

What Can Educators Do to Better Prepare Women for Leadership Positions in the Hospitality Industry? The Perspectives of Women Executives in Hong Kong

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Abstract

This study aims to identify areas of training that universities could include in their undergraduate programs to better equip female graduates to pursue their leadership aspirations. Hong Kong is the research setting. In-depth interviews were conducted with 24 female executives in the hospitality and tourism industry. The soft skills shown to best prepare women to assume managerial positions included social and professional communication, non-verbal communication, confidence building, and leadership. The research indicated the prominence of soft skills over hard skills in today's workplace. It yielded the novel finding that non-verbal communication and confidence building are important competencies for female graduates seeking leadership positions.

Keywords: soft skills, competency, female students, leadership education, leadership aspirations.

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Introduction

Since 2012, women have represented more than 70% of the undergraduate students enrolled each year in a hotel and tourism management school in Hong Kong, hinting that possibly more women than men in Hong Kong begin their careers in the hospitality and tourism industry. However, the proportion of women in managerial positions and above does not reflect this percentage. In 2015, according to the latest statistics from the Census and Statistics Department (2016), 283,900 people in Hong Kong worked in the hospitality industry (predominantly in the accommodation and food services sector), of whom 52% were women. However, of the 58,300 managers and administrators in the service industry (retail, accommodation, and food services) in the same year, only 39% were women. Although this disparity is longstanding, it appears to be decreasing. Indeed, in 2010, 12,500 women (34%) versus 24,800 men held managerial positions or above in the service industry. This represents a significant increase since 1993, when the percentage of women in this category was 16% (Census and Statistics Department, 2016). Hong Kong is not unique in this regard. Global evidence has been obtained that women represent a relatively small percentage of top hospitality executives (Walsh, Fleming, & Enz, 2014; Zhong, Couch, & Blum, 2013). Researchers have tended to emphasize the importance of institutional barriers to women's access to executive positions, especially in Western countries (Oakley, 2000, Walsh, Fleming, & Enz, 2014).

*** Insert Figure 1 about here ***

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to identify areas of training that universities should include in their programs, particularly at an undergraduate level, to better equip female graduates to pursue their leadership aspirations. The following sections review the literature on factors that affect women's advancement, followed by research on hard skills and soft skills. The first section includes general research on women advancement as well as hospitality and tourism management studies on women leadership. Hard skills are soft skills required and expected in hospitality education is discussed in the second section. These sections come together to make the case for the purpose of the study.

Factors Affecting Women's Advancement

In a widely cited study, Oakley (2000) identified corporate practices and behavioral and cultural factors as two categories of causation underlying theories concerning the lack of women in executive positions. Corporate practices included training and career development, promotion, and compensation policies. Relevant behavioral and cultural factors included behavioral double binds, gender and communication styles, gender-based stereotypes, and preferred leadership styles. Oakley (2000) highlighted gender-based stereotyping and "old boy" networks as particularly strong social forces. The concept of a "glass ceiling" has also received extensive attention as a barrier to women's advancement in the hospitality industry (Knutson & Schmidgall, 1999; Myerson & Fletcher, 2000; Weber, 1999). However, Boone, Veller, Nikolaeva, Keith, Kefgen, and Houran (2013) questioned the presence of a glass ceiling in today's hospitality industry, stating that both male and female executives regard self-imposed barriers rather than workplace barriers as the most important obstacle to women's advancement. The most common self-imposed barriers identified in their study were family and household responsibilities and work-life balance. Insufficient mentoring, a lack of careful career planning,

stereotyping, and perceptions of feminine traits were listed as major workplace barriers (Boone et al., 2013).

Walsh, Fleming, and Enz (2014) interviewed 20 top female executives in the U.S. hospitality industry to understand how these executives use their power and gain a platform for affecting change in their professional lives. Three enablers of career advancement that emerged from their study were taking thoughtful risks and setting non-linear assignments, networking, and finding sponsors. Based on their findings, Walsh et al. (2014) advised hospitality companies to make a substantial long-term commitment to developing and promoting female professionals.

Ng and Pine (2003) investigated the perceptions of gender and career development issues held by female and male managers in the hotel industry in Hong Kong, and compared their results with findings obtained in the U.S. They found that female hotel managers in both Hong Kong and the U.S. are aware of the barriers women face in the industry. Interestingly, the study also revealed that female managers in Hong Kong tend to regard marriage and family decisions as personal matters of no concern to their companies, although some also believed that “it would be good for family-friendly policies to be provided by employers” (Ng and Pine, 2003, p. 98). Ng and Pine (2003) concluded that female managers in Hong Kong tend to hold themselves responsible for their career success or failure to a greater extent than their US counterparts. The authors voiced their concerns about female leadership in Hong Kong as follows: “it is mildly worrying that female hotel managers, who are role models for younger women, seem to have a low awareness of women’s issues and prefer male supervisors. They generally believe that women can overcome obstacles and succeed if they are willing to work harder than men. In other words, it is a woman’s inability to compete and persevere—rather than institutional factors—that prevents her career from progressing as smoothly as that of a man. The danger associated with

this mentality is that female managers might not be taking enough initiative to change human resource management policies to help more women to break the glass ceiling and succeed in the industry. Instead, they may be perpetuating male dominance by questioning little and subscribing fully to the current norms of management and leadership practices” (Ng & Pine, 2003, p. 99).

Hard Skills and Soft Skills

Hard skills are competencies related to technical or cognitive knowledge, whereas soft skills are interpersonal competencies (Ling, Ofori, & Low, 2000; Mitchell, Skinner, & White, 2010). Hard skills are typically taught through training and education. Soft skills are linked with the attitudes and emotions manifested, communication, teamwork, and problem solving.

According to Robles (2012), soft skills are a combination of interpersonal (people) and personal (career) skills.

