

Relevance of Intercultural and Gender Sensitivity in the Hotel Industry - A Growing Necessity

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Abstract

With the fast-changing pace of the contemporary world, the only way to persist is by modifying one's existing schemas. The advent of globalisation brought with it a multi-cultural facet to the world. Although the hospitality industry has been known for its diverse composition, sensitivity to different aspects of the industry is essential. The rise of social media has made information more transmittable but vague. Therefore, the repercussions of cultural identity can be massive. For instance, many established luxury brands like Dolce and Gabbana faced backlash for their allegedly anti-Chinese advertisements. Another critical and long-awaited phenomenon of the present century is the pertinence of gender sensitivity. This includes things like the use of correct pronouns. Digressing from the new norm can reflect poorly on the hotel's image, but it can be offensive. This paper aims to explore sensitivity-namely intercultural and gender- and its pertinence in the contemporary world.

Keywords: Culture, Gender, Sensativity, Hospitality Industry, Strategies

INTRODUCTION

This age is called the post-modern age. This involves the process to bridge the gap between the "high" and "mass" culture as well as analyse old boundaries and create new forms (Rattansi, 1990, p. 10). This means that we live in a world where meaning is being created as much as understood. This results in re-examining our conventional ideas of what is correct. It poses a challenge to any foundational approach (Sweet, 2012). Inter-cultural and gender sensitivity, in such a world, are matters of importance because they are part of basic courtesy. The paper will look at the variables from three perspectives-growth of intercultural and gender sensitivity phenomenon

and its importance, effective techniques to implement sensitisation, and challenges to the process.

GLOSSARY

Culture - There are three broad definitions of culture. The first one defines it as a state of human perfection as a universal value. This is an idealist definition. The second one defines it as a body of all of human imaginative and absolute works. This is a documentary-based definition that is used primarily for criticism. The third definition defines it as a description of a particular way of life reflected in something as symbolic as art and as functional as behaviour. This is a social definition of culture (Williams, 2003, p. 28). In this paper, the word "culture" will be used in terms of its social definition. Therefore, the term "inter-culture" would also mean the differences between two social cultures.

Gender - Refers to a social category that is characterised by specific social norms for each gender. These norms are given to a child by their society at their birth. Therefore, there is cultural relativity. Our conventional idea sees gender as a dichotomy idea, but there are feminine men and masculine women and transgender people (Connell, 2009, p. 10).

It is conclusive to say that today, gender is seen as a scale rather than two polarities. This paper will aim to understand how to remain sensitive to different gender identities and why it is essential to do in the hospitality industry.

Sensitivity - Refers to the ability to catch and understand stimuli properly. Cultural sensitivity refers to awareness and appreciation of other's cultural norms, values, and beliefs (APA Dictionary of Psychology, n.d.). Gender sensitivity refers to taking into account the impact of

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policies, programmes, and projects on men, women, girls, and boys and trying to mitigate their adverse effects (UNO, n.d.).

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

There is a growth in the study of gender and culture and appropriate ways to address these issues and the effect of the same. Higher Social sensitivity or the ability to understand the perspective of others positively correlates with more excellent team performance (Bender, 2012). This is social or emotional intelligence, and it denotes and enhances one's leadership skills (Riggio, 2008). There is also an increase in individual performance and effectivity with the development of emotional intelligence like social sensitivity (Arhan, 2020). For specific cases, a gender-sensitive work environment reduces workplace deviant behaviour (Melwin, 2016). It can also lead to highly negative consequences like concern for their safety, especially if they are working in a male-dominated demographic like mass media (Pant, 2021). Sometimes in the absence of gender sensitivity, there can be acts of microaggression, which is detrimental (Basford TE, 2014). For people being transgender social isolation in the workplace is a concerning and debilitating issue even in practices like mental health (Mizock, 2016). They experience a sense of loss of respect because they refuse to conform to a gender role, even in male-identified transgender people (Dentice, 2009). In intercultural sensitivity, it is the need of the hour as we live in a globalised and interconnected world. Studies conducted have found that employees high on intercultural sensitivity have a more excellent score in terms of service attentiveness, revenue contribution, interpersonal skills, job satisfaction, and social satisfaction (Steve Sizoo, 2005). Having cultural intelligence in the form of cross-cultural sensitivity makes the managers look competent and gives them a leadership quality (Glazer, 2017). This pattern extends to other places of work.

