

Am I Being Served? Emotional Exploitation of Young People in the Hospitality Sector

Molly Whiteside





An Investigation into the Relationship Between Workplace Treatment and Emotional Wellbeing of 16-25 Year Olds in the Hospitality Industry: Are Young People Being Taken Advantage Of?

INTRODUCTION

As young people, our first steps into the workforce commonly lead to roles in the hospitality or retail sectors. These roles are particularly appealing as they tend to require little experience, are accessible in competitive job markets, and have transferable skills to start building one's career path.

These factors contributed to me choosing to work in the food and beverage hospitality industry at the age of 16. My first role truly allowed me to see the positive sides of hospitality, fostering positive connections and gaining valuable experience for my future. However, as I progressed through a range of roles and working environments, I slowly recognized the costs that are hidden by the ease of access to the role.

As I became older and began to diversify my experience outside of the food and beverage industry, I noticed a particular difference in my fairness of pay, workplace treatment and job security. When investigating previous literature into this area, key insights into factors contributing towards emotional wellbeing emerged. Interestingly, these were the same factors I had personally experienced: fairness of pay, workplace treatment and job security. This reinforced the need for further research of these three key factors as possible causes for concern on the emotional wellbeing of 16-25 year olds within the hospitality industry.

BACKGROUND

Security

Job security is a common topic within hospitality research, often being labelled as the root of the issue. There is a widespread nature of precarious work in the food and beverage hospitality industry, particularly during economic slowdowns where businesses will prioritise their own needs over their workers. However, it is notable that these negative consequences seem to notably impact young workers.

A UK-based charity named FLEX reported that young people are more likely to lose their jobs and suffer long term damage due to weak job security, compared to their older colleagues (1).

In part, this is due to a lack of labour which may enable businesses to fail to take care of and exploit young employees, who tends to lack the skills or resources to challenge potential exploitation or discrimination. If therefore, a young person is feeling precarious in their employment, it may manifest in concern regarding treatment and pay in the workplace.

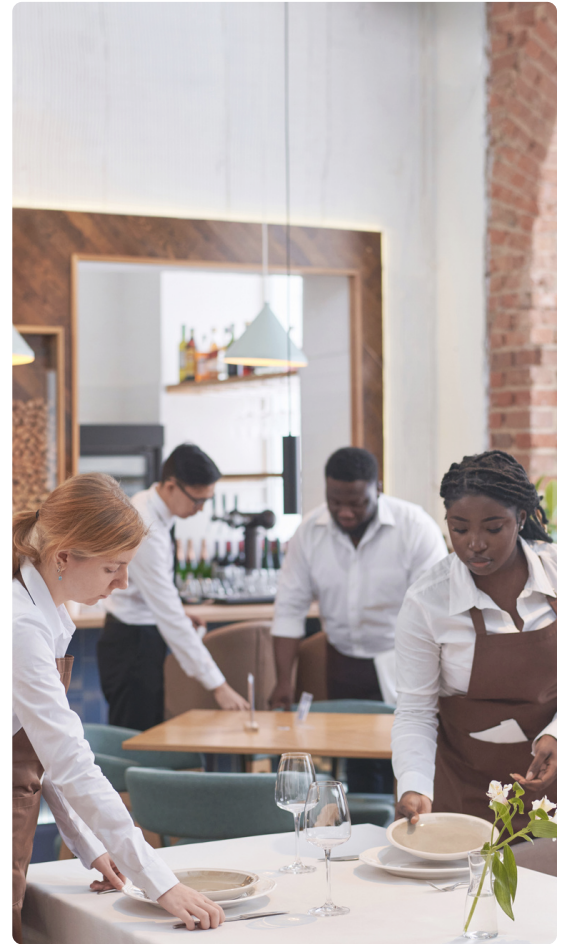
Treatment

Poor treatment in the workplace can be a direct and physical form of exploitation, which may lead to favouritism and prejudice. Griffith's University found amongst hospitality employees, 49% reported verbal harassment, 29% reported bullying and 15% sexual harassment (2).

These percentages may understandably suggest a low level of motivation as respondents are reporting bullying and/or harassment.

If Adam's Equity Theory suggests people are only motivated when treated equitably and what is fair on the basis of perceived efforts (3), then why would young people feel motivated in the workplace when exposed to these experiences?

My research aims to explore attitudes towards this dynamic, and the emotional consequences it can have on employees by looking into their attitudes and experiences.



