or education for these skills? If so: which ones; if not: why not?
- Do you use an external organisation to help train your staff in digital skills? If so: which ones and what kind of training do they provide?
- What would be the most effective training method in social skill development for employees?

As can be seen, the interview questions mirrored the questions in the questionnaire, but were formulated as open-ended questions to enable data triangulation.

Before starting the data collection, the researchers realised that there was no comprehensive, publicly available list of current contact details of tourism businesses in the country that could serve as a sampling frame for the probability sample. Therefore, a non-probability sample was chosen. In order to achieve a higher response rate and a greater diversity of the sample, a combination of convenience, snowball, and self-selection sampling types were used for data collection. The link to the questionnaire was posted in closed social media groups with managers from the country's tourism industry. It was also emailed to the managers of several hundred tourism and hospitality businesses. The authors sought the support of industry associations to distribute the link to the questionnaire to their members and invite them for interviews. Industry contacts were also utilised. This ensured that the link to the questionnaire was available to the relevant potential respondents. In addition, purposive sampling was applied to contacting interviewees to achieve a diverse sample. For the interviews, the authors contacted some hospitality training providers in particular, as they had a good overview of the country's tourism and hospitality industry and their training needs.

The final sample comprised 151 respondents from Bulgaria; 135 of them completed the online questionnaire, while 16 were interviewed. The characteristics of the sample are shown in Table 1. Micro and small

TABLE 1. Sample's characteristics

a) Questionnaire

Characteristic	Number of respondents	Share (%)
Sector		
Accommodation	42	31.1
Destination management organisations	31	23.0
Visitor attractions	28	20.7
Travel agents and tour operators	26	19.3
Food & beverage	8	5.9
Size		
Large (250 or more employees)	10	7.4
Medium (100-249 employees)	10	7.4
Small (10-99 employees)	54	40.0
Micro (Less than 10 employees)	58	43.0
Individual or part-time activity	3	2.2
Total	**135**	**100**

b) Interviews

Sector	Number of interviewees
Training providers	6
Accommodation	5
Travel agents and tour operators	3
Food & beverage	2
Destination management organisations	0
Visitor attractions	0
Total	**16**

SOURCE: Authors

enterprises predominate in the sample, reflecting the composition of the country's tourism industry.

The Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests have shown that the empirical distributions of the respondents' answers deviate statistically from the normal distribution. In addition, many of the values for skewness and kurtosis were beyond the +/-2 range. Also considering that the sample size was less than 500 people, the non-parametric tests Wilcoxon signed ranks test and Kruskal-Wallis test were therefore used for quantitative data analysis. The Wilcoxon signed ranks test was used to determine differences between current and required future skill levels, while the Kruskal-Wallis test was used for differences in respondents' answers based on company size and sector affiliation. Cross-tabulations with

corresponding Chi-square test values showed the role of company size and industry affiliation in the provision of different types of social skills training. The authors used thematic analysis to analyse the qualitative data from the interviews separately for each skills group (digital, green, social). The data set relevant to this study comprised 2660 words out of 13566 words in the notes from the interviews.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Quantitative research

Table 2 presents the quantitative findings. Respondents were quite confident about the current level of social skills in their organisations. They indicated the

TABLE 2. Current level of proficiency and future required proficiency level of personal and social skills

