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EMPLOYEE SOFT SKILLS AND CUSTOMER SATISFACTION IN THE HOTEL INDUSTRY: EVIDENCE FROM LAHORE, PAKISTAN

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Abstract

Purpose: *This study examines the association between ten workplace soft-skill dimensions and customer satisfaction in the hotel industry of Lahore, Pakistan. It addresses the limited empirical attention given to guest-perceived employee-related service behaviours in the Pakistani hospitality context.*

Methodology: *The study uses a quantitative, cross-sectional survey of 300 hotel guests in Lahore. The research instrument included 14 questions concerning respondent and visit characteristics and 41 Likert-type items concerning hotel service experiences. The reported analyses comprise descriptive statistics, Cronbach's alpha, Pearson correlations and multiple linear regression.*

Findings: *The ten-predictor regression model was statistically significant, $F(10, 289) = 8.05$, $p < .001$, and explained 21.8% of the variance in customer satisfaction ($R^2 = .218$; adjusted $R^2 = .191$). Ability to work had a significant positive coefficient ($\beta = .229$, $p = .001$) after controlling for the other dimensions. Flexibility/adaptability ($\beta = -.249$, $p = .001$) and being a team player ($\beta = -.293$, $p < .001$) had significant negative coefficients. The remaining seven dimensions were not statistically significant.*

Originality/value: *The study provides empirical evidence on how guest-perceived employee soft skills and service experiences relate to customer satisfaction in Lahore hotels, a context that has received limited research attention. The findings offer practical guidance for hotel managers and a basis for further hospitality research in Pakistan.*

1. Introduction

Hotels deliver an experience that is shaped not only by accommodation and physical facilities but also by the interactions through which guests obtain information, request assistance and resolve service problems. Front-office employees, concierge personnel, security staff and other service workers influence how guests evaluate a stay. In this context, communication, courtesy, adaptability, teamwork, responsibility and a constructive attitude are relevant workplace capabilities. These capabilities are commonly described as

JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE STUDIES
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Volume 4 • Issue 7 • November 2026

soft skills and are particularly salient in interactive service settings.

The hospitality sector is characterised by frequent employee–customer contact and by service encounters in which the quality of an experience may depend on both operational reliability and interpersonal conduct. Previous hospitality research has linked guest satisfaction and repeat patronage with perceived service quality and the overall hotel experience (Choi & Chu, 2001; Kandampully & Suhartanto, 2000; Ladhari, 2009; Oh & Parks, 1996). Research on generic skills in hospitality has also emphasised the importance of interpersonal and transferable competencies for service work and management (Baum, 2007; Raybould & Wilkins, 2005, 2006; Sisson & Adams, 2013; Weber et al., 2009).

Robles (2012) identified ten soft skills that executives consider important in the workplace: communication, courtesy, flexibility, integrity, interpersonal skills, positive attitude, professionalism, responsibility, teamwork and work ethic. These categories provide a useful starting point for considering employee capabilities in hotels. In a hotel, guests experience these skills through observable behaviours, such as whether staff communicate clearly, respond promptly, show courtesy and attend to individual needs, and through the quality of the services that employees deliver.

Evidence from Pakistan has more commonly examined service quality and customer satisfaction than a broad set of employee soft skills. Studies in the Pakistani hotel context have reported associations between service-quality dimensions and customer outcomes (Noor & Ali, 2018; Shah & Baloch, 2017; Ullah, 2019). The present study uses survey evidence from 300 hotel guests in Lahore to examine ten soft-skill dimensions, measured through guests' ratings of their service experiences, and their relationship with customer satisfaction.

1.1 Research objectives

The study has three objectives: (1) to examine the relationship between ten selected soft-skill dimensions and customer satisfaction among hotel guests in Lahore; (2) to identify which dimensions are statistically associated with customer satisfaction when considered jointly; and (3) to derive cautious implications for hotel service management, employee development and future measurement.

1.2 Research questions

RQ1. Which of the ten measured soft-skill/service dimensions are significantly associated with customer satisfaction among surveyed hotel guests in Lahore?

RQ2. What is the relative contribution of these dimensions in the reported multiple regression model?

