

## **Age Stereotypes and the Job Suitability of Older Workers from Hotel Managers' Perspectives**

### **Abstract**

This study explored hotel managers' views of older workers and the underlying mechanism of their appraisal of older workers' job suitability. A qualitative research approach was adopted: in-depth interviews were conducted with 20 hotel managers in Hong Kong. Analysis of the hotel managers' responses revealed that age stereotypes influenced their perceptions of the suitability of certain jobs for older workers. The study contributes to the hospitality literature by developing a novel version of the cognitive framework of prototype matching to examine hotel managers' perceptions of job suitability according to age. It offers examples of age-typed jobs in the hotel industry and suggests human resource practices to reduce age stereotypes and age-related discrimination in the hotel workplace.

*Keywords: Older Workers; Aging Population; Prototype Matching Process; Occupational Age-Typed; Hotel Managers*

## 1. Introduction

The aging population is growing substantially due to increasing life expectancy and decreasing fertility rates. According to the World Population Prospects Report (United Nations, 2017), the aging population accounted for one-fifth of the world's population in 2017 and is estimated to reach 25% of the world's population by 2050. Many scholars and policymakers are concerned that the growing aging population may lead to a considerable decrease in labor supplies and could ultimately decelerate economic growth (Bloom, Canning, & Fink, 2010; Greenspan, 2003). According to a report of Aging and Employment Policies: Working Better with Age (OECD, 2019), promoting the employment of older workers is an important way to reduce the negative economic impact of population aging.

The hotel industry has long relied heavily on a young workforce (Lucas, 1995; Mykletun, Lorentzen, & Mykletun, 2000). For example, approximately half of all hospitality employees in the U.K. are younger than 35 (Economic Insight, 2019). However, jobs in the hotel industry offer low starting salaries, incur a high level of stress, are often unskilled or require nontransferable skills, and provide poor promotion prospects (Richardson & Butler, 2012; Wood, 1997). Therefore, they may be unappealing to younger workers, who often have high career expectations. As a result, the industry has a high turnover rate.

In contrast, older workers will be more willing and able to prolong their working life in the hotel industry under the aging population due to pension-driven pressures and having healthier and longer lives (Bloom et al., 2010; Kulish, Kent, & Smith, 2010; Ng & Law, 2014). Moreover, employing older workers may bring several benefits to the hotel industry, such as lowering the turnover rate and enabling the industry to respond to the needs of senior customers, a growing market segment in aging populations. (Clark & Maass, 1988; Drolet, Schwarz, & Yoon, 2011). Therefore, it is advocated that the hotel industry should employ more older workers to stabilize the workforce and meet market needs. However, older workers are underrepresented in the hotel industry, with people aged 50 or above making up fewer than a fifth of all hotel employees (Kersley, Alpin, Forth, Bryson, Bewley, Dix, & Oxenbridge, 2006). Studies have shown that many hotel managers hold negative perceptions of older workers, preferring to employ younger workers (Jenkins & Poulston, 2014; Lucas, 1995). Therefore, understanding how hotel managers view older workers may be vital to promoting the employment of older workers in aging societies. Also, it is necessary to apply effective strategies to recruit and retain older workers to deal with this emerging demographic change. Thus, the purpose of this study was to explore hotel managers' views of older workers and the underlying mechanism of their appraisal of older workers' job suitability. To this end, the study integrated the proportional representation approach (Cleveland & Hollmann, 1990) with the cognitive framework of prototype matching (Perry, 1994; Perry & Finkelstein, 1999).

This study chose Hong Kong to understand hotel managers' attitudes and perceptions towards employing older workers. Using the in-depth interview, data were gathered from Hong Kong for two reasons. First, Hong Kong is facing an increasingly aging population. According to the Population Census Report (Census and Statistics Department, 2016), the median age of Hong Kong citizens and the proportion of people aged 65 years or above were 44.3 and 16%, respectively, in 2016. This trend is likely to continue; indeed, by 2050, Hong Kong is expected to be one of the world's top 10 countries/areas in terms of its proportion of older people and its old age dependency

ratio (United Nations, 2019). Second, Hong Kong has a serious labor shortage in the hotel industry. According to the Quarterly Report of Employment and Vacancies Statistics (Census and Statistics Department, 2019), the number of job vacancies in the accommodation and food services sector is the third-highest among all industries. However, unlike other aging countries, the Hong Kong SAR government has not implemented enough measures to support older workers' employment, such as legislation on the continued employment of older workers and age discrimination (Research Office Legislative Council Secretariat, 2018).

## **2. Literature review**

### *2.1. Age of older workers*

There are no clear and universal standards for what age to consider workers as being old. According to public policy, the cut-off age markers of older workers are either set at 55 years old or 65 years old (McCarthy, Heraty, Cross, & Cleveland, 2014). Existing studies have considered the age of older workers in various ways, including those aged 55 years or above (Sterns & Miklos, 1995), 60 or above (Kornadt & Rothermund, 2011), or even 40 or above (McGregor, 2007). Among hotel studies, many (Canning, 2011; Jenkins & Poulston, 2014; Loretto & White, 2006) define the age of older workers as 50 years or above because the average age of hotel employees is lower than that in other industries (Mykletun et al., 2000). Based on prior hotel literature, this study regards older workers as those aged 50 years or above.

