

Role of Soft Skills and Digital Skills in Modern Tourism Education and Employability

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Abstract:

Technology advancements in the recent times have changed the business perspectives throughout the world. Introduction of artificial intelligence, digitization and platform economy has changed the modern tourism industry. This transformation has made a shift in requirement of manpower in tourism. Global tourism industry now needs graduates with advanced soft skills and job-specific digital skills. However, the lack of focus on digital and soft skills in academic curriculum created industry-academia gap which impacts the employability of tourism graduates particularly in developing countries like India. This exploratory study collected primary data through in-depth interviews from tourism industry experts including entrepreneurs, top-management and HR managers. The data then collected was analyzed through thematic analysis. After analyzing the data, four prominent themes emerged suggesting formal communication and digital competency as compulsory skills for employability in modern tourism industry. The research also revealed that the existing curriculum focuses more on theoretical learnings and does not align properly with the evolving tourism industry expectations. The study also contributes to the tourism education and employability literature as it suggests the need for curriculum upgradation by emphasizing more on grooming soft skills digital skills in addition to the existing theoretical knowledge.

Keywords: Tourism Education; Employability; Himachal Pradesh; Soft Skills; Digital Skills; Thematic Analysis.

1. INTRODUCTION

The global tourism industry dynamics have changed rapidly post-covid era. Emergence of AI, growth of digital technologies and platform-based distribution models have completely changed the sectors operational and human resource skill landscape. The modern tourism enterprise requires a workforce which is versatile, digitally fluent and professionally adept. In this fast-evolving ecosystem, the role of higher education institutes offering tourism courses becomes very crucial.

India, being one of the fastest-growing tourism destinations throughout the world, presents a strong case for examining this transformative dynamic. Tourism contributes around 9.2 % to the India's GDP supporting over 85 million livelihoods (WTTC, 2023). To train the manpower entering tourism industry, there are a number of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in tourism management across various Indian universities. However, despite of this all, significant employability deficit among tourism graduates still persists. Employers and industry professionals frequently cite fresh graduates' inability to communicate effectively in English, lack of destination knowledge, unfamiliarity with digital platforms,

and limited practical exposure as major barriers to productive employment (Baum, 2019; Solnet et al., 2019).

This mismatch between the tourism education and its employment yield points to a misalignment between what institutions teach and what the industry requires. The concept of the industry–academia gap, long discussed in tourism and hospitality management education literature, assumes particular urgency in the context of tourism education in India, where curriculum design has traditionally focussed more on theoretical content rather than competency-based learning (Bharwani & Jauhari, 2013; Ruhanen, 2006). Soft skills, which refer to a cluster of interpersonal and intrapersonal competencies including communication, emotional intelligence, teamwork, and adaptability, have been frequently identified as crucial determinants of employability across service industries (Yorke, 2006; Knight & Yorke, 2004). On the other hand, digital skills including the ability to use technical tools for booking platforms and MIS reporting to social media marketing and artificial intelligence-assisted itinerary planning are considered very important for entry in the modern tourism industry (Gössling, 2021; Sigala, 2018).

Himachal Pradesh is a popular mountain tourism destination of India. Home to globally recognised travel destinations such as Shimla, Manali, Dharamshala, Spiti and Dalhousie, the State generates significant inbound and domestic tourism demand. Recent travel trends suggest that the tourism footfall in the State is increasing every year which creates demand for skilled tourism professionals. The role of educational institutes like Himachal Pradesh University offering tourism and hospitality courses comes to play here (Kamal and Patial, 2025). However, these universities and colleges still focus more on conceptual curriculum rather than experiential and skill-based learning which leads to industry-academia gap. This gap between the supply of graduates and industry-ready talent in this region is both an educational challenge and an economic concern too.