2. Literature review and hypotheses

2.1 Soft skills in hospitality work

Soft skills refer broadly to non-technical capabilities that support effective interaction, cooperation and task performance. Robles (2012) places communication, courtesy, flexibility, integrity, interpersonal skills, positive attitude, professionalism, responsibility, teamwork and work ethic among the soft skills valued by executives. In hotels, these capabilities are relevant because employees must coordinate with colleagues while responding to guests whose needs and expectations may vary across service encounters. Research on hospitality employment has considered the generic skills required by the sector and the relationship between education, experience and managerial expectations (Baum, 2007; Raybould & Wilkins, 2005, 2006). Competency studies consistently rank soft skills such as communication, teamwork and professionalism among the most important requirements for entry-level hospitality managers (Sisson & Adams, 2013; Weber et al., 2009).

Interactive service work also involves emotional and aesthetic dimensions beyond technical task completion (Warhurst & Nickson, 2009). This perspective is important for hotel settings, where a technically correct response may still

JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE STUDIES
An International Peer-Reviewed Open Access Journal
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Volume 4 • Issue 7 • November 2026

be experienced negatively if it is delivered without courtesy, attentiveness or sensitivity.

2.2 Employee interaction, service quality and satisfaction

The SERVQUAL framework conceptualises perceived service quality through tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy (Parasuraman et al., 1988). Several of these dimensions are closely connected to employee behaviour. Responsiveness concerns willingness and promptness in helping customers; assurance relates to employees' knowledge and ability to inspire confidence; and empathy concerns individualised attention. These dimensions provide a conceptual bridge between interpersonal service behaviour and customer evaluations. Cronin and Taylor (1992) further argued that performance-based measures capture service quality better than expectation–perception gap scores and that service quality is an antecedent of customer satisfaction.

Research has associated employee emotional competence and empathy with customer satisfaction, rapport and loyalty. Critical-incident research in hotels, restaurants and airlines shows that contact-employee behaviour, including responses to service failures and special requests, distinguishes highly satisfying from highly dissatisfying encounters (Bitner et al., 1990). Hartline and Ferrell (1996) show that the attitudes and behaviours of customer-contact employees shape customers' perceptions of service quality, and Ekinci and Dawes (2009) link frontline employees' personality traits to interaction quality and customer satisfaction. Delcourt et al. (2013) identify rapport as a mechanism linking perceived employee emotional competence with customer outcomes. Bahadur et al. (2018) report that employee empathy can influence satisfaction and loyalty through perceived service quality and affective commitment. In hotel settings, Lam et al. (2021) examine the role of emotional and cultural intelligence in guest satisfaction, while Xin and Choi (2020) connect employee service attitudes with service quality, satisfaction and loyalty. These studies support the relevance of employee interaction to guest outcomes.

2.3 Customer satisfaction in the hotel context

Customer satisfaction is an overall evaluation of an experience relative to a guest's expectations and perceived performance (Oliver, 1980). In hotels, this evaluation can reflect multiple aspects of the stay, including room condition, staff interactions, food quality, facilities, convenience and value. Choi and Chu (2001) identify determinants of guest satisfaction and repeat patronage in the Hong Kong hotel industry, while Oh and Parks (1996) review the relationship between service quality and satisfaction in hospitality research. Hotel studies have also found that employee behaviour and appearance form a distinct dimension of perceived service quality (Wong Ooi Mei et al., 1999), that hotel service quality comprises physical, interaction and outcome components (Wilkins et al., 2007), and that guest satisfaction is associated with loyalty and hotel image (Kandampully & Suhartanto, 2000). These perspectives indicate that satisfaction is multidimensional and shaped by both employee behaviour and the wider service experience.

2.4 Evidence from Pakistan and research gap

Previous research has examined service quality and customer outcomes in Pakistan, including hotel customers in Lahore and guests of Pearl Continental properties (Noor & Ali, 2018; Shah & Baloch, 2017; Ullah, 2019). In a larger multi-city study that included Lahore, Shah et al. (2018) applied the SERVQUAL model to 1,429 hotel customers and reported that service attributes had a significant positive effect on customer satisfaction. This work provides a relevant local context, but few studies have examined a broad set of employee soft skills alongside customer satisfaction in Pakistani hotels. The present study addresses this gap by examining ten soft-skill dimensions in a Lahore hotel sample.

JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE STUDIES
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Volume 4 • Issue 7 • November 2026

2.5 Theoretical framing and hypotheses

The study is framed using SERVQUAL, particularly the employee-facing dimensions of responsiveness, assurance and empathy (Parasuraman et al., 1988), alongside the general expectation-based understanding of customer satisfaction. The framework suggests that guest-perceived employee behaviours may be associated with satisfaction. The hypotheses are stated as positive associations, consistent with the conceptual expectation that effective workplace behaviours support service experiences.

H1: Positive attitude is positively associated with customer satisfaction.
H2: Strong work ethic is positively associated with customer satisfaction.
H3: Time management ability is positively associated with customer satisfaction.
H4: Communication skill is positively associated with customer satisfaction.
H5: Ability to work is positively associated with customer satisfaction.
H6: Self-confidence is positively associated with customer satisfaction.
H7: Flexibility/adaptability is positively associated with customer satisfaction.
H8: Being a team player is positively associated with customer satisfaction.
H9: Learning from criticism is positively associated with customer satisfaction.
H10: Ability to accept is positively associated with customer satisfaction.

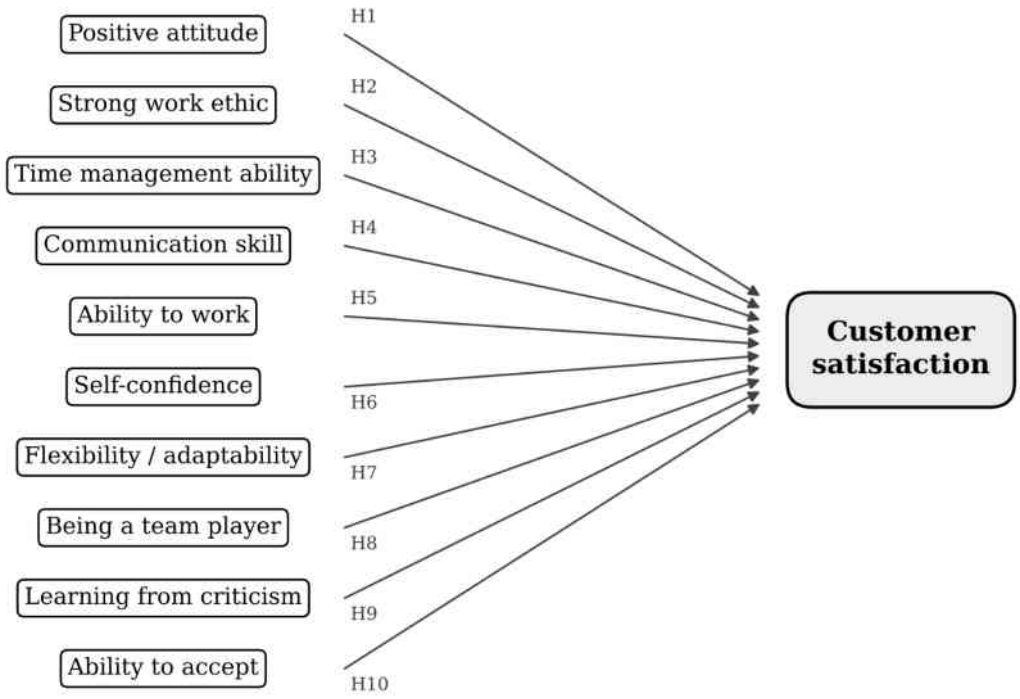

Figure 1. Conceptual framework of the study.

Note. The ten soft-skill dimensions are examined as predictors of customer satisfaction. The arrows represent tested associations, not causal effects.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design and sample

The study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional questionnaire design. The target population was hotel guests in Lahore, Pakistan, and 300 completed responses were collected.

JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE STUDIES
An International Peer-Reviewed Open Access Journal
ISSN (Online): 3006-2071 | ISSN (Print): 3006-2063
Volume 4 • Issue 7 • November 2026

3.2 Research instrument

The questionnaire contained 14 questions concerning respondent and visit characteristics and a set of 41 five-point response items. The response anchors shown in the questionnaire are strongly agree (5), agree (4), neutral (3), disagree (2) and strongly disagree (1). The questionnaire includes questions on parking and security, concierge services, front-office interactions, room service, the business centre, gym and swimming-pool facilities, and food quality. These service touchpoints are grouped under ten skill labels.

Each dimension was measured through guest ratings of the service touchpoints at which the relevant employee behaviour is experienced, covering both direct staff interaction (for example, communication manner, responsiveness and personal attention) and the services that staff deliver (for example, room cleanliness, business-centre support and food quality).

3.3 Measures and construct mapping

Table 1. *Questionnaire indicators grouped under each construct*

Construct	Questionnaire indicators
Positive attitude (PA)	Car-parking service; behaviour of security staff
Strong work ethic (SWE)	Parking-area space; hotel infrastructure motivating business travellers
Time management ability (TMA)	Security measures; bell-person service and efficiency; concierge cooperation, information and satisfaction
Communication skill (COM)	Telephone response; communication manner; front-office efficiency; personal attention; professional attitude; friendliness; front-office satisfaction
Ability to work (ATW)	Room cleanliness; room amenities; front-office staff efficiency
Self-confidence (SC)	Front-office experience; guidance and courtesy; front-office satisfaction
Flexibility/adaptability (FA)	Business-centre response; staff manners; computer/internet; mail/fax/delivery; overall satisfaction
Being a team player (BTP)	Swimming pool, exercise equipment, gym and pool services
Learning from criticism (LFC)	Complimentary food and beverage; food hygiene; food quality
Ability to accept (ATA)	Satisfaction with hotel/food and beverage; infrastructure; recommending hotel to others

Customer satisfaction (CS) served as the dependent variable.

3.4 Data analysis

The reported analysis includes descriptive statistics, Cronbach's alpha, Pearson product–moment correlations and multiple linear regression. The regression model estimates the association between the ten soft-skill dimensions and customer satisfaction. The model is expressed as:

$$CS = \beta_0 + \beta_1 PA + \beta_2 SWE + \beta_3 TMA + \beta_4 COM + \beta_5 ATW + \beta_6 SC + \beta_7 FA + \beta_8 BTP + \beta_9 LFC + \beta_{10} ATA + \varepsilon$$

Multicollinearity was assessed with variance inflation factors (VIFs).

4. Results

4.1 Sample and descriptive information

The analysis included 300 respondents with no missing cases. The questionnaire captured purpose of visit, age, gender, employment and marital status, education, reason for stay, visit frequency, source of hotel awareness, expected expenditure and reservation method.

Item-level frequencies showed generally favourable responses for most hotel touchpoints, alongside neutral and dissatisfied responses for some.

JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE STUDIES
An International Peer-Reviewed Open Access Journal
ISSN (Online): 3006-2071 | ISSN (Print): 3006-2063
Volume 4 • Issue 7 • November 2026

4.2 Reliability

Cronbach's alpha was .824 for the 11-item scale (N = 300), which exceeds the conventional threshold of .70 and indicates good internal consistency.

4.3 Correlation analysis

The correlation matrix shows positive associations among the ten predictor dimensions (reported pairwise correlations range from approximately .11 to .65). Customer satisfaction is negatively correlated with all ten dimensions; the associations are statistically significant for strong work ethic, time management ability, self-confidence, flexibility/adaptability, being a team player, learning from criticism and ability to accept. The associations with positive attitude, communication skill and ability to work are not statistically significant.