### *2.2. Age stereotypes of older workers*

"Age stereotypes" refer to beliefs about and expectations of individuals based on their age (Hamilton & Sherman, 1994). In the workplace, age stereotypes often take the form of distorted and inaccurate perceptions of employees' characteristics based on their age (Toomey & Rudolph, 2017). These stereotypical views influence older workers' opportunities to obtain recruitment, training, and promotion, as well as the likelihood of their retention (Chiu, 2001). Studies have identified both positive and negative stereotypes of older workers in different dimensions.

In some cases, older workers are perceived as exhibiting poorer job performance than younger workers in terms of productivity and competence. This perception is based on the belief that average labor productivity starts to decline between 40 and 50 years old (Johnson, 1993). In particular, older workers are often rated lower than their younger counterparts for "hard" qualities, which consist of physical and mental capacity, flexibility, and willingness to learn new technology-related skills (Van Dalen, Henkens, & Schippers, 2010). However, older workers may also be perceived as exhibiting better job performance than younger workers in terms of "soft" qualities such as reliability, commitment to the organization, social and customer-oriented skills, accuracy, and emotional stability (Sliter, Chen, Withrow, & Sliter, 2013; Van Dalen et al., 2010). However, the perceived superiority of older workers in terms of soft qualities does not give them an advantage in evaluations of their productivity. They often receive lower ratings for productivity

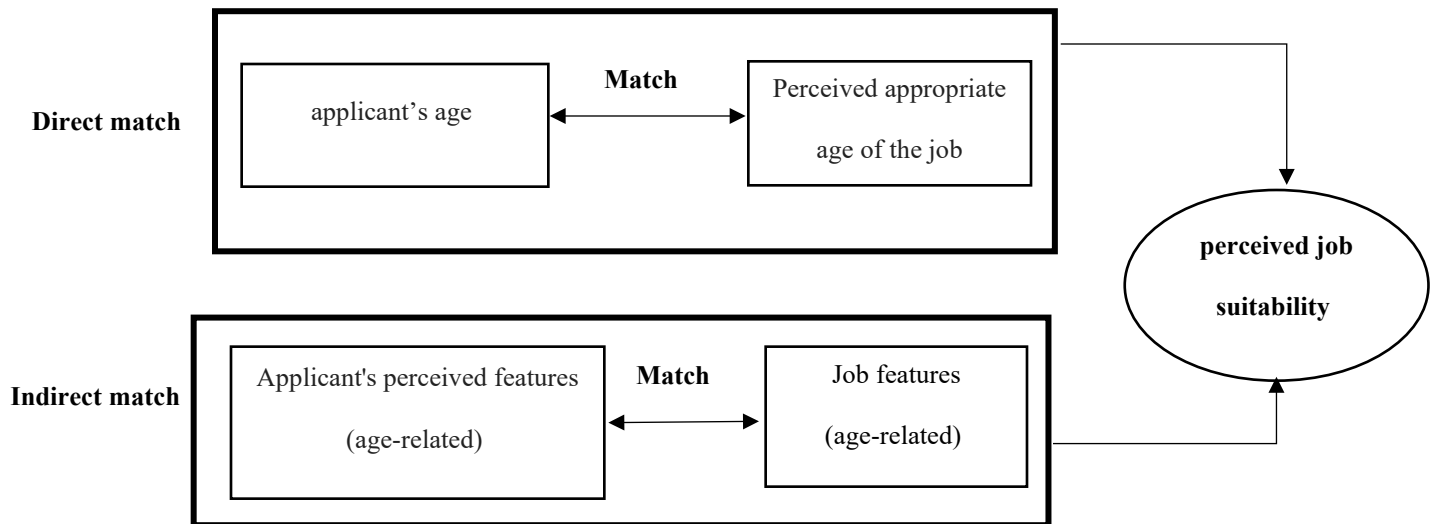
than younger workers do, because employers put more emphasis on hard than soft qualities (Van Dalen et al., 2010).

In addition, older workers are perceived as having less capacity for learning on the grounds that they are more resistant to change and that learning ability and skills deteriorate with age (Peterson & Spiker, 2005). They are considered less trainable than their younger counterparts and are expected to offer lower returns on employers' investment. As a result, they receive fewer training and career development opportunities than younger workers do (Posthuma & Campion, 2009; Wrenn & Maurer, 2004). However, according to Peterson and Spiker (2005), the idea that older workers are afraid of learning new things is a myth, and they suggested that older workers are still eager and able to learn and try new things to seek promotion opportunities. In addition, as older workers have a lower turnover rate, employers gain swifter returns on their investment in training such employees (Hedge, Borman, & Lammlein, 2006).

Compensating older workers may also be perceived as costly for organizations. Employers may need to pay higher salaries to older workers due to their rich experience and knowledge. Older workers tend to have higher salaries than younger workers; salaries usually increase with age until 50 years old, after which they level off (Hedge et al., 2006; Posthuma & Campion, 2009). In addition, based on the assumption that health status declines with age, employers may expect older workers to take more sick leave, increasing their health insurance costs (Pickersgill, Briggs, Kitay, O'Keeffe, & Gillezeau, 1996). However, studies have shown that these costs are not significantly higher than those associated with younger workers and may even be offset by the cost savings on recruitment and training brought by older workers, due to their lower turnover rate (Brooke, 2003).