This paper addresses the following research problem: to what extent do soft and digital skills serve as catalysts for the employability of tourism graduates, and how should curriculum and pedagogy be reformed to reflect this reality? The study employs a qualitative methodology, using already available secondary data and drawing primary evidence from in-depth expert interviews with tourism industry professionals, and analyses the data using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Employability in Higher Education: Theoretical Foundations

The concept of employability has evolved considerably from narrow, job-placement-oriented conceptions to broader frameworks that encompass graduate capabilities, career self-management, and contextual adaptability. Knight and Yorke (2004) proposed the seminal USEM model, which posits that employability comprises four interacting dimensions: Understanding (disciplinary knowledge), Skilful practices (competencies), Efficacy beliefs (self-efficacy), and Metacognition (the ability to learn). Yorke (2006) further defined employability as 'a set of achievements — skills, understandings and personal attributes that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy'. This understanding foregrounds that employability is not simply about securing a job but about sustaining productive engagement with the evolving demands of a professional context.

Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1964; Schultz, 1961), one of the foundational frameworks in education-employment scholarship, posits that investments in education enhance workers' productive capacities, thereby increasing their labour market value. From this perspective, the quality of curriculum content and

specifically the degree to which it develops transferable competencies directly influences graduate employability. When tourism education fails to cultivate relevant human capital, it creates a structural mismatch that neither serves graduates nor the industry.

More recent scholarship has drawn on the capability approach (Sen, 1999; Walker & Unterhalter, 2007) to argue that employability must be understood not only in terms of economic productivity but also in terms of graduates' capacity to function effectively as autonomous agents in complex professional environments. This framing has direct implications for tourism education, which must cultivate both technical competence and personal agency.

2.2 Soft Skills and Employability in Tourism and Hospitality

A substantial body of empirical research confirms the centrality of soft skills to employability in tourism and hospitality. Bharwani and Jauhari (2013) identified emotional intelligence, service orientation, cultural competence, and communication as the core hospitality intelligences demanded by global hotel chains. Their cross-sectional study found that industry recruiters valued interpersonal competencies as highly as, or more highly than, technical qualifications.

Baum (2019) provided a comprehensive review of human resource practices across the global hospitality and tourism industry, concluding that 'soft skills are not marginal but are the bedrock of service quality in tourism' (p. 134). He highlighted communication, empathy, problem-solving, and professional presentation as consistent priorities for employers. Solnet, Kralj, and Kandampully (2012) similarly found that Australian tourism employers ranked attitude, communication, and customer service orientation above technical knowledge in their recruitment criteria.

In the Indian context, research by Jauhari (2006) at the Institute for International Management and Technology identified communication skills, confidence, and work ethic as the three most consistently cited deficits among tourism graduates seeking employment in the hospitality sector. More recently, Chanda and Gokhale (2018) examined tourism education in Maharashtra and found that students' inability to communicate confidently in English remained a decisive barrier to employment in premium tourism roles, particularly those involving international clients.

Despite this consensus, soft skills remain inadequately institutionalised within many tourism education programmes. Curriculum structures, accreditation norms, and institutional inertia have collectively militated against the systematic incorporation of communication training, emotional intelligence development, and personality enrichment as formal academic components.

2.3 Digital Skills and the Technological Transformation of Tourism

The digital transformation of tourism has been one of the defining trends of the twenty-first century. Buhalis and Law (2008), in a seminal study of e-Tourism, argued that information and communications technology had fundamentally reconfigured the competitive landscape of tourism, necessitating new forms of digital literacy among both managers and front-line staff. Their framework anticipated many of the developments that now characterise the sector: OTA dominance, algorithmic pricing, digital marketing ecosystems, and CRM-driven customer management.

Gössling (2021) extended this analysis to the era of artificial intelligence, arguing that AI applications in tourism — including chatbots, recommendation engines, predictive analytics, and automated itinerary tools — were creating a new digital skills premium in the labour market. Graduates who could navigate these technologies fluently would be disproportionately advantaged in employment competition.

