

Unveiling women's leadership traits in Southeast Asia's hospitality and tourism sector: Perceptions of undergraduate female students

Anderson Ngelambong¹, Siao Fui Wong^{2*}, Luh Yusni Wiarti³, Rasmee Islam⁴ and Silverina A. Kibat⁵

¹*Faculty of Hotel and Tourism Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Pulau Pinang, Malaysia*

²*MODUL School of Tourism and Hospitality Management Nanjing, Nanjing Technology University Pujiang Institute, China*

³*Bali Tourism Polytechnic, Indonesia*

⁴*Tourism Industry Program, Faculty of Management Science, Chandrakasem Rajabhat University, Thailand*

⁵*Faculty of Hotel and Tourism Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Sabah, Malaysia*

* Corresponding author: siaofui.wong@modul.ac.at

Abstract

In the hospitality and tourism industries, women are well-represented in non-management roles but their presence decreases as they rise in leadership. This qualitative study aims to explore critical traits contributing to women's leadership roles in the hospitality and tourism industries in the Southeast Asian countries of Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand from the perspectives of female undergraduate students. The Voyant Tool version 2.6.12 was used to analyze a corpus of 4,469 words obtained via semi-structured interviews. Based on thematic analysis, five key themes emerged: communication skills, strategic thinking, adaptability, resilience, and emotional intelligence. Although these themes were consistent across the three countries, each country's replies differed. Malaysians prioritized crisis management and market trend prediction. Indonesians noted relationship-building and inventiveness, while Thais noted clarity of communication and analytical thinking. The individuals also did not set themselves apart from stereotypically masculine roles. Instead, they recognize the importance of masculine and feminine traits in leadership approaches and are willing to accept their true selves. The findings provide valuable insights for practical and theoretical advancements in women's empowerment and gender equality. This study encourages Asian business managers to embrace a gender-neutral leadership style as a means to inform evidence-based gender equality and inclusiveness strategies.

Keywords: Women Leadership, Gender Equality, Hospitality and Tourism, Trait Theory.

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Introduction

The role of gender equality and women's empowerment in tourism and development was highlighted by Ferguson (2011). This is also emphasized in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UNWTO, 2019). To support this goal, numerous studies have addressed gender equality in leadership roles within the hospitality and tourism industries. For example, Ferguson and Alarcón (2014) and Laksi and Monica (2022) highlighted the role of gender parity in advancing women's empowerment and inclusivity to achieve global development goals. Guillet et al. (2019a) and Mooney (2020) highlighted the need to examine gender representation in leadership and the importance of preparing women for leadership positions. Ali et al. (2022) and Gebbels et al. (2020) shed light on the current depiction of women in leadership positions within the industry. Despite women being well-represented in non-management roles, there is a noticeable decrease in their presence as they move up the leadership hierarchy. These collective studies emphasize the significance of addressing gender disparities to enhance female progression into leadership roles.

Existing studies that have examined the topic of female representation in leadership roles primarily explore how diversity and culture affect leadership styles and female representation in leadership positions (Kalargyrou and Costen, 2017), and challenges and opportunities in leadership roles (e.g., Apriani and Zulfiani, 2020; Je et al., 2020; Gebbels et al., 2020). Limited research has qualitatively explored the traits that contribute to women's leadership roles, particularly in the tourism and hospitality industry. Qualitative studies on women's leadership enable an in-depth exploration of gender issues within the industry (Guillet et al., 2019a). Moreover, scant studies have delved into the perspectives of young female undergraduates, the industry's future leaders, except Guillet et al. (2019a), Sánchez et al. (2021) and Yeoward and Nauta (2020) who highlighted the necessity of leadership education for undergraduate female students to increase executive representation. The hospitality and tourism sector is a female-dominated occupation, and achieving gender equality and empowerment for all women is a core commitment of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UNWTO, 2019). Yet, not only have men continued to dominate in leadership positions, but the issue of gender stereotypes in the Asian hospitality industry remains understudied (Xiong et al., 2022). Perhaps Ting et al. (2024) were the only scholars who explored the necessity of integrating diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) into business education.

To fill the research gaps, this study aims to explore critical traits contributing to women's leadership roles in the hospitality and tourism industry from the perspectives of female undergraduate students. Specific attention is given to three prominent tourism destinations in Southeast Asia: Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand. The study enhances understanding of leadership practices, gender representation, and organizational sustainability within the hospitality and tourism industry. It addresses critical issues such as inclusive leadership, gender disparities in leadership roles, and empowering leadership practices. This study helps shape the future of leadership in the dynamic and evolving landscape of hospitality and tourism.