### *2.3. Prototype matching process*

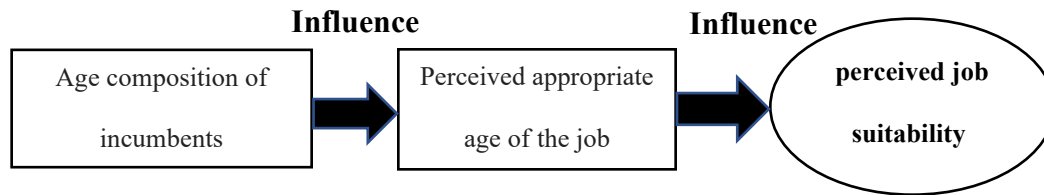
Prototype matching has been used to examine age stereotypes and job suitability. This cognitive framework reflects the perceived suitability of a job applicant for a certain position. It involves the matching of the stereotypical characteristics of an applicant (e.g., age-associated characteristics) with those of a job (Perry, 1994; Perry & Finkelstein, 1999). "Central" features of such stereotypes have the greatest impact on the perceived suitability of an applicant for a job, because the more central features that the applicant shares with the job, the better suited to the job he or she will seem. Central features are often related to age and influence the age-typing of particular jobs, which may occur either directly or indirectly during the prototype matching process (see Figure 1).



**Fig.1.** Prototype matching process framework (Perry 1994; Perry & Finkelstein 1999, adapted by authors).

A direct match involves a direct comparison between an applicant's age and the perceived appropriate age of a job. When the age of a worker is inconsistent with the typical age of job incumbents, he or she will be considered as less fit for the position. For instance, older applicants may be considered unsuited to the position of teaching assistant because age is a central feature of this position, which is usually held by young people (Perry, & Bourhis, 1998). On the other hand, an indirect match refers to the comparison of job features with the features of the age group to which an applicant belongs (Perry & Finkelstein, 1999). For example, managers who uphold age stereotypes may perceive older people to be physically weaker than younger people. When older people apply for jobs that include the feature of age (e.g., firefighter), they are likely to be considered less suitable than younger applicants (Reeves, 2011). Based on indirect matching between features, it is found that jobs requiring competence, stability, loyalty, and experience are perceived as being more suitable for older workers (old-typed jobs); jobs involving guest contact, the use of computers, and high levels of adaptability are considered as being more suitable for younger workers (young-typed jobs); jobs involving repair and maintenance are perceived as being age-neutral jobs (Oswick & Rosenthal, 2001; Reeves, 2011). Older workers may be considered less suitable for young-typed jobs as they are perceived as lacking young-typed traits (e.g., creativity) (Perry & Finkelstein, 1999).

According to the proportional representation model proposed by Cleveland and Hollmann (1990), the direct matching process may be influenced by the age composition of job incumbents, which may shape perceptions of the appropriate age for an occupation and thus an individual's suitability for the role (see Figure 2). This indicates that older applicants are commonly perceived as being more suitable for an occupation when that occupation is usually held by a higher proportion of older incumbents, and as being less suitable for an occupation when it is usually held by a higher proportion of younger incumbents. Thus, the proportional representation may change people's original age perception of job tasks. For example, job tasks that used to be perceived as being old-typed may change to being young-typed when the proportion of younger incumbents increases.



**Fig. 2.** Proportional representation approach (Cleveland & Hollmann, 1990, adapted by authors)

#### *2.4. Older worker studies in the hotel industry*

Hospitality studies examining managers' stereotypical views of older workers have found that managers hold polarized perceptions of such workers. Some studies have reported negative perceptions of older workers, such as a lack of adaptability and creativity, unwillingness to adapt to technological changes, and high costs of employment (DeMicco & Reid, 1988; Jenkins & Poulson, 2014; Magd, 2003; Qu & Cheng, 1996). However, other research has suggested that older workers are generally perceived by managers to have positive work attitudes, such as respect for authority, a sense of responsibility, self-motivation, and self-discipline (DeMicco & Reid, 1988; Furunes, 2005; Jenkins & Poulson, 2014; Magd, 2003; Qu & Cheng, 1996). They may feel greater job satisfaction than do younger workers due to their greater need for security and connection and reduced need for self-actualization (Meyer & Meyer, 1988). As a result, older employees are associated with less absenteeism and a lower turnover rate (Magd, 2003; McNaught & Barth, 1992; Qu & Cheng, 1996). For example, in a case study of Days Inns of America, McNaught and Barth (1992) found that older workers' average duration of employment in a hotel (one year) was three times longer than that of younger workers. Older workers' strengths in customer services have also been recognized (DeMicco & Reid, 1988; Jenkins & Poulson, 2014). In contrast with common perceptions, research has found that older workers are as productive and intelligent as younger workers (McNaught & Barth, 1992). The time taken to train older workers may also be the same as that for younger workers (Magd, 2003; Jenkins & Poulson, 2014). Overall, research has shown that it is worthwhile for hotels to employ older workers, as they are associated with a lower annualized cost per hire and higher hotel revenues (McNaught & Barth, 1992).

As above, studies have indicated that hotel managers generally hold a positive impression of older workers. However, older workers are not commonly employed in the hotel industry. For example, Meyer and Meyer (1988) found that only 3.1% of the hotels they investigated employed people aged 65 or above, and Qu and Cheng (1996) discovered that older workers accounted for only 4.3% of the surveyed hotel workforce. Managers' stereotypical views of older workers are reflected in their assessment of such workers' (un)suitability for particular jobs. For instance, managers may expect older workers to be unable to meet the requirements of physically demanding jobs, such as those of chef and room attendant, on the grounds that their health is generally poorer (Jenkins & Poulson, 2014). Hotel managers may also be unwilling to assign older workers to guest contact positions, fearing that their less youthful physical appearance will damage the hotel image (Meyer & Meyer, 1988). As a result, most older workers are employed in hotels' back-of-house departments (e.g., stewarding, housekeeping, and engineering and security) (Magd, 2003; Qu & Cheng, 1996).