Sigala (2018) examined the implications of Big Data and digital platforms for tourism education, arguing that curricula must urgently incorporate data literacy, digital marketing, and platform management as core

competencies. She noted a significant lag between industry adoption of digital tools and educational responses, which she characterised as a 'curriculum digitalisation deficit'.

Research by Airey and Tribe (2005), while predating the most recent digital wave, established the foundational argument that vocational and professional relevance must coexist with academic rigour in tourism education. Their critique of overly theoretical tourism curricula resonates strongly with contemporary concerns about digital skills deficits.

In the Indian context, Ruhanen (2006) observed that tourism education programmes have been slow to incorporate digital competencies, citing institutional resource constraints, gaps in faculty familiarity, and accreditation frameworks that prioritise theoretical content. Similar findings have been reported by researchers examining tourism education in Southeast Asia (Xiao & Smith, 2006) and Africa (Airey & Frontistis, 1997).

2.4 The Industry–Academia Gap in Tourism Education

The industry–academia gap, the divergence between what tourism programmes teach and what employers require has been extensively documented in the literature. A comprehensive meta-analysis by Raybould and Wilkins (2005) identified communication, problem-solving, and technical operational competence as the skills most frequently cited by industry as lacking in tourism graduates. Importantly, their review found that this gap was not merely a matter of degree but of kind. Graduates possessed knowledge but not competence, theory but not practice.

Chung-Herrera, Enz, and Lankau (2003) developed a hospitality competency model through a Delphi study involving senior industry executives, identifying leadership, interpersonal skills, and technological literacy as the three most critical competency domains for future tourism professionals. However, subsequent reviews consistently found that hospitality curricula devoted insufficient attention to all three (Barrows & Johan, 2008).

Ruhanen (2006) argued that the gap was structurally embedded in the university system's incentive structures, which rewarded academic publication and theoretical rigour over industry engagement and applied learning. She called for a fundamental reorientation of tourism education towards 'experiential learning, problem-based learning, and industry partnerships'.

The Indian literature on this subject is comparatively sparse but convergent. Jauhari (2006), examining hotel management education, found that industry-university collaboration was 'episodic and informal' rather than systematised, resulting in curricula that were perennially behind industry needs. Goswami (2017) identified a similar pattern in tour operations education, noting that students completing three-year tourism degrees often could not prepare a professional itinerary or handle a client complaint.

Taken together, the literature establishes a robust theoretical and empirical case for the argument that soft skills and digital skills, as catalysts of employability, must occupy a more prominent and structured position within tourism education. However, there remains a significant gap in qualitative, interview-based studies that explore this nexus from the perspective of Indian tourism industry practitioners a gap that the present study seeks to address.

2.5 Theoretical Framework

This study integrates three complementary theoretical perspectives. First, Human Capital Theory (HCT; Becker, 1964) posits that investment in education and skill development enhances individual productivity, labour market value, and economic returns. Within this framework, the acquisition of soft and digital skills during formal education constitutes a form of human capital investment that directly enhances graduate employability and lifetime earnings potential.

Second, Yorke's (2006) Employability Skills Framework conceptualises employability as comprising four interrelated elements: (i) subject-specific knowledge; (ii) generic skills; (iii) efficacy beliefs (self-confidence and resilience); and (iv) metacognition (self-awareness). This framework is particularly valuable because it situates soft skills (captured under generic skills and efficacy beliefs) and digital skills (an emerging component of subject-specific knowledge in contemporary tourism) within a coherent and empirically validated employability model.