The implication of this can be found in the hospitality industry as well. Gender diversity and inclusion are mediated by corporate social responsibility, which eventually also determines a hotel's overall performance (Cristina Quintana-García, 2018). As of now, women face an invisible barrier that restricts them from advancing to executive positions (Mónica Segovia-Pérez, 2019). Sexual harassment in the workplace is another rampant issue wherein staff is encouraged to "flirt" or sell "sexuality" in order to secure a position (David Gilbert,

1998). There also exists a pay gap between the genders (Iverson, 2000). These issues arise because of the absence of gender sensitivity. The consequence of this is that many potentially good employees cannot contribute to their fullest extent. This also reduces job satisfaction and, eventually, the quality of work (Derya Kara, 2012). In the case of cultural sensitivity, the situation seems to be improving because the hospitality industry is one of the few industries where intercultural sensitivity is essential. This skill does not depend on the education level of the employee (Senay Yurur, 2021). However, one way to expand and foster this skill is through meaningful interactions with people from other cultures (Chocce, 2014). Intercultural sensitivity makes for competent leaders (Ersoy, 2014). Ultimately like gender sensitivity, it leads to customer satisfaction (Arora, 2013).

GROWTH AND IMPORTANCE OF INTERCULTURAL AND GENDER SENSITIVITY

The hospitality industry is one of the largest industries, and it is known for its multi-cultural nature. Intercultural sensitivity is being recognised as one of the crucial tenets of a successful venture. This is mainly through the emphasis put on better communication. Many studies, including one by Powers and Reigal (1993), concluded that, like other businesses, the success of a hotel venture depends on the experience that the staff can provide for the customers (Powers & Reigal, 1993 cited by D. Wolvin, 1994). Therefore, it is one of those industries where human resource is the greatest asset. Therefore, the development of that resource is a good investment. As mentioned above, intercultural sensitivity increases customer satisfaction. Therefore, it has become the manager's responsibility to train their staff dress codes' perceptions of times, service procedures, the motivation for professional development' employee counselling; work schemes; and the role of women and effective communication (Djauhari, 2011). All these affect intercultural interactions. These skills are taught to students and staff regularly now.

Similarly, for gender sensitivity, the issue became more prominent when feminine sensibility became apparent in the research. Work has been historically gender-typed; therefore, responsibilities that involve caring or nurturing go to women. So, there is a large proportion of women in the hospitality workforce (approximately 55.5 per cent) but very few women in positions of power (10 per cent)

(Washington State University, n.d.). This requires that the industry become more sensitive to the differences in the experience of men and women. It is also affected by cooperation and political policies (Ghosh, 2020). Another barrier, besides the glass ceiling, is prejudice, especially in “feminised industries” (Purcell, 1996).

Nevertheless, there is a change in this phenomenon. Awareness is bought by movements that mobilise people to look at feminine sensibilities and laws that acknowledge all genders. Hotels are trying to develop gender-sensitive policies to combat perceived gender bias (Khan FN, 2021). This is important because this would help bring changes on three levels- institutional, individual, and interaction (Monica Segovia-Pérez, 2021).

TECHNIQUES TO IMPLEMENT SENSITISATION

There are behavioural differences between different cultures. For example- Americans and Asians find integration and exemplification techniques more desirable than intimidation and supplication (Jogaratham, 2007).

The importance of cultural competency has been established above, but another benefit of it includes better team performance, especially in an environment where the cultural background of the staff is diverse. Cross-cultural competency, cultural sensitivity, and relationship building are three critical aspects determining the staff’s performance in a multi-cultural environment (Cheung, 2015). Similarly, the hour’s need is to adapt, assimilate, and integrate women and other genders within the existing framework. This acts as a sound moral principle and helps in harnessing their potentials to the fullest. In order to create a sensitive framework, I have applied the SERVQUAL model proposed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1988). This model has been applied because of its widely accepted validity and reliability in different subsets of the hospitality industry (Ravichandran et al., 2010; Pakurár et al., 2019; Saleh & Ryan, 1991).

The model was initially formulated to fix the gaps between service quality and the customer’s perception of service quality. This tenant can be extracted to include gender and inter-cultural sensitisation because the service quality is influenced by these two variables, which will influence the customer’s perception of the service quality. The aspect of the SERVQUAL model that can be especially appealing to this area is the determinants

of service quality. The model proposed ten determinants of customer satisfaction. These ten dimensions have been analysed and adapted into five categories through which gender and cultural sensitisation can be practically applied. These include- responsiveness, competence, communication, tangibility, and knowing the customer (Parasuraman, 1988).