Personal and social skills	Current level		Future level		Absolute gap (future level – current level)		Percentage gap (Absolute gap/Current level)	Correlation between Current and Future levels	Wilcoxon signed ranks test (Current vs Future level)
	Mean	Standard deviation	Mean	Standard deviation	Mean	Standard deviation			
Personal skills									
Problem solving	3.84	0.775	4.33	0.854	0.489	0.809	12.73%	0.510***	-5.982***
Initiative and commitment	3.85	0.894	4.35	0.867	0.496	0.992	12.88%	0.366***	-5.432***
Customer orientation	4.10	0.871	4.46	0.835	0.363	0.903	8.85%	0.441***	-4.624***
Ethical conduct and respect	4.12	0.811	4.44	0.797	0.319	0.807	7.74%	0.496***	-4.716***
Willingness to change	3.81	1.059	4.32	0.861	0.504	1.112	13.23%	0.343***	-5.015***
Promoting a positive work environment	4.00	0.881	4.44	0.816	0.437	0.903	10.93%	0.436***	-5.355***
Creativity	3.79	1.023	4.37	0.853	0.578	1.047	15.25%	0.388***	-5.939***
Willingness to learn and to perform	3.99	1.026	4.44	0.869	0.444	1.041	11.13%	0.405***	-4.801***
Communication and cultural skills									
Written communication skills	3.87	0.921	4.26	0.853	0.393	0.947	10.16%	0.462***	-5.282***
Oral communication skills	4.06	0.862	4.40	0.830	0.341	0.899	8.40%	0.436***	-4.865***
Active listening skills	3.90	0.827	4.39	0.820	0.489	0.929	12.54%	0.364***	-6.108***
Skills related to cultural awareness and expression	3.81	0.910	4.40	0.830	0.593	0.995	15.56%	0.350***	-6.507***
Skills related to awareness of local customs (e.g., food, arts, language, crafts)	4.06	0.870	4.44	0.779	0.385	0.930	9.48%	0.368***	-4.885***
Ability to speak foreign languages	3.59	1.039	4.33	0.880	0.733	0.979	20.42%	0.489***	-6.978***
Skills related to intercultural host-guest understanding and respect	4.06	0.853	4.44	0.798	0.385	0.898	9.48%	0.410***	-4.747***
Diversity skills									
Gender equality skills	3.95	1.002	4.30	0.925	0.356	0.876	9.01%	0.589***	-4.707***
Age-related accessibility skills	3.87	0.973	4.32	0.895	0.444	0.920	11.47%	0.518***	-5.347***
Diets and allergy needs skills	3.54	1.077	4.17	0.910	0.630	0.944	17.80%	0.560***	-6.685***
Skills related to disabilities and appropriate infrastructure	3.41	1.161	4.28	0.861	0.874	1.142	25.63%	0.392***	-7.245***
Skills related to diversity in religious beliefs	3.68	1.090	4.21	0.980	0.533	1.050	14.48%	0.490***	-5.579***

NOTES: N=135; **Level of significance:** ***p< 0.001; **Coding – 1-no skills present, 5-expert.**
source: Authors

TABLE 3. Differences among respondents based on tourist sector and size

Personal and social skills	Kruskal-Wallis test ($\chi 2$ values)					
	Current level		Future level		Absolute gap	
	Sector	Size	Sector	Size	Sector	Size
Personal skills						
Problem solving	7.895	5.625	4.455	2.618	3.911	2.379
Initiative and commitment	3.091	2.258	1.984	2.797	2.133	2.238
Customer orientation	9.009	2.955	5.940	3.611	11.417*	9.075*
Ethical conduct and respect	7.214	5.441	3.460	3.365	4.495	12.187**
Willingness to change	3.142	6.652	1.157	1.645	4.840	7.078
Promoting a positive work environment	5.100	11.139*	6.743	3.502	5.603	16.726***
Creativity	13.318**	15.710***	3.353	5.356	10.843*	13.912**
Willingness to learn and to perform	7.570	11.107*	2.012	5.809	10.131*	8.170*
Communication and cultural skills						
Written communication skills	3.829	8.439*	4.133	3.695	7.086	3.669
Oral communication skills	5.397	10.375*	2.800	4.222	5.161	7.415
Active listening skills	3.898	8.688*	2.756	1.702	5.405	7.653
Skills related to cultural awareness and expression	10.771*	15.869***	0.736	3.314	15.415**	8.544*
Skills related to awareness of local customs (e.g., food, arts, language, crafts)	14.250**	9.383*	1.058	9.851*	14.338**	11.149*
Ability to speak foreign languages	14.639**	6.271	5.376	2.551	7.185	1.914
Skills related to intercultural host-guest understanding and respect	8.976	13.269**	2.130	4.469	6.544	6.969
Diversity skills						
Gender equality skills	14.479**	2.353	8.179	3.381	6.693	5.206
Age-related accessibility skills	2.324	4.014	5.236	2.118	3.992	3.280*
Diets and allergy needs skills	8.889	4.089	22.156***	3.839	3.070	1.232
Skills related to disabilities and appropriate infrastructure	2.045	2.878	6.190	2.920	4.270	5.863
Skills related to diversity in religious beliefs	2.783	1.425	2.141	8.498*	1.568	5.179