Literature Review

Gender Equality and Leadership

Previous studies on female leadership have elucidated the importance of gender representation and equality in the hospitality and tourism industry. Koseoglu et al. (2019) highlighted the under-representation of women in senior management positions in tourism academia, highlighting the imbalance ratio and influence of female leaders. Mooney (2020) emphasized how stereotypes about women's domestic commitments are reinforced, calling for a shift in traditional theoretical frameworks. Meneses et al. (2020) found that general stereotyping contributes to sectoral prejudices in tourism, while Vila et al. (2021) revealed a concentration of publications related to gender equality in tourism, indicating a growing focus on this crucial issue. Xiong et al. (2021) highlight the significance of gender equality for the support and development of sustainable tourism in China's hospitality. Gewinner (2020) examined gender and leadership among full professors of hospitality and tourism academia across the UK, USA, German speaking countries and the Asia-Pacific region. Additionally, Ferguson (2011), Ferguson and Alarcón (2014), and Laksi and Monica (2022) emphasize promoting women's empowerment and inclusivity through gender equality. Their work aligns with global development goals. Guillet et al. (2019a) explored women's leadership orientation (feminine, masculine, gender-neutral) in the Hong Kong hospitality industry, shedding light on diverse leadership styles and the importance of recognizing and valuing these different approaches. The literature indicates that gender equality is crucial to engendering successful leadership in the tourism and hospitality industry.

Female Leadership in the Tourism and Hospitality Industry

Female representation in leadership roles within the tourism and hospitality industry has been a subject of growing interest. Despite the industry being one of the few that are relatively gender-balanced, female's representation remains low in senior and management positions (Ali et al., 2022). Women are well-represented in non-management roles (Nomnga, 2017). This disparity highlights challenges that hinder women from progressing into higher leadership roles (Guillet et al., 2019a). The rise of working women has also increased research on challenges and barriers to female career advancement (Nagar, 2021).

Efforts addressing gender gap in leadership have been emphasized in the literature. Initiatives for women's entrepreneurial empowerment in the industry were proposed to challenge traditional beliefs and encourage women's leadership in Iran (Bagheri et al., 2023) and South Africa (Nomnga, 2017). Issues (e.g., work-life balance, systemic barriers, lack of female role models) and strategies (e.g., flexibility, promotion initiatives, working harder) for female advancement into leadership were also identified in the U.S. (Remington and Kitterlin-Lynch, 2018). Additionally, the importance of education and training in preparing women for leadership positions has been underscored in Hong Kong (Guillet et al., 2019b). The unseen obstacles faced by female leaders in southeastern U.S. were also explored (Chen et al., 2021). Studies have also evaluated the financial implications and highlighted the need for U.S. organizations to foster an inclusive culture, address gender disparities, and promote gender diversification in management positions (Repetti, 2020). The role of gender

diversity in leadership positions for organizational performance and resilience has been recognized, suggesting the need for strategic leadership frameworks that endorse inclusivity and diversity (Ho et al., 2022). However, in the Asian context, inclusive policies may positively improve women's roles in the workforce but may negatively affect financial performance to the business (Pidani et al., 2020).

Revisiting Relevant Studies on Female Leadership in the Hospitality and Tourism Industry

Various aspects of women's leadership in the industry have revealed research gaps that warrant further exploration. Gebbels et al. (2020) proposed suggestions for addressing gender underrepresentation in women's career advancement in the U.K. hospitality industry, emphasizing the need for inclusive dialogue and changes in organizational policies. Boone et al. (2013) discussed the invisible barriers to women's career advancement in the global hospitality industry, highlighting how women remain a minority in top executive positions. Recently, Ali et al. (2022) explored the dynamics of women in tourism and hospitality, shedding light on hierarchical and bottom-up phenomena within the industry.

Guillet et al. (2019a) raised questions about feminine leadership in the hospitality industry, pointing out the need for more dialogue on female executives' leadership orientations in future studies. Kalargyrou and Costen (2017) focused on identifying gaps and providing suggestions for managing diversity in tourism and hospitality. Mooney (2020) critiqued the approach to "female leadership" and reinforced stereotypes about women's domestic commitments. Hoang et al. (2021) conducted a systematic literature review on empowering leadership in hospitality and tourism, highlighting the need for further exploration using diverse methodologies. Bagheri et al. (2023) examined empowerment among female entrepreneurs in Iran tourism industry, emphasizing its impact on neutralizing gender discrimination.

Women's leadership in Southeast Asia, particularly in the tourism and hospitality industry, is a topic of growing attention. Several recent studies have shed light on challenges and opportunities faced by women aspiring to leadership roles in this region. Apriani and Zulfiani (2020) discussed how examining authentic leadership characteristics could better prepare Southeast Asian women for leadership positions. Gebbels et al. (2020) highlighted the imbalance of women in senior roles in the hospitality sector and emphasized the need for reflection on career development for women. Je et al. (2020) provided insights into gendered labor issues in tourism organizations and recommended advancing gender equality in tourism and hospitality.

Trait Theory of Leadership

Trait theory assumes leaders are differentiated by certain traits (Colbert et al., 2012). These traits tend to remain stable over time and can vary in individual expression. However, Harrison (2018) criticized the theory by highlighting its ineffectiveness in justifying leadership roles among entrepreneurs. Also, early trait research encountered challenges as it lacked a robust personality theory to guide the exploration of leadership traits (Colbert et al., 2012). Despite these criticisms, trait theory has been foundational in leadership studies since the early 20th century. According to DeRue et al. (2011) and Zaccaro (2007), trait theory emphasizes the significance of individual

traits and characteristics in shaping leadership effectiveness. This is supported by Colbert et al. (2012), who found significant effects of extraversion and openness to experience on the emergence and effectiveness of leadership. Trait theory is useful for exploring key leadership traits essential for effective leadership in the tourism and hospitality industry.

Today, trait theory is still relevant in comprehending leadership perceptions and self-efficacy, especially concerning gender biases (Andrade, 2022). Recent studies have delved into the intersection of gender, personality traits, and leadership effectiveness, indicating that feminine qualities may augment transformational leadership, particularly in female leaders (Chen and Shao, 2022). Literature also highlighted the expected role (adaptability of leadership styles) and traits (better communication, caring, empathy) of female leaders (Costa et al., 2017; Fan et al., 2021). Recently, Xiong et al. (2022) highlighted the need for more examination of women leadership in trait theory studies, particularly in terms of methodology. Trait theory is a useful framework for assessing the impact of gender role expectations and stereotypes on leadership perceptions (Rosette and Tost, 2010). Exploring how gendered expectations influence leadership traits and behaviors reveals challenges and opportunities encountered by women in leadership roles within the hospitality and tourism sector. Therefore, trait theory can be utilized to understand how specific leadership traits are perceived and to provide insights into valued qualities associated with successful female leadership in the industry.

Methodology

Research Design

Qualitative studies are instrumental in exploring women's career development. They enable a profound exploration of complex phenomena, including leadership styles, and provide rich insights that quantitative methods may not capture (Domecq et al., 2015). In the context of leadership in tourism and hospitality, qualitative approaches can offer an understanding of the experiences and perspectives of women leaders, shedding light on leadership orientations and practices (Guillet et al., 2019a). Qualitative approaches have been utilized in studies on feminine leadership in the hospitality industry to capture various dimensions of leadership orientations among female executives (Guillet et al., 2019a) and to provide a more in-depth exploration of gender issues within the industry (Domecq et al., 2015; Hoang et al., 2021). By adopting qualitative phenomenological approaches, researchers have been able to delve into the opinions and lived experiences of female leaders in Southeast Asia (Guillet et al., 2019a).

Population and Key Informants

Sánchez et al. (2021) and Yeoward and Nauta (2020) highlight the importance of fostering leadership education among undergraduate female students to enhance their representation in executive positions. Thus, the target population consists of female undergraduate students majoring in hospitality and tourism programs at three renowned public universities in Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand. Female undergraduate students are valuable participants in studies on women's leadership, as

they represent a significant demographic group with distinctive perceptions regarding women's leadership roles within the industry. For this study, informants who had four to six months of internship experience in the hospitality and tourism sector were selected for their insights and perceptions about traits perceived as important for female aspiring to leadership roles. Previous studies have employed female college students to understand the process of leadership role development (Guillet et al., 2019a, 2019b; McKenzie, 2018).

This study applied purposive sampling to gather context-specific insights that may not be captured through random sampling. The sampling approach allows for the selection of participants based on specific criteria, such as gender and educational background, which are essential for studying women's leadership in the industry (Robinson, 2013). It ensures in-depth and information-rich data about the phenomenon of interest from selected respondents. The sample size is comparable across the three countries, with 23 participants from Malaysia, 25 from Indonesia, and 20 from Thailand, making up a total sample of 68 participants. Since data reached saturation at the 20th interview, it indicates an appropriate sample size for a qualitative study (Guest et al., 2020).

Data Collection Procedure

Three trained researchers conducted the in-depth interview sessions in their respective countries from January 2024 to March 2024. The method is highly appropriate for this study for several reasons. It allows for a detailed exploration of participants' experiences, perspectives, and insights related to women's leadership roles within the industry (Kallio et al., 2016). The semi-structured nature of in-depth interviews provides flexibility in probing and following up on responses, enabling researchers to uncover rich insights and perspectives from participants. It is well-suited for exploring personal meanings, attitudes, and decision-making processes, making it ideal for investigating women's leadership experiences in the hospitality and tourism sector (Guillet et al., 2019b). The researchers were provided with a guideline specifying the standard interview protocol and a series of open-ended questions. For this study, the main objective is to explore female undergraduate students' perceptions about the leadership traits perceived to be important for management positions. Thus, the interview question asks "In your opinion, what specific skills or qualities are important for women aspiring to leadership roles in this industry?" Due to language barriers, the questions were translated into their respective national languages. By adapting to the informants' mother tongue, the researchers can delve deeply into their leadership perceptions and aspirations, comprehensively understanding the topic. To enhance reliability (or trustworthiness) of the data, the English interview guidelines were translated and back-translated, and both versions were compared to ensure consistency (Brislin, 1970). The same procedures were applied to the transcription of interview data.

Data Analysis

Systematic Thematic Analysis using Voyant Tools

The study employed thematic analysis, a widely used qualitative research method, to identify, analyze, and report patterns or themes within the data. This method provides

a systematic approach to organizing and interpreting qualitative data and is a valuable tool for exploring complex phenomena such as women's leadership skills in the hospitality and tourism industry. Thematic analysis enables researchers to uncover key themes, patterns, and insights from interview transcripts, surveys, or other qualitative data sources related to women's leadership experiences. For example, Chaudhary and Dutt (2022) have utilized thematic analysis to examine women leaders' resistance to gender norms and the challenges they face in conflict and humanitarian health contexts.

The study utilized Voyant Tool version 2.6.12 to analyze the qualitative data. As a text analysis and visualization tool that supports the analysis and interpretation of textual data, it is particularly beneficial for examining qualitative data such as interview transcripts, open-ended survey responses, or written documents (Cortés-Sánchez, 2018). It supports text mining, allowing researchers to explore extensive linguistic corpora and thoroughly analyze participants' language (Cobo et al., 2011); allows researchers to visually represent textual data using word clouds, frequency lists, and interactive visualizations, enabling a more intuitive data comprehension (Weinberger and Bouhnik, 2023). This aids in pinpointing significant discourse themes within the data, offering a systematic approach to analyzing qualitative data.

Through Voyant Tools, two researchers independently performed the thematic analysis and then discussed their results to reach a mutual consensus. This enhances the credibility and rigor of the qualitative analysis (Bengtsson, 2016). Several text and visualization analyses were applied to identify patterns and themes in the participants' discussions on women's leadership roles within the industry. The word cloud visualization tool was used to identify emerging common themes and unique perspectives related to women's leadership traits in hospitality and tourism. The word frequency and trends functions helped to reveal hidden patterns and relationships across the corpus. By leveraging Voyant Tool's functionalities, the researchers systematically analyzed the textual data and extract meaningful insights that improve the interpretation of the research findings. To further enhance the credibility of the findings, member check was conducted through follow-up discussion with participants to confirm the credibility of the data and interpretations (Rose and Johnson, 2020).

Results

Key Themes of Women Leadership Traits in the Hospitality and Tourism Industry

Three documents, totaling 4,469 words and 810 unique word forms, were analyzed using the Voyant Tool version 2.6.12. Each document represents one of the study's three selected countries: Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand. The qualitative data shed light on the essential skills and qualities required for women aspiring to leadership roles in the hospitality and tourism industry. Based on word frequency analysis, the most common word related to leadership traits was communication skills, encompassing speaking, listening and writing. Informants from Thailand recorded 25 words related to communication skills, followed by Indonesia 19 and Malaysia 17. Table 1 presents the most frequently occurring words related to leadership traits

across the corpus.

Table 1: The most mentioned theme related to leadership traits across the corpus

	Malaysia	Indonesia	Thailand	Total
Communication	17	19	25	61
Strategic Thinking	12	20	22	54
Emotional Intelligence	11	11	18	40
Adaptability	7	10	14	31
Resilience	7	12	9	28

Source: Authors

Five key themes emerged through thematic analysis, offering valuable insights into the perceptions and experiences of participants in the three countries. They are communication skills (speaking, listening, and writing), strategic thinking (decision-making and problem-solving), adaptability (innovation and creativity), resilience and emotional intelligence (empathy, emotion, sensitivity and understanding). Figure 1 presents a word cloud visualization, illustrating the relative frequencies of key leadership traits mentioned across the corpus of the three selected countries.

Figure 1: The word cloud visualization of the relative frequencies across the corpus



Source: Authors

Key Theme 1: Communication

Effective communication emerged as the most valued skill for leadership roles, as highlighted by participants from all three countries. In Malaysia, participants emphasized the importance of clear communication in building relationships and motivating teams. For example, participant MAL5 stated, "*Effective communication*

is vital for understanding and addressing the needs of clients and team members." Participant MAL10 explained, "effective **communication** is crucial. Being able to **express** ideas clearly, **listen** actively..." whereas, participant MAL22 stated, "**communication** skills is the most important skill as it is essential to develop relationship with customers so that the industry can grow even further." Similar insights are found among participants interviewed in Indonesia. Strong communication skills were deemed essential for resolving conflicts and inspiring teams. Participant INDO7 noted, "Strong **communication** skills: Effective **communication** is crucial for building relationships, resolving conflicts, and inspiring teams in leadership positions." Participant INDO11 agreed with the statement and said, "strong **communication** skills are essential, as leaders in this industry must effectively **convey** their vision, motivate teams, and build relationships with customers and stakeholders." In Thailand, participants echoed these sentiments, emphasizing the role of communication in conveying ideas clearly and fostering trust. Participant THA15 remarked, "Strong **communication** skills are essential to **conveying** ideas and directives clearly and effectively." The same sentiment is reiterated by participant THA8 who stated, "Effective **communication**, both **written** and **verbal**, is crucial for managing teams, resolving conflicts, and **conveying** the brand's message." Participants in Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand unanimously stated effective communication as the most valued skill for leadership roles in the hospitality and tourism industry. Women as leaders should possess strong communication skills to build relationships, inspire teams, resolve conflicts, and effectively convey their vision to drive success in this dynamic and people-centric industry.

Key Theme 2: Strategic Thinking

Strategic thinking emerged as the second key competency essential for effective leadership in the hospitality and tourism industry. Participants from Malaysia highlighted the importance of strategic thinking in anticipating industry trends and formulating plans for future growth. Participant MAL13 stated, "Strategic **thinking** involves analyzing market trends, identifying opportunities, and making **informed decisions** to achieve organizational goals." Similarly, in Indonesia, participants emphasized the need for innovative thinking to address industry challenges and identify new opportunities. Participant INDO10 remarked, "The ability to **anticipate** industry trends, identify opportunities, and develop **long-term strategies** to drive business growth." This is further supported by participant INDO11 who said, "**strategic thinking** and **decision-making** skills are critical for guiding organizations through complex business environments and driving growth and innovation." Likewise, participants in Thailand shared a similar point of view, emphasizing the importance of analytical thinking and decision-making skills. Participant THA18 noted, "Analytical **thinking**, critical **thinking**, and the capacity to make informed decisions under pressure." Participant THA10 added, "**Forward thinking** leaders can drive innovation and differentiation in their organizations, whether through the introduction of new services, technologies, or business models." These statements provide evidence that strategic thinking is universally recognized as a key competency for effective leadership in the hospitality and tourism industry.