Between 1994 and 2013, numerous studies of hospitality education explored these skill categories. Earlier studies focused on communication, information technology, and general management knowledge (Brownell, 1994; Tas, LaBrecque, & Clayton, 1996; Su, Miller, & Shanklin, 1997; Cho & Connolly, 1999; Chung-Herrera, Enz, & Lankau, 2003; Kay & Moncarz, 2004; Weber, 1999) from the perspective of industry executives, primarily in the hotel industry and the food and beverage industry. For instance, Gursoy and Swanger (2004; 2005) identified 15 of the most important areas determining success in the hospitality industry, and recommended including training in leadership, communication, customer service, work habits, ethics, team building, dispute resolution, and goal-setting skills in hospitality management programs. To identify changes in the industry between 2004 and 2009, Gursoy, Rahman, and Swanger (2012)

conducted another survey in 2009, in which the highest ranked soft skill was leadership. Tesone and Ricci (2005; 2006) argued that the most important competencies at entry level are teamwork, effective listening, verbal and written communication skills, the ability to project a professional image, knowledge of standards for grooming and for one's professional image, and the ability to empathize with customers. Raybould and Wilkins (2006) listed problem solving, interpersonal skills, and self-management as the most important competencies. As previously mentioned, all of these studies identified competencies from the perspective of industry professionals. In contrast, Whitelaw, Barron, Buultjens, Cairncross, and Davidson (2009) compared the views of educators and industry professionals on the skills needed to succeed in the hospitality industry in Australia. They reported divergent perspectives: educators emphasize critical thinking and strategic management, whereas industry professionals favor interpersonal and supervisory skills.

In a more recent study, Sisson and Adams (2013) examined the perspectives of managers in the accommodation sector, the food and beverage sector, and the meeting and event management sector with respect to essential competencies in the hospitality industry. They found that soft skills account for approximately 90% of the essential competencies identified. The soft skills addressed in their study are as follows: coaching and developing staff, cultivating a diverse environment, customer service problem solving, delegating tasks effectively, developing positive customer relations, facilitating the construction of teams and teamwork, leadership skills, managing personal stress, managing staff meetings, negotiation techniques, presentation skills, professional demeanor and appearance, supervising subordinates, ethical decision making, working effectively with peers, and written communication skills. In short, Sisson and Adam (2013) highlighted the importance of a shift from hard skills to soft skills in training and

development in the hospitality industry. Zhong et al. (2013) also emphasized the contribution of hospitality education to the career advancement of women in the industry. Focusing on developing women for leadership positions and the role of education in reducing career advancement barriers for women, they identified leadership skills, mentoring, and role models as important factors preparing women for leadership positions. To overcome obstacles to women's career progression, they recommended educating women about the barriers they face and teaching them to value their abilities. However, as their study was conducted in 2006, the data analyzed are not up to date. The current study builds on more recent studies of female students and soft skills. It examines ways in which hospitality and tourism educators can better prepare women to assume leadership positions in the hospitality industry. It is important to note that Sisson and Adam (2013) and Zhong et al. (2013) examined the perspectives of recent graduates and current students, respectively.

Methodology

Adopting a qualitative approach, this study examines the perspectives of female executives in the hospitality industry in Hong Kong to find ways of better preparing female students to assume leadership positions in the hospitality industry. To collect in-depth insights, participants were selected by convenience sampling. The industry contact database constructed by a hotel and tourism management school in Hong Kong was used to select and contact 37 female executives working in the hospitality industry in Hong Kong. Of the 37 women contacted, 24 agreed to participate in the project.

Interviews were conducted as part of a larger study investigating the career paths of female executives by examining their personal perceptions of their lived experiences. Career-

related and background questions were included. In addition, to better understand how to prepare graduating students to take similar career paths toward leadership in the industry, the following questions were asked.

- What skills should tertiary education institutions teach to better prepare women to assume managerial positions in the tourism and hospitality industry?
- What are the skills you wish you had during your education?

In-depth interviews were conducted between March and July 2016. Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. NVivo was used to manage the data during the analysis and coding of the transcripts of the 24 in-depth interviews. The data analyzed comprised 16 single-spaced pages of coding summarized by node (produced by NVivo). For reference, original transcripts for 24 interviews are 392 pages.

Content analysis was used to examine the participants' responses. The goal was to obtain a condensed and complete representation of the participants' opinions in the form of a set of categories of specific skills, actions, or activities identified and recommended by the participants (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). Ultimately, these categories helped the researchers to extrapolate guidelines for action that were as practical as possible. The responses to the interviewees' questions were analyzed separately to enable comparison of the skills recommended by the participants with those they wished that they had acquired earlier (Bengtsson, 2016). This comparison had two main objectives: first, to check the consistency of the participants' assessment of their own skills in relation to their professional development, and second, to examine potential reasoned differences between the participants' own experiences and their assessment of current industry needs.

The first step in content analysis is to choose the unit of analysis, understood as “the smallest unit that contains some of the insights the researcher needs” (Bengtsson, 2016, p. 11), such as a word, a group of words, or a paragraph. Given the explicit nature of the questions and the practical outcome sought, the researchers conducted inductive coding of manifest content. Manifest content analysis is generally favored over latent analysis. Researchers conducting latent analysis aim to identify hidden meanings in participants’ speech, which was not the objective of our analysis. In contrast, researchers conducting manifest content analysis seek to broadly represent what participants say. Therefore, when presenting findings, the researchers use the participants’ actual words, often referring to the text of interview transcripts and adhering to it closely (Bengtsson, 2016). As the data coding was inductive, data categories were derived from the text, moving from the specific to the general. Unlike inductive coding, deductive coding usually tests the applicability of a previously established conceptual system to the current context by applying pre-existing categories to the data, thus moving from the general to the specific (Elo and Kyngäs, 2008; Bengtsson, 2016). In this study, the chosen units of analysis were words or groups of words identifying the skills proposed by the participants in their answers to the interview questions. To provide context, the findings are presented here with a description of what the participants meant by each skill and their reasons for suggesting it.