NOTES: N=135; Level of significance: ***p<0.001, **p<0.01, *p<0.05; Micro (Less than 10 employees) and Individual or part-time activity merged into one group due to the small number of respondents in the Individual or part-time activity group.
Source: Authors

lowest level of competence for *Skills related to disabilities and appropriate infrastructure* (M=3.41) and *Diets and allergy needs skills* (M=3.54), and the highest for *Ethical conduct and respect* (M=4.12) and *Customer orientation* (M=4.10). Whilst respondents' answers for current skills were more varied, the rating for future social skills needs was rated quite highly – the mean scores for all skills means were above 4, with some notable examples. *Customer orientation* (M=4.46) remained at the top of future tourism professionals' demand, along with *Promoting a positive work environment* (M=4.44) and *Willingness to learn and perform* (M=4.44). In addition, *Ethical conduct and respect* (M=4.44), *Awareness of local customs* (M=4.44) and *Skills relates to intercultural host-guest understand-*

ing and respect (M=4.44) retain their top positions in both current and future skill requirements, demonstrating the importance of cultural interaction and tolerance to the tourism industry

The absolute gaps and the percentage gaps between the current and the required future level of social skills show large gaps in the areas of *Skills related to disabilities and appropriate infrastructure* (absolute gap=0.874, percentage gap=25.63%), *Diets and allergy needs skills* (absolute gap=0.630, percentage gap=17.80%), *Skills related to cultural awareness and expression* (absolute gap=0.593, percentage gap=15.56%), and *Creativity* (absolute gap=0.578, percentage gap=15.25%). In the *Ability to speak foreign languages* (absolute gap=0.733, percentage
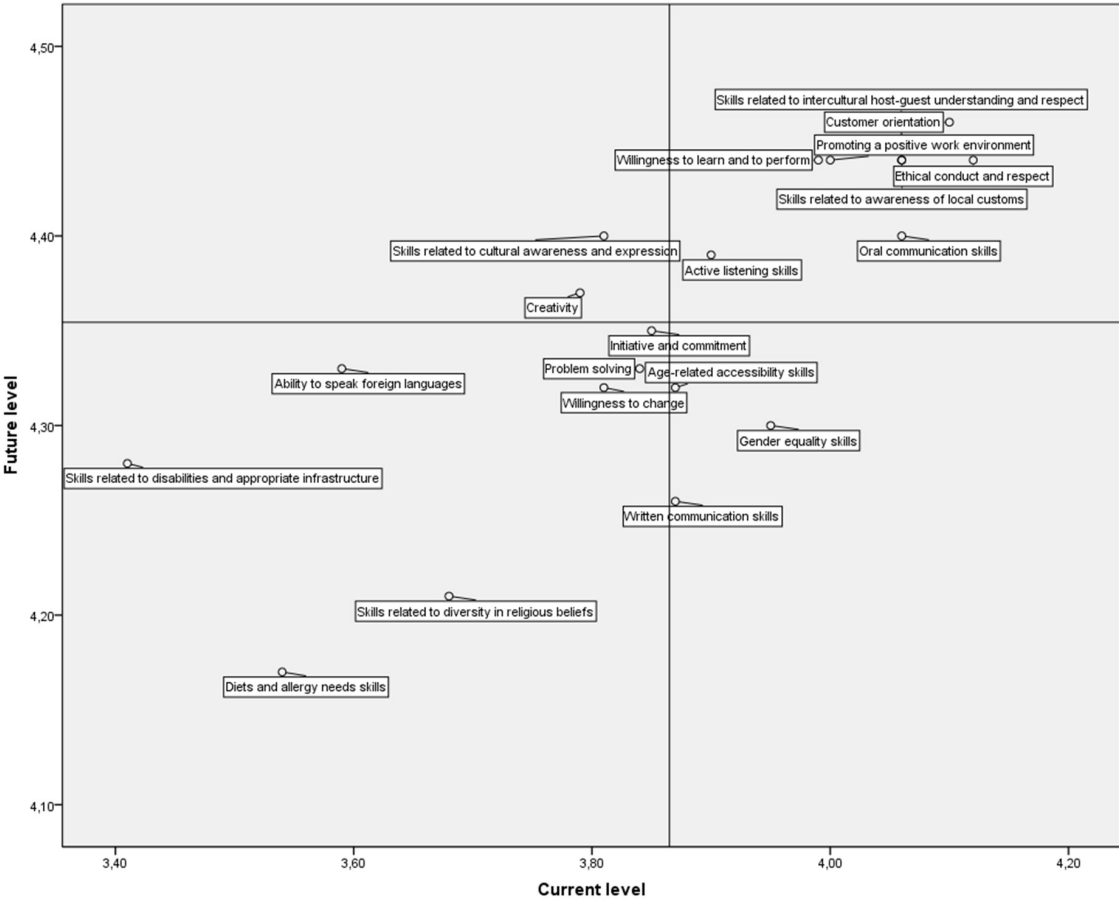
FIGURE 1. Relationship between the current and required future level of social skills
SOURCE: Authors