## 2.5. *Research gaps*

Although studies have provided significant insights into hotel managers' perceptions of older workers, they have some limitations. First, they have failed to provide a clear and detailed explanation of the underrepresentation of older workers in the hotel industry. For example, some studies have failed to explain their finding that only a few hotels employ older workers or that hotels employ only a small proportion of such workers (e.g., Jenkins & Poulson, 2014; Magd, 2003; Meyer and Meyer, 1988; Qu & Cheng, 1996). Although some studies have attempted to examine the perceived suitability of particular hotel jobs for older workers, they have not applied theoretical frameworks for analysis and their findings lack depth. For instance, they have failed to comprehensively analyze older workers' perceived suitability for guest contact and physically demanding positions (Jenkins & Poulson, 2014; Meyer and Meyer, 1988). Second, the findings of this body of research may be inaccurate, as managers have been found to give socially desirable responses (Jenkins & Poulson, 2014). These limitations may be related to the adoption of quantitative research approaches, because statistical methods may not reveal the mechanisms underlying the influence of age stereotypes in the workplace (Johnson, 2003) and "are not likely to produce honest and accurate responses" (Riach & Rich, 2002, p. 481). To fill these research gaps, this study adopted a qualitative research approach, conducting in-depth interviews with hotel managers. To gain an in-depth understanding of the hotel managers' stereotypical views and perceptions of the suitability of jobs for older workers, the study combined the proportional representation approach developed by Cleveland and Hollmann (1990) with the prototype matching framework proposed by Perry (1994) and Perry and Finkelstein (1999).

## 3. **Methodology**

### 3.1. *Sampling*

As qualitative research aids examination of the formation of people's behaviors, attitudes, and development of practices, a qualitative method was expected to offer a broad understanding of the formation of hotel managers' views of older workers. The study sought to fully describe and interpret hotel managers' views of older workers from different perspectives, which would not have been adequately captured by numerical analysis (Hancock, Ockleford, & Windridge, 1998, p. 6). Therefore, a qualitative research approach was chosen to examine hotel managers' views of older workers.

Participants were recruited for this study using purposive sampling. They must 1) serve as general managers or human resource managers; 2) have at least three years of managerial experience. By targeting participants with rich experience and knowledge on the research topic, it helps address the research questions in a better way (Rai & Thapa, 2015). To reduce the influence of demographic and work-related factors, diverse managers were recruited in terms of age, managerial experience, hotel size, and hotel classification (except apartment hotels). Hotel managers' contact information was obtained from hotel websites and LinkedIn. Invitation emails were sent to hotel managers for participating in the interviews. Data saturation was reached after conducting 20 interviews, which is the ideal sample size for qualitative studies (Creswell, 2002).

### 3.2. Data collection

Data were collected from February to August 2018 via face-to-face, in-depth semi-structured interviews with 20 managers of different hotels. In-depth semi-structured interviews help researchers to thoroughly examine people's perceptions. They not only encourage respondents to express their opinions freely but also allow researchers to efficiently obtain a range of important information (Louise & While, 1994). In-depth semi-structured interviews are also well suited to studies that cover sensitive issues, such as the stereotypical views examined in this study. Before the interviews, ethical issues associated with participating in the research were considered. These include obtaining participants' full consent for answering interview questions, ensuring the confidentiality and anonymity of research data, and seeking permission to audio-record the interviews. As qualitative research requires data to be collected in the participants' natural settings (Creswell, 2003), the interviews were conducted in the respective hotel offices of the participants to encourage them to express their views freely. Each interview lasted from 30 minutes to one hour and was conducted in Chinese (Cantonese or Mandarin) or English, based on the preferences of the interviewees. Interview protocols were developed with reference to the existing literature about older workers and the matching process (Cleveland & Hollmann, 1990; Jenkins & Poulston, 2014; Perry & Finkelstein, 1999), in which participants were asked to respond to five open-ended questions regarding older workers (Table 1). The first three questions aim to find out participants' positive and negative stereotypical views towards older workers and the reason for such stereotypical views formed while the remaining two questions aim to examine job suitability of older workers and age-typed jobs in the hotel industry. Also, follow-up questions were asked based on their responses.

Table 1. Interview protocol

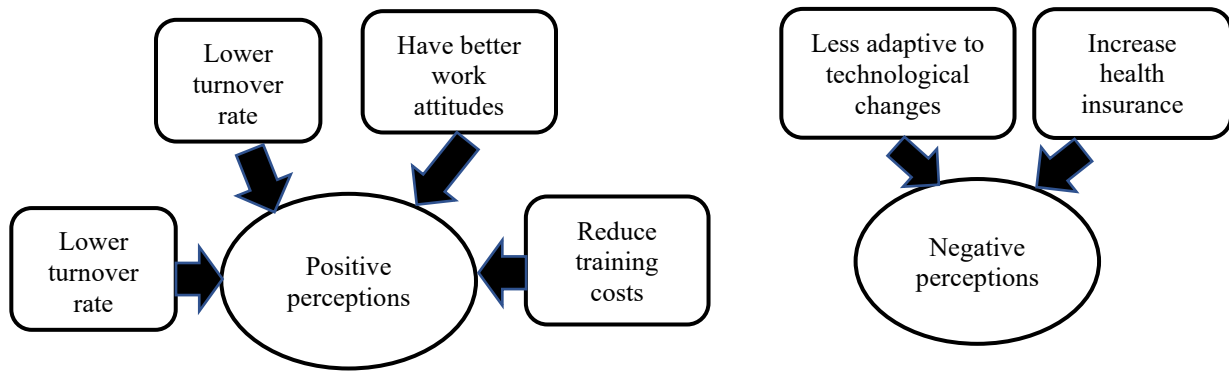
Interview questions
1. What are your perceptions of the job performance of older workers?
2. What are your perceptions of the work attitudes of older workers?
3. Could you explain the reason(s) behind your perceptions?
4. Do you think there are some jobs that are more suitable for older workers? If yes, can you suggest which jobs?
5. Could you explain the reason(s) behind your ideas about this suitability?

