

What really matters: an exploratory sequential mixed-method study of women's hospitality professional identities

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Abstract

Purpose – Through the lens of professional identity (PID), this paper aims to examine what matters to women when reflecting on their professions in hospitality. The purpose of this examination is to understand to what extent these PIDs are shared among women in hospitality and to include women's voices into the workforce.

Design/methodology/approach – An exploratory sequential mixed-methods approach was used. The qualitative step included 24 in-depth interviews with female middle and senior managers in hotel management in the USA. The results of the interviews informed the design of a quantitative survey completed by 330 women hospitality professionals in managerial and non-managerial positions in the USA.

Findings – The qualitative analysis derived three super-ordinate and ten sub-themes. These themes were then quantitatively measured for validity and generalization. The mixing of qualitative and quantitative data indicated the relevance of work environment, social evaluation and perception of work and demonstrating professional competence as a woman in hospitality as significant drivers in establishing women's hospitality PIDs.

Originality/value – This paper is the first to address women hospitality professionals through the lens of PID. By providing a different gender perspective on hospitality PID, this paper contributes to the expansion of diversity, equity and inclusion research and practices.

Keywords Women in hospitality, Professional identity, Exploratory sequential mixed-methods, Hospitality workforce, Diversity, Equity, Inclusion

Paper type Research paper



Introduction

Multinational hospitality organizations have recently addressed diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) gaps in their workforce. Various strategies include creating and promoting corporate

diversity and inclusion statements, appointing diversity and inclusion officers, forming within-organization diversity groups, working with diversity organizations in communities and using consulting teams to strategize diversity policies. These efforts are encouraging in an industry that has seen limited progress in DEI issues (Mooney *et al.*, 2017), including hospitality leadership largely protecting masculine values (Mooney *et al.*, 2017; Mooney, 2020), expecting stereotypically gendered behaviors (Segovia-Perez *et al.*, 2019) and overlooking female talent (Morgan and Pritchard, 2019).

Although women are gaining in hospitality leadership, they continue to be segregated horizontally and trapped beneath a gendered glass ceiling. Women tend to be isolated in departments like housekeeping and human resources, and less than 5% of CEOs are women (Castell Project, 2022). Furthermore, due to the impacts of COVID-19, women are even more burned out than their male counterparts and often consider downshifting their careers or leaving the workforce entirely (McKinsey and Company, 2021). To address the gender disparity, previous research has focused on studying the negative impacts of gender stereotypes on female career development through the lens of social role theory (Xiong *et al.*, 2022). We provide a different approach by acknowledging women hospitality professionals' voices to construct their professional identities (PIDs) to authentically embrace and activate DEI initiatives.

PID is often defined as "the relatively stable and enduring constellation of attributes, beliefs, values, motives, and experiences in terms of which people define themselves in a professional role" (Ibarra, 1999, pp. 764–765). Based on the social identity theory (SIT), the process of PID construction involves individuals self-defining their work to determine identifying factors of their profession (Hotho, 2008). When individuals possess positive PIDs, possible outcomes include increased job satisfaction, work engagement and organizational success. In hospitality research, determinants of PID are an under-researched concept (Wang *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, by focusing on the individual voices of women in hospitality to determine how they self-define their work, this paper offers a platform for women's hospitality PIDs to be included in the workforce. The examination of hospitality PIDs is explored by understanding what matters to women professionals and to what extent these PIDs are shared among them.

An exploratory sequential mixed-methods approach consisting of in-depth qualitative interviews and quantitative surveys was used. The inclusive gender approach contributes to diversifying PID perspectives and understanding equitable career development approaches for hospitality. This paper also proposes a PID prototype for women in hospitality to expand DEI efforts in hospitality.

Professional identity formation in hospitality

A PID's origin is rooted in Tajfel and Turner's (1979) prominent work on SIT. The authors explained that when individuals go through a self-assessment process of internally questioning "where I belong" and "where I do not belong," the results lead to individuals aligning themselves with social groups for positive group distinction and self-enhancement (Tajfel and Turner, 1985). Having a sense of group membership provides a basis for individuals to establish their self and social identities as they learn, share and accept social values, beliefs and behavioral norms of the group. A collective PID is stimulated by an individual's awareness of being a professional that does a specific type of work and their identification with other individuals whose work is similar. The formation of these social identities is key to group behavior (Ashforth *et al.*, 2008), which provides a foundation for understanding PID (Murnieks *et al.*, 2014). Therefore, individuals that host high levels of group identification through their profession can have stronger PIDs (Adams *et al.*, 2006),

resulting in increased individual levels of job satisfaction and performance (van Dick and Haslam, 2012).

Gebbels *et al.* (2019) explained that for some hospitality employees, passion for hospitality and being hospitable extend beyond the job and is an integral part of their identities. Hospitality employees with clearer PID tend to engage in more discretionary behavior, going beyond what is asked, than those who consider hospitality work as casual employment (Redmond and Sharafizad, 2020). Furthermore, hospitality workers with resilient PIDs are less likely to change careers due to the feelings of belonging and social connection (Mooney *et al.*, 2016). In essence, when hospitality employees host a stronger PID infused with passion and job satisfaction, they are less likely to leave the industry (Chen *et al.*, 2022).