gap=20.42%), the required level rises in line with the importance of inbound tourism for the country.

The findings show that the proficiency all social skills must increase in the future (p<0.001 for all values of the Wilcoxon signed ranks test). The bivariate correlations between the current and required future skill levels were positive for all skills, which means that the way respondents perceive the future need for social skills in their organisations is analogous to the way they see the current skill level. This is also confirmed by Figure 1.

Table 3 shows the differences in the respondents' answers in relation to the sector to which they belong and the size of the company/organisation. Overall, the results show that these two characteristics have little impact on the current level of knowledge and future need for social skills, similar to the study by Sisson & Adam (2013), as only 30 out of 126 χ2 values (or 23.8%) were statistically significant. Nevertheless,

some specific differences need to be emphasised. In particular, tour operator and travel agency representatives rated *Creativity* much higher in their current skill level than accommodation managers (χ2=13.318, p<0.01). Similarly, the current *Ability to speak foreign languages* (χ2=14.639, p<0.01) was rated higher by travel agents than by visitor attraction managers. It is clear that tour operators need a lot of creativity in their work to develop new itineraries and different package holidays or to discover new niche markets or destinations. As tour operators operate in different countries, the need for multilingual employees is understandable. Nevertheless, it is somewhat strange that visitor attraction representatives have underestimated the need for foreign language skills. One of the explanations for this is that most of the visitor attraction representatives interviewed work in museums where there are specially employed guides who translate and give talks for the foreign visitors,

TABLE 4. Personal and social skills training provided by tourism and hospitality companies

Characteristic	No training provided	Training provided										Chi-square
		Total	On-the-job training	Online course	One day of on-site training by an external provider	Several days of on-site training by an external provider	One day of off-site training by an external provider	Several days of off-site training by an external provider	Apprenticeship	Vocational training	Higher education	
Sector												
Destination management	**10**	**21**	14	5	5	4	4	3	3	6	0	χ2=29.698 df=32 p>0.05
Food & beverage	**5**	**3**	3	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
Visitor attractions	**13**	**15**	13	0	3	1	1	2	1	0	2	
Travel agents and tour operators	**16**	**10**	8	1	1	3	2	3	2	3	1	
Accommodation	**17**	**25**	21	5	5	3	1	0	2	1	2	
Size												
Large (250 or more employees)	**3**	**7**	5	0	2	1	0	0	0	1	0	χ2=14.530 df=32 p>0.05
Medium (100-249 employees)	**4**	**6**	5	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	1	
Small (10-99 employees)	**24**	**30**	25	4	6	4	3	4	2	3	2	
Micro (Less than 10 employees)	**28**	**30**	23	7	6	6	4	4	5	6	2	
Individual or part-time activity	**2**	**1**	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
Total	**61**	**74**	**59**	**12**	**14**	**11**	**8**	**8**	**8**	**10**	**5**	

NOTE: N=135
SOURCE: Authors

so other museum employees may not need foreign language skills.

Similarly, managers of accommodation establishments were very concerned about the *Diets and allergy needs skills* in the future, compared to all other respondents, and especially the visitor attractions managers (χ2=22.156, p<0.001). Unsurprisingly, visitor attraction managers rated their current level of *Skills related to awareness of local customs* higher than the other organisations (χ2=14.250, p<0.01) and felt that they had the lowest absolute gap in this skill, meaning that visitor attraction employees would not need much additional training in this skill in the future (χ2=14.338, p<0.01). However, F&B and accommodation managers identified a serious absolute gap

in *Skills related to cultural awareness and cultural expression* (χ2=15.415, p<0.01), implying that they would need to develop these skills.