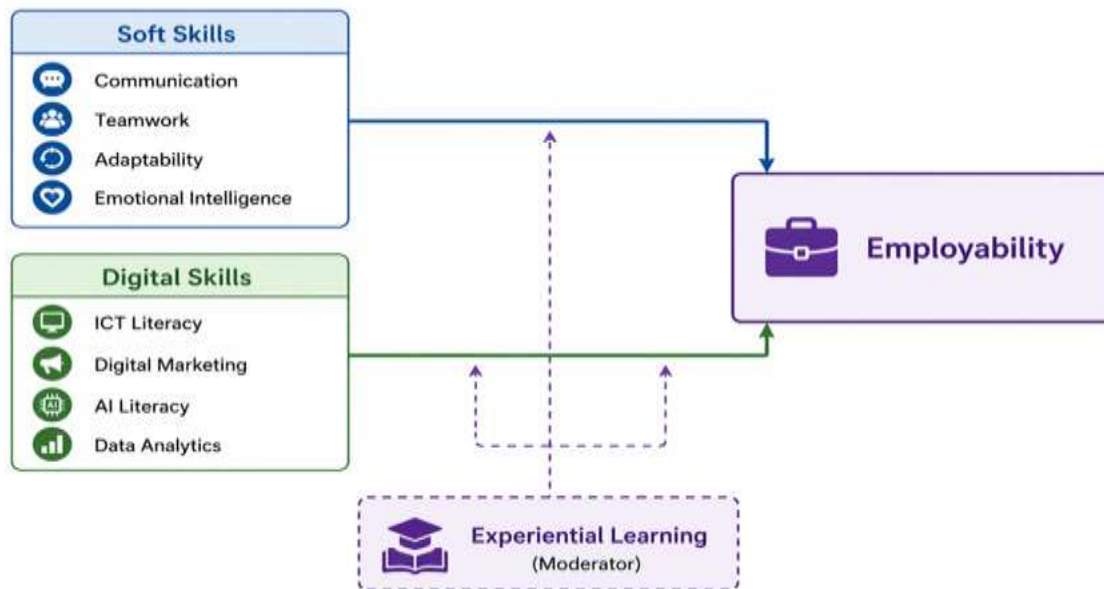
Third, the European Digital Competence Framework (DigComp 2.2; Vuorikari et al., 2022) provides a granular and validated taxonomy of digital competencies applicable to higher education contexts. By mapping specific digital skill dimensions against DigComp areas, this study ensured conceptual precision and international comparability.

Together, these frameworks generate the following conceptual model: Soft Skills and Digital Skills, mediated/moderated by Experiential Learning (internship experience), influence the Self-Perceived Employability of tourism students. This model integrates supply-side individual capabilities with educational process variables, grounding the hypotheses in established theory.

2.6 Conceptual Framework

Based on the theoretical integration and literature review, Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework positing the direct effects of soft skills (four dimensions) and digital skills (four dimensions) on perceived employability, with experiential learning (internships) as a moderator.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of Soft Skills and Digital Skills as Determinants of Employability in Tourism Education



Source: The framework is developed by the researcher through a synthesis of the literature and empirical findings.

2.7 Research Gaps

Based on the identified gaps, the existing tourism employability literature suffers from several critical limitations: there is a lack of qualitative evidence explaining how soft and digital skills function as interdependent catalysts rather than mere additive competencies; the unique contextual barriers faced by rural tourism graduates in the Indian Himalayan region, particularly Himachal Pradesh, remain empirically

unexplored; the perspectives of Indian industry practitioners—especially DMC managers and training leads—are systematically underrepresented in curriculum reform debates; Indian research lacks granular analysis of specific digital skill deficiencies (CRM, AI, booking platforms) as distinct employability determinants; current employability theories remain generic and unadapted to rural, mountain-region educational contexts; there are no empirically validated guidelines for the optimal timing, duration, and structure of internships in developing-country settings; the field is methodologically dominated by quantitative surveys, limiting interpretive depth; and most studies examine soft skills and digital skills separately, overlooking their synergistic, catalytic relationship. These gaps collectively underscore the need for a theoretically grounded, qualitative investigation into how soft and digital skills jointly determine the employability of tourism graduates in the under-researched Himalayan context.