### 3.3. Data analysis

The interviews were audio-recorded and fully transcribed. Interviews conducted in Chinese were transcribed into English, and the transcripts were sent to a native Chinese translator to check their accuracy. After each interview, the researcher summarized and discussed the findings with the interviewee. An interview transcript was sent to each of the participants, enabling them to confirm the findings and thus ensuring the content validity of the study (Kandasamy & Ancheri, 2009).



Content analysis was adopted for this study. After finalizing all the interview transcripts, the researchers read all the transcripts in detail to get a general picture of the data. Interview notes were coded by repeated or emphasized words or phrases about older workers that were mentioned in the interviews. Next, the codes were examined to identify patterns and categorized into broader themes reflecting the similarities and differences between the responses. (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Figure 3 shows examples of the themes identified in this study. During the content analysis process, pseudonyms were assigned to the interviewees, to maintain confidentiality. To increase the validity and reliability of the data analysis, the researchers were jointly involved in checking the transcripts and interpreting and categorizing the codes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The researchers then met together and discussed the themes until they reached a complete agreement on them (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013).



**Fig. 3.** Themes of managers' stereotypical views towards old workers

## 4. Findings and Discussion

### 4.1. Profile of participants

A total of 20 hotel managers (13 human resource managers and seven general managers) participated in the interviews. Among them, seven were female and 13 were male, with ages ranging from 28 to 75 years. These managers had between three and 21 years of hotel managerial experience and worked in 20 hotels located in Hong Kong at the time of the interviews. These hotels range from three stars to five stars hotels, have 97-673 rooms, and operate as either independent or chain hotels. Details of the demographic profiles of the participants are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Demographic profile of participants (n=20)

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Category</b>	<b>% (n)</b>
Gender	Male	65 (13)
	Female	35 (7)
Age	20-29	5 (1)
	30-39	35 (7)
	40-49	30 (6)
	50-59	15 (3)
	60 or above	15 (3)
Position	Assistant HR manager	10 (2)
	HR manager	40 (8)
	Senior HR Manager	15 (3)
	General Manager	35 (7)
Managerial experience (years)	< 5 years	10(2)
	5-10 years	40 (8)
	11-16 years	35 (7)
	17-22 years	15 (3)
Hotel size	< 300 rooms	30 (6)
	300-399 rooms	15 (3)
	400-499 rooms	25 (5)
	500-599 rooms	10 (2)
	600 or above rooms	20 (4)
Hotel classification	Three Stars	10 (2)
	Four Stars	30 (6)
	Five Stars	60 (12)
Operation type	Chain Hotel	75 (15)
	Independent Hotel	25 (5)

#### *4.2. Stereotypical views toward older workers*

Hotel managers in this study were found to hold both positive and negative stereotypes toward older workers. Labor shortages have long been a concern of hotel managers, due to the high turnover rate in the industry. This reflects managers' positive views concerning hiring older workers to maintain a stable workforce at their hotels. According to some managers, "older workers tend to be loyal to the company, less aggressive in seeking promotions, and prefer working

in a stable work environment; that is why the turnover rate of older workers is usually three to five times lower than that of younger workers.” Employing older workers is key to maintaining a high standard of customer services, not just because older workers possess essential skills and knowledge in customer services (Charles & Carstensen, 2010; Jenkins & Poulston, 2014; Van Dalen et al., 2010), but also because “returning guests prefer being served by familiar faces who remember their preferences”, as mentioned by several managers. Besides the customer services perspective, employing older workers can also reduce the considerable amount of turnover costs incurred by hotels in different aspects, such as training, recruiting, and selecting (Davidson, Timo, & Wang, 2010). Managers especially valued the savings made in training costs brought about by employing older workers. They mentioned that employing older workers could reduce the costs of retraining employees in regard to routine job tasks because they tend to work in the same positions for long periods. Also, training costs can be saved when older workers serve as role models for their less-experienced colleagues and newcomers during on-the-job training, especially in roles that require professional knowledge and skills, such as sommeliers. Compared with younger workers, managers more positively perceived older workers’ work attitudes as being more “committed”, “patient”, “obedient”, “attentive to details”, “hardworking”, and “responsible.” One manager gave an example to show that older workers take their jobs more seriously than younger workers: “While younger workers will take sick leave immediately without considering their existing tasks, older workers will come back to the company to make proper arrangements with their tasks before taking sick leave.” Related to older workers’ attitudes, a perception change was evident in the interviews. Although previous literature has suggested that older workers are resistant to adopting technological changes (Brook, 2003; Van Dalen et al., 2010), some managers interviewed in this study hold different views. They positively perceived older workers as being willing to learn and adopt new technology by “taking the initiative to attend training and familiarization workshops for new technology.”