The data analysis was carried out in multiple phases of data coding and categorization. The first phase, data coding, also known as “open coding,” involved identifying the units of analysis in the text and labeling each with a code, generally using the participants’ exact words (Bengtsson, 2016, p. 11). Following this phase, categories were generated freely, grouping together similar codes. This second phase marked the beginning of the data reduction and category broadening process. These early categories of similarly coded content were

progressively categorized into broader, higher-order categories based on similarities and differences. Each category was then labeled using words characteristic of the content it identified. This process progressively reduced the number of categories by organizing the content into broader categories that described the data (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). In this process, a coding and categorization list was developed. It was vital to ensure that all content relevant to the research questions was coded and categorized and that the categories obtained represented all aspects of the content (Bengtsson, 2016; Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). The coding process resulted in a few main categories, described by subcategories condensing and representing the meaning of the coded content (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). The subsequent analysis relied on the codes and the categories generated to identify patterns and actionable insights (Bengtsson, 2016). Table 1 presents an example of a coding and categorization outcome for each category.

*** Insert Table 1 about here ***

The trustworthiness of a study using qualitative research methods depends on three criteria: researcher's subjectivity, which is concerned with the unavoidable influence of the researcher(s) on the data analysis and interpretation; confirmability, which addresses the risk of meaning distortion; and repeatability, the transferability of the results and the repeatability of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Denzin, 2003; Silverman, 1993; Bengtsson, 2016). This research was carefully planned to best meet these criteria, and the procedures implemented are explained below and summarized in Table 2.

*** Insert Table 2 about here ***

To determine the confirmability of findings and mitigate the potential effects of researchers' subjectivity, the following procedures were used. The participants were given

verbatim transcripts of their interviews and invited to check their accuracy. The researchers contacted the participants when necessary to clarify any unclear statements that emerged during the data analysis. The data were coded by one of the researchers, who was also the main interviewer. This researcher kept personal notes on each interview to underline personal attitudes, likes and dislikes, and elements that surprised and challenged the researcher's assumptions (Bengtsson, 2016). The principal investigator of the research project listened to the interview recordings. To continuously check the rationality of the data coding and categorization, categories were discussed as they emerged in regular meetings between the researcher analyzing the data and the principal researcher, who was familiar with the recorded interviews (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Bengtsson, 2016). When the researchers' interpretations of the coded content differed, they were discussed until an agreement was reached (Bengtsson, 2016). Finally, the findings were checked against the literature to confirm their plausibility.

The transferability of a study has two dimensions: the transferability of results in a similar context and the repeatability of the study under similar conditions. The first criterion was addressed by providing detailed information on the context of the study with respect to the participants' privacy (Krefting, 1990; Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). The second criterion was fulfilled by reporting all of the choices made and processes carried out during the research, including the recruitment of participants, the methods and tools used to gather data, and the data analysis procedures (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Krefting, 1990).

Findings

Participants

The participants in this study were 24 female executives with senior positions in hospitality and tourism firms. Table 3 displays the background of the participants. Sixteen participants came from the hotel industry; entrepreneurs/consultants, and the travel industry were each represented by two participants; and one participant came from each of the club, theme park, the conventions and events sector, and food and beverage sectors. Their areas of expertise included human resources, revenue management, public relations, strategy and business development, convention and event management, financial management, room management, and sales and marketing.

*** Insert Table 3 about here ***

Ten of the participants were between 40 and 49 years old, nine were between 50 and 59 years old, four were aged 30 to 39, and one was over 59 years old. We did not collect information about the number of years in the current position although age might be used as a proxy for their work experience. Fourteen of the participants had Master's degrees, six had Bachelor's degrees, two had higher diplomas, and two had senior high school diplomas. The most common degree majors were hospitality and tourism management (12) and business administration (8).

Soft Skills to Better Prepare Women

The participants were asked what universities could do from an educational viewpoint to better equip female graduates entering the workforce to pursue their leadership aspirations. Based on the participants' observations, the researchers were able to identify areas of education

both in need of improvement and with room for improvement. The participants were also asked about the educational training programs and opportunities they would have liked to receive during their education. All of the participants' recommendations focused on soft skills. Social communication and professional communication skills were most frequently cited followed by non-verbal communication, building confidence and leadership. The main findings of the study are listed in Table 3. The numbers in brackets indicate how many participants mentioned each of the subcategories.

*** Insert Table 3 about here ***

Social and professional communication. Nineteen of the interviewees highlighted social and professional communication skills, confirming that the hospitality industry is a people-based industry. They suggested offering courses to help students to learn, develop, and refine various social and communication skills. The participants clearly identified the weaknesses of young employees, providing detailed recommendations for the content of the courses suggested. In particular, two very specific content areas, negotiation skills and debate skills, were underlined. Five of the participants suggested that these skills are essential in a multitude of situations, transferable, and always learned too slowly on the job. Therefore, learning the basics of and gaining some practice in debate and negotiation in an educational environment before entering the workforce are advantageous for young graduates.

The response below summarizes most of the recommended skills.

Communication, I think that's important, not just about language but also about [...] non-verbal [communication], role play, how you connect with people, how you tell a story... Communication is all about how you write an elevator speech, for example. ... In college, in high school, you were told to write 3,000-word essays, [but] you wrote 10,000 words of whatever, right? Now you only have 30 seconds, you're sitting in front of the CEO and say, "Hey how's it going, what's happening?" and he doesn't have, like, 10 minutes to listen to you, he probably has one minute to focus on you, one minute or even less. What are you

going to say? What stories are you going to tell? What is the essence of your stories? So I think that communication is about “less is more,” and about how you tell a story in such a compelling manner that it’s touching and has an effect. (Interviewee 10, Regional Director of Talent Management-MSc in Hospitality Administration, 50-59 years old)

In addition, 11 participants identified the emotional intelligence (EQ) necessary to manage difficult guests and being a good leader as essential skills. The following quotation explains why these participants emphasized the importance of EQ.