Table 1: Matrix of Identified Research Gaps

Gap Area	Specific Gap	How the Paper Addresses It
Catalytic role of skills	Lack of qualitative evidence on how skills enable other competencies	Positions soft/digital skills as catalysts, not supplements
Regional focus (Himachal)	No employability studies specific to the Indian Himalayan region	Contextualises findings in Himachal Pradesh
Industry practitioner voices	Underrepresentation of employer perspectives in Indian research	Uses in-depth expert interviews as primary data
Digital skills granularity	Limited Indian research on specific digital tool deficiencies	Examines CRM, AI, booking platforms, and data analytics
Contextualised theory	Generic employability models ignore rural barriers	Calls for region-specific theoretical adaptation
Qualitative methodology	Over-reliance on quantitative surveys	Employs thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006)
Skill interdependence	Soft and digital skills are studied separately	Analyses their interactive/catalytic relationship

Source: Developed by the author from literature synthesis and qualitative findings.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts an exploratory qualitative research design, premised on the ontological position that social reality — including perceptions of employability and professional competence — is constructed through experience, interaction, and interpretation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Qualitative inquiry is particularly suited to the research objectives of this study, which seek to understand the nuanced

expectations of industry professionals and to uncover the experiential basis of the industry–academia gap, rather than to test predetermined hypotheses or generate statistical generalisations.

The interpretive paradigm informs the epistemological stance of this study. Accordingly, the researcher seeks to understand how tourism industry practitioners construct meanings around graduate employability, skill requirements, and curriculum relevance, and how these meanings are shaped by their professional experiences and organisational contexts.

3.2 Data Collection: Expert Interviews

Primary data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured expert interviews with tourism industry professionals. Expert interviews were chosen as the primary data collection instrument because they are particularly well-suited to capturing specialised professional knowledge, tacit industry wisdom, and contextual insights that cannot be adequately obtained through surveys or secondary sources (Bogner, Littig, & Menz, 2009).

A semi-structured interview guide comprising four core questions was developed, covering: (i) perceived gaps between education and industry; (ii) required technical and digital skills; (iii) the importance of soft skills; (iv) suggestions for curriculum reform. The interview guide was reviewed by two academic peers for content validity and refined before data collection.

Interviews were conducted in a naturalistic, conversational manner to allow for the organic emergence of themes and to encourage respondents to share experiences beyond the structured question framework. Interviews were conducted in person and via voice recording, with participants' informed consent. Transcripts were prepared from audio recordings and supplemented by handwritten notes. Given the bilingual fieldwork context (Hindi and English), responses in Hindi were professionally translated and contextually interpreted for analytical purposes, ensuring that cultural meaning and nuance were preserved.

3.3 Sampling Strategy

Purposive sampling was employed to select participants who possessed relevant and substantive knowledge of tourism industry operations and graduate employment (Patton, 2015). The inclusion criterion was a minimum of 5 years of direct professional experience in the tourism industry in a role involving the hiring, training, or supervision of tourism graduates. A total of five expert respondents were included in the study, representing the following professional profiles:

Expert 1: Senior executive at a travel and package design company with extensive client-facing experience.

Expert 2: Founder and Director of a travel company and DMC operating across Himachal Pradesh, Ladakh, Kerala, and Andaman, with prior corporate experience at MNCs, including Snapdeal (acquired by Flipkart) and Tech Mahindra.

Expert 3: Operations professional at a travel agency specialising in inbound tourism.

Expert 4: Senior manager with experience in the DMC and leisure tourism segments.

