Gender Bias in the Hospitality Sector: Female and Male Jobs

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Abstract: The hospitality sector is still very traditional and male-dominated in terms of values, it is segregating and discriminatory according to gender, not only horizontally but also vertically, the wage differences between men and women are critical, and many of the jobs are stigmatized. Indeed, despite women representing most of the workforce in hospitality, such numerical dominance is not reflected in the leadership positions they occupy. Traditionally, men and women occupy different roles in the hospitality industry: women are more often assigned functions that are in line with their social roles and that represents an extension of their domestic tasks so that it is easier to find women in-room service or cleaning. Men, on the other hand, are more easily assigned physically demanding tasks, administrative and management functions, which require more skills and are therefore better paid. This study aims to examine the female and male social representation associated with the performance of certain roles in the hospitality sector, as perceived by tourism and hospitality students, to explore gender representations associated with different hierarchical positions and departments, and to understand some of the (in)equalities that continue to persist between men and women in hospitality. A quantitative cross-sectional study was performed to achieve the study goals. Our sample consists of 200 higher education students in tourism and hospitality. Based on Bem Sex Role Inventory short-form traits questionnaire, we applied an online questionnaire with the purpose of knowing the students' gender representations of different professional activities in the hospitality industry. Within our results, we expect to describe the gender bias of the professional functions in the hospitality sector. On the other hand, we expect to understand possible gender differences between operational and leadership positions, and from different departments. The findings of this study will help the hotels to analyse their gender practices and policies. By giving voice to the stereotypes that foster gender inequalities in the hospitality sector, hotels can become aware of their gendered practices and policies that impact the recruitment process and the various roles and functions that are assigned to men and women.

Keywords: Gender bias, Gender stereotypes, Hospitality

1. Introduction

According to Risman (2004), gender can be defined as a social structure, insofar as it is at the basis of the stratification of individuals' personalities, cultural and institutional rules. In this sense, the idea of structure emerges as a form of constraint based on the idea of gender, with implications at various levels. A first level, the individual, is based on the idea of the development of the gendered self, as a man and a woman, with a consequent impact on the development of personality, masculinity or femininity, definition of behaviours, values, and preferences. A second level, interpersonal in nature, highlights the idea that personal conceptions of gender and gender roles are reinforced in interaction with others, so that men and women, when interacting, are expected to behave according to their gender roles. Finally, a third level, the institutional one, advocates that the various structures, whether social, cultural, or organizational, reproduce gender differences: opportunities, regulations, division of labour and hierarchies are some of the gender-dependent aspects. Thus, the idea of social structure is assumed as a set of constraints, because not only are men and women somehow coerced to accept and perform different social roles according to gender, but consequently, they choose professional paths clearly oriented according to gender (Risman, 2004).

The study of the relationship between gender and tourism began around the 1980s, with further growth beginning in the 1990s, notably with the publication of the Annals of Tourism Research in 1995 (Figueroa-Domecq *et al.*, 2015). Although research on gender in tourism is still very marginal, several authors attest to the relevance of research in this area as a way of contributing to giving voice to the stereotypes that favour gender inequalities (Figueroa-Domecq *et al.*, 2015; Small, Harris & Wilson, 2017).

In this regard, the goals of our study are to examine the female and male stereotypes associated with the performance of certain roles in the hospitality industry, as perceived by tourism and hospitality students, to understand some of the inequalities that continue to persist between men and women in the organizational context.

2. Literature Review

Assuming gender as a social structure (Risman, 2004) we can consider that society sets expectations about what is desirable and acceptable for men and women. Women are traditionally seen as being more nurturing, caring, and gentle, while men are attributed traits such as being active, competitive, able to handle tools and machines (Acker, 2012). Women are still perceived as being less aggressive, ambitious, dominant, and independent than men (Rudman *et al.*, 2012).

The hotel industry, like any other sphere of human activity, ends up reflecting in its practices these social patterns, norms and constraints that translate into gender inequalities and stereotypical processes based on the dichotomy between men and women. Research shows that women represent most of the workforce in hospitality, however, such numerical dominance is not reflected in the leadership positions they occupy (Pritchard & Morgan, 2017).

In fact, the hospitality industry is still very traditional and clearly male-dominated in terms of values, it is segregating and discriminatory according to gender, not only horizontally but also vertically, the wage differences between men and women are critical, and many of the jobs are stigmatized (Segovia-Pérez *et al.*, 2018; Morgan & Pritchard, 2019).