Emotional intelligence is something that I think schools don’t really teach. This is all about EQ... I would say that probably 50% of the time when I have to reject a promotion suggestion, it’s because that person doesn’t have enough emotional intelligence. They can’t deal with pressure. They just falter under pressure. It may not seem like our job is [high] pressure, but it is. You have people in your face all the time, so if you don’t know how to deal with them and you don’t know how to manage other people’s emotions and turn them into [something] positive... (Interviewee 20, General Manager, Area Vice-President, Hong Kong & Thailand-High School Diploma-50-59 years old)

These participants suggested that universities seeking to prepare young people for professional careers in the hospitality industry should ensure that graduates have the ability to deal with a range of people, social environments, and problems, including difficult guests and difficult staff situations. In short, the participants defined EQ as the ability to connect and establish a functional communication channel with anybody in front of them. The participants also emphasized the importance of general professional communication skills, ranging from presentation skills to the ability to choose the most appropriate and effective communication style when communicating with superiors, peers, subordinates, clients, customers, or vendors.

I think [that] where many people fail [is] not being able to communicate down, sideways, and up. ... the scary part is that today’s younger generations are so used to shortening everything when they communicate electronically that maybe they find it a bit awkward having to communicate on a serious level. Their vocabulary may be a bit weak sometimes... and presentation skills. ... how do I convince someone, or how do I turn someone around, or how do I lead a meeting when someone interrupts me all the time and he has a higher position than me, how do I deal with that? So, leadership skills and communication... these inter-human [skills]... are becoming more and more important... (Interviewee 22, Vice President of Revenue Management- BSc in Hotel Management-40-49 years old).

The participants repeatedly affirmed the connection between communication skills and leadership and career progression. They considered these skills important for all young people entering the industry, not just newly graduated female students. However, some of the participants viewed EQ and the ability to communicate clearly as essential skills enabling women to handle situations in which they are the targets of inappropriate behavior. The following quotation offers an example.

It would be great if you could actually include—like, incorporate into the curriculum—some of these things for women. I think it would better prepare them to tackle the business world... [like] teaching them how to deal with an angry, white, burly Australian man who's yelling at you because he is discriminating against you. (Interviewee 11, Vice President of Hotel Development-BSc in Hotel Administration-30-39 years old)

Whether such behavior arises from profiling or relates to skills, ability, authority, or other factors, women need to determine how to best manage the situation and stand their ground while maintaining their professionalism. As the interviews showed, these types of incident are common, so young women need to be aware of them and ready to face them. Therefore, schools should include support for the development of such skills in their curriculums.

Non-verbal communication. When discussing communication skills, the participants also mentioned forms of non-verbal communication, such as grooming, etiquette, and confident self-presentation. Non-verbal communication is important in a number of areas. Again, the participants highlighted that grooming is especially important in the hospitality industry, as employees are expected to regularly deal with guests. Representing one's brand professionally and appropriately is one of the goals of self-presentation. Therefore, grooming is important in all spheres of the industry. The participants remarked on the importance of appearance and grooming, reporting that they took special care of their appearance to attract attention and

communicate authority. For instance, one participant explained that grooming is important to protect one's personal brand, as one's appearance can attract negative comments.

Grooming, I think it's important... I've heard some bad comments about women who wear a lot of jewelry, for example. I've heard very bad comments about women ... who dress a little flashily. Men can make very cruel comments on that behind their backs... So grooming, not in the sense of [presenting yourself as] a man but dressing in a neutral way, not too much make-up, short nails, very little jewelry, especially if it's fake... It's important for your brand! You are "you," the brand [is] "you"; it's important that you also come across as honest, and wearing fake jewelry, for example, doesn't contribute to honesty. (Interviewee 22, Vice President of Revenue Management- BSc in Hotel Management-40-49 years old).

Etiquette is another aspect of professionalism. The participants suggested that proper behavioral etiquette in many common business settings should be taught at university as part of training in social and communication skills. Examples included chairing and mediating meetings, business meal etiquette, and guest-service etiquette appropriate to the front office. One participant described the importance of etiquette as follows.

When it comes to Western dining, sometimes we are not accustomed to the same kind of fine dining. First, not all kids understand it when they enter the industry. They don't know... how to dress, how to sit, how to behave; burping is not polite, yawning is not polite... Shaking your legs is not polite. People have no idea.... as I said, how to address a person, how to open the door, how to let people walk in front of you, how to look after people's coats, things like that are part of the etiquette. Getting out of the car, entering the lift... I didn't have that kind of training. But I started to observe. I really appreciate when people offer this kind of gesture. Also, how you carry yourself during conversations, in a meeting, this type of social etiquette, business etiquette. I hope that this formal training that I didn't have and had to learn over time exists today. Looking back, I probably embarrassed myself without realizing it... (Interviewee 9, Managing Director-MSc in Management-50-59 years old)

Accordingly, the participants suggested that social and business etiquette should be taught at university. They argued that familiarity with business etiquette not only protects young professionals from embarrassing themselves, but also enables them to focus on conversations without worrying about looking out of place. This in turn improves their self-confidence. Indeed,

body language is a professional communication skill, and in the context of the hospitality industry, emphasis is placed on learning to convey confidence.

Building confidence. Eight of the participants stated that universities should support students' development of confidence, helping them to communicate self-confidence, to communicate confidence in their job, and to communicate non-verbally that they know what they are doing. The participants linked the concept of confidence with social and communication skills, but did not limit it to these skills. They also identified the dimensions of self-awareness and positive beliefs about oneself. The interviewees suggested that universities should help students to develop the self-awareness required to improve their skills with the help of educators, learn how to identify and invest in their own character strengths, and develop positive beliefs about themselves.