Despite recent research supporting the relevance and significance of hospitality PID's impact on job passion, commitment and satisfaction, the complexity in how hospitality employees process their identities through work is under-researched (Ponting and Lee, 2022). Given the fluid nature of identity, efforts to understand PID in hospitality are far more complex and require further exploration. Contrary to previous literature, PID was not found to be a significant construct to decrease employee intentions to leave the hospitality industry, suggesting PID alone may not reduce hospitality employees' intentions to leave the industry (Lee *et al.*, 2022). Other research argued since the pandemic has exacerbated the vulnerability of the hospitality workforce, it is crucial for hospitality academics, educators and practitioners to reshape and cultivate hospitality PIDs (Chen *et al.*, 2022).

According to King *et al.* (2021), shaping PID at the macro-level (industry associations, hospitality organizations, educational programs) is crucial for attracting and retaining talented individuals. Developing individual identification with the work of hospitality rather than a specific company or brand is also crucial (Wang *et al.*, 2020). McGinley *et al.* (2014) explained that even when individuals make career changes and work in non-hospitality organizations, individual PIDs with the work of hospitality remained strong. These findings showcase that a higher level of PID has longer impressions than organizational or industry identity in hospitality.

Overall, previous studies provide converging evidence for PID as a shared platform for members of a profession to feel a sense of belonging, attachment and identification. Although multiple PIDs may exist within a professional group, an overarching PID is essential for professional groups to elevate their status (Ponting, 2021). Finally, Ponting and Lee (2022) argued that not exploring how identities are formulated in the hospitality workforce hampers the opportunity to create a strong hospitality PID that is inclusive and diversified.

Women in hospitality

Although the hospitality workforce is considered gender-balanced, women continue to be under-represented in leadership and executive roles (Mooney, 2020; Gebbels *et al.*, 2019). Due to considerable efforts in the industry, there is slow progress with women holding one leadership spot for every 10.3 men (compared to one to 11.2 in 2019) in 2021 (Castell Project, 2022). Nonetheless, although more opportunities for women to be promoted to managerial roles are provided, such moves are highly competitive (Ali *et al.*, 2022). Furthermore, burnout induced by the COVID-19 pandemic has led one in three women to consider leaving hospitality entirely or downshifting their careers (Castell Project, 2022).

First, workforce barriers for hospitality women include lack of mentoring, gender stereotyping and negative perceptions of feminine traits. Specifically, Boone *et al.*'s (2013) study showed that although both men and women executives had identical viewpoints regarding their careers, self-imposed barriers such as family and household responsibilities were major obstacles for women and less so for men. Segovia-Perez *et al.* (2019) also found

self-imposed barriers, such as having children, hindered women from aspiring to management positions.

Second, the hospitality literature discussed gendered stereotyping of leadership styles. Historically, successful leadership characteristics and personalities are associated with masculinity, and thus, when women are leaders (a conflict in common stereotypes), they can face adversity (Xiong *et al.*, 2022). Regardless of these challenges, women can possess various leadership styles whether perceived feminine, masculine or gender-neutral that aligns with the organizational culture (Guillet *et al.*, 2019). Therefore, gendered norms are challenged in the hospitality workforce and subjective interpretations of leadership behaviors are becoming more prevalent (Liu *et al.*, 2022).

Third, other studies have focused on the well-being of women in hospitality and found stress incurred by hospitality work negatively and significantly affect women professionals (Tsaor and Tang, 2012). For example, Kara *et al.* (2018) found managers' long-term hostile behavior toward women employees negatively impacted employees' quality of work and life outside the organization.

Fourth, without supportive resources, achieving gender DEI across horizontal and vertical positions in hospitality organizations continues to be an uphill battle. According to women in hospitality and tourism executive-level positions, women role models, organizational support, organizational structure (Russen *et al.*, 2021b) and mentoring (Dashper, 2020) are imperative in breaking down workforce barriers. Providing equitable career promotion opportunities for women in hospitality organizations yields overall benefits of a stronger organizational culture and higher financial performances (Russen *et al.*, 2021a). Women at managerial levels can showcase positive perspectives of organizational culture, including a welcoming and supportive environment for potential and qualified women employees (Ali *et al.*, 2022).

Research on women in hospitality continues to grow as gender DEI is good for business. Thus, exploring and verifying the shared PIDs of women in hospitality can provide a diversified, inclusive and equitable perspective in understanding the hospitality profession.

Methods

To understand and corroborate the breadth and depth of PIDs, an exploratory sequential mixed-methods design was used (Creswell and Creswell, 2017). This approach allows researchers to initially explore an under-studied construct through a qualitative method. Then, guided by the qualitative exploration, researchers follow up with a quantitative method to seek generalization of qualitative findings from a sample population (Creswell and Creswell, 2017). Due to the dearth of research on understanding women hospitality PIDs, data collection began with semi-structured interviews to retrieve PID constructs. A total of 24 interviews were conducted with women from various hospitality positions, years of experience, age, marital status, race and ethnicity. Interviewees were recruited using convenience and snowball sampling through authors' professional networks. Zoom conferencing was used and interviews lasted an average of 50 min. All interviews were audio recorded for transcription with the interviewee's consent.

The interview protocol (Supplemental file) followed Ibarra's (1999) definition of PID to include questions such as:

- definitions of work to determine factors of the profession (Hotho, 2008);
- intersections of gender and PID to explore any tension or alliance (Christie, 2006);
- interactions in work settings to examine a sense of belonging (Hatmaker, 2012);

- reasons behind working in hospitality to understand relationships between passion and PID (Chen *et al.*, 2022); and
- how the hospitality profession is perceived (Chen *et al.*, 2022).