With regard to company size, significant differences were found in the current competence levels in the areas of Communication and cultural skills. In terms of *Creativity*, the lowest level of competence was reported by managers of large companies (250+ employees) and the highest by micro-enterprises (less than 10 employees) (χ2=15.710, p<0.001). The same result holds for current *Skills related to cultural expression and awareness* (χ2=15.869, p<0.01) and *Skills in intercultural host-guest understanding and respect* (χ2=13.269, p<0.01) – large companies reported the lowest competence, while micro companies reported

the highest current level of these skills. In micro-enterprises, an employee usually shares multiple roles and therefore needs to be more creative to manage the different tasks they need to perform, unlike in large enterprises where the specialisation of work is higher. In addition, micro businesses need to provide a much more personalised service as they do not have economies of scale and cannot afford to lose dissatisfied guests; therefore their intercultural awareness and understanding should be at a very high level.

On the other hand, medium-sized companies (50-249 employees) had the highest absolute gap in the skills for *Promoting a positive work environment* ($\chi2=16.726$, $p<0.001$) and in *Ethical conduct and respect* ($\chi2=12.187$, $p<0.01$). Most likely, as medium-sized companies evolved from small to large, they experienced certain problems with their employees in terms of internal relationships and building a solid corporate culture; therefore, they acknowledged that they needed to master these two skills better than other companies and organisations.

The last part of the study analysed the training of tourism professionals in Bulgaria (see Table 4). The results showed that training in the area of social skills was inadequate, which was also confirmed in the interviews. Most of the training took place in the workplace and was usually conducted internally. Very few of the training courses were provided by external companies, and when they were, it was again on site. Quite concerning is the fact that 45% of respondents (61 out of 135) stated that they have no soft skills training at all. Most of these respondents belonged to micro and small enterprises, which by default do not have sufficient resources to organise and fund such specialised training. No statistically significant differences were found in relation to the size and sector affiliation of the company/organisation (both $p>0.05$).

4.2. Qualitative research

The results of the interviews largely confirmed the main findings of the survey. Almost all respondents agreed that communication skills are and will remain the most important thing for the tourism and hospitality industry. *Interpersonal communication skills, intercultural competences, the ability to listen and understand customers and partners, teamwork skills*, but also *religious and social tolerance* and *non-verbal communication* were explicitly mentioned.

One interviewee from a training and consulting company particularly emphasised that social skills should be differentiated for operational and managerial levels, as the requirements for the respective positions are different – managers need more leadership and decision-making skills, while operational level employees should develop their ability to un-

derstand and work effectively with different cultures, religions, genders, ages groups, ethnicities, etc. The finding is similar to that of Weber *et al.* (2013), who found that performance management and leadership skills are the most important categories of social skills.

In terms of social skills training, it is interesting to note that tour operator representatives expressed a clear preference for external training providers specialising in human resource management. Another interviewee from the same sector even recommended working with a psychologist as a valuable addition to soft skills training. In contrast to accommodation managers, where training usually takes place on site, travel agency managers appreciated professional help in improving social skills. Although there are certain expectations for educational institutions to address the social skills deficit (Wilks & Hemsworth, 2012; Singh & Jaykumar, 2019), company representatives admitted that they rarely organise targeted training for their employees. A common view among practitioners was that employees can acquire essential social skills primarily under the mentorship of other practitioners, i.e. that soft skills are best taught through role modelling rather than formal instruction (Grigorliene *et al.*, 2023). Similarly, training and consulting companies reported that the most effective training was face-to-face team building with concrete and precise examples and situations.

5. CONCLUSION

The study analysed the gaps between the current and the required future level of social skills of companies in different sub-sectors of the Bulgarian tourism industry. From a theoretical point of view, the results show that size and industry affiliation do not play a major role, similar to the results on digital skills (Ivanova *et al.*, 2022). Although some statistically significant differences were found in the respondents' answers, the overall competence level (especially the required future competence level of social skills) was not influenced by the size and industry affiliation of the company/organisation. This means that the tourism managers' assessment of the future need for social skills in their companies is fairly uniform. From a manager's perspective, the results suggest that *Customer orientation, Ability to speak foreign languages, Cultural awareness, Intercultural understanding between host and guest, Ethical conduct and respect* and *Creativity* will be the most sought-after social skills among Bulgarian tourism professionals in the future (similar to studies in other cultural contexts – e.g. Hassan *et al.*, 2009; Pranić *et al.*, 2021). In line with recent trends in tourism demand, there is an increasing need for skills

