
AGE DISCRIMINATION IN THE HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY: HOW DO HOSPITALITY STUDENTS VIEW THEIR ELDERLY COLLEAGUES?

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Elderly individuals are frequently perceived as being physically weak, reliant on others, and a source of societal stress. It is imperative for public health professionals and society at large to confront ageism, as they have the potential to mitigate and prevent discrimination, influence policy development, and impact the possibilities available for older individuals to achieve healthy ageing (WHO 2022). The focus of this study is the incidence of discrimination against older people (ageism) as a distinct form of prejudice in the tourism and hotel business. On the basis of an investigation of reciprocal interactions and the perception of working with older colleagues, the current situation of intergenerational relationships among the aging population is revealed. The aim of this study is to address the need for a better mutual understanding of the older and younger populations in the business environment and to foster more pleasant and productive collaboration between them. Using the proposed model, the study examines how prepared hospitality students in Serbia are to work with older colleagues and what their general opinion is about the older population. A survey was conducted among 198 students of hospitality management from Novi Sad (Serbia), incorporating several metrics indicated in the literature. The results imply that students' attitudes towards the social skills of older colleagues have the greatest positive influence on their willingness to work with older workers. In addition, the study revealed that a higher degree of anxiety about aging is associated with a decreased willingness to work with older colleagues. This emphasizes the need for hospitality and tourism faculties to incorporate pedagogical strategies, such as intergenerational service learning, to encourage and maintain intergenerational cooperation in the hospitality industry.

Keywords: *ageism, hospitality students, hotel industry, Serbia.*

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1. Introduction

The world's population is experiencing an increase in life expectancy. The phenomenon of population ageing is escalating significantly and rapidly on a global scale, indicating a pivotal demographic shift of utmost significance in the annals of human history. During the second half of the twentieth century, affluent nations across the globe successfully underwent a comprehensive demographic transformation (Powell and Cook 2009). According to forecasts, by 2030, approximately one in six people in the world will be aged 60 or over (WHO 2022). The impact of the world's aging population is already significant and will only increase in the coming years (Grinin, Grinin, and Korotayev 2023). Given the widespread nature of these trends, it is anticipated that the coming period will be characterized by an increase in the ageing workforce. For decades, the Serbian population has been affected by the process of demographic aging, which essentially means an increase in the number and share of the elderly population in the overall population. In the middle of the twentieth century, Serbians were one of the youngest populations in Europe. However, due to a decline in the birth rate and a decrease in the mortality rate of the elderly, an intensive and continuous aging of the population began in the middle of the last century (Manzi *et al.* 2019). As the world's population ages, the need for older persons to continue working grows. Although regulations in Serbia have significantly contributed to the elimination of age discrimination in the workplace, biases still exist. The problem can partly be explained by the stereotypes about older workers a being unable to adapt to training and will be ill or prone to accidents (Bešlić, I., and Bešlić D. 2008). In the literature on hospitality and tourism, the majority of research on age diversity concentrates on managers' opinions and attitudes towards older workers, as well as their impact on employment opportunities and interactions with these individuals (Ng and Lim-Soh 2021; Pit *et al.* 2021). This study focuses on hospitality students because they are the current and future young employees in the hospitality and tourism industries and represent the future managers and leaders of the industry. As such, their perspective on older adults in the workplace may be crucial in preventing age discrimination.

2. Literature Review

The hospitality industry, which mostly employs people in catering establishments, classic restaurants, fast-food restaurants, hotels, *etc.*, was one of the first to opt to hire older people. There are numerous explanations for this. To begin with, older workers performed above-average during their training period and were recognised as top performers. Aside from the fact that a considerable percentage of them already had prior experience and knowledge that they applied successfully, they excelled in the following areas: quality of work, self-confidence, and task execution speed (Ananth and DeMicco 1991). The consequences of ageism are reflected in the domain of discrimination in the workplace, in the unequal position of older people in the health care system, as well as in stigmatisation in various social relationships (Chang *et al.* 2020). The fear that others may evaluate a person through the prism of negative group-based stereotypes is known as stereotype threat (Kaiser 1974). Previous research has investigated the factors that may influence the younger people's attitudes towards older adults and their willingness to collaborate with older workers. These factors include knowledge about aging

(Cooney, Minahan, and Siedlecki 2021), aging anxiety (Powell and Cook 2009), contact (Barnett and Adams 2018; Bousfield and Hutchison 2010), and culture (Mihajlović 2013). According to Cooney *et al.* (2021), ageism was specifically predicted by higher levels of anxiety about aging, poorer levels of knowledge about aging, and less frequent and poorer quality contact with older persons. A strong link between the quality of contact and the students' intentions to work with older people was found by Bousfield and Hutchison (2010). Knowledge about aging and contact with older adults are associated with lower ageism (Barnett and Adams 2018). Stereotypes about older people can lead to aging anxiety, which has been studied in relation to attitudes towards older people and willingness to work with older adults (Donizzetti 2019). Although hospitality students did not have high levels of aging anxiety, a study by Powell and Cook (2009) found that it was the second most important of seven independent variables in determining students' willingness to work with older people. In line with these arguments and previous evidence, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1. Attitudes towards social skills have a positive effect on Willingness to work with older workers.