A qualitative data management software, NVivo (QSR International Pty Ltd., 2020) was used to organize and analyze interview transcripts. Guided by Braun and Clarke's (2019) foundational work on thematic analysis, the first step in interview data analysis involved a close reading of all transcribed interviews. Next, the first and fourth authors used NVivo to independently conduct a line-by-line thematic coding process to group and organize themes. These two authors then discussed initial codes to regroup, modify and finalize super-ordinate themes and sub-themes.

Data analysis from the interviews was used to design a quantitative survey. Specifically, scales from previous research were adapted to measure the corresponding themes from the interviews. A content adequacy assessment was conducted using analysis of variance (ANOVA) with all items listed randomly in a survey to assess content validity (Hinkin and Tracey, 1999). A total of 44 undergraduate students studying hospitality from a major research university in the USA were recruited for a pilot study to rate the consistency of each item and the definitions of the themes provided. The mean of each item was compared across sub-themes under each super-ordinate theme using a series of ANOVA and least significant difference (LSD) *post hoc* analyses. The results suggested the ratings of all items on their sub-themes were significantly higher than those on other sub-themes. Therefore, the results provided evidence of content validity (Hinkin and Tracey, 1999).

A questionnaire with scales measuring the ten sub-themes was distributed through an online data panel (i.e. Prolific). All items were measured based on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*). Participants were asked to report their occupation and gender. A total of 420 participants reported themselves as women hospitality professionals, who were qualified for the main study. Then, the main survey with scales measuring all themes was distributed to the 420 participants three days after the filter survey. A total of 341 participants completed the main survey, with a response rate of 81.2%. Attention check questions were included in the main survey to ensure the response quality, and a total of 330 participants passed the attention check and were included in the data analysis with a valid rate of 96.8%.

Findings

Interviewee and survey participant profile

Table 1 presents interviewee profiles, and Table 2 presents profiles of survey participants.

The qualitative study yielded three super-ordinate themes supported by ten sub-themes. Interviewees recounted their work environments, social and self-valuation and perceptions of work, gendered identities and other social identities to narrate their PIDs. Figure 1 provides a visualization of how the super-ordinate themes are connected to sub-themes and examples of corresponding codes. Appendix includes descriptive statistics and correlation results from the quantitative survey.

Within each theme, both qualitative and sequential quantitative results are shared. This mixing of data allows for deeper interpretation and examines the applicability and generalizability of qualitative results.

The work environment

The first super-ordinate theme relevant to PID was the work environment. Interviewees identified with a sense of autonomy, mentorship opportunities, alignment with their organizations and diversity in senior positions imperative for women in hospitality.

Table 1.
Interviewee profile

Interviewee no.	Discipline area	Position at the time of interview	Years in industry	Ethnicity	Age	Marital status	Children
I1	Human resources (HR)	Area talent acquisition manager	5	White	25-34	Single	No
I2	Finance	Director of finance	15	White	35-44	Married	Yes
I3	HR	Area learning and development manager	8	Hispanic	25-34	Single	No
I4	HR	Senior leadership manager	10	Hispanic	25-34	Married	Yes
I5	Events	Conference services manager	10	White	25-34	Single	No
I6	HR	Senior talent acquisitions manager	15	White	35-44	Single	No
I7	HR – corporate	Chief human resources officer	26	White	45-54	Married	Yes
I8	HR – corporate	Senior manager, diversity and inclusion	4	African American	35-44	Single	No
I9	Property operations	Regional vice president and general manager	32	White	55-64	Married	Yes
I10	Group distribution – corporate	Director of group strategy	4	African American	25-34	Married	Yes
I11	HR	Senior talent acquisitions manager	13	Mixed	25-34	Married	Yes
I12	Engineering	Director of engineering	13	Asian	35-44	Married	Yes
I13	HR	Senior talent acquisitions manager	8	White	25-34	Single	No
I14	Revenue management	Portfolio revenue manager	25	White	45-54	Married	Yes
I15	Sales	Associate director of sales	13	Mixed	25-34	Married	No
I16	Catering	Director of catering	26	African American	35-44	Married	Yes
I17	HR	Senior manager	20	White	35-44	Married	Yes
I18	Sales	Sales manager	25	Mixed (Hawaiian, Asian)	35-44	Married	No
I19	Sales	Assistant director of sales	22	White	55-64	Single	No
I20	Front office	Front office manager	11	African American	25-34	Single	No
I21	Food and beverage (F&B)	Operations manager	9	Mixed (White, Japanese)	25-34	Single	No
I22	Sales	Key accounts director	11	White	25-34	Married	Yes
I23	F&B	Area operations director	11	White	25-34	Single	No
I24	Events	Director of events	11	White	35-44	Married	Yes