People believe in you as much as you believe in yourself. If you don't believe in yourself, I instantly know it because your body language tells me that... You don't have self-confidence [...]. But if I see someone who knows what he or she wants, I will give that person my time because I know that this is a fighter [...]. I would like to see more people coming for interview, like future executives, who know how to sit, how to talk, how to make eye contact, and how to interest me in what they want. It is really important. You need to be able to raise people's interest, and this can only be achieved if you are confident and know what you want. (Interviewee 16, Global Director of Rooms-High School Diploma-40-49 years old)

In addition, the participants linked confidence with self-affirmation, which was more often perceived as an area of weakness or difficulty for women than for men.

I would teach a class how not to be a doormat [laughs]. You know, I often tell my assistants, "Don't be a doormat." I teach them how to manage upward, which is something I constantly have to do because they tend not to do it, I don't know why... Oh no, maybe I do know why... because sometimes I do the same. It's a natural reaction... maybe more so a female one actually... Don't get bullied at work, you know, don't be a doormat... (Interviewee 21, Vice President of Public Relations-MSc in Communications Management-40-49 years old)

Participants proposed concrete examples of ways to achieve this goal. Some suggestions involved hands-on training, especially through role play sessions, mentorship programs, and/or overseas learning. Other suggestions included providing leadership training and training for young women in how to market themselves.

Leadership. Finally, the participants suggested that universities hold guided reflection sessions on the definition of success to advise students on planning ahead and managing their time to fulfill women's multiple daily roles in the industry. Eight participants emphasized the importance of motivating others as a leadership responsibility, and five discussed how to become an effective leader. Another important subcategory mentioned by eight of the participants was preparation for a changing world. The following quotation illustrates this category.

...have you seen the *Harvard Business Review* article "How do you measure success in your life? How successful are you in life?" A professor teaches this course at Harvard Business School, and I think that the course is very important. If all schools had such a course, all students would be set. Now at 22, 19, or 20 years old, they may not be able to understand everything at the time; perhaps that's why [the professor] teaches it to an older group at Harvard Business School. But if you could teach them some life lessons and life skills and perspectives before they graduate... (Interviewee 11, Vice President of Hotel Development-BSc in Hotel Administration-30-39 years old)

Leadership skills were cited by the eight interviewees, for the reasons covered in the following quotations.

Well, [it's] a very general word: leadership. Because when we graduate from [university], I don't think we really understand what leadership is. Leadership involves a lot of things, like how you communicate with your peers, how you motivate them... all these are leadership skills, right? I don't think we really understand the word at the beginning of our professional lives. (Interviewee 4, Executive Vice President-MSc in Hotel & Tourism Management-50-59 years old)

I don't know how you can teach leadership, but I suppose it's also a subject they need to be aware [of]. It's not about technical know-how, marketing strategies, or revenue strategies. It's about how to become an effective leader, so maybe they should do more projects and gain exposure, such as doing internships or going to hotels, to answer the following

questions. What does it mean to be an effective leader? What are the effects of being an effective leader, an inspirational leader? What do you need to do to become an inspirational leader? I think leadership is important; so is how you adapt to changes. How you emotionally, spiritually, mentally, physically get ready for the changing world, because changes are inevitable, right? ...it's the survival of the fittest, if you can't adapt... you will be gone, you will be out of the game. (Interviewee 10, Regional Director of Talent Management-MSc in Hospitality Administration, 50-59 years old)

Six participants suggested inviting women in high leadership positions in the hospitality industry or other industries to give talks to young women at university. They believed that by introducing themselves and their eclectic career paths, such speakers could inspire and motivate students to pursue their goals, representing a range of role models to broaden students' horizons and ambitions.

Seeing other women in the professional roles they play is really helpful. Hearing about how they dealt with some situations is also helpful. I think sharing, inviting women to discuss some of these things and share how they overcame challenges is important, whether it's being the ugly duckling in an all-male company where all they talk about is sports while drinking beer, and trying to get around that, or balancing having children and a successful career... Whatever it is, it's really helpful to hear stories because you go, "Oh, maybe there's another way to get around this obstacle I'm facing today." ...I think that hearing these stories helps, because you figure out that there are always ways to get around them. We just need to be creative. (Interviewee 11, Vice President of Hotel Development-BSc in Hotel Administration-30-39 years old)

Training I wish I had received

To explore how universities can better equip graduates to face common difficulties in the workplace, the participants were asked what training they wished they had received sooner or at all in cases in which such training had never been available. Of the 12 participants who answered this question, two could not think of any such formal training, although they wished they had spent more time learning another language. In one case, this lack of confidence in a working language had created an obstacle to achieving a career goal. Two other participants expressed the

desire to have received training in formal grooming and social business etiquette, believing that this would have spared them embarrassment and insecurity early in their careers. The participants' desired training was consistent with the training they suggested for university students.

