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**The importance of genuine service and human interaction for millennials' guest experience: the case of hotel reception and front line employees.**

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**Extended Abstract**

The hospitality industry has been affected by technology and digitalisation over the past years along with other industries and is disrupted by new innovations and competitors. Some researchers compare the situation in hospitality industry to what happened to the music industry where a sharing economy resulted as start of the music streaming services and the end for the traditional music industry (Sekulic 2015; Divecha 2015). Hospitality is considered as a player in the experience economy where experiences are significant factors and that can lead to differentiation and eventually achieving competitive advantage over competitors. Disney is claimed to be the best organisation in the world to offer memorable experiences to its customers and they see customer experience satisfaction directly in link with employee satisfaction and the people who provide those experiences (Ford & Heaton 2000). Although the hospitality industry and especially accommodation service providers have been widely known to be founded on people, their capability of hosting, caring and serving the guests with sincerity, technology is replacing customer service work and the role and importance of humans have been debated. At the same time, there have been some negative

customer reactions to the increased level of self-service and technology and decreased level in service in the hospitality industry and companies are returning to service personalisation for better success (De Carvalho et al. 2016; Lashley 2015). Importantly, while hotels are eagerly seeking new ways to satisfy customers, literature is unanimously supporting the importance of customer service, satisfaction and human interactions (Bach and Milman, 1996; Mayo and Collegia, 1997; McColl-Kennedy and White, 1997; Kriegl, 2000; Kuo, 2009 cited by Sohrabi et al. 2012). As different generations are being argued to act differently and create experiences differently, the role of front of house staff in hotels creating those experiences might need to be rethought.

The paper is focused on an under-researched area, what guests consider as significant factors in the customer service interactions and what makes them enjoyable, genuine and part of the whole experience. Also, there are only modest attempts on finding out how these, staff behaviour, attitude interactions affect customers' emotions and creating a meaningful customer experience. These presented thoughts and arguments underlined the focus of this study. The aim of this research is to explore the role of the front office and the importance of its employees as a vital part of a hotel experience. It examines the behaviour of millennial travellers, definition of an experience and the influence of front office staff, genuine interactions and emotions for the guest experience in the hotel context. Finally, the study explores the factors that motivate staff to act more genuinely in the workplace and as a result, to create memorable experiences to guests. This study intends to find insights concerning the significance of people and interactions in creating the guest experience and how these encounters could be more enjoyable for the guests in the context of hotels. The research is designed and conducted from the perspective of millennial guests who are expected to represent the majority of travellers in a few years (Khan 2007). It attempts to find in-depth insights and responds to whether millennials value humans, front line employees and genuine service interactions as part of their individual guest experience. Traditionally, managerial implications are investigated. This study adopts a qualitative research approach; a hotel case study employed where 8 millennial guests and 8 front office staff members and managers were interviewed. All interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed by the employment of content analysis (Bryman 2015).

The findings of this research reveal that millennial guests are still looking for human touch and enjoyable interactions with the hotel staff despite the technological disruption. Moreover, the study explored the role of emotions in the guest experience evaluation. The existing research including this study finds human interaction to be one of the most fundamental factors in the success of a hospitality company (Ariffin 2013; de Carvalho et al. 2016). While the hotel staff participants were concentrating on the importance of professionalism and service quality, millennial guests highlighted the attitude and behaviour of the staff to be the most affecting factor for the guest experience. This result suggests that although physical elements are important, psychological elements might be even more important to millennial guests. Surprising content was found from the recommendations for the hotels where the significance of staff's wellbeing and happiness directly reflect on the interactions, service delivery and guest experiences. As per the findings, hotel managers are suggested to concentrate on the training, well-being and taking good care of employees in order to achieve the intended service for the guests.

This research provides new insights and more in-depth discussion on the perceptions of millennial guests and additionally adds staff and managerial perspective to the discussion on how important interactions are in creating a meaningful and memorable experience. As different generations are being argued to act differently and create experiences differently, the role of front of house staff in hotels creating those experiences might need rethinking. It is suggested that research should be conducted on how the customer service and interactions should be delivered and in which way the guests perceive this service to be more beneficial for the overall experience. Based on the findings of this study it is also argued that frontline employee attributes such as attitude, behaviour, hospitableness, genuine interaction and emotional labour are the most significant factors determining a memorable guest experience for millennials; future research can investigate the importance of these attributes in the wider industry context.

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