Traditionally, and from a horizontal career perspective, men and women occupy different roles in the hospitality industry. Women are usually assigned jobs that require fewer skills, are considered less impactful from an economic point of view and, consequently, are paid less (Guimarães & Silva, 2016). Thus, they are more often assigned functions that are in line with their social roles and that function as an extension of their domestic tasks, so that it is easier to find women in room service or cleaning (Lucena *et al*, 2021). The research also shows that there is a perception that roles involving interaction and welcoming the client, such as the receptionist role, are performed more efficiently by women than by men, reinforcing their ability as caregivers (Mathies & Burford, 2011; Basnyat *et al*, 2021). Associated with female "natural characteristics", the women are also seen as more skilled at perceiving potential conflicts or negative situations with clients, showing greater ease and patience in resolving them and the ability to calm any changes in the client's mood (Basnyat *et al*, 2021). Men, on the other hand, are more easily assigned physically demanding tasks (Mathies and Burford, 2011), administrative and management functions, which require more skills and are therefore better paid (Guimarães & Silva, 2016). These are roles that enhance the stereotype of being more functional and results oriented (Mathies & Burford, 2011). The relevance of beauty and physical appearance, especially as far as women are concerned, is another example of the gendered roles in the hospitality industry and eventually the objectification of women. Studies show that female employees who are considered beautiful are placed in more prominent locations, near the doors, at reception, or in places where they can easily welcome guests (Basnyat et al., 2021).

Some studies have shown that many of the constraints women face are kind of self-imposed: research highlights that negative self-concept and beliefs about their own abilities, resulting from internalizing their gender roles as women in the family, limit their career progression, and their talent ends up being neglected (Segovia-Pérez *et al.*, 2018; Chen *et al.*, 2021). In fact, women are expected to behave like women, and traditionally, women's behaviour and roles are not what one expects to see in a leader. Studies suggest that unconscious gender bias kind of drowns out women's voices favouring male dominance in leadership roles (Pritchard and Morgan, 2017). Women are typically perceived as being more emotional and sensitive, attributes that are commonly perceived as negative in the work context and when performing leadership roles (Brescoll, 2016).

Research conducted with Portuguese students, future managers, about the social stereotypes of the female and male manager showed that the characteristics typically attributed to the male stereotype, and excluded from the female stereotype, include assertiveness, flexibility, success, commitment, and power. On the other hand, to the female stereotype, students attributed traits such as the ability to motivate others, ability to relate to others, and devotion to the profession. The research also showed that the reference of the stereotyped role of the male manager is predominant and that women, when they do not fit into their social stereotype, are perceived as masculine: this masculinization of the social image of the female manager is understood as a way to justify the presence of women in contexts that do not agree with their gender stereotype (Fernandes & Cabral-Cardoso, 2006).

Costa *et al.*, (2017) report that, although recruiters in the hospitality industry deny that recruitment processes are gender-oriented, the truth is that the authors highlight the presence of a predominantly male discourse

when talking about the "ideal worker" in hospitality. In fact, the description of the woman as the ideal worker is based on a set of typically feminine characteristics, such as sensitivity, greater attention to detail, more understanding and more responsible. However, and even though women are supposed to show all these characteristics, they are at a disadvantage when compared to men, because of their lack of flexibility. A nationwide survey conducted in Portugal between 2013 and 2014 in the tourism sector showed a high predominance of women as part of the workforce, with 42% of respondents considering that they have more women than men in their organizations (Costa *et al.*, 2015). Despite the feminization of the tourism sector in Portugal, the research also shows a superiority of men in management and leadership positions: 60.8% male managers and only 39.2% female managers (Costa *et al.*, 2017). This under-representation of women in managerial positions flares up when we refer to technological companies in the hospitality sector, a clearly male context: research shows a direct relationship between the technological level of the company and the low representation of women in management positions (Figueroa-Domecq *et al.*, 2020).

The idea of "gender invisibility", seems to be quite evident, in that such inequalities between men and women are seen, by hotel industry managers, as a "non-issue", boiling the issue down to the idea of the flexibility that women need so that they can take on caregiving roles, thus contributing to their work-family balance, while at the same time assuming a role that society expects them to play (Costa *et al.*, 2015). In fact, there are studies that end up reflecting these gender practices in the recruitment process in tourism, in which the ideal worker, considering the specificities of the hospitality field, is defined as being available and flexible to work shifts, out of hours and to be absent from home for several days for work reasons. In general, women are less flexible in that it is assumed that they "choose" to prioritize family over work. The perception that women "have a choice" meets what society expects of them in terms of their social role (Costa *et al.*, 2017).