Source: Authors' own creation

			Women's hospitality professional identities
Items	Frequency	%	
<i>Ethnicity</i>			
Caucasian	223	67.6	
African American	56	17.0	
Asian	40	12.1	
Native American	8	2.4	
Pacific Islander	3	0.9	
<i>Age</i>			
18–24	91	27.6	
25–34	106	32.1	
35–44	71	21.5	
45–54	37	11.2	
55–64	21	6.4	
Over 65	4	1.2	
<i>Education</i>			
Less than high school	3	0.9	
High school/GED	140	42.4	
Associate's degree	10	3.0	
Bachelor's degree	143	43.3	
Master's degree or above	34	10.3	
<i>Household income</i>			
Less than US\$24,999	72	21.8	
US\$25,000–US\$49,999	134	40.6	
US\$50,000–US\$99,999	93	28.2	
US\$100,000–US\$199,999	11	3.3	
Prefer not to say	20	6.1	
<i>Marital status</i>			
Single (never married)	164	49.7	
Married	154	43.9	
Widowed	2	0.6	
Divorced	12	3.6	
Separated	7	1.5	
Prefer not to say	2	0.6	
<i>Children</i>			
Yes	123	37.3	
No	207	62.7	
<i>Work experience</i> ($M = 4.1$, $SD = 2.37$)			
Less than 1 year	85	25.8	
1–3 years	114	35.5	
4–6 years	72	21.8	
More than 6 years	59	17.9	
<i>Industry</i>			
Hotel	114	34.5	
Restaurant	165	50.0	
Event planning	18	5.5	
Casino	33	10	
<i>Job level</i>			
Front-line employee	130	39.4	
Shift supervisor	69	20.9	
Manager	118	35.8	
Director/general manager	13	3.9	
Source: Authors' own creation			

Table 2.
Demographic profile
of survey
participants

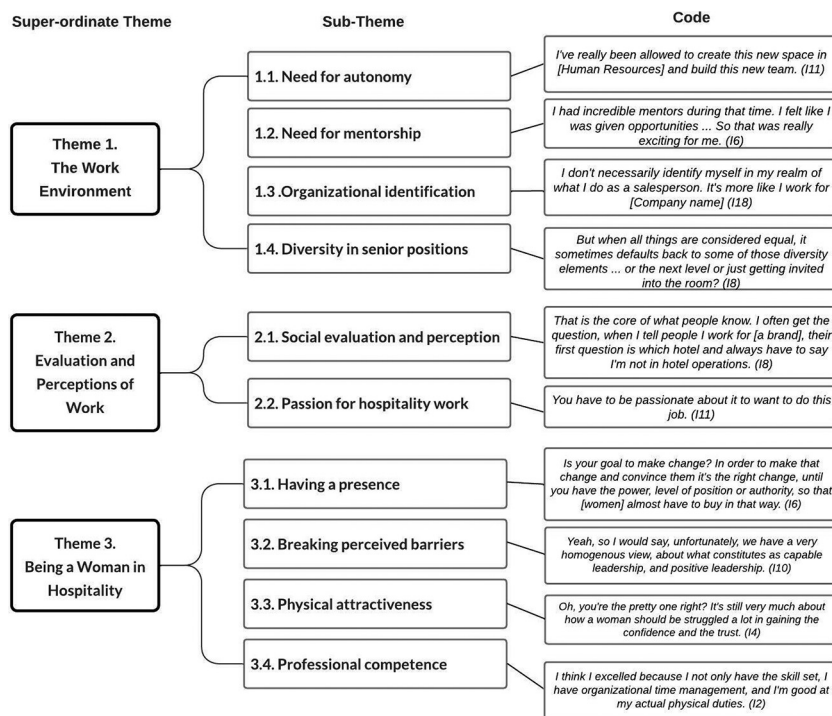


Figure 1.
Super-ordinate
themes, sub-themes
and example code
descriptions

Source: Authors' own creation

Need for autonomy. Interviewees explained a sense of autonomy in the workplace was important for curating their own work environment. For instance, when I11's company was acquired by another company, she was "allowed to create this new space [...] build this new team" (I11), which heightened her allegiance to the new company. Others sought to have autonomy in decision-making:

I never wanted to be the salesperson that was like, well, okay, I might be able to get you that. But let me go ask my boss [...] if they can knock off five more dollars. [...] I need to know what my bottom numbers are. I need to know what's acceptable for the hotel, so that I can offer that to the client (I22).

These narratives were reflected in the survey. Need for autonomy ($\alpha = 0.91$) was quantitatively measured using a six-item scale (Deci et al., 2001) on a seven-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly agree*). An example item is "It is important to me that I can make a lot of input to deciding how my job gets done," and participants reported the need for autonomy as moderately important ($M = 5.77$, $SD = 0.63$), demonstrating the generalizability of this sub-theme.

Managers required more autonomy in their work than non-managers ($F(1, 328) = 18.86$, $p < 0.001$). Age groups demonstrated significant difference in need for autonomy between age groups ($F(5, 324) = 3.32$, $p < 0.01$). The LSD *post hoc* analysis indicated women hospitality professionals aged 18–24 (mean = 5.72) and 25–34 (mean = 5.61) required less autonomy in the workplace compared to those aged 45–54 (mean = 5.98) and above 55 (mean = 6.08), suggesting older

generations seek more autonomy at work. This aligns with previous research on older workers' higher preference for job autonomy (Jiang et al., 2021). This finding holds relevance in the people-centric hospitality industry, where managers and empowered-employee are often requested to solve problems for customer problems (for a review, see Hoang et al., 2021).

Need for mentorship. All interviewees signified the importance of mentorship opportunities in the work environment. Having "incredible mentors" (I6) and the roles they play in being "my biggest advocate . . . having my best interest" (I1) impacted interviewees' perceptions of career development. I15 reflected:

I have a couple of mentors within the company, which I'm so grateful for, because they were like "you have to see the bigger picture", and I'm thankful that they pushed me to do these things (I15).