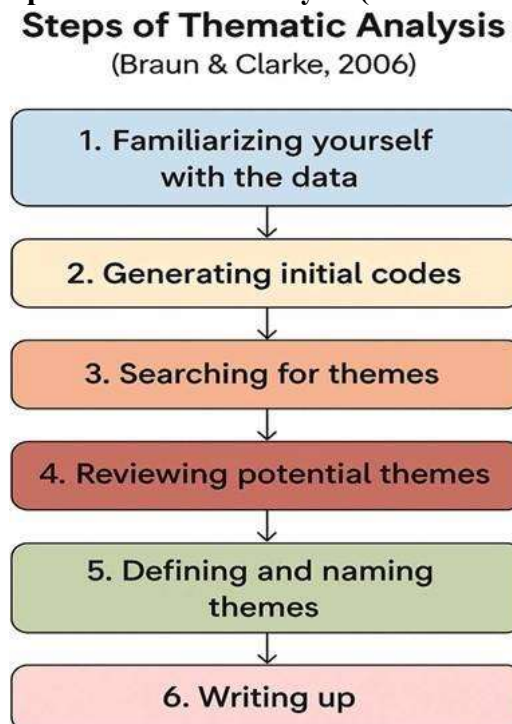
Expert 5: Team Leader at a Destination Management Company, with five years of industry experience and academic engagement in curriculum consultation.

Additionally, a focus group discussion was facilitated with the Senior Professors, Industry Expert, Research Scholars, and Students (an academic practitioner and former DMC manager) serving as both participant-observers and analytical anchors. Theoretical saturation was reached after five expert interviews, as no new themes emerged.

3.4 Data Analysis: Thematic Analysis

Data were analysed using Thematic Analysis (TA) as elaborated by Braun and Clarke (2006), who describe TA as 'a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data' (p. 79). Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework — familiarisation, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing up — was followed systematically.

Figure 1: Steps of Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006)



Source: Adapted by the author from Braun and Clarke (2006).

In Phase 1 (Familiarisation), all interview transcripts were read and re-read to achieve deep immersion in the data. Notes were made on initial impressions, recurring ideas, and significant phrases. Phase 2 (Initial Coding) involved line-by-line open coding, whereby meaningful units of text were assigned descriptive labels. Coding was conducted manually, with codes organised into a structured codebook. Phase 3 (Searching for Themes) involved collating related codes into candidate themes, using a combination of deductive logic (guided by the research objectives and existing literature) and inductive emergence (attending to unexpected or contradictory patterns in the data). Phase 4 (Reviewing Themes) involved checking the internal coherence of each theme against the coded data and ensuring that themes were meaningfully distinct. In Phase 5 (Defining and Naming Themes), each theme was given a precise, analytically grounded name, and a clear narrative description was developed for each. Phase 6 (Writing Up) involved integrating thematic analysis into the broader research narrative, supported by direct quotations from participants. All quotations have been rendered in formal academic English while preserving the substantive meaning of the original statements.

Trustworthiness of findings was enhanced through member checking (sharing key interpretations with two respondents for verification), analytical reflexivity (maintaining a researcher journal), and audit trail documentation (archiving original transcripts and codebooks).

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Thematic analysis of the expert interview data yielded four robust themes. Each theme is discussed below, supported by representative quotations and grounded in analytical commentary.

Table 3: Four Themes from Thematic Analysis

Theme	Theme Name	Core Finding
1	Structural Industry–Academia Gap	Tourism education prioritises theory over application. Graduates lack applied understanding despite academic credentials.
2	Communication and Soft Skills as Gatekeepers	English communication, confidence, and emotional intelligence are absolute barriers to employment, not merely desirable.
3	Digital Skills and Technology Literacy	Graduates are unfamiliar with CRM platforms, AI tools, MIS reporting, booking systems, and basic data management.
4	Need for Curriculum Reform and Skill-Based Education	Shift from content-transmission to competency-based education with practical, industry-relevant modules.

Theme 1: The Structural Industry–Academia Gap

The most pervasive and consistently articulated finding across all interviews was a structural disconnect between what tourism education delivers and what the industry requires. All five expert respondents independently characterised this gap as fundamental rather than incidental.

"The major gap I found was destination knowledge — students have done a course, but they do not know basic things about the places they will be selling. That is the core problem."

This observation resonates with Expert 4's complementary critique of curriculum design:

"There is too much theoretical feeding happening in classrooms. Students can recite definitions, but they cannot handle a real client situation. The gap between what is taught and what is needed is enormous."