Table 2. *Pearson correlations among study variables*

Variable	CS	PA	SWE	TMA	COM	ATW	SC	FA	BTP	LFC	ATA
CS	1										
PA	−.050	1									
SWE	−.180**	.108	1								
TMA	−.116*	.264**	.465**	1							
COM	−.092	.342**	.435**	.646**	1						
ATW	−.023	.198**	.422**	.478**	.562**	1					
SC	−.256**	.191**	.424**	.322**	.395**	.432**	1				
FA	−.333**	.344**	.279**	.454**	.525**	.402**	.560**	1			
BTP	−.330**	.327**	.400**	.472**	.509**	.512**	.457**	.571**	1		
LFC	−.206**	.226**	.296**	.156**	.231**	.138*	.213**	.368**	.287**	1	
ATA	−.234**	.179**	.389**	.267**	.337**	.246**	.325**	.360**	.382**	.503**	1

Note. N = 300. * p < .05; ** p < .01 (two-tailed). CS = customer satisfaction; PA = positive attitude; SWE = strong work ethic; TMA = time management ability; COM = communication skill; ATW = ability to work; SC = self-confidence; FA = flexibility/adaptability; BTP = being a team player; LFC = learning from criticism; ATA = ability to accept.

JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE STUDIES
An International Peer-Reviewed Open Access Journal
ISSN (Online): 3006-2071 | ISSN (Print): 3006-2063
Volume 4 • Issue 7 • November 2026

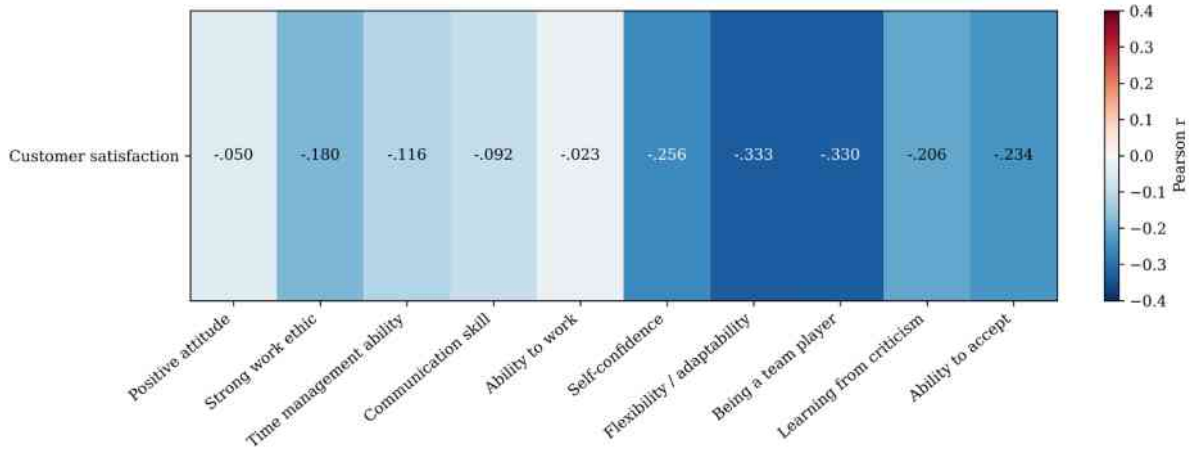

Figure 2. Reported bivariate correlations between the ten dimensions and customer satisfaction.

Note. Values are taken from Table 2. This is a one-row display, not a complete correlation matrix.

4.4 Multiple regression

The multiple regression model was statistically significant, $F(10, 289) = 8.050$, $p < .001$. The model yielded $R = .467$, $R^2 = .218$ and adjusted $R^2 = .191$, with a standard error of estimate of .679. Thus, the ten predictors jointly accounted for 21.8% of the variance in the customer-satisfaction measure. VIFs ranged from 1.23 to 2.28, well below conventional thresholds, so multicollinearity is not a concern.

Table 3. ***Regression model summary***

Model statistic	Reported value
R	.467
R^2	.218
Adjusted R^2	.191
Standard error of estimate	.679
F statistic	8.050
Degrees of freedom	10, 289
Model significance	$p < .001$
N	300

JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE STUDIES
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ISSN (Online): 3006-2071 | ISSN (Print): 3006-2063
Volume 4 • Issue 7 • November 2026