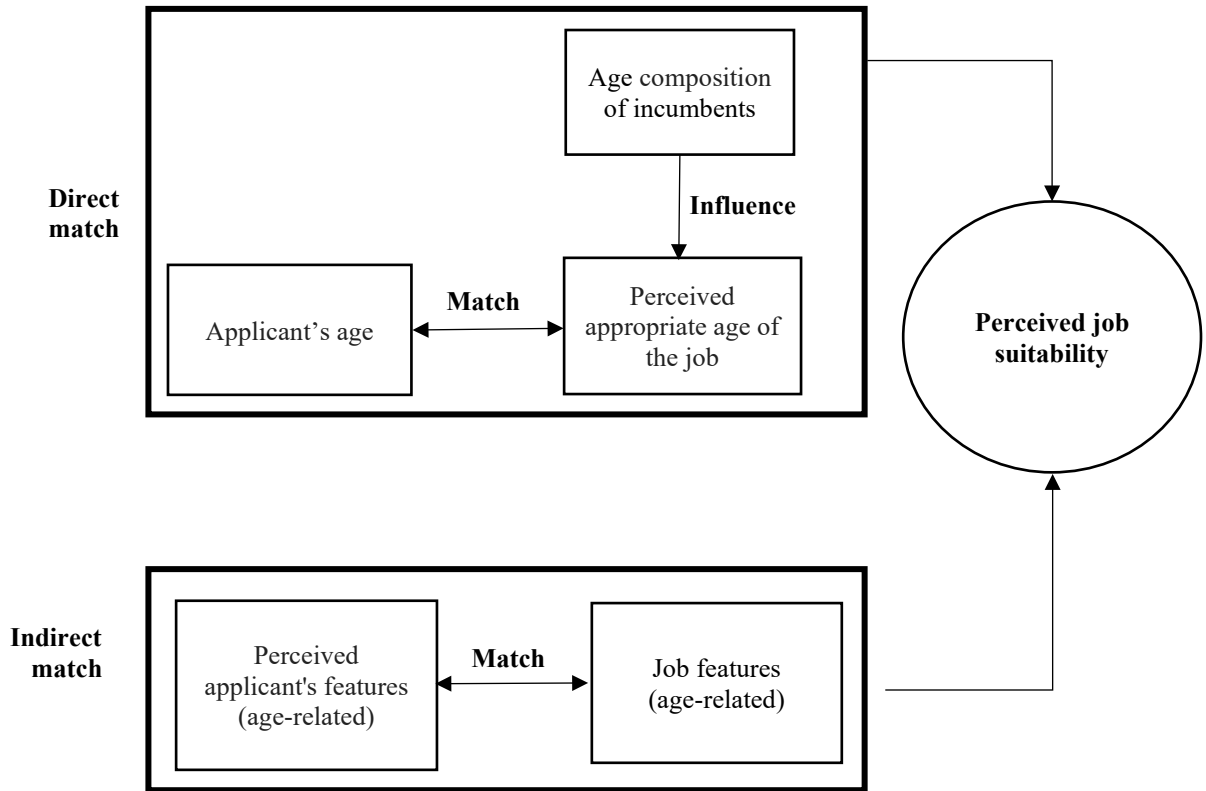
On the other hand, managers’ negative perceptions of older workers were found. Regarding the health conditions of older workers, managers perceived older workers as “suffering from diseases easily” and “taking more time to recover when they suffer from serious health problems.” Influenced by these perceptions, managers were concerned about the increase in their hotel’s expenditure on employees’ health insurance. According to a manager, “since older workers consult doctors more frequently due to their weaker health condition, they may claim more for medical expenses. Also, we may need to pay additional health insurance premiums to cover specialized components for older workers and so spending on insurance would increase with age.” Although studies have found that such increases in health insurance costs are insignificant for hotels because older workers comprise a small proportion of the total workforce (Broadbridge, 2001; Brooke, 2003; McNaught & Barth, 1992), the findings of this study reflect that this stereotype may deter managers from employing a greater proportion of older workers in the future.

The interviewed hotel managers also considered older workers to be less able than younger workers to adapt to technological changes. This perception is reflected in the following quotations: “Older workers are weaker than younger workers in terms of their knowledge of technology. They need more time to master the use of high-tech equipment” and “As older workers have weaker

technology-related skills, they may not be able to assist guests with using new technological products, such as handy phones.”<sup>1</sup>

#### 4.3. Prototype matching process for job suitability

Stereotypical views had an important influence on the managers’ perceptions of the job suitability of older workers. Those who do not hold stereotypical views toward older workers tend to focus more on actual job requirements and workers’ actual abilities in determining suitability. However, most managers are influenced by stereotypical views, and they perceive some jobs as being more suitable or less suitable for older workers. Figure 4 summarizes the findings of this study. It shows how the hotel managers compared older workers’ perceived characteristics with perceived job requirements using the framework of direct and indirect match (integrating the proportional representation approach).



**Fig. 4.** Matching process of job suitability in hotels

<sup>1</sup> Smartphones provided to guests during their stay.