Interview findings support the importance of empowering women in hospitality through mentorship (Dashper, 2020). The survey measured the need for mentorship quantitatively using Noe's (1988) scale with three dimensions: career development, psychosocial function and role model. Items were assessed by a seven-point Likert scale (1 = *Strongly disagree*, 7 = *Strongly agree*). The importance of mentoring to career development ($\alpha = 0.92$) was measured with six-items, such as "It is important for me to have a mentor who can help me coordinate my job goals." Participants reported a neutral level of importance for the need for mentorship in career development ($M = 4.60$, $SD = 1.25$). Psychosocial support to mentoring ($\alpha = 0.92$) was measured with four items (e.g. "It is important for me to have a mentor who can convey feelings of respect for me as an individual") and participants rated it as moderately important ($M = 5.84$, $SD = 1.08$). The importance of the ability of the mentor ($\alpha = 0.90$) was measured with three-items (e.g. It is important for me to have a mentor who can motivate others), and participants reported it as moderately important ($M = 5.79$, $SD = 0.73$). Additionally, paired samples *t*-test were conducted to examine the importance of the three sub-scales (career development, psychosocial support, role model) and found psychosocial support (mean difference = 1.24, $SD = 1.05$; [$t(329) = 21.41$, $p < 0.001$]) and ability of the mentor (mean difference = 1.19, $SD = 1.25$; [$t(329) = 17.28$, $p < 0.001$]) to be more important than career support. Finally, participants preferred no gender preference for mentors (57.3%), with a minority preferring a male (9.1%) or female (33.6%) mentor. Most participants reported that the mentor's gender is not important at all (29.1%) (Lockwood, 2006). Therefore, the gender of a mentor is not important to most women. However, when gender of a mentor is important, women hospitality professionals prefer their mentor be female.

The findings of the quantitative measure suggest the needs for mentorship as moderately important to women hospitality professionals, validating this sub-theme.

Organizational identification. Some interviewees illustrated that finding alignment between individual employees and organizations is vital for professional growth and pride. I18 stated, "If I were to identify myself about my job, it's more about who I work for" showing identification with their organization. I7 explained:

I think a lot of it is making sure that you're in an organization that gets to know you, as an individual, what's important to you, and that those continue to align at every stage, whether that's vertical or lateral, because I think expansion can happen both ways (I7).

For the survey, the importance of identifying with or finding meaning and a sense of belonging with an organization ($\alpha = 0.91$) was quantitatively measured using a six-item scale (Mael and Ashforth, 1992) on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = *Strongly disagree*, 7 = *Strongly agree*). An example item is "When someone criticizes our organization, it feels like a

personal insult.” Participants reported neutral importance for organizational identification ($M = 4.60$, $SD = 1.34$), indicating generalizability to women hospitality professionals.

Furthermore, MANOVA results showed that managers (mean = 5.01) consider organizational identification more important than non-managers (mean = 4.27; $F(1, 328) = 26.89$, $p < 0.001$). Additionally, women hospitality professionals differed based on tenure (e.g. organizational/work experience), and the results showed only work experience was significantly related to organizational identification ($F(1, 328) = 13.04$, $p < 0.001$). The LSD *post hoc* analysis showed that employees with more than six years of experience (mean = 5.29) had significantly stronger organizational identification than those with less than a year of experience (mean = 4.20).

Diversity in senior positions. Another emergent theme from the interviews was the existence of diversity in senior positions in the work environment. I10 shared:

From a racial diversity standpoint, there aren't a lot of people of color in executive leadership positions. And although my company CEO has been very vocal about the fact that there is a lot of diversity in the company, but if you look at it, throughout the organization, and throughout different positions, you find that it's very minimal. The higher in terms of executive rank you go [...] it makes you wonder like, why is that? Why aren't there more women leaders, why aren't there more people of color in leadership positions? (I10)

Incorporating qualitative results, the importance of diversity in senior positions ($\alpha = 0.92$), was quantitatively examined using scales adapted from Anderson *et al.*'s (2019) importance of ethnical minority leader scale. The revised scales measured the importance of gender and race at the executive level. All items were assessed by a seven-point Likert scale (1 = *Strongly disagree*, 7 = *Strongly agree*). The importance of having a female leader was measured with a three-item scale and the importance of race in senior positions was measured with a three-item scale (e.g. “Having ethnical minority leaders at the executive level of my organization is important for me”). Participants agreed that having gender ($M = 5.24$, $SD = 1.28$) and race ($M = 5.07$; $SD = 1.28$) diversity in senior positions is important, validating its significance. Furthermore, differences in the importance of minority senior leaders were examined based on self-reported demographic variables. Respondents who reported their race as Caucasian were coded as white, and all other races were coded as minority. Although there were no differences in the reported importance of women leaders at the executive level by race (white: $M = 5.17$, $SD = 1.28$; minority: $M = 5.38$, $SD = 1.27$), participants identifying as a minority population reported race as more important (minority: $M = 5.51$, $SD = 1.17$) compared to those identifying as white (white: $M = 4.86$, $SD = 1.29$; $t = -4.43$, $p < 0.001$).