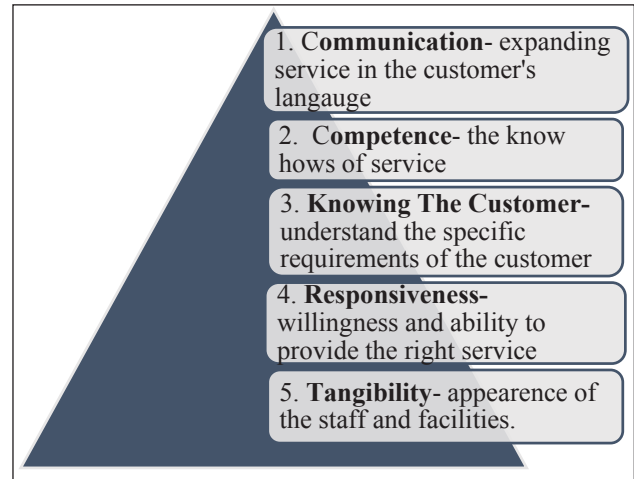


Fig. 1

When all of these determinants align with the existing goal, i.e. gender and intercultural sensitivity, there will be consonance between the perceived service quality and actual service quality. therefore, there can be three conditions:

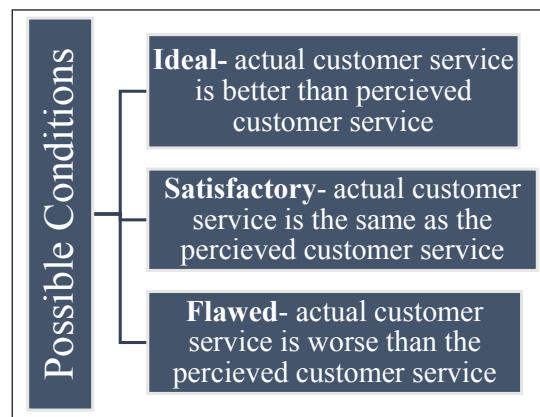


Fig. 2

Every establishment will aim to achieve the ideal condition, which will ensure that the customer is happy. In order to do so, the hotel needs to include gender and intercultural sensitivity into its service and vocabulary. This can be done by applying sensitisation training on these five dimensions:

Dimension	Inter-Cultural and Gender Sensitisation
1. Responsiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff should cultivate the quality of not falling for unconscious cultural and gender bias. • This can be done by following the ACE formula, i.e. acknowledgement, call, and empathy. • The staff should acknowledge their bias then move on to focus on their call, i.e. the need of the customer, and finally, this call can only be executed through empathy (as shown in Fig. 3).
2. Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural sensitisation- the staff should understand the cultural demographics of their customers, educate themselves on the broad aspects of various cultures, and be patient while conversing with the people. • Gender sensitisation- the staff, should be familiar with the different and specific experiences of genders, they should understand the specific pronouns used by individuals, and apologise if they have assumed another gender pronoun for an individual. • Other essential skills are given in Fig. 4.
3. Competence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The staff should be well versed in the main languages of the area. For instance- the staff should be aware of the disparities in meaning between different languages. • The staff should be aware of professional behaviour and ethics. They should not behave in any manner that would make the guest uncomfortable.
4. Knowing the customer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The staff should be aware of the customer’s essential background while still respecting their privacy. They should be sensitive to aspects of their cultural or gender identity, which is susceptible to prejudice. • This will allow the staff to formulate a strategy to deliver the specific needs of the customer.
5. Tangibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The hotel should ensure that it has the necessary material required, which are user friendly. • This is specifically applicable in electronic gadgets, boards, instructions, or other information presented in a singular “universal” language. • The staff should also remember that they are not supposed to make assumptions about their ethnicity or gender.