#### *4.3.1. Direct match*

Although most of the managers claimed that age did not affect their decision on whether to employ older workers, some argued that the positions of housekeeping attendant, laundry attendant, kitchen porter, and security guard are best suited to older workers (aged 50 or above), while that of front desk officer is more suitable for younger workers (in their 20s or 30s). One manager explained that perceptions of the most appropriate ages for these five jobs were based on the age composition of incumbents. According to this manager, the jobs of housekeeping attendant, laundry attendant, kitchen porter, and security guard are usually held by employees aged 50 or above, while most front desk officers are young (e.g., fresh graduates). Some of the managers argued that employees feel more comfortable working with colleagues of a similar age, as this helps to minimize communication problems caused by generational differences. According to the similarity-attraction paradigm proposed by Byrne (1971), individuals who have similar individual characteristics and attitudes tend to hold positive attitudes toward each other and treat each other favorably. Therefore, Shore and Goldberg (2005) claimed that assigning individuals to workgroups with incumbents of a similar age can lead to more positive work outcomes.

#### *4.3.2. Indirect match*

##### *4.3.2.1. Guest contact jobs*

In addition to comparing the age of an applicant with that of incumbents, the interviewed hotel managers compared the perceived attributes of the applicant with those of the job to determine job suitability. Although older workers' strengths in customer services were recognized by managers, some of them perceived older workers as being unsuitable for guest contact jobs. In particular, they argued that the roles of front desk officer, and waiter/waitress are unsuitable for older workers. They believed that older workers are physically weaker and thus unable to meet the heavy physical requirements of these jobs. For instance, front desk officers and guest relations officers may be required to undertake 24-hour shifts and stand for long periods, and waiters and waitresses are required to remain active and carry heavy dishes. While the roles of these jobs were perceived as being too "physically difficult" for older workers, yet the role of housekeeping attendant, one of the most physically challenging jobs in the industry, was regarded as being acceptable for older workers. The contradictions in this finding reflect that "weak physical conditions" do not play an important role in the formation of this perception. Therefore, the managers were asked to indicate other important factors related to perceived suitability. They mentioned that hotel image is a concern when filling guest contact positions, especially for hotel brands that aim to project a "young and energetic" image. One stated that "older workers look less youthful and smile less than younger workers, and thus do not fit the hotel image while employing younger workers to serve guests creates a more youthful impression." Some of the managers even expressed an explicit preference for employing younger workers in guest contact positions, e.g., "If we have many applicants to choose from for the front desk officer position, we prefer younger workers, even if older workers are just as qualified." These findings are consistent with Meyer and Meyer's (1988) argument that the physical appearance of older workers is the most important determinant of their perceived unsuitability for guest contact positions, as their "old appearance" is incongruent with hotels' image. The inconsistent perception of older workers' strengths in customer services and their suitability of guest contact positions reflect that some managers exhibited negative age stereotypes because they put more emphasis on superficial aspects of the

appearances of older workers while discarding their potential positive attributes (i.e., strengths in customer services) when determining potential employees' suitability for guest contact jobs (Blaikie, 1999).

#### *4.3.2.2. Jobs involving the use of technology*

Managers perceived older workers as being unsuitable for jobs involving the use of technology because of their weaker learning abilities and limited knowledge in regard to using technology. More specifically, the managers argued that the roles of reservation officer and IT technician are unsuitable for older workers, as they "require rich knowledge and the ability to use new technological tools to maintain smooth hotel operation." Although the managers admitted that older workers had begun to show more positive attitudes toward learning about new technologies, they felt that these positive attitudes did not translate into job suitability. Some of the managers affirmed negative age stereotypes, arguing that "one's learning ability decreases with age" and expressing little faith in older workers' ability to use technology. Despite the efforts made by older workers to learn about new technologies, the managers still regarded them as inferior to younger workers in terms of technological capability, and thus perceived them as unsuited to jobs involving the use of technology. This finding is consistent with Perry and Finkelstein's (1999) observation that when a job requires the extensive use of advanced technology and performance in that job is regularly assessed using technology, skills requirements related to technology will be incorporated into stereotypes of the job.

#### *4.3.2.3. Low-skilled jobs*

Older workers were considered unsuited to managerial positions due to the perception that they held lower educational qualifications than younger applicants. According to one manager, "Older workers are less educated and creative and thus not proficient in generating ideas. That is the reason why we think younger workers are more capable of supervising people." As a result, only a few older workers were given opportunities to work as managers in the sampled hotels. In contrast, the managers perceived older workers to be well suited to low-skilled jobs, such as those of housekeeping attendant, laundry attendant, kitchen porter, and security guard. These jobs involve highly repetitive tasks such as cleaning and sanitizing utensils and other kitchen equipment, and are thus unattractive to younger workers, who place more emphasis on job satisfaction. In contrast, the managers perceived older workers to be "less marketable," "less selective in finding jobs," and more "loyal to the company" and thus more willing to take low-skilled jobs, eventually reducing the turnover rate for these positions. Older workers were also considered well suited to these positions due to their perceived ability to maintain stable job performance. Low-skilled jobs usually involve highly repetitive tasks that require standard operating procedures to be followed to yield consistent job performance. The managers thought that these requirements are more readily met by older workers, who "work well in routine tasks with standard operating procedures" and are "able to maintain stable productivity due to their rich work experience."