The MANOVA indicated no significant difference in the importance of gender ($F(5, 324) = 7.26$, $p < 0.001$) and race ($F(5, 324) = 5.45$, $p < 0.001$) diversity at the executive level between those aged 18–24 and 25–34. However, statistical differences were found when comparing the importance of having women in leadership positions for participants aged 18–24 with other age ranges. For instance, participants aged 35–44 (mean difference = 5.01, $p < 0.001$), 45–54 years old (mean difference = 4.69, $p < 0.001$) and 55–64 years old (mean difference = 4.73, $p < 0.001$) reported having women in leadership positions as less important compared to those aged 18–24 (mean difference = 5.80, $p < 0.001$). Finally, participants between ages 18–24 (mean difference = 5.60, $p < 0.001$) reported the importance of race in senior positions as the most important, compared to other age ranges.

Interestingly, participants' marital status affected the perceived importance of diversity in senior positions. The importance of having a woman leader ($F(1, 328) = 17.19$, $p < 0.001$) was greater among participants who self-reported as single (never married) ($M = 5.49$, $SD = 0.09$) compared to participants who self-reported as married or in a domestic partnership ($M = 4.92$, $SD = 0.10$). Similarly, the importance of race in senior positions ($F(1, 328) = 17.19$, $p < 0.001$)

was greater among participants who self-reported as single (never married) ($M = 5.32$, $SD = 0.09$) compared to those who self-reported as married or in a domestic partnership ($M = 4.78$, $SD = 0.11$).

Evaluation and perception of work

The second super-ordinate theme developed from the interviews was how interviewees' PIDs are influenced by social and self-evaluation and perception of hospitality work.

Social evaluation and perception. Individuals are often active participants in the formation of PIDs. To establish self-views of work, individuals engage in cognitive behaviors, including sharing narratives, to represent the image of their profession (Caza and Creary, 2016). However, when I18 was asked about her work in daily life, she portrays an ideal work image:

For people not involved [in hospitality], it's really all about, fun things, that we go to great places we get amazing experiences. So that's really kind of what I tend to focus on (I18).

The importance of social evaluation and perception ($\alpha = 0.82$) was quantitatively examined using a three-item scale such as "I want other people to consider my job as an altruistic job" (Inglehart, 2004; Wan *et al.*, 2014). The responses were assessed by a seven-point Likert scale (1 = *Strongly disagree*, 7 = *Strongly agree*). Participants reported this sub-theme as somewhat important ($M = 5.24$, $SD = 0.81$), demonstrating its generalizability.

Passion for hospitality work. For some interviewees, self-evaluating their own perception of hospitality work was crucial. I12 stated that questioning the core reasons behind working in the hospitality industry allowed her to ground her passion. She explained:

What is your why, you know, what is your passion? Why do you want to do this? How do you get it done? But why are you doing this? I finally had that moment. Kind of finally found my why [...] I have a position here to really make a difference (I12).

Other interviewees self-evaluated their "passion for people" (I8) and "making the world better" (I15) through their work. To quantitatively measure passion for hospitality work ($\alpha = 0.93$), a three-item scale was revised from Cable and Turban (2003) job pride scale to be specific about hospitality industry on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = *Strongly disagree*, 7 = *Strongly agree*). An example item is "I'm proud to be part of hospitality industry." Despite hospitality research emphasizing the role of passion in hospitality work (Chen *et al.*, 2022), survey participants of this study somewhat disagreed with the importance of passion for the hospitality profession ($M = 3.68$, $SD = 0.90$).

Being a woman in hospitality

The last super-ordinate theme drawn from the interviews was how identifying as a woman in the hospitality workforce affects their profession. These gendered interactions are expressed through the presence of women, breaking perceived stereotypes, physical attractiveness and professional competence.

Having a presence. Interviewees believed it was necessary to have gender representation. To be a "good leader [...] having a seat at the table" (I2) was important for women hospitality professionals. Interviewees explained that from a managerial perspective, gender diversity is good for business:

If you have a male and a female, and you have a completely male dominated leadership team, the female is the better choice, they're going to change the dynamic [...] What you want is diversity of thought (I9).

For the survey, the importance of having a presence in the workforce ($\alpha = 0.94$) was quantitatively measured with a five-item scale on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = *Strongly disagree*, 7 = *Strongly agree*), such as “It is important for me to be the person who often tries to introduce new structures, technologies, or approaches to improve efficiency” (Morrison and Phelps, 1999). Participants reported having a presence as neutral in importance ($M = 4.08$, $SD = 1.28$), suggesting having a presence is not generalizable to hospitality women professionals.

Breaking perceived barriers. For interviewees, dealing with gendered stereotypes in the workforce was a part of being a woman in the hospitality workforce. I18 elaborated:

For a man to be assertive is what we expect. For a woman to do that is overbearing and it's bitchy, and it's too aggressive and we don't like woman to talk like that. We don't want them to be confrontational (I18).

Furthermore, I1 mentioned the hospitality workforce expects women to be in departments such as human resources, “work Monday through Friday, eight to five [...] everyone just expects women to place themselves [in human resources].” These perceptions have conditioned I1 “to be your [her] biggest advocate.”

To quantitatively measure the significance of breaking perceived barriers ($\alpha = 0.78$), a seven-point Likert scale of level of problem ranging from “not at all a problem” (1) to “a very serious problem” (7) was used (Ragins *et al.*, 1998). An example item is “stereotyping and preconceptions,” and participants reported breaking perceived barriers to be a considerable concern ($M = 4.18$, $SD = 1.20$). This finding suggests that breaking perceived barriers is important to those interviewed, but is not generalizable to women hospitality professionals.