Pay

Low pay has also been examined across literature and is shown to have a negative impact on emotional wellbeing as a result of entry-level, precarious employment.

Newcastle University aimed to explore employees' attitudes towards their work and found a large quantity of responses relating to being paid disproportionately in relation to their efforts and as a result, feeling disempowerment and wanting to look for other work (4).

However, when looking into the generational pay gap, Rodgers and Rodgers found that despite the commonality of burnout and stress in work, employees feel trapped as they can see no other way to achieve long-term advancement within their careers (5).

It may be said that regardless of the extent to which people tolerate low pay, their capacity to endure it is not a reflection of positive wellbeing. Instead, it can have opposing effects of frustration and overwhelm due to young worker's lack of options because of low experiences.

The amalgamation of these factors can contribute to overall negative attributes of work in the hospitality sector, such as toxic workplace cultures and heightened poor mental health, which can be particularly impactful on young people entering the workforce as they may not be prepared or paid in ways which reflect the emotional labour they must endure to succeed.



EMOTIONAL LABOUR



Arlie Russell Hochschild, delves into the psychological consequences on emotional labour (6) with an exploration into the exponential pressure on workers to 'wear a mask' in front of superiors and customers to appear as though they are experiencing feelings of consistent pleasure in their work when this is not always the case.

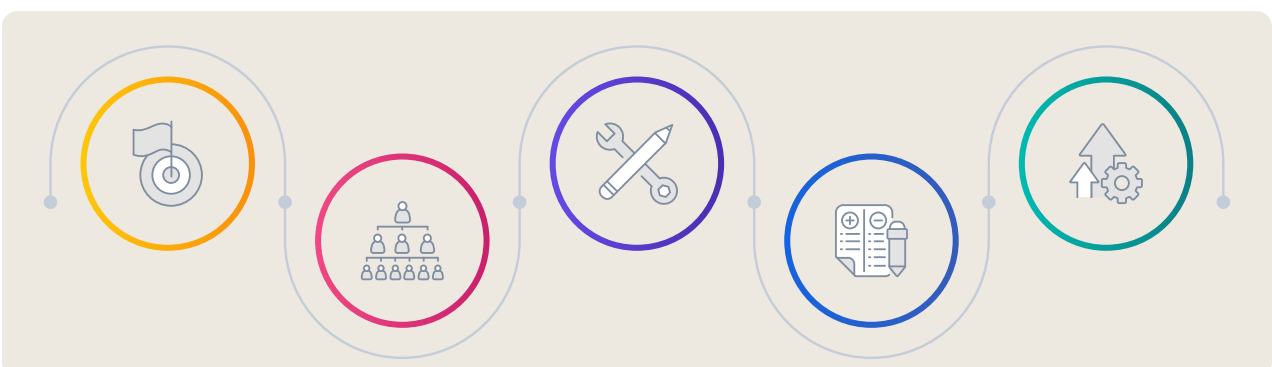
This creates a strong need for managerial support for employees to be able to excel in their work by feeling able to carry out this emotional labour and be comfortable and satisfied with their job security, pay and treatment. The overarching factors contributing to negative well-being in hospitality workers means the following research can be utilized to enable businesses to foster supportive environments.

METHODOLOGY

The study used a combination of quantitative and qualitative data collection methods in the survey to acquire relevant information to allow exploration of the relationship between workplace treatment and emotional wellbeing in young people.

The independent variable was the experiences of young people in the hospitality sector, predominantly focusing on treatment, pay and security. The dependent variable was self-report measures of emotional wellbeing.

The survey had 4 main sections with demographic information followed by statements or questions regarding each factor; each asked 2-3 quantitative questions, utilising a 5 point likert scale assessing the extent to which the participants agreed with the statements, and each section concluded with 1-2 open-ended qualitative questions asking participants to describe specific feelings or experiences.



Participants

There were 87 participants that took part in the survey. The sample consisted of 57 females, 11 males, and 1 participant who preferred not to say.

Participants were recruited through volunteer and opportunity sampling, using relevant online groups, social media and direct messages. Inclusion criteria required that participants be aged 16–25 and currently employed in the food and beverage sector of the hospitality industry.

Those who were outside this age range, no longer worked in hospitality, or worked in other hospitality sectors such as events or lodging were excluded.



Materials and Procedure

The online platform, **SurveySparrow** was used to create and distribