

## WORK IN PROGRESS

# Understanding how millennial hospitality employees deal with emotional labour

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Qualified employees are the most valuable assets in today's environment and this requires that employers understand and engage their employees. One process that might influence their happiness at work is emotional labour. Emotional labour entails that an employee tries to feel, create and display emotions that are expected by the guest. This means that employees occasionally need to suppress certain emotions and put on "a mask". In a service interaction, emotional labour is key to achieving guest satisfaction. An industry that relies heavily on these service interactions is the hospitality industry. The greater part of the millennial generation is already in the labour market and working in the hospitality industry. This generation is known for their special traits and work values. The millennials want to have a good work-life balance, a meaningful job and want to feel happy at work, otherwise they quickly switch to another job. This master's dissertation's exploratory study aims at understanding how the millennials deal with emotional labour by focusing on their perception of the job. Data will be collected via semi-structured interviews with 14 front-line employees working in a four-star hotel in the north of the Netherlands. Even though both the millennials and the concept of emotional labour have been investigated by many researchers, it seems a combination of both has rarely been represented. This research in progress responds to this gap in research by combining both subjects in the context of the hospitality industry. Moreover, it wants to contribute to practice by providing practical applications for hospitality practitioners.

**Keywords:** emotional labour, hospitality, job perception, millennials

## Introduction

The hospitality industry relies heavily on the service providing process (Pizam, 2004; Wong & Wang, 2009). In this field, face-to-face conversations occur continuously. In addition, employees are seen as a fundamental component during the service interaction to satisfy the guest. No guest would want to step into a hotel, restaurant or spa and face emotion-driven employees. Therefore, it can occur that an employee needs to show emotions that do not correspond with the felt emotions. In other words, employees are asked to hide their truly felt feelings for guests. Consequently, during the service interaction, employees need to enact so-called emotional labour. Expressions of enthusiasm, happiness and friendliness are part of the job, regardless of the experienced feelings (Wong & Wang, 2009), which need to be suppressed (Jin & Guy, 2009).

Currently, millennials or Generation Y born between 1981 and 1999 (Meriac et al., 2010) enter the labour market and hospitality industry. Being a millennial myself, I have noticed that an increasing amount of attention is given to the characteristics of our generation. Researchers, motivational speakers and journalists are trying to point out what we as millennials want, how we think and what we value. Attributed characteristics such as autonomous, individualistic, impatient, optimistic, multi-taskers, and job hoppers (Alsop, 2008; Caraher, 2016), and work values, such as meaningful work,

and work-life balance, are addressed to differentiate "us" from earlier generations.

I have been working in the hospitality industry for more than six years. At work, I experience or encounter the phenomenon of emotional labour. I know how it feels to suppress feelings and show emotions that are not honestly felt. Thus, considering the expectations in service interactions, on the one hand, and the work values and personal characteristics of a growing group of hospitality employees, on the other, gives rise to the question of how millennials perceive and cope with emotional labour at work.

Even though both the millennials and the concept of emotional labour have been investigated by many researchers, it seems a combination of both has rarely been represented. This research in progress responds to this gap in research by combining both subjects in the context of the hospitality industry. I aim to contribute to the current body of knowledge on emotional labour by exploring how the millennials deal with it at work in the hospitality industry.

## Literature review

In this literature review, the concept of emotional labour and the strategies to perform emotional labour will be elaborated upon. The reason for this is the fact that it is a crucial element in the hospitality industry. Following up, the work values will be touched upon, given their interrelation with job perceptions.

Lastly, the millennial generation and its traits will be discussed since they are the focus of this research.

### ***Emotional labour – a phenomenon in the service industry***

The first introduction to the concept of emotional labour was by Hochschild (1983), who conducted a study among airline attendants working in the service sector. As quoted by Hochschild (1983, p. 7), the concept of emotional labour can be defined as “the management of feelings to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display”. In other words, to display facial expression and body language that can be observed and acknowledged by others so that they adjust their state of mind too. Taking it a step further, Ashforth and Humphrey (1993) state that emotional labour constitutes of the control of feelings to express organizationally expected emotions through facial and bodily displays. Likewise, Diefendorff and Richard (2003) acknowledge that it is part of the job, but in their definition they exclude the expectations that an organisation might have set. They refer to emotional labour as the management of emotions as part of the work role. Clearly, the proposed definitions show an overlap since they all refer back to the management or control of one’s feelings. Yet, to exclude any confusion, in this research the definition by Hochschild (1983) will be referred to when discussing emotional labour. Even though his study was based on flight attendants, it is a concept that is linked to a wide variety of jobs that are “people-focused” and where quality of service depends on interactions that employees have with their clients. For instance, employees working in the hospitality industry are particularly vulnerable to the demand of emotional labour since the interaction with the guests is a crucial element of the service encounter which can affect the perceived service quality (Pizam, 2004). As suggested by Kim (2008), organisations operating in the hotel industry expect their service employees to display both cheerful and friendly emotions when interacting face-to-face or voice-to-voice with guests. This is in line with the proposed three criteria of emotional labour by Hochschild (1983), namely (a) face-to-face or voice-to-voice interaction with customers are part of the job, (b) emotions are displayed to produce an emotional state in another person, and (c) there is a certain control that the employer has over the emotions that an employee displays (Hochschild, 1983).

### ***Strategies to enact emotional labour***

An organisation has control over the feelings of an employee by adhering to certain rules which are practical guidelines for an employee on which emotions to display. The expectation of certain emotions by the employer is defined as “feeling rules” (Hochschild, 1983) or “display rules” (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993). Since the desired response is not always likely to occur naturally, employees are required to either suppress feelings that are not appropriate during the interaction (such as frustration), or display the emotions that are expected (such as patience).

In order to perform according to the display rules of an organisation, an employee will apply an emotional labour strategy (i.e. surface, deep or genuine) that matches their state of mind. Kruml and Geddes (2000) state that surface acting occurs when employees display emotions that are not truly felt. Thus emotions are displayed on the “surface” so that they are visible to the guest they are interacting with. Hochschild (1983) claims that effort is made to display emotions that are in line

with the organisational display rules, but no effort is made to also feel the displayed emotions. So, when applying this acting strategy, the inner felt emotions remain unchanged. When employees in a particular situation are required to perform according to the “display rule” that cannot be achieved by displaying truly felt emotions, emotional dissonance will occur (Hochschild, 1983; Lashley, 2002; Chu et al., 2012). Emotional dissonance is seen as problematic from the start (Hochschild, 1983). In addition, it is a result of needing to display emotions that are not in line with the inner emotions felt by the individual. Clearly, the employer expects the employee to put on a mask so that guest satisfaction is achieved. A challenge that an employee will encounter when applying surface acting is that the displayed emotions might be perceived as “superficial”. Hochschild (1983) argues that people who display “fake” emotions, but still believe that it is not part of their job, perform surface acting. However, they continue to display these emotions in order to keep their jobs. This strategy is the least authentic and may not satisfy the needs of genuine hospitality (Chu et al., 2012). Therefore, Kim et al. (2012) claim that engaging in surface acting should be discouraged.

On the other hand, this challenge does not have to be dealt with when employees are applying the deep acting strategy. This strategy consists of an employee’s effort to adjust the inner felt feeling so that they conform to the display rules. Thus, both the expressed emotions and the felt emotions are modified to the situation. Nevertheless, this strategy also results in emotional dissonance since the true feelings are in conflict with the desired ones. From a guest perspective, this strategy is a little less authentic, but still personalised (Chu et al., 2012). In addition, deep acting concerns people who display these “fake” emotions and believe that it is part of their job.

In genuine acting, the job is done on automatic mode. In other words, employees act as they feel at that specific moment. Therefore, from a guest perspective, it is perceived as the most authentic one, since personalised service is provided to the guest (Chu et al., 2012). Therefore, this acting strategy does not require any effort since it is honestly felt and consistent with the emotions displayed. According to Lashley (2002), emotional harmony is the term for situations in which the individual feels the required emotions.

### ***Work values***

The work values of employees are considered to be the source of differences among generations and therefore a source of conflict in the workplace (Society for Human Resources Management, 2004). Therefore, it is of great importance for managers to understand the work values of a new generation, in this case the millennials, to create human resource policies that satisfy their needs (Lyons et al., 2005). Even though many different labels have been assigned to the term “work values”, they can be considered as a subset of the general value system (Wuthnow, 2008). The reason for viewing work values as a subset point to the fact that these values play an essential role in human life by ensuring the satisfaction of different needs and goals. They take a central position in the overall pattern of values and share a relationship with other personal values (Jin & Rounds, 2012). As proposed by Harding and Hiksipoors (1995), a categorisation based on the function that work fulfils can be divided into four dimensions: (a) Personal meaning: work offers ability utilisation, self-development and actualisation;

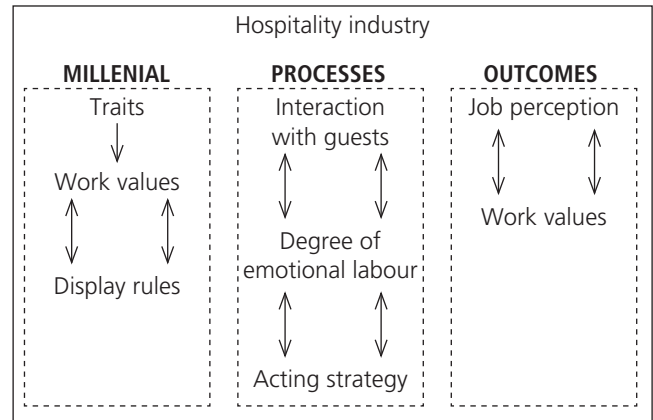
(b) Exchange: employees work for compensation, i.e. money and security; (c) Social contact: build different relationships with co-workers; and (d) Prestige: a certain degree of work provides power, prestige and authority. Similarly, there are four labels for work values proposed by Lyons et al. (2010): instrumental (hours of work, salary, job security); cognitive (variety, challenge and interesting work); social/altruistic (freedom, contribution to society and social interaction); and prestige (influence, authority and impact).

When zooming in on the millennial generation, Lyons et al. (2010) found that the importance of altruistic work values has decreased over time, being the least important to millennials compared to the previous generations. According to Gursoy et al. (2013), the millennials show a strong will to get things done with a great spirit and are in favour of teamwork. They tend to challenge authority (Gursoy et al., 2008), work to live, believe in collective action, and are optimistic (Gursoy et al., 2013). Walsh and Taylor (2007) state that millennials focus on finding jobs that offer growth opportunities, ongoing skills development, involvement in the decision-making process and increased responsibility.

**The millennials**

The millennials or Generation Y are seen as the most technologically savvy and well-travelled group. Another name given to this generation is “the trophy kids”, due to the fact they have been raised in an environment in which they have received awards for the simplest things (Crampton & Hodge, 2009). The work of Kamau et al. (2014) argues that one of the characteristics of millennials is that they do not comply with rules at work and prefer to do things their own way. In other words, the millennials want to have a degree of job autonomy in their work. As a consequence, the millennials question every rule that is made in a company, and believe that rules are made to be broken (Gursoy et al., 2008). In their quantitative study among part-time students, Kamau et al. (2014) found that millennials seek freedom in their jobs and are very self-assertive. As a consequence, they do not feel the need to consult others and believe that their way is the right way. Millennials are also more individualistic than previous generations (Twenge et al., 2012). They suggest that not only do they seek freedom in their jobs, but also outside the workplace. The millennials value a good work-life balance. Besides being very confident of themselves, they are also extremely ambitious when it comes to their careers. The millennials value extrinsic awards, such as money and status, more than previous generations (Twenge et al., 2010). They never really settle, want to have everything within a short period of time, and easily switch to another job when it is more appealing (Gursoy et al., 2008; Crampton & Hodge, 2009). This is slightly contradictory to Twenge et al. (2010), who argue that millennials want more job security than previous generations, and thus want to settle, but eagerly embrace opportunities that they perceive as better. Hence, they want to be happy in their jobs, or they move on to a new job (Gursoy et al., 2008). Regarding the mental health of the millennials, and Twenge et al. (2010; 2012) claim that millennials are more likely to suffer from anxiety, depression, and poor mental health than previous generations.

Based on previous literature, a framework for this research has been created to display the main conceptual ideas with the arrows representing the time flow (Figure 1). This



**Figure 1:** Conceptual framework

framework includes the main themes taken from the literature. The outer layer represents the external context in which this research will be conducted, i.e. the hospitality industry. The millennial possesses traits that define behaviour and shape their work values. These work values are interrelated to the display rules, since adhering to certain values might change the interpretation of display rules. Meaning that when the values are contradictory to or not supportive of the display rules, the millennial might decide to prioritise the values and not follow the display rules. Both work values and the display rules are the foundation for the interaction with the guest. During this interaction, a certain degree of emotional labour will be performed. Depending on the type of interaction and the degree of required emotional labour, a suitable acting strategy will be applied. After completion of the interaction, the millennial will hold a job perception. This job perception is interrelated with the work values, since the perception held might cause reconsideration of the work values. On the other hand, adhering to values might influence the perception when the values are poorly met in the job. Thus, the job perception reflects how the millennial deals with emotional labour.

To understand how the millennials deal with this phenomenon called emotional labour, a qualitative research approach will be applied. This research focuses on a case study in a four-star hotel located in the north of the Netherlands. Data will be collected via semi-structured interviews with 14 front-line employees who are from the millennial generation. Findings will be presented in the form of storytelling so that feelings and perceptions can be experienced by the reader. This is in line with the ultimate aim of this paper, to come to an understanding of how the millennials deal with emotional labour.

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