Physical attractiveness. Another sub-theme that emerged from the interviews was the physical attractiveness of women hospitality professionals. I4 mentioned that women are blatantly judged on appearance; however, when categorized as “the pretty one,” it does work as a benefit in career development. I19 elaborated on her observations:

I think physical perception is a big part. I think I see more of a bias toward ethnic or curvier girls, um, than pretty white face slim girl [...] But you know, you can't tell me that. The pretty blonde girl maybe isn't as sharp as you know, the chubby little Asian girl who is working twice as hard? (I19)

The interview results support the notion that perceived physical attractiveness of women in hospitality can impact organizational practices such as managerial favoritism (Abubakar *et al.*, 2019). For the survey, the importance of physical attractiveness ($\alpha = 0.91$) was quantitatively measured with a three-item scale on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = *Strongly disagree*, 7 = *Strongly agree*) (e.g. “A physically attractive female is most suited for a managerial job”) (Usmani, 2020). Participants neither agreed nor disagreed regarding the importance of physical attractiveness ($M = 4.07$, $SD = 1.61$). Thus, although physical attractiveness was mentioned by the interviewees, this sub-theme is not generalizable to women in the hospitality industry.

Professional competence. Interviewees shared their opinions on the importance of being recognized for their professional competence. For I1, this meant confidence in performing her work was important:

I need to know how to read the financials. I need to be able to look at that and know the numbers side to it too. Human resources is not just [about] planning parties (I1).

The survey results echoed this narrative. The importance of professional competence ($\alpha = 0.83$) was quantitatively examined with a four-item scale on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = *Strongly disagree*, 7 = *Strongly agree*), such as “It is important to me that I feel very capable when I am

working” (Deci *et al.*, 2001). Participants reported professional competence as moderately important ($M = 5.30$; $SD = 0.60$), validating the generalizability of this sub-theme.

Discussion and conclusion

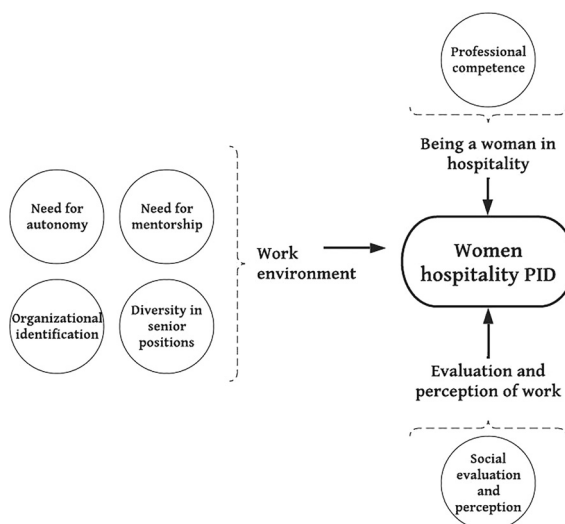
Women comprise over half of the hospitality workforce. To foster a truly inclusive hospitality workforce that embodies DEI, it is crucial to consider how women perceive their professional roles and seek a sense of belonging at work. This paper theoretically mapped women in the hospitality workforce through the lens of PID, offering practitioners a way to leverage women’s PIDs within institutional systems to include gender-neutral norms. Addressing the entrenched masculine culture and behaviors prevalent in the industry, especially at the leadership level, requires acknowledging women’s voices and embracing social change.

This study highlights the relevance of PID in the context of hospitality, challenging the traditional measurement of hospitality professions based on masculine perceptions. As the hospitality industry continues its efforts to embrace DEI, this study shows that breaking traditions and sharing a different perspective are crucial for establishing a new kind of hospitality culture. The current study expands the theoretical knowledge on hospitality PID from a different gender perspective. Figure 2 provides a visual prototype of what matters for women in hospitality.

Theoretical implications

This study highlights the importance of conceptualizing PIDs in the context of hospitality, particularly for women employees. It emphasizes the need to establish an inclusive work environment that promote job autonomy, as evidenced by both managerial and non-managerial women across age groups, particularly those over 45 (Cai *et al.*, 2019). When women explained their work environment, provision of mentorship was crucial, contrary to previous studies affirming the lack of women mentors in hospitality (Remington and

Women’s hospitality professional identities



Source: Authors’ own creation

Figure 2.
Women hospitality
PID prototype

Kitterlin-Lynch, 2018), our results showed gender of the mentor was not important for most women in hospitality.

Organizational identification was also found to be important, with managers and employees with longer tenure identify with their organizations, supporting previous findings (He and Brown, 2013). Findings also showed that younger women (between ages 18–24) prioritize having women in senior leadership positions more than other age groups. Although the positive impact of having females in managerial positions has been documented (Remington and Kitterlin-Lynch, 2018), our research specifies that the level of importance for having women in senior positions may differ among age groups. Furthermore, women identifying as a minority population emphasized the importance of racial diversity in senior positions. These results build on Swann *et al.*'s (2009) identity negotiations at work and explain the way hospitality PID is developed.

Second, the findings explain how hospitality work is evaluated and perceived by society is important for women employees. According to SIT, individuals desire to belong to social groups, such as professional groups, that are distinctly superior than others (Tajfel and Turner, 1985). Women in hospitality strive to challenge the historical perception of the industry as unskilled or low-skilled (Duncan *et al.*, 2013), presenting their work as desirable and exciting. Our findings suggest that women tend to describe their hospitality work as desirable and exciting, and this social evaluation influences how women shape their hospitality PIDs (Roberts, 2005).