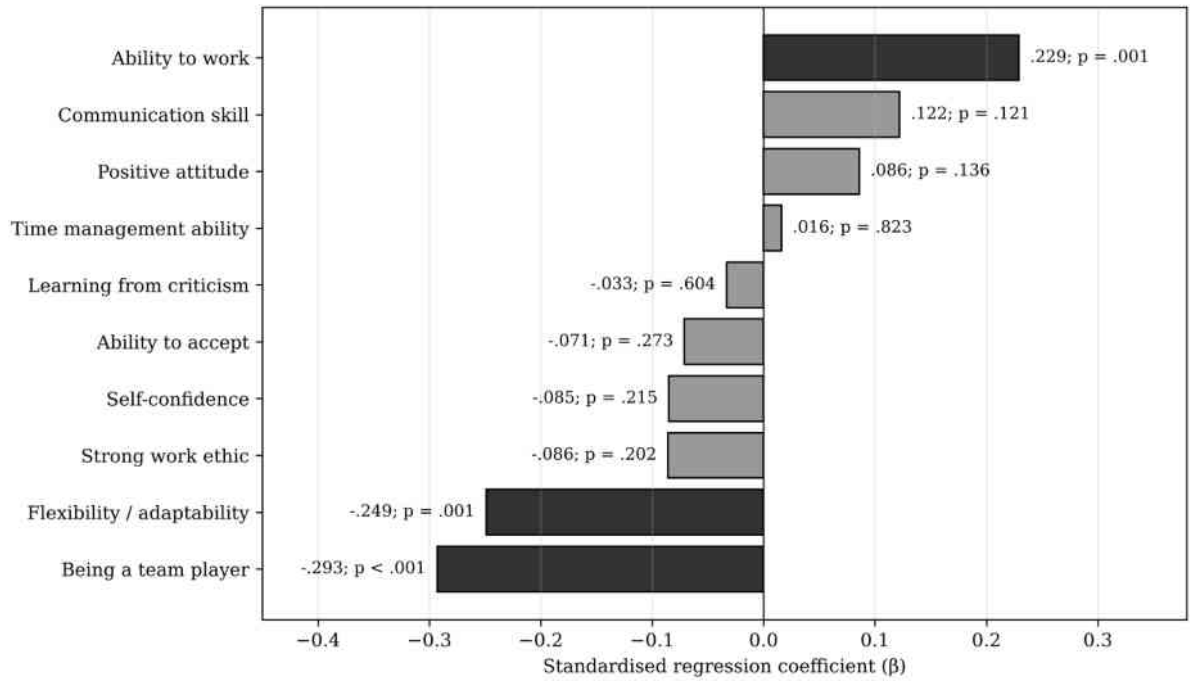

Figure 3. Explanatory power of the reported regression model.

Note. Values are taken from Table 3.

Table 4. ***Multiple regression coefficients predicting customer satisfaction***

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
Constant	3.595	.609	–	5.907	< .001
Positive attitude (PA)	.085	.057	.086	1.496	.136
Strong work ethic (SWE)	−.060	.047	−.086	−1.279	.202
Time management ability (TMA)	.005	.021	.016	.224	.823
Communication (COM)	.029	.019	.122	1.554	.121
Ability to work (ATW)	.112	.034	.229	3.328	.001
Self-confidence (SC)	−.037	.029	−.085	−1.243	.215
Flexibility/adaptability (FA)	−.068	.021	−.249	−3.235	.001
Being a team player (BTP)	−.088	.022	−.293	−4.068	< .001
Learning from criticism (LFC)	−.016	.032	−.033	−.519	.604
Ability to accept (ATA)	−.026	.024	−.071	−1.098	.273

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An International Peer-Reviewed Open Access Journal
ISSN (Online): 3006-2071 | ISSN (Print): 3006-2063
Volume 4 • Issue 7 • November 2026

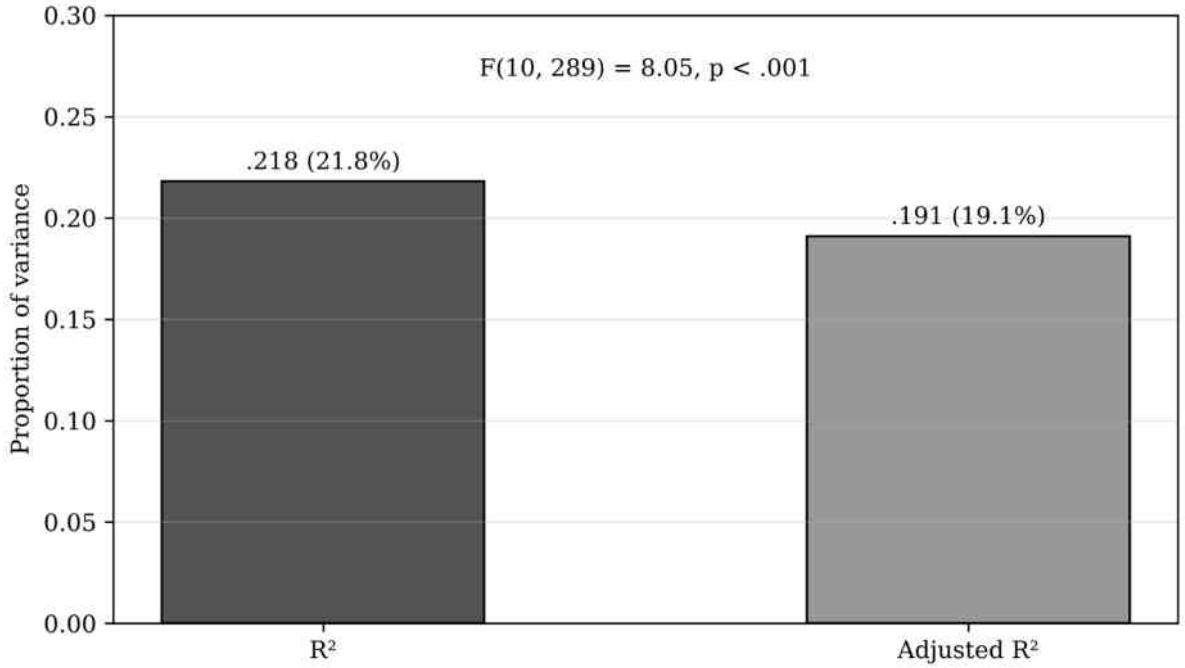

Figure 4. Standardised regression coefficients for the ten predictors.

Note. Coefficients and p-values are taken from Table 4. Dark bars indicate p < .05.

Ability to work was the only predictor with a statistically significant positive coefficient (β = .229, p = .001). However, its bivariate correlation with customer satisfaction was negligible and negative (r = −.023, ns). The positive coefficient emerges only when the other nine predictors are held constant, which indicates a suppression effect rather than a robust direct association (MacKinnon et al., 2000). Flexibility/adaptability (β = −.249, p = .001) and being a team player (β = −.293, p < .001) had statistically significant negative coefficients, consistent with their bivariate correlations (r = −.333 and −.330), the strongest in the matrix. The other seven predictors did not reach the .05 significance threshold.

4.5 Hypothesis assessment

Table 5. *Hypothesis assessment*

Hypothesis	Decision	Reason
H1 Positive attitude	Not supported	Positive but not statistically significant (p = .136).
H2 Strong work ethic	Not supported	Negative and not statistically significant (p = .202).
H3 Time management ability	Not supported	Not statistically significant (p = .823).
H4 Communication	Not supported	Positive but not statistically significant (p = .121).
H5 Ability to work	Supported	Positive and statistically significant (β = .229, p = .001).
H6 Self-confidence	Not supported	Negative and not statistically

JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE STUDIES
An International Peer-Reviewed Open Access Journal
ISSN (Online): 3006-2071 | ISSN (Print): 3006-2063
Volume 4 • Issue 7 • November 2026

		significant (p = .215).
H7 Flexibility/adaptability	Not supported	Statistically significant, but coefficient is negative (β = −.249, p = .001).
H8 Being a team player	Not supported	Statistically significant, but coefficient is negative (β = −.293, p < .001).
H9 Learning from criticism	Not supported	Not statistically significant (p = .604).
H10 Ability to accept	Not supported	Not statistically significant (p = .273).

5. Discussion

The results provide a mixed pattern of support for the proposition that the ten soft-skill dimensions are positively associated with customer satisfaction. The overall regression model is statistically significant and explains 21.8% of the variance in customer satisfaction. Ability to work has a positive and statistically significant coefficient, flexibility/adaptability and being a team player have significant negative coefficients, and the remaining dimensions are not statistically significant when entered jointly.

5.1 Ability to work and core service delivery

The positive coefficient for ability to work highlights the importance of dependable core service delivery. In the questionnaire, this dimension is represented by room cleanliness, necessary amenities and front-office staff efficiency, which are essential aspects of the guest experience. The effect emerges once the other dimensions are controlled, indicating that the distinctive contribution of reliable, efficient work is positively related to satisfaction (MacKinnon et al., 2000). This finding is consistent with the SERVQUAL emphasis on reliability and responsiveness (Parasuraman et al., 1988) and with prior work linking hotel service quality to customer outcomes (Choi & Chu, 2001; Noor & Ali, 2018).

5.2 Interpreting the negative coefficients

The negative coefficients for flexibility/adaptability and being a team player are counter to the hypothesised direction. They should not be read as evidence that hotels should discourage adaptability or teamwork. In this study, flexibility/adaptability was assessed mainly through business-centre services, including staff responsiveness, computer and internet facilities and mail/fax/delivery support, while being a team player was assessed through swimming-pool and gym services. These are specialised facilities used by a subset of guests, and guests who use them may hold higher expectations or encounter more variable service, which could lower their overall satisfaction. All VIFs were below 2.3, indicating that the results are not driven by multicollinearity.

5.3 Theoretical implications

The study extends research on employee soft skills to the guest perspective in an under-researched hotel market. SERVQUAL offers a useful framework for understanding how employee responsiveness, assurance and empathy shape service evaluations (Parasuraman et al., 1988). The results suggest that guests' satisfaction is most closely tied to reliable core service delivery, and that skills expressed through specialised facilities may relate to satisfaction differently from skills expressed in core front-office and room services. Future studies could test whether employee capabilities influence satisfaction directly or through perceived service quality.

5.4 Managerial implications

For hotel managers, the results support continued attention to core operational delivery, particularly room cleanliness, the availability of promised amenities and efficient

ISSN (Online): 3006-2071 | ISSN (Print): 3006-2063
Volume 4 • Issue 7 • November 2026

front-office service, which are widely recognised contributors to guest satisfaction (Choi & Chu, 2001). Managers should also collect guest feedback on observable employee behaviours such as clear communication, courtesy, prompt responses, respectful problem handling and individualised attention, and build training programmes around these behaviours. The negative coefficients for the business-centre and gym/pool dimensions suggest that managers should review service standards in these specialised areas, rather than reduce teamwork or adaptability training.

5.5 Limitations and future research

This study has limitations that suggest directions for future research. First, the cross-sectional design does not establish causality. Second, the sample is limited to 300 hotel guests in Lahore, which may limit generalisability to other cities. Third, soft skills were measured through guests' ratings of service experiences rather than through direct assessment of employees. Finally, because the same respondents rated service experiences and satisfaction, common-method variance cannot be ruled out (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

Future research could develop multi-item scales that measure employee soft skills, perceived service quality, tangible facilities and customer satisfaction separately, and could complement guest ratings with employee or supervisor assessments. Larger multi-hotel samples across Pakistani cities would improve generalisability, and confirmatory factor analysis and longitudinal or multi-source designs could clarify the pathways linking employee capabilities, service quality, satisfaction and loyalty.

6. Conclusion

This study examined ten soft-skill dimensions and customer satisfaction among 300 hotel guests in Lahore. The regression model was statistically significant and explained 21.8% of the variance in customer satisfaction. Ability to work had a significant positive coefficient, whereas flexibility/adaptability and being a team player had significant negative coefficients.

The findings highlight the importance of dependable core service delivery, including clean rooms, necessary amenities and efficient front-office staff, for guest satisfaction in Lahore hotels. They also indicate that services delivered through specialised facilities such as business centres, gyms and pools deserve management attention. Hotels can use these insights to prioritise training and service standards, and future research can build on them with broader samples and refined measures.

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Volume 4 • Issue 7 • November 2026

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