Key Theme 3: Emotional Intelligence

Emotional intelligence emerged as the third prominent theme across all three countries, especially among Malaysian participants. This reflects its perceived importance for effective leadership in the hospitality and tourism industry. Most participants emphasized the significance of emotional intelligence in understanding and managing emotions, both personally and interpersonally, to foster positive relationships, resolve conflicts, and inspire teams. In Malaysia, participant MAL1 stated, *“I believe that **emotional** management is a necessary skill for women who want to hold leadership positions in this industry. These skills enable a woman to empathize with her co-workers and understand the diversity of their backgrounds.”* Similarly, participant MAL20 cited, *“**Emotional intelligence** matters too, as they need to understand and manage emotions for effective leadership.”* The same sentiments were also voiced by participants from Indonesia and Thailand, with participant INDO2 mentioning, *“Having high **emotional intelligence** enables leaders to understand and manage their own emotions, as well as empathize with and motivate others effectively.”* This was further reinforced by participant INDO7, who said, *“Empathy and **emotional intelligence** are important qualities that enable women leaders to understand and respond to the needs of diverse stakeholders and create inclusive and engaging environments within their organizations.”* Participant THA7 indicated, *“**Empathy** allows leaders to understand and connect with the needs and emotions of their team members and guests. Women who demonstrate **emotional intelligence** can effectively manage conflicts, inspire trust, and foster a positive work culture.”* These collective statements recognize emotional intelligence as a critical theme in leadership discussions and highlight its central role in shaping women’s leadership roles within the hospitality and tourism industry.

Key Theme 4: Resilience

Resilience emerged as the fourth significant theme across the qualitative data from Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand. Participants consistently highlighted the necessity of resilience in navigating the industry’s challenges and uncertainties, such as fluctuating market conditions, demanding work environments, and unforeseen crises. Participant MAL10 mentioned, *“... **resilience** is critical. Facing challenges, learning from failures, and bouncing back are essential traits for successful leaders.”* This is supported by participant MAL12 who explained, *“... the hospitality and tourism industry can be demanding and stressful, so **resilience** in the face of setbacks and adversity is critical for maintaining focus and motivation.”* A similar point of view was echoed by participants from Indonesia and Thailand. Participant INDO10 cited, *“**Resilience** ... to persevere in the face of setbacks, learn from failures, and bounce back stronger is vital for women leaders in navigating the industry’s challenges, while participant INDO17 stated, “**Resilience** is also vital, given the industry’s susceptibility to external factors such as economic fluctuations or global events.”* Abstractly, Thai participant THA12 elucidated, *“Leaders need to have good self-management ability, deal with stress and challenges, and remain calm and tenacious in the face of difficulties.”* Likewise, participant THA5 remarked, *“Female leaders need to have a **strong belief** in their abilities and the courage to voice their opinions and pursue their goals with **determination**.”* The statements consistently emphasized the necessity of resilience in navigating the industry’s myriad challenges and uncertainties, including fluctuating market conditions, demanding work environments,

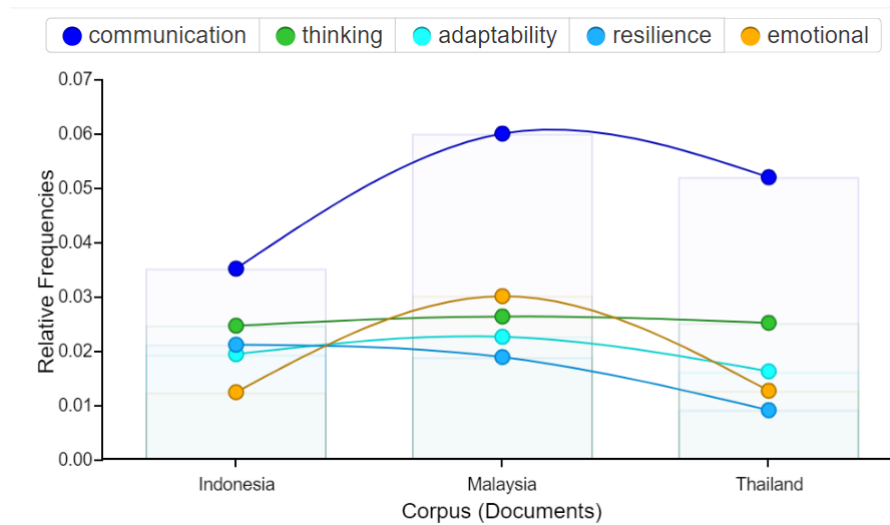
and unforeseen crises.

Key Theme 5: Adaptability

Adaptability emerged as the fifth critical quality for navigating the dynamic and often unpredictable nature of the hospitality and tourism industry. Participant MAL3 stated, “*women should have knowledge and **creativity** in the hospitality and tourism industry.*”, while participant MAL4 pointed out, “*Women should have skills in **innovation** so that they can bring fresh ideas.*” Participants from Indonesia emphasized the need for adaptability in responding to industry changes and challenges. Participant INDO5 stated, “*Given the industry’s dynamic nature, leaders need to be able to **adapt** to changing circumstances.*” This statement was reinforced by participant INDO10 who stated, “*Given the dynamic nature of the industry, women leaders must be **adaptable** in the face of change, uncertainty, and challenges.*” In Thailand, participants echoed these sentiments, emphasizing the importance of adaptability in overcoming challenges and driving progress. Participant THA19 noted, “*Leaders must be able to **navigate changing landscapes** and overcome challenges.*” A similar perspective was echoed by participant THA2 who explained, “*The tourism industry is constantly evolving, and female leaders need to possess a **keen insight** and an **innovative mindset** to identify new opportunities and address challenges.*” The statements underscore the importance of adaptability as a critical quality for effective leadership in the dynamic and unpredictable hospitality and tourism industry. Participants across the three countries emphasized the need for women leaders, to adapt to industry changes and challenges.

All in all, while there were commonalities in the key themes identified across Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand, there were also notable differences that reflected cultural nuances and contextual variations. For example, while communication skills were emphasized in all three countries, the specific aspects highlighted varied, with Malaysian participants focusing on effective communication in crisis management, Indonesian participants emphasizing communication for building relationships, and Thai participants highlighting communication for conveying ideas. Similarly, while adaptability, resilience, and emotional intelligence were consistently highlighted, the specific challenges cited varied, reflecting differences in the industry’s dynamics across the three countries. Figure 2 shows the line graph depicting the relative frequencies of the top five traits related to women’s leadership across the corpus of the three selected countries.

Figure 2: The line graph of the relative word frequencies across the corpus of the three countries



Source: Authors

Discussion

This paper delved into the essential qualities required for women aspiring to leadership roles in the hospitality and tourism industry, as elucidated through in-depth interviews conducted in Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand. Through thematic analysis, several key themes emerged across the three countries, highlighting both commonalities and unique cultural perspectives. Findings revealed that strong communication skills, strategic thinking, adaptability, resilience, and emotional intelligence were the five fundamental attributes for women leaders in the industry across all three countries. Effective communication emerged as a cornerstone, facilitating relationship-building, crisis management, and clarity in directives. Adaptability, resilience, and emotional intelligence were underscored as imperative for navigating the dynamic and often unpredictable nature of the industry, while strategic thinking was deemed essential for anticipating trends and making informed decisions.

Participants highlighted the necessity of effective communication for building relationships, motivating and inspiring teams, resolving conflicts, fostering trust, and conveying ideas and directives. This finding resonates with existing literature emphasizes that female leaders must communicate effectively to display the outspoken traits (e.g., better communicators, better facilitators) of masculine leadership (Costa et al., 2017) while maintaining the renegotiation-favoring traits (e.g., better listener) of feminine leadership (Guillet et al., 2019a). Thus, the finding supports Chen et al. (2021) that adopting an open-door policy and adapting one's communication styles to different circumstances and individuals will ensure leadership effectiveness. Participants also pinpointed the importance of understanding clients' needs, aligning with Nagar (2021), who highlighted soft skills (e.g., being sensitive to customer needs, handling complaints) of effective communication.

Participants emphasized the significance of adaptability in responding to the dynamic

and challenging industry, such as being flexible in applying policies and procedures and adaptability to industry changes and challenges. This aligns with Remington and Kitterlin-Lynch (2018), who value the flexibility of female leaders as a critical factor in their career advancement. Finding also supports Chen et al. (2021) and Fan et al. (2021), who assert that female should adapt leadership styles when leading different teams. Participants also emphasized the need for resilience during tough times, such as navigating the industry's challenges and uncertainties. This aligns with Guillet et al. (2019a), who suggest that female leaders must be resilient during tough times. Findings also demonstrate that participants emphasized the significance of emotional intelligence in understanding and managing emotions, both personally and interpersonally, to foster positive relationships, resolve conflicts, and inspire teams. This supports Guillet et al. (2019a) that female leaders who are willing to spend time listening to subordinates could drive organizational performance.

Participants also emphasized the significance of strategic thinking in anticipating industry trends and opportunities, fostering innovative thinking and decisiveness in female leaders. This aligns with Guillet et al. (2019a), who suggest that female leaders should practice strategic thinking (e.g., consider more elements in decision-making), be determined, assertive, decisive, and bold in decision-making, while also paying particular attention to details. The finding also supports Chen et al. (2021), who argue that female leaders should be proactive and practice rational thinking to overcome stereotypes encountered in the workplace.