The research also suggests that women who have been successful and are in leadership positions have encountered major challenges in terms of traditional gender roles, not only in their personal lives but also at work, particularly in the hospitality industry, a traditional sector strongly influenced by a masculine discourse that favours stigmatized jobs (Segovia-Pérez *et al.*, 2018). Rudman *et al.*, (2012) suggest that women who attain leadership positions end up being seen as dominant, being penalized for not being "nice enough" and failing to do what would be expected as women.

3. Method

This study uses a quantitative approach with cross-sectional and descriptive nature to achieve the main objective to know the female and male social representation associated with the performance of certain roles in the hospitality sector, as perceived by tourism and hospitality students.

To achieve this objective we used the Bem Sex Role Inventory Short Form Traits (Bem, 1974). This questionnaire presents a list of personality traits associated with Masculine personality traits (n=10) and Feminine Personality Traits (n=10). To conduct the inventory, we had translated it to Portuguese and then another person has translated to English to ensure adequacy of the terms used. We used the Portuguese adapted version. the In our questionnaire, we presented four professions: head of reception, receptionist, housekeeper, and floor maid, and asked the participants to associate the professions with the required personality traits.

Our population was students from hospitality, restaurant, and tourism courses from a Portuguese Higher Education institution. We had a convenience sample with 200 participants, 67% (n=134) were female and 33% (n=66) were male, with a mean age of 21,45 years old (SD=5,27). Regarding their courses, 47% (n=94) were hospitality students, 42% (n=84) were tourism students, and 11% (n=22) were restaurant students. Most of the students were first-year students (52%, n=104), 25% (n=50) were second-year students, and 22% (n=44) were third-year students. Our sample had a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error (Saunders et al., 2009).

For statistical analysis we used IBM SPSS version 28.0. Descriptive statistics were calculated to all variables. In order to achieve the gender perception of each function, we calculated the mean of masculine personality traits and the mean for the feminine personality traits for each function. All ethical procedures were considered.

4. Results

The objective of our study was to know the female and male social representation associated with the performance of certain roles in the hospitality sector. Therefore, for each function – head of reception, receptionist, housekeeper, and floor maid, the participants had to identify the personality traits associated

with the specific function. In table 1 we can observe the results associated with masculine personality traits and table 2 shows the results for feminine personality traits. Most participants associated the function head of reception with the following personality traits: defending own beliefs, dominant, assertive, leadership ability, independent, strong personality, willing to take a stand and to take risks, sympathetic, compassionate, gentle, understanding, and sensitive to the needs of others.

Table 1: Frequency of the Masculine Personality Traits for the Functions Head of Reception, Receptionist, Housekeeper, and Floor Maid

Masculine Personality Traits	Head of reception		Receptionist		Housekeeper		Floor maid	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Forceful	86	43	135	67,5	103	51,5	138	69
Aggressive	26	13	11	5,5	19	9,5	9	4,5
Defends own beliefs	143	71,5	90	45	106	53	60	30
Dominant	117	58,5	32	16	92	46	20	10
Assertive	166	84	122	66	136	68	92	46
Leadership ability	174	87	30	15	135	67,5	19	9,5
Independent	126	63	99	49,5	114	57	83	41,5
Strong Personality	135	67,5	66	33	116	58	44	22
Willing to take a stand	163	81,5	65	32,5	133	66,5	43	21,5
Willing to take risks	134	67	80	40	96	48	61	30,5

The function receptionist is associated with being forceful, assertive, affectionate, sympathetic, compassionate, gentle, sensitive to the needs of others, understanding, warm, and loves children.

Most of the participants associate the function housekeeper with the following traits: being forceful, defends own beliefs, assertive, having leadership ability, being independent, strong personality, being willing to take stand, willing to take risks, being sympathetic, gentle, sensitive to the needs of others, and understanding.

Table 2: Frequency of the Feminine Personality Traits for the Functions Head of Reception, Receptionist, Housekeeper, and Floor Maid

Feminine Personality Traits	Head of reception		Receptionist		Housekeeper		Floor maid	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Affectionate	88	44	136	68	67	33,5	76	38
Sympathetic	139	69,5	178	89	120	60	132	66
Tender	51	25,5	51	25,5	45	22,5	37	18,5
Compassionate	107	53,5	106	53	96	48	78	39
Eager to soothe hurt feelings	92	46	86	43	74	37	44	22
Loves children	63	21,5	116	58	70	35	78	39
Gentle	130	65	163	81,5	125	62,5	133	66,5
Sensitive to the needs of others	133	66,5	135	67,5	122	62	110	55
Understanding	155	77,5	152	76	129	64,5	115	57,5
Warm	96	48	134	67	75	37,5	71	35,5

The floor maid was associated for most of the participants with the personality traits: being forceful, sympathetic, gentle, sensitive to the needs of others, and understanding.