Expert 5 (DMC Team Leader) echoed this structural characterisation, noting that graduates arrive with academic credentials but require extensive industry re-training before they can function productively. This finding is theoretically consistent with Ruhanen's (2006) argument that the structural incentives of tourism education privilege academic abstraction over applied competence.

The analysis suggests that the industry–academia gap in the Himachal Pradesh context is not merely a content deficit but a pedagogical one: even when relevant topics are nominally covered in the curriculum, students lack the applied understanding needed to apply their knowledge in professional contexts.

Theme 2: Communication and Soft Skills as Employment Gatekeepers

Communication emerged as the dominant soft skill theme across all interviews. Respondents described communication deficits not merely as inconveniences but as fundamental barriers to employment — particularly for roles involving premium and international clients.

"Communication is the most important skill. Everything depends on how you speak to a client, how you write an email, and how you convince a customer. Students are severely lacking in English communication, and that is affecting their employability directly."

Expert 5 (DMC professional) offered a nuanced elaboration:

"We look for enthusiasm, communication skills, and professionalism. Most importantly, the ability to work under pressure while remaining professional with clients. Students often come in with good academic records but fail at the first client interaction."

Expert 2 added an important dimension concerning confidence and sales communication:

"The student who can convince someone, who can manage a client's expectations, who can speak with confidence — that is the student who will succeed in sales. However, most students are not trained to do this. They know the product; they cannot sell it."

Beyond communication, respondents identified related soft skills as significant: emotional intelligence in client interactions, professional behaviour in the workplace, adaptability under pressure, and the ability to collaborate across departments. These findings align with Bharwani and Jauhari's (2013) hospitality intelligence framework and Baum's (2019) empirical synthesis of industry skill demands.

Theme 3: Digital Skills and Technology Literacy

A consistent and urgent theme concerned graduates' inadequate familiarity with the digital tools that define contemporary tourism operations. Respondents identified a range of specific competencies as essential but absent in fresh graduates.

"AI tools are coming into use in companies. Students should be familiar with these. They do not know how to use CRM platforms. They do not know how to generate MIS reports. They ask colleagues every time, because they were never taught to do research properly using technology."

Expert 2 offered a detailed taxonomy of the digital skills expected from industry entrants:

"Students should know the basics: hotel categories, flight codes, booking platforms, and data management. MIS reports, Excel-based analysis — these things come with work, but at least they should know why they matter. Right now, even basic digital literacy is not there."

Expert 4 contextualised digital skills within the broader transformation of tourism business models:

"The top booking websites and hotel platforms are what the industry runs on now. Basic Excel, basic document preparation, understanding of how ticketing systems work — if students do not have this, they are a liability for the first three months."

Expert 5 highlighted the increasing prevalence of CRM systems and itinerary planning tools, noting that 'key technical skills in modern tourism include itinerary planning tools, CRM platforms, online booking channels, and invoicing software.' The absence of structured training in these tools represents a significant curricula gap that aligns with Sigala's (2018) identification of a 'curriculum digitalisation deficit' in tourism higher education.

Theme 4: Need for Curriculum Reform and Skill-Based Education

Respondents offered specific, actionable recommendations for curriculum reform that collectively point toward a fundamental redesign centred on skill-based, competency-driven learning outcomes.

"Add practical things to the course. Hotel categories, meal plans, airport codes, flight basics — these are not hard to teach, but they make a real difference when a student enters the job. Right now, the course is teaching things that are either not relevant or taught without any application."

Expert 5 provided a structured overview of the reforms deemed most critical, noting that 'the current curriculum requires a stronger focus on practical, foundational subjects directly linked to tourism

operations', including mandatory airport and transport management, extended hotel exposure through industry visits, and greater emphasis on spoken English and business communication.

Expert 2 emphasized on the problem of curriculum alignment with student career opportunities:

"If a student wants to be a tour guide, train them in languages and historical knowledge. If they want to work in travel companies, train them in itinerary designing and sales. Do not teach everyone the same thing regardless of where they want to go."