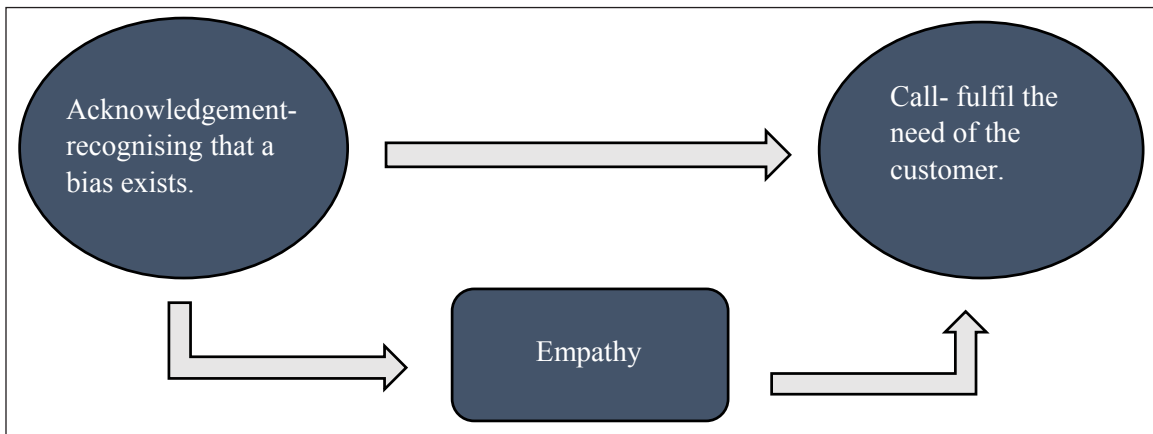


Fig. 3

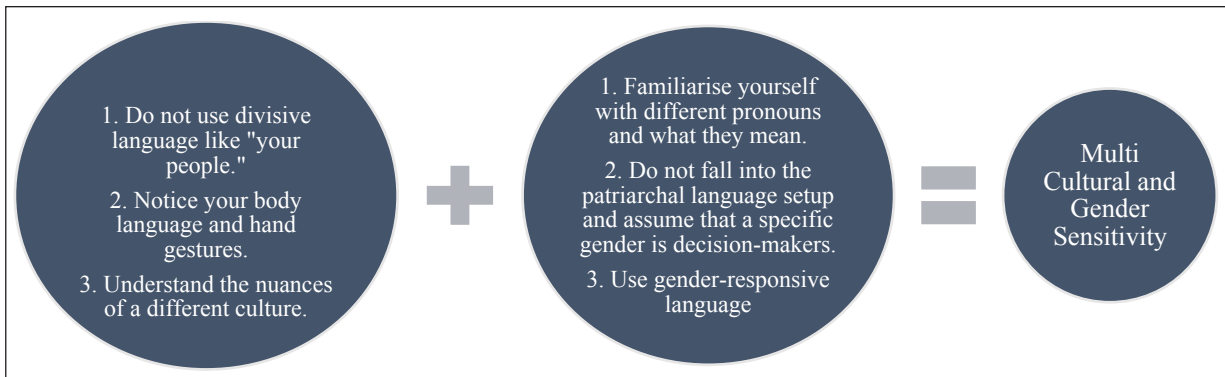


Fig. 4

Besides these five determinants, three more extraneous variables will ensure that the sensitisation and effect reach the guest and increase the hotel's performance. These include word of mouth, experience with the hotel, and the guest's personal needs (Parasuraman, 1988).

OBSTACLES IN THE PRACTICAL APPLICATION OF THE STRATEGIES

The interaction between the employees and the customers is an important aspect that determines the quality of the hotel. Therefore, the biggest obstacle is the training of the staff. The staff may be unable to understand the specific requirement of the guest. This may be further worsened by the unconscious biases that nearly all of us harbour. This may offend the guest or come off as rude. Therefore, to overcome this, the staff needs to be trained in cultural sensitivity from the very beginning. Another effective solution is to create a conducive and safe environment among the hotel employees wherein any form of formal/informal prejudice or remark would be unacceptable, along with training on professional communication skills. Education is also an opportunity to instil this attitude in the staff. By including cultural/gender sensitisation courses in the syllabus and providing practical examples to the student, the educators can ensure that their students become apt employees in the future (Grobelna, 2015; Mohsin, 2014; Vidya, n.d.).

FUTURE IMPLICATIONS

This paper forms a comprehensive research base that could explore the possible practical applicability of

sensitisation in the hospitality industry. Because of its very nature, this industry is uniquely positioned to mould ideas and become a vehicle for social change. Cultural and gender-based discriminations are sadly observed even today. Despite movements across the world holding people accountable. Therefore, this field of research would yield more practical applications that would eventually add positively to the industry.

CONCLUSION

Ernest Hemingway, despite his gruff persona, transferred a heavy piece of wisdom onto humanity. He said, "When people talk, listen completely. Most people never listen." Perhaps, at its core, sensitisation is about a compassionate response, especially to those historically wronged. Besides the moral aspect, fiscally, it is a lucrative minefield, as noted above. It brings in customer satisfaction which eventually helps increase business. In this paper, by applying a customer satisfaction model, I found the five determinants through which cultural and gender sensitivity could be practically applied to the hospitality field. This includes- responsiveness, competence, communication, tangibility, and knowing the customer. Then, I identified the obstacles that that one might face. These include- communication barriers, staff-guest interaction, and educational reforms. Therefore, this paper explored the importance, applicability, and obstacle to cultural and gender sensitisation.

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