H2. Attitudes towards physical and mental abilities have a positive effect on Willingness to work with older workers.

H3. Aging anxiety has a negative effect on Willingness to work with older workers.

H4. Contact quality has a positive effect on Willingness to work with older workers.

3. Methods

3.1. Questionnaire development

The questionnaire in this study was comprised of a number of scales derived from previous research that established their validity. The researchers defined an 'older person' as a person aged 65 and over. This was chosen on the basis of the age-related retirement requirements of workers in Serbia. The questionnaire used in the study consists of four parts. The first part measured the socio-demographic characteristics of the students (gender, level of study, and work experience in the hotel industry) and their contact with older people at work. Students were asked to indicate how often they had contact with older adults on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (many times a day). The second part of the questionnaire measured *aging anxiety* using the four-item scale developed by Bousfield and Hutchison (2010). The third part assessed the *willingness to work with older adults* with five items adapted from Chu A. and Chu R. (2011). Respondents rated their level of agreement with statements in parts two and three on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The fourth part presents ten bipolar adjective pairs reflecting extreme words that have been used to measure students' *attitudes towards the physical and mental abilities* (four pairs) and *social abilities* (six pairs) of older workers (Powell and Cook 2009). To determine contact quality, participants were asked to express their feelings about their contact with older persons using bipolar adjective pairs adopted from Grinin *et al.* (2023) and Hertzman and Zhong (2016). The adjective pairs were rated on a 5-point semantic scale. The higher the score, the more favorable the respondent's attitudes towards older people are.

3.2. Data collection

Data were collected from March to June of 2022 using a technique called convenience sampling. The combination of an online survey and a standard paper and pen survey was used in order to collect data from the hospitality students at the University of Novi Sad, Department of Geography, Tourism and Hotel Management (Hotel Management and Gastronomy courses). The sample consists of students who have worked in hotels in different positions (F&B sector, reception, hotel housekeeping). A total of 227 respondents accepted the invitation to complete the questionnaire. A total of 29 questionnaires were discarded due to many missing values. Finally, 198 valid questionnaires were processed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences Version 23 (SPSS). Respondents were informed that the questionnaire was anonymous and that their participation was completely voluntary. The average time taken to complete the questionnaire was 15 minutes.

4. Results

4.1. Study Sample

The sample consists of 198 hospitality students from the University of Novi Sad, Department of Geography, Tourism and Hotel Management. There is a higher number of women in the sample (52 %). There is also the highest number of students in their first year of bachelor studies (26.3 %) and in their second year (22.2 %). Students with up to one year of work experience in the hotel industry are predominant in the sample (35.8%), followed by those with 1 to 3 years of experience (30.8 %). The largest number of students never had contact with older workers in the workplace (66 students, or 33.3% of the sample), while 28.8 % of respondents had contact with older workers several times per month. A very small number of respondents had regular contact with older workers (8.6 %) (Table 1).

Table 1

Study sample of respondents (N = 198)

Gender (%)		Level of study (%)	
Male	48.0	Bachelor studies	
Female	52.0	1 st year	26.3
		2 nd year	22.2
		3 rd year	21.7
		4 th year	17.2
		Master studies	9.1
		Ph.D. studies	3.5
Contact frequency (%)		Work experience in the hotel industry (%)	
Never	33.3	Up to 1	35.8
Several times per month	28.8	1-3	30.8
Several times per week	18.7	3-5	21.2
Several times per day	10.6	More than 5	12.1
Many times per day	8.6		

4.2. Descriptive statistics and Exploratory factor analysis (EFA)

Table 2 presents the mean values and standard deviations for all measurement items, as well as the results of the Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) (principal component analysis) with Promax rotation: factor loadings, KMO (Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin test) and % Variance explained. Representativeness was good (KMO for all factors is greater than 0.7) and Bartlett's sphericity test was significant, confirming that the data are suitable for the analysis (Iweins *et al.* 2013). EFA suggested that all variables analyzed were unidimensional, explaining 60.26–81.54 % of the variance. The reliability analysis confirmed that all factors used in the study are reliable, as Cronbach's alpha (α) for each construct is greater than 0.7 (Iweins *et al.* 2013), ranging from 0.701 to 0.837. The descriptive statistics show that the overall mean value is the lowest for Aging anxiety (2.347), and highest for Contact quality (4.624).

Table 2

Results of descriptive statistic, exploratory factor analysis (EFA), and reliability of the instruments

Factors and Items	Mean	Std. Dev.	Factor loadings	KMO	% Variance explained	α
Willingness to work with older workers	4.072	0.686				
I believe I have the ability to work well with older workers in the workplace	4.136	0.864	0.812	0.878	71.27 %	0.789
With the increasing number of older customers and workers in the hospitality and tourism industry, I am still willing to work in the industry	4.061	0.921	0.831			
I will cooperate with older workers on my job	3.995	0.881	0.801			
I am willing to work with older workers in the workplace	3.924	1.047	0.816			
I am willing to help older workers at my job	4.242	0.908	0.827			
Attitudes toward social abilities	4.119	0.646				
Ignorant–knowledgeable	4.429	.9466	0.798	0.774	81.54 %	0.837
Withdrawn–sociable	4.045	.9306	0.813			
Negative–positive	3.954	0.914	0.864			
Hostile–friendly	4.005	1.054	0.793			
Contempt–respect	4.273	0.876	0.901			
Disgust–admiration	4.010	1.037	0.873			
Attitudes toward physical and mental abilities	3.589	0.898				
Dependent–independent	3.505	1.636	0.754	0.801	60.26 %	0.701
Grumpy–pleasant	4.081	1.1504	0.783			
Narrow minded–open to new ideas and values	3.449	1.244	0.717			
Unwell–healthy	3.323	1.249	0.782			
Aging anxiety	2.347	1.160				
I do not want to get old because it means I am closer to dying.	2.221	2.232	0.896	0.830	79.08 %	0.806
I am concerned that my mental abilities will suffer when I become an old adult.	2.328	2.343	0.901			
I am worried that I will lose my independence when I become an older adult	2.446	2.465	0.876			
Contact quality	4.624	0.469		0.712	80.62 %	0.827

Table 2 (continued)

Factors and Items	Mean	Std. Dev.	Factor loadings	KMO	% Variance explained	α
Awkward–Natural	4.510	0.650	0.837			
Unpleasant–Pleasant	4.687	0.623	0.828			
Bad–Good	4.702	0.458	0.911			
Negative–Positive	4.596	0.492	0.908			

4.3. The results of the regression analysis

Standard linear regression analysis was conducted in order to analyze the influence of Attitudes towards social abilities, Attitudes towards physical and mental abilities, Aging anxiety, and Contact quality on Willingness to work with older workers. The results show that H1 and H2 were supported, indicating that Attitudes towards social abilities ($\beta = 0.794$, $p = 0.000$) and Attitudes towards physical and mental abilities ($\beta = 0.191$, $p = 0.007$) have a significant positive impact on Willingness to work with older workers. Aging anxiety ($\beta = -0.298$, $p = 0.000$) was found to have a negative effect on the Willingness to work with older workers. This means that H3 is confirmed. Contact quality ($\beta = 0.008$, $p = 0.920$) was not found to positively affect the Willingness to work with older workers, thus rejecting H4 (Table 3).

Table 3

The results of the regression analysis

Independent variable	Dependent variable – Willingness to work with older workers			
	R ²	F	Sig.	β
Attitudes towards social ability	0.631	334.630	0.000	0.794**
Attitudes towards physical and mental abilities	0.066	7.415	0.007	0.191**
Aging anxiety	0.089	18.902	0.000	-0.298**
Contact quality	0.005	0.010	0.920	0.008

Note: ** β is significant at 0.01 level.

5. Conclusion

The results of the conducted research proved that hotel management students in Serbia have a generally positive attitude towards their older colleagues. The research results are consistent with the results of the study conducted by (Powell and Cook 2009), so the hospitality students did not have very high levels of aging anxiety. However, aging anxiety has a significant negative impact on their willingness to work with older workers. The importance of young people's attitudes towards the elderly should occupy a special place in educational practice and work with students of all ages. While there are some positive aspects of the impact of the ageing workforce, such as their extensive experience and job compatibility, it is generally observed that the ageing workforce hinders the implementation of innovations, as well as the retraining of the workforce and the potential for increasing labour productivity (Grinin, Grinin, and Korotayev 2023). Therefore, it is necessary to promote and develop in students and young people a positive attitude towards the elderly in their environment, primarily in the family but

also in general. This positive relationship should imply the willingness of young people to help older people adapt to new technologies. Ageism and ageing anxiety could be mitigated by enhancing knowledge about the ageing process and the quality of contact with older people. From an educational and developmental point of view, it is mutually beneficial and desirable for young people to have a positive view of older people. Those primarily responsible for discrimination against the elderly should benefit from a better understanding of the ageing process in terms of fear and stereotyping. Understanding the causes of prejudice against the elderly is essential for fostering favourable views towards them. It is important to work systematically to improve relations between the young and the elderly. General human values such as respect, understanding, compassion, and support for others must be fostered in students through education, because this is the only way young people will be able to develop into mature individuals capable of actively participating in the development of the hospitality industry as well as of other activities, for the benefit of society as a whole.

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