Expert 4 advocated for data analytics, business communication, and digital media as essential curriculum additions:

"Curriculum should be updated regularly while keeping the current trends in mind. Data analytics, business communication, and digital tools are no longer optional. The industry has moved on, and the curriculum must catch up accordingly.

Collectively, these findings support a shift from content-transmission pedagogy to competency-based education (CBE), consistent with recommendations from Airey and Tribe (2005) and Ruhanen (2006).

5. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study illuminate the complex and multi-dimensional nature of the industry–academia gap in tourism education and point compellingly to soft and digital skills as the twin catalysts through which this gap must be addressed. This discussion situates the empirical findings within the broader theoretical landscape, drawing connections to the extant literature and identifying the study's contributions and implications.

The structural nature of the gap between tourism education and industry needs, as documented in this study, confirms and extends the theoretical models proposed by Knight and Yorke (2004) and Ruhanen (2006). From a human capital perspective (Becker, 1964), investment in tourism education is not yielding commensurate returns because the knowledge and skills developed do not align with the industry's productive requirements. The Thematic analysis emphasis on 'skilful practices' and 'efficacy beliefs' is particularly instructive here. Respondents confirmed that graduates possess disciplinary knowledge (Understanding) but lack the practical competencies (Skilful practices) and self-confidence (Efficacy beliefs) that constitute genuine employability.

The centrality of communication — and, more broadly, soft skills — to employability in the tourism context confirms the findings of Bharwani and Jauhari (2013) and Baum (2019) while enriching them with specific contextual detail from the Indian and Himachal Pradesh context. The finding that English communication serves as a particular gatekeeper for employment in premium tourism roles reflects the sociolinguistic dimension of the industry–academia gap, shaped by students' regional backgrounds and the industry's international orientation. This nexus between linguistic competence, confidence, and professional identity formation is an important area for future investigation.

The digital skills findings are consistent with Gössling's (2021) analysis of the AI-driven transformation of tourism and Sigala's (2018) identification of a curriculum digitalisation deficit. However, the present study adds important empirical texture by specifying the particular tools and competencies that industry professionals regard as essential: CRM platforms, booking and ticketing systems, MIS reporting, airport codes, hotel category knowledge, and AI-assisted tools. This granular specificity is valuable for curriculum developers because it moves the discourse on digital skills from the abstract to the actionable.

The theme of student profiling and role specialisation represents a significant theoretical contribution. Existing employability frameworks tend to focus on generic transferable skills, implicitly treating graduate

employability as a homogeneous property. The industry expert data in this study suggest that in the context of tourism, employability is highly role-differentiated. Different positions — sales, operations, backend analytics, ticketing, hotel reservations — require significantly different skill configurations, and current curricula's one-size-fits-all approach is inadequate. This finding invites a more disaggregated approach to tourism employability research and a more personalised approach to curriculum design and student guidance.

6. CONCLUSION

This study intended to investigate the role of soft and digital skills in modern tourism education as catalysts for employability, in reference to the Indian context, focussing particularly on Himachal Pradesh. Drawing on in-depth interviews with tourism industry experts and analysing the data through Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis framework, the study identified four robust themes that collectively illuminate the structural, pedagogical, and competency dimensions of the industry–academia gap.

The findings confirm that soft skills particularly communication, confidence, emotional intelligence and professional behaviour; and digital skills including CRM platforms, booking systems, MIS reporting, AI tools, and destination digital marketing are not optional attributes but infact are mandatory for graduate employability in contemporary tourism industry. The existing theory-driven conceptual curriculum model is not adequate for producing skilled tourism graduates and must be updated keeping in mind the competency-based, practice-oriented, and industry-integrated pedagogical approach.

Future-ready tourism graduates cannot be produced by textbooks alone. They can be trained by the deliberate, collaborative, and evidence-based integration of real-world competencies into educational systems that are genuinely responsive to the industries they serve. This study provides both the empirical evidence and the analytical framework to support that transformation.

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