To understand the gender role associated with each function we calculated the mean of the personality traits associated with each function. Therefore, the head of reception was associated, in mean, with six masculine personality traits and five feminine personality traits. The receptionist function was associated, in mean, with three masculine personality traits and 6 feminine personality traits. The housekeeper was associated, in mean, with five masculine personality traits and five feminine personality traits. The floor maid function was associated, in mean, with two masculine personality traits and 4 feminine personality traits.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The results obtained reflect a sexually oriented view in terms of the vertical hierarchy, assigning male personality traits to higher hierarchical positions, such as head of reception, and female personality traits to lower hierarchical positions, such as receptionist or floor maid. These results are corroborated by Segovia-Pérez *et al.*, (2018) who state that the hospitality sector is still very traditional, based on masculine values and, consequently, on a stigmatized and stereotyped view of jobs. Thus, the results suggest that women are more easily assigned lower roles from a hierarchical point of view, thus, less well paid, and less demanding from a skills point of view, as we found in the literature (Guimarães and Silva, 2016; Morgan and Pritchard, 2019).

In our study, female and male characteristics were also attributed to the role of housekeeper. If, on the one hand, the results suggest that this is a position whose responsibilities involve being affectionate, compassionate, gentle, sensitive to the needs of others, and understanding, which are typically feminine characteristics, on the other hand, it is also a leadership position. Thus, characteristics typically associated with the male personality, such as forceful, leadership ability, defends his own beliefs, independent, strong personality, and willing to take a stand, seem equally relevant. In this way, the results may go along with the idea that hospitality is indeed a sector where male culture prevails and according to which men and women should behave according to the expectations of the gender roles associated with each in relationships with others. (Segovia-Pérez *et al.*, 2018).

The results obtained also suggest that female characteristics are more easily attributed to the receptionist and floor maid roles, such as being friendly, kind, sensitive to the needs of others, and understanding, characteristics easily attributed to women, as shown by Mathies and Burford (2011). The results obtained are in line with the literature, according to which women are expected to behave as women, which means taking on the roles of caregiver (Segovia-Pérez *et al.*, 2018; Basnyat *et al*, 2021) and performing roles more related to housework (Lucena et ali, 2021).

On the contrary, the results also suggest that leadership roles, such as head of reception, were more associated with masculine characteristics, such as standing up for one's beliefs, dominant, leadership ability, independent, strong personality, willing to take a stand and take risks, an idea that is corroborated by the literature, according to which employees in leadership positions are expected to assume a posture of confidence, power, aggressiveness, goal orientation, qualities that are not normally considered feminine (Segovia-Pérez *et al.*, 2018).

Our study has some limitations that should be analysed. Regarding our sample, it was a student convenience sample, in one way it is not possible to generalize our results in other perspectives, most of our students do not have professional experience, therefore their gender opinion might be influenced by social stereotypes. For further studies, it would be interesting to assess the perspective of hotels employees namely from different departments, and different sociodemographic characteristics such as gender, age, and qualifications. Additionally, we only assessed the perspective for four functions. It is important to consider other departments and several hierarquical functions.

The results of this study point to an interesting and equally worrying conclusion: the presence of a sexually biased view by university students of tourism, hospitality, and restaurant management. The existence of a gender discourse, even if unconscious, can have considerable implications on the career perspectives of male and female students, reinforcing the typical gender roles based on social expectations and stereotypes and, consequently, limiting especially women in the perception of their roles and access to leadership positions. Thus, it is important to reflect on the role of universities in promoting an egalitarian gender discourse and promoting career perspectives based on gender diversity and equality.

On the other hand, the hospitality industry in general should also promote a more transparent view of gender, not only in terms of recruitment practices, but also in terms of career management, helping its employees to develop non-gendered perceptions of their roles based on equal opportunities. Additionally, in a macro perspective it is important to understand what are the organisations policies in this field, this is, how hotels policies and practices promote gender diversity and equality and what their employees think and feel about what is being implemented and announced in these organisations.

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