Third, the results suggest being a women in hospitality is related to proving and clarifying professional competence at work. Although other professions that are historically male-dominant (such as engineering) have discussed the struggles women face to legitimize their professional competence at work (Hatmaker, 2012), our study provides new insights into hospitality women's challenges in demonstrating professional competence.

In sum, the study findings not only support the significance of PID among hospitality professionals (Chen *et al.*, 2022) but also advances hospitality PID by including novel elements of what matters to women engaged in hospitality work. The theoretical underpinnings of SIT show that experiencing the “where I belong” and “where I do not belong” identity categorization process for hospitality women fosters a unique sense of professional membership that has not been previously discussed.

Practical implications

Formulating a women's hospitality PID that embodies what matters to its members is far more complex. Nonetheless, our findings offer important practical implications. First, managers value autonomy more non-managers. Creating roles and responsibilities to reflect autonomy of power (e.g. decision-making) and empowerment to carry out decisions with resources (e.g. customer compensation) could help reinforce the study findings. Similarly, organizational identification was more important for managers than non-managers. Therefore, continuing communication to understand women values and priorities can foster a DEI-oriented work environment.

Second, most women hospitality professionals did not have a gender preference for mentors but value mentorship opportunity. Therefore, supporting women managers with female allies can catalyze mentorship opportunities. Fostering mentorship opportunities, especially for early-career professionals, promotes belonging, affiliation and commitment to their profession and industry (Mooney *et al.*, 2016).

Finally, women from minority groups prioritize gender and race diversity in senior leadership more than white women professionals. Women of color often face multiple stigmatized identities, experiencing gender and racial barriers. These compounding impacts

are linked to negative workplace outcomes and reduced well-being (Remedios *et al.*, 2020). Furthermore, younger women hospitality professionals (ages 18–24) prioritized gender and race diversity more. The results of the present study is consistent with Schroth's (2019, p. 22) proposition that “issues surrounding diversity, equity, and inclusion are more salient than in any other generation for Gen Z.” This finding emphasizes the importance of including women and women of color in leadership positions to preserve a diverse workforce pipeline. Practitioners must pay equitable attention to supporting young women of color in mediating stigmatization through diversified mentorship, inclusive communication and equitable career advancement opportunities.

Limitations and future research

The findings contribute to DEI efforts in hospitality. However, like any research initiative, there are limitations to this study. First, the qualitative interviews involved US hotel managers, while the quantitative survey included both managers and non-managers. Although the mixing of the qualitative and quantitative data yielded valuable insights into exploring the professional identities of women in hospitality, the items surveyed may have leaned toward managerial-level PIDs. For example, participants' passion for hospitality work may not have been quantitatively significant despite the qualitative results due to the variance in sample populations. Therefore, future research should expand the interviewee population to include non-managers to provide inclusive perspectives to the formulation of hospitality PID.

Second, exploring how employees from diverse backgrounds develop their PIDs would enhance understanding of social and self-perceptions in hospitality. These diverse backgrounds can also include participants' socio-economic class and disability. Additionally, future studies could explore the relationships between the sub-themes and outcomes for individuals and organizations to extend the implications of the findings. Furthermore, conducting a similar study outside of the USA may yield different perspectives.

Third, the PID survey measuring ten sub-themes was relatively long. The average time respondents took to complete the survey was 9.6 min. Although the duration is within the 15-min limit, the length of the survey may have caused respondents' fatigue bias, which refers to the measurement errors after long sessions of decision-making (Pignatiello *et al.*, 2020). A shortened version of the hospitality women profession PID survey needs to be developed and validated through the psychometric process.

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Supplementary material

Supplementary material for this article can be found online.

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Table A1.
Descriptive statistics
and correlation table
of sub-themes

Sub-themes	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1. Need for autonomy	5.77	0.63	1												
2. Mentorship in career development	4.60	1.25	0.37**	1											
3. Psychosocial support to mentoring	5.84	1.08	0.22**	0.60**	1										
4. Ability of the mentor	5.79	0.73	0.38**	0.49**	0.46**	1									
5. Organizational identification	4.60	1.34	0.32**	0.24**	0.18**	0.26**	1								
6. Ethnical minority leaders	5.07	1.28	0.18**	0.27**	0.21**	0.16**	0.14*	1							
7. Female leaders	5.24	1.28	0.21**	0.23**	0.20**	0.18**	0.21**	0.66**	1						
8. Social evaluation and perception	5.24	0.81	0.44**	0.39**	0.36**	0.41**	0.48**	0.14*	0.27**	1					
9. Passion for hospitality work	3.68	0.90	0.21**	0.12*	0.09	0.23**	0.39**	0.05	0.10	0.48**	1				
10. Having a presence	4.08	1.28	0.45**	0.40**	0.14**	0.39**	0.40**	0.19**	0.20**	0.44**	0.30**	1			
11. Perceived barriers	4.18	1.20	-0.26**	0.23**	0.18**	0.17**	-0.88**	0.05	0.09	0.07	-0.25**	-0.17**	1		
12. Physical attractiveness	4.07	1.61	0.05	0.03	0.07	0.03	-0.02	0.03	0.09	0.02	0.05	0.06	0.33**	1	
13. Professional competence	5.30	0.60	0.41**	0.27	0.24**	0.32**	0.40**	0.16**	0.19**	0.53**	0.30**	0.54**	0.01	0.08	1

Notes: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$
Source: Authors' own creation