While these overarching themes were consistent, there were notable differences within each country's responses. Malaysian participants, for instance, prioritized crisis management skills and foresight in anticipating market trends. On the other hand, Indonesian participants emphasized relationship-building and innovation, while Thai participants highlighted clarity of communication and analytical thinking. These variations reflect the diverse cultural contexts and unique challenges within each country's hospitality and tourism industries. Although variations were identified, findings were consistent with the trait theory of leadership (Colbert et al., 2012). Notably, findings demonstrated that successful female leaders should be outspoken and open to communication, supporting the notions of Colbert et al. (2012). Findings also show perceived favorable traits of female leaders, including communicability, innovation, decisiveness, flexibility, resilience, and emotional stability, align with Chen and Shao (2022), DeRue et al. (2011), Rosette and Tost (2010), and Zaccaro (2007). More importantly, findings revealed the relevance of trait theory to female leadership in a gender-biased industry, supporting Andrade (2022). Understanding how trait theory of leadership affects female is crucial for developing targeted interventions and support mechanisms to foster their leadership development effectively.

Practical Implications for Asian Business

To the best of our knowledge, this study differs from existing research as the first to compare female leadership traits from three prominent tourism destinations in Southeast Asia. Based on the findings, this study offers several practical implications. First, understanding the effective leadership traits required for women in these roles will help businesses reduce stereotypes and promote gender equality in the workplace.

This study revealed five essential traits for females aspiring to leadership roles in the tourism and hospitality industry. Diversity, equality, and inclusion remain recurring issues in the workplace (Meneses et al., 2020), and female leaders continue to encounter stereotypes (e.g., being perceived as indecisive or irrational) in gender-biased industries (Chen et al., 2021). Findings indicate that leadership traits are inherently natural and embraced by women in today's society and workplace. Based on these the findings, this study suggests that Asian business managers can utilize leadership traits to nurture and empower women working in the hospitality and tourism industry.

Secondly, Asian business managers should encourage a gender-neutral leadership style to eliminate or reduce social prejudices and stereotypes towards female leaders and employees in the industry. Findings show that gender-neutral leadership is perceived as favorable for women aspiring to leadership roles. This study found that female leaders are often described using feminine terms such as 'sensitive' or 'good listener' rather than 'communicator'. However, they are still expected to exhibit traditionally masculine traits (e.g., decisiveness, resilience) alongside feminine qualities like caring and sensitivity to others' needs. While adopting masculine traits can help female leaders thrive in the workplace (Guillet et al., 2019a), hospitality and tourism managers should consider promoting gender-neutral leadership approach to empower females.

Next, organizations and policymakers need to redefine leadership by considering gender-neutral leadership traits as desirable. This study agrees with Guillet et al. (2019a) in arguing that allowing female leaders to lead in their own style encourages them to embrace their natural traits while reducing gender bias in the workplace. Such an approach could foster gender equality and inclusivity in the workplace. Fourth, Asian business schools should adapt the academic curriculum to improve students' soft skills (Guillet et al., 2019b; Ting et al., 2024). This study highlights that female participants were often judged based on their perceived weaknesses. Although participants recognized critical leadership traits for effective leadership, variations among the three countries indicated differing communication skills needs. Integrating DEI into the curriculum is a practical way to acknowledge its importance and foster fair, representative, and inclusive environments (Ting et al., 2024).

Fifth, higher institutions and organizations in Asia should better prepare females for advanced leadership roles (Chen et al., 2021). Higher education institutions could establish communities or clubs to inspire female students and build their confidence in the pre-employ stage. Organizations could implement female-supportive system or promote career advancement policies focused on gender equality. Finally, higher education institutions, organizations, and policymakers should facilitate open conversations on diversity, equality, and inclusion at all stages of an individual's life by organizing events and raising awareness across different organizational levels. Therefore, higher education institutions, organizations and policymakers must adopt context-specific approaches to effectively promote gender diversity and leadership equity within the industry. By leveraging the insights from this study, stakeholders can design tailored initiatives that address the specific needs and priorities of women leaders in Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, and beyond.

While the journey toward gender equality in leadership roles may be multifaceted,

this study underscores the imperative of fostering an inclusive and supportive environment in which women can thrive and contribute meaningfully to the advancement of the hospitality and tourism industry. Through collaborative efforts and targeted interventions, Asian businesses can work towards a future where women's leadership is celebrated and valued, enriching the industry and society at large. It is hoped that the hospitality and tourism businesses will gain a better understanding of women's leadership in the industry and use this knowledge to inform evidence-based interventions that promote gender equality and inclusivity.

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