related to diets and allergies, especially among accommodation providers, to better cater to the dietary needs of tourists (Serdar, 2020). In addition, visitor attraction managers (i.e. mainly museums) appeared to be the most confident about their social skills, as they differed significantly from the other respondents by indicating the smallest gaps between their current and future social skills, although these differences were not always statistically significant. The most important managerial implication stems from the last part of the study, which deals with social skills training. A large proportion of respondents, both in the survey and in the interviews, had insufficient social skills training. Therefore, social skills training is crucial to maintain and improve the employability of graduates and to strengthen the competitiveness of tourism businesses and the destination as a whole (Wilks & Hemsworth, 2012). From a policy perspective, the curricula of tourism and hospitality programmes at secondary, vocational and tertiary levels need to be revised to emphasise social skills alongside digital and green skills. This can be done, for example, by introducing new modules in the curricula, new topics within the modules or through the assessment methods. Education and training institutions need to anticipate future skills needs in order to equip graduates with relevant skills (Varra *et al.*, 2021). In this way, education and training will contribute to achieving the ambitious goals of the Pact for Skills in Tourism and the European Year of Skills.

Some limitations of this study should be noted. Firstly, the sample only includes respondents from Bulgaria and therefore the conclusions are only valid in this cultural context. Secondly, despite the authors' efforts, only 151 respondents participated in the study. Similarly small samples due to low response rates have been reported in other studies with respondents from the Bulgarian tourism industry and are intrinsic to the country (e.g. Ivanova & Ivanov, 2015; Kiryakova-Dineva *et al.*, 2019). Thirdly, there could be a self-reporting bias in the data, as respondents self-assessed the current level of the respective skills in their organisations. It is possible that some respondents overestimated and others underestimated the current level of skills in their organisations. However, due to time and project resource constraints, it was not possible to assess the actual skill levels in all 40 individual competences (digital, social, and green) of the hundreds of thousands of employees of the companies in the 8 countries represented in the NTG project. Therefore, the project participants opted for a feasible research design, namely self-assessment by the managers as the most knowledgeable respondents in the organisations, as has been the case in previous studies (Castro & Ferreira, 2019).

Due to the increasing importance of international tourism and the diversity of employees in tourism and hospitality organisations, future studies could further explore skills related to intercultural awareness, diets and allergies, and diversity skills related to disability, age, religion and gender diversity and inclusion. In addition, future research could focus on the social skills needs of managers and employees in different positions and at different levels of the organisational hierarchy, as they may require different skills. Finally, the studies can also be conducted in other cultural contexts.

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119

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JAZ U DRUŠTVENIM VJEŠTINAMA U BUGARSKOJ TURISTIČKOJ INDUSTRIJI

SAŽETAK

Ovaj rad istražuje jaz u društvenim vještinama u bugarskoj turističkoj industriji kao dio paneuropske studije o digitalnim, društvenim i zelenim vještinama u turizmu i ugostiteljstvu. Fokusira se na trenutačnu i buduću potrebnu razinu 21 društvene vještine te na obuku zaposlenika u turizmu i ugostiteljstvu u području društvenih vještina. Uzorak obuhvaća ispitanike iz 151 tvrtke i organizacije iz pet turističkih podsektora (smještaj, hrana i piće, putničke agencije, turističke atrakcije i organizacije za upravljanje destinacijom - DMO). U ovom istraživanju su korištene mješovite metode. Rezultati pokazuju da su budući zahtjevi za društvenim vještinama u korelaciji s trenutačnom razinom vještina. Orijentacija na korisnika, poznavanje stranih jezika, kulturna osviještenost, međukulturno razumijevanje između domaćina i gostiju, etičko ponašanje i poštovanje te kreativnost bit će najtraženije društvene vještine među bugarskim turističkim profesionalcima u budućnosti. Veličina organizacije i pripadnost sektoru imaju mali utjecaj na trenutačnu i buduću razinu kompetencija te na jaz u društvenim vještinama. Također se raspravlja o teorijskim, upravljačkim i političkim implikacijama.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI: *Društvene vještine, meke vještine, Bugarska, turistička industrija, jaz u društvenim vještinama*

121