## 5. Conclusion

### 5.1. Theoretical contributions

This study is the first to apply the cognitive framework of prototype matching to the hotel context to provide an in-depth assessment of older workers' job suitability from managers' perspectives through direct and indirect matching. The study developed a novel version of this framework by integrating the original prototype matching framework (Perry, 1994; Perry & Finkelstein, 1999) with the proportional representation approach (Cleveland & Hollmann, 1990). Regarding the direct approach, this study suggests that the age composition of job incumbents is important to the formation of managers' perceived suitability of hotel jobs. For instance, a large proportion of housekeeping attendants, laundry attendants, kitchen porters, and security guards are aged 50 or above, while front desk officers tend to be in their 20s or 30s, leading to the perception that older workers are better suited to the former jobs and younger workers are better suited to the latter job. Concerning indirect match, this study explored the perceived job suitability of older workers in terms of the skills required and the extent of guest contact. Interestingly, although the managers seemed to have formed their perceptions of older workers' suitability for different hotel jobs based on the workers' attributes, the perceived attributes of older workers did not always correlate with the expected jobs. For instance, although older workers' strengths in customer services were recognized due to their rich experience, knowledge, and skills, managers still considered them as being unsuitable for front desk officer positions, because they over-emphasized the physical appearance (old appearance) of older workers. This indicates that competence and experience were neglected by some of the managers when identifying jobs suitable for older workers. This finding diverges from the results of previous studies (Oswick & Rosenthal, 2001; Reeves, 2011). In this study, the hotel managers clearly focused on hiring older workers to fill low-skilled jobs, reserving highly skilled and guest contact jobs for younger workers. Overall, this study suggests that jobs in the hotel industry are age-typed (see Table 3).

Table 3. Examples of age-typed jobs in the hotel industry

Old-typed jobs	Characteristics: low-skilled, with limited guest contact and a high proportion of older workers employed (i.e., aged 50 or above) Examples: housekeeping attendant, laundry attendant, kitchen porter, and security guard.
Young-typed jobs	Characteristics: high-skilled, with frequent guest contact, and a high proportion of younger workers employed (i.e., aged 20s to 30s). Examples: reservation officer, front desk officer, waiter/waitress, IT technician, and managerial roles.

This study also diverges from previous research regarding hotel managers' perceptions of older workers. Studies (e.g., Jenkins & Poulson, 2014; Magd, 2003) have indicated that hotel managers have overwhelmingly positive views of older workers. However, through presenting the cognitive framework of the prototype matching process, this study reflects that more hotel managers adhere to negative age stereotypes and rely more on stereotypical views than objective job information and workers' information in determining older workers' job suitability.

## *5.2. Practical implications*

To reduce age stereotypes and age-related discrimination in the hotel workplace, this study offers some practical recommendations for developing best practice in diversity or age management, as proposed by previous human resource studies. In terms of recruitment and selection, hotel managers should use different recruitment channels to target applicants in different age groups (Kreitz, 2008; Madera, 2013). For example, instead of using traditional recruitment channels, hotels could make use of employee referral programs and recruitment talks in community centers to reach older people more effectively for recruitment. To achieve “fairness” in recruitment, hotel managers should reduce their age stereotyping and focus more on a person’s abilities, knowledge, and previous work experiences when making hiring decisions. For instance, job opportunities for older workers should not be limited to back-of-house or low-skill jobs. Instead, they should be given the opportunity to work in every position (e.g., guest contact positions) if their qualifications match the job requirements. Hotels are also advised to communicate to all applicants the importance and benefits of diversity. Second, diversity training programs should be organized for all employees, including managers. This would increase employees’ understanding of and improve their attitudes toward age diversity by enabling them to learn about the beliefs and values of different generations of the workforce. The content of diversity training should focus on empathy, which “requires a person to think and feel what it would be like to be a member of an out-group” (Madera, Neal, & Dawson, 2011, p. 471). Empathy helps to decrease negative attitudes and promote harmony between groups in the workplace (e.g., older and younger members of the workforce). Third, both previous studies (Conen, Henkens, & Schippers, 2011, 2012; Remery, Henkens, Schippers, & Ekamper, 2003) and this study indicate that hotel managers remain passive about developing the capabilities of older workers through training. Therefore, alongside on-the-job training for employees of all ages, tailored training should be provided to cater to the particular needs of older workers. In addition, training should be designed to facilitate cooperation between younger and older employees. For instance, older and younger workers could be paired in teams during training. This would not only help to reduce age stereotypes but also promote knowledge transfer between employees (Frerichs, Lindley, Aleksandrowicz, Baldauf, & Galloway, 2012). Fourth, flexible working practices should be implemented to meet the needs of older workers, such as job redesign, job rotation, and the opportunity to work part-time to reduce working hours.

## *5.3. Limitations and future studies*

This study has several limitations. First, it did not obtain quantitative data on managers’ perceptions and attitudes toward older workers, such as the proportion of older workers employed in each hotel department, the benefits and costs of recruiting and training older workers, and the effects of hiring older workers on hotels’ financial performance. Therefore, future studies should verify this study’s results using a mixed-methods design, by collecting quantitative data. This would help to support or refute the findings regarding managers’ reasons for hiring older workers. Second, as this study focused solely on managers’ perceptions of older workers, its findings do not offer insights into other parties’ views of older workers. Future studies should examine the perceptions of older workers from different perspectives. They could explore how other employees perceive older workers and determine whether the similarity-attraction paradigm (e.g. similar age) accounts for differences in their views. Studies could also examine how older workers perceive



themselves in relation to their work. For example, what do older workers think about their suitability for different hotel jobs? Can the large proportions of older workers with guest contact jobs and low-skilled jobs be attributed to their interest in such roles? Future studies could also explore hotel guests' perceptions of older workers. As hotel guests are the final users of hotel services, their views would provide substantial insights into service management for hotel managers. For instance, hotels could consider employing more older workers in guest contact positions to cater to the needs of older guests.

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