Discussion

Unlike most studies in the field, this study adopts a qualitative approach to explore how to better equip female graduates to pursue their leadership aspirations. Previous studies, including a recent study conducted by Sisson and Adams (2013), have typically listed skills and competencies and asked respondents, mainly industry professionals, to assess the importance of each competency. In contrast, this study asks participants what tertiary education institutions could do to better prepare women for managerial positions in the tourism and hospitality industry. As a result, the respondents listed only the most important competencies and skills in today's world. Sisson and Adams (2013) rank negotiation skills much lower than in the current study, at 17th of 33 competencies investigated. Professional communication skills with different parties were ranked first and third. Sisson and Adams (2013) also address the importance of EQ in relation to different competencies, including customer service problem solving, managing personal stress, managing crisis situations, and managing staff grievances. These competencies are ranked eighth, ninth, 23rd, and 32nd, respectively, of 33. In addition, the authors discuss non-verbal communication through professional demeanor and appearance, which is ranked fourth. However, business and social etiquette and confident self-presentation are not specifically addressed. In contrast, the participants in the current study repeatedly emphasized the importance of confidence in different forms, including self-awareness, positive beliefs about oneself, and understanding the meaning of career success. In Sisson and Adams (2013), leadership skills are

ranked fifth out of the 33 competencies. In sum, the most important soft skills identified by 102 hospitality industry professionals in the U.S. (Sisson and Adams, 2013) are similar to the soft skills emphasized by female executives in the Hong Kong hospitality industry. The differences between the results are mainly related to non-verbal communication and confidence building. Whether confidence building is a skill is subject to debate, but we largely agree that confidence can be built with practice.

Unsurprisingly, all of the competencies cited by our interviewees were soft skills rather than technical skills. Indeed, previous research in the hospitality industry has emphasized the importance of soft skills (Mitchell et al., 2010; Sisson and Adams, 2013). Therefore, the next step for hospitality and tourism education institutions may be to decide how to incorporate teaching soft skills into their undergraduate programs. Following Zhong et al. (2013), this study calls for changes to the curriculums of hospitality and tourism programs to include the soft skills needed in today's workplace. According to the participants in this study, acquiring these soft skills takes time. Therefore, instead of expecting students to acquire these skills during internships or in the workplace, universities should incorporate them into curriculums. These findings contrast with the recommendation by Spowart (2011) and Su et al. (1997) that these skills be learned outside school. However, they are consistent with the results and recommendations provided by Gursoy and Swanger (2004) and Mitchell et al. (2010).

The participants considered most of the soft skills and competencies listed as important for all young people entering the industry, not solely female graduates. However, the implications of grooming for career success differ between women and men, which represents another important finding of this study. Furthermore, consistent with previous literature (Zhong

et al., 2013), the participants highlighted the importance of role models, suggesting that successful female role models can inspire and motivate female students to pursue their goals.

Figure 2 presents the proposed model of student development through curriculum, co-curriculum and extra-curriculum activities. In the most basic sense, academic curriculum refers to the list of the subjects comprising a course of study such as undergraduate studies in hospitality and tourism institutions. Co-curriculum activities include learning experiences that are linked to the academic curriculum while extra-curriculum activities may not be explicitly connected to the academic curriculum. There doesn't seem to be a clear distinction between co-curriculum and extra-curriculum activities. For instance, depending on the context and existing academic curriculum, a short class on negotiation skills can be considered a co-curriculum or extra-curriculum activity. Each hospitality education institution has a curriculum, co-curricular activities, and extracurricular activities. Though administrators review their curriculum, co-curricular activities, and extracurricular activities time to time, it is possible for them to fall behind the needs and expectations of today's workplace. Therefore, each institution should review their curriculums as well as curricular activities and extracurricular activities on a regular basis to identify where these skills fit best for their students' development throughout their studies.

*** Insert Figure 2 about here ***

Conclusion

The female executives participating in this study emphasized the importance of soft skills, particularly social and professional communication, non-verbal communication,

confidence building, and leadership, to survive and thrive in today's workplace. This study differs from other studies in that, to the best of our knowledge, it is the first study conducted in Asia to examine how to better prepare female students for leadership positions in the hospitality industry. Most of the skills mentioned by the participants are in line with previously reported findings in the literature on essential hospitality management competencies. Specifically, the current research demonstrates the importance of soft skills in today's workplace. In addition, it identifies two competencies rarely discussed in previous studies: non-verbal communication and confidence building. Therefore, more research should be conducted on these soft skills and how they can be improved through education.

The findings of this study should serve as a warning signal to hospitality and tourism educational institutions around the world. It is vital to adapt academic hospitality and tourism curriculums to include soft skills in addition to traditionally taught hard skills. Soft skills are important not only to excel in a professional organization but also to help students to overcome adverse situations in their personal or academic lives. Take EQ as an example. Our respondents regarded EQ as one of the important soft skills for female executives in the industry under study. EQ can help university students to deal with difficult moments in their everyday lives. In this respect, the study's most important finding is the need for structural changes to the current education system to include developing soft skills essential to students' integral development. These skills will help students to survive and excel in today's society, and stimulate them to become better versions of themselves.

The qualitative approach taken in this study explores the perspectives of female executives to improve understanding of the competencies needed to better prepare female students for managerial positions. Another stream of future research could focus on the soft skills

required for female executives at different career stages, from early to late. Identifying these skills will be helpful for educational institutions as well as female executives themselves. In addition, the model of student development introduced in Figure 2 can be further developed through examining currently offered soft skills development opportunities at curriculum, co-curriculum and extra-curriculum levels at the educational institutions to identify the gaps. Despite its contributions, however, this research has several limitations. First, the results are based on 24 interviews with female executives in the hospitality industry in Hong Kong. Therefore, the opinions of male executives are not considered. Second, the findings are not necessarily generalizable to other settings, although they are generally consistent with the results of recent literature.

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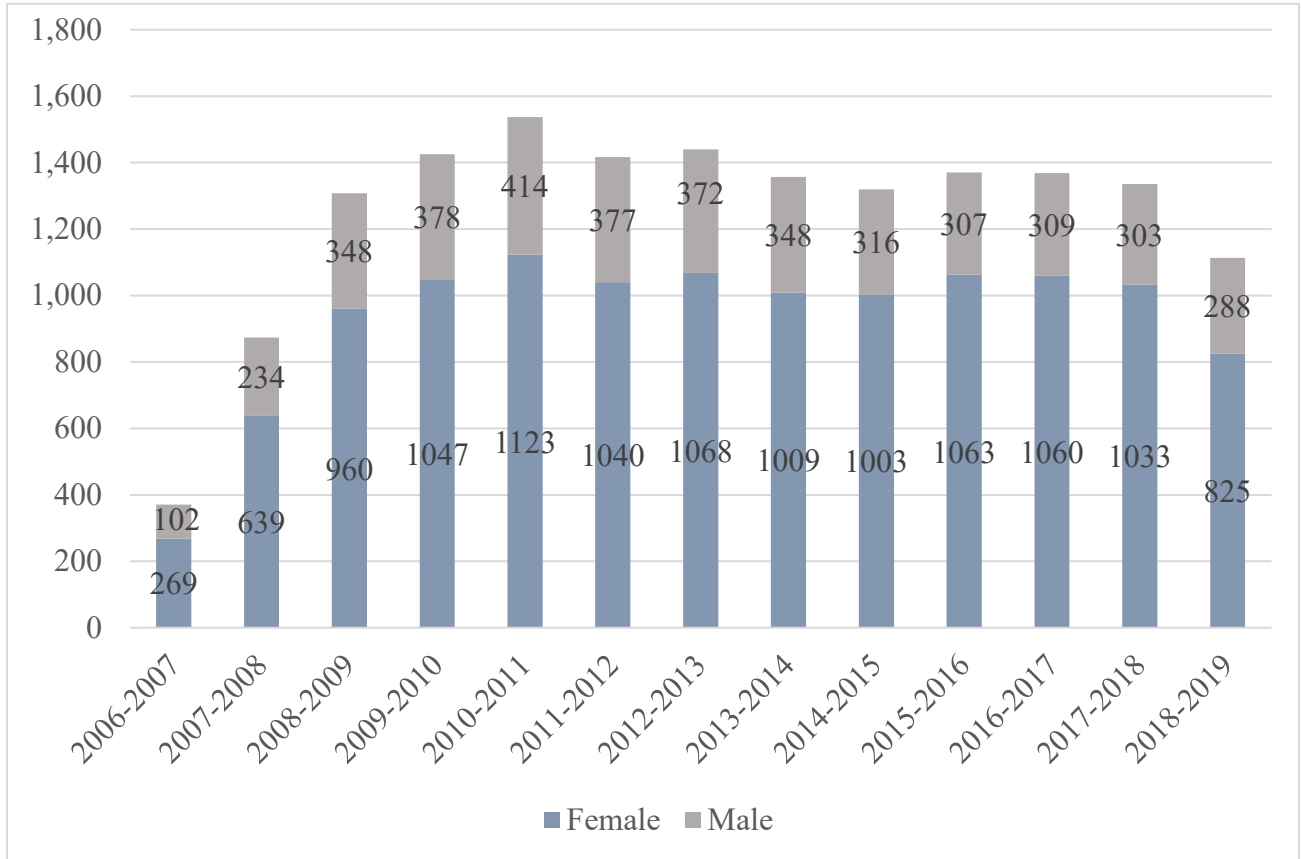
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Figure 1

Students enrolled in tourism and hospitality undergraduate programs at a hotel and tourism management school in Hong Kong



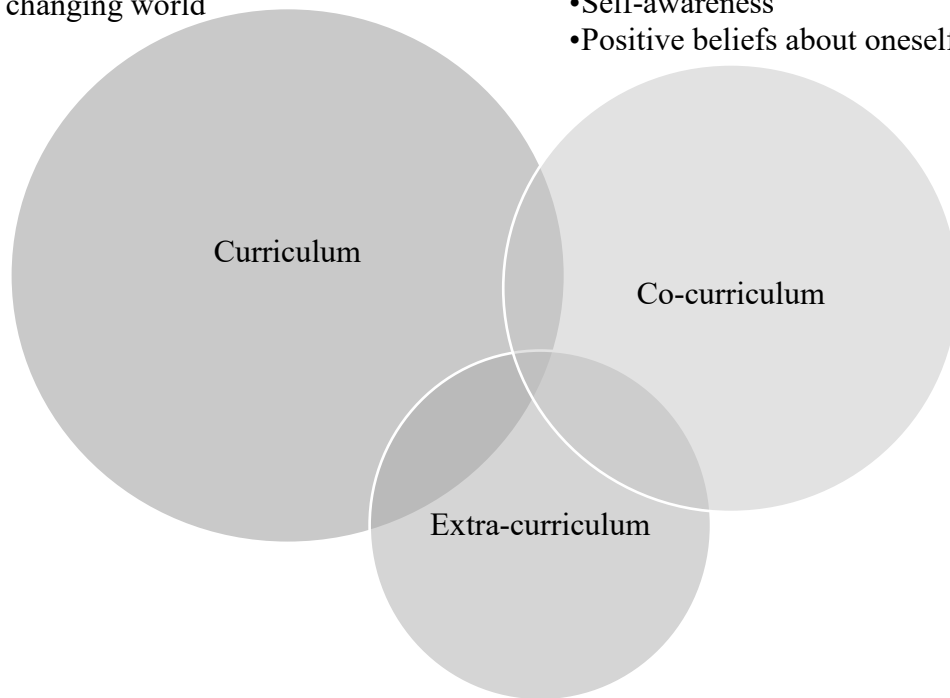
Source: Academic Secretary Department of a Hotel & Tourism Management School in Hong Kong

Figure 2

Model of student development

- Professional communication skills with different parties
- Emotional intelligence
- How to motivate
- How to become an effective leader
- How to get ready for a changing world

- Business and social etiquette
- Grooming
- Self-awareness
- Positive beliefs about oneself



- Negotiation skills
- Understanding the meaning of career success
- Self-presentation with confidence
- Introduction of female role models

Table 1

Example of inductive coding and categorization of manifest content

Unit of analysis	Subcategory	Category
<p>“This is all about EQ, If someone yells at you, you didn’t do anything wrong but I just feel like yelling at you because I’m a guest. How do you deal with that? How do you take that emotion and manage it? So that you can still be professional and positive for the next guest, that’s not easy” (Interviewee 20)</p>	<p>Emotional Intelligence</p>	<p>Social and Professional Communication</p>
<p>“most of the graduate [ehh] female they... straight from the university, they don’t know that this is important. Especially how they dress up [mmm] I saw in my work place some of the women, they dress [mmm] they don’t know how to dress in a way that people would respect them.” (Interviewee 8)</p>	<p>Grooming/Dressing the part</p>	<p>Non-verbal Communication</p>
<p>"... reflecting and thinking about what is important, doing a life plan, writing out a life plan, beyond just work, identifying what’s important to you, identifying what goals you want in life, both career and life... It teaches people to set goals for yourself as a person. Work or not and go after them. And I think it helps them [students] to strategize and prepare to get out there in the workforce... something like that would have helped me a lot more as a woman because you do face a lot more obstacles and options and you do face a lot more questions as a result." (Interviewee 11)</p>	<p>Identifying personal meanings of success</p>	<p>Building Confidence</p>
<p>“Well a very general word leadership. Because when we first graduate from university, I don’t think that we really understand what leadership is. Leadership consists of a lot’s of things like how you communicate with your peers, how you motivate them... I don’t think we really know that well at the beginning of our career life” (Interviewee 4)</p>	<p>How to motivate</p>	<p>Leadership</p>

Table 2

Trustworthiness procedures

Trustworthiness criteria	Procedures	Tackled criteria's dimensions
Researcher's subjectivity	<p>Memos of critical self-reflection</p> <p>Regular discussion with other researcher</p>	Mitigate one-researcher's bias
Confirmability	<p>Participants' check (transcripts' accuracy, findings)</p> <p>Check plausibility of findings against literature</p> <p>Regular discussion with other researcher</p>	Prevent and check for distortion
Transferability	<p>Provide detailed context of study</p> <p>Provide details about data collection and analysis procedures</p>	<p>Findings transferability</p> <p>Study repeatability</p>

Table 3
Backgrounds of the participants

Participant	Industry	Position	Last degree	Age range	Educated in
Interviewee 1	Consulting/ Entrepreneur	Director and Founder	MSc in Business Administration	60 or more	Hong Kong, Canada
Interviewee 2	Private Club	General Manager	MSc in Business Administration	50-59	Hong Kong
Interviewee 3	Hotel	Director of Events	MSc in Hospitality Management	40-49	Hong Kong
Interviewee 4	Hotel Group	Executive Vice President	MSc in Hotel & Tourism Management	50-59	Hong Kong
Interviewee 5	Hotel	General Manager	Higher Diploma in Hotel Management	40-49	Switzerland
Interviewee 6	Consulting/ Entrepreneur	Master of Wine	MSc in Public Policy	50-59	USA
Interviewee 7	Hotel Group	Corporate Director of Human Resources	MSc in Hotel & Tourism Management	40-49	Hong Kong
Interviewee 8	Theme Park	Director of Revenue Management and Analytics	MSc in Marketing	30-39	Thailand, Australia
Interviewee 9	Convention Management	Managing Director	MSc in Management	50-59	Hong Kong
Interviewee 10	Hotel Group	Regional Director of Talent Management	MSc in Hospitality Administration	50-59	Hong Kong, USA
Interviewee 11	Hotel Group	Vice President of Hotel Development	BSc in Hotel Administration	30-39	USA
Interviewee 12	Airline	Learning and Development Executive	MSc in Business Administration	40-49	Philippines, Hong Kong
Interviewee 13	Hotel	General Manager	MSc in Business Management	50-59	Hong Kong
Interviewee 14	Hotel Group	Senior Vice President of Sales & Marketing	MSc in Professional Studies	50-59	USA
Interviewee 15	Hotel	Director of Revenue Management	BSc in Tourism & Hospitality Management	30-39	Turkey
Interviewee 16	Hotel Group	Global Director of Rooms	High School Diploma	40-49	Turkey
Interviewee 17	Restaurant Group	Director of People, Asia	BSc in Hospitality Management	40-49	Scotland
Interviewee 18	Travel Group	Regional Vice President	BSc in Marketing	30-39	USA
Interviewee 19	Hotel	Director of Strategy and Business Development	Higher Diploma in Anatomy and Physiology	40-49	UK

Interviewee 20	Hotel Group	General Manager, Area Vice-President, Hong Kong & Thailand	High School Diploma	50-59	Hong Kong
Interviewee 21	Hotel Group	Vice President of Public Relations	MSc in Communication Management	40-49	Australia
Interviewee 22	Hotel Group	Vice President of Revenue Management	BSc in Hotel Management	40-49	Norway
Interviewee 23	Hotel Group	Executive Director and Chief Operating Officer	BSc in Hotel & Restaurant Management	50-59	USA
Interviewee 24	Hotel Group	Executive Vice President and Chief Financial Officer	MSc in Business Administration	40-49	Australia, Singapore

Table 4

Soft skills to better prepare women to assume managerial positions

Category	Subcategory
Social and professional communication (19)	Negotiation skills (5)
	Emotional intelligence (11)
	Professional communication skills with different parties (9)
Non-verbal communication (18)	Grooming (9)
	Business and social etiquette (6)
	Self-presentation with confidence (8)
Building confidence (8)	Self-awareness (6)
	Positive beliefs about oneself (4)
	Understanding the meaning of career success (6)
Leadership (8)	How to motivate (8)
	How to become an effective leader (5)
	How to get ready for a changing world (8)

Note: The numbers in brackets indicate how many participants mentioned each of the subcategories. For example, nineteen interviewees mentioned social and professional communication skills. Among 19 people, 5 brought up negotiation skills, 11 talked about emotional intelligence and 9 discussed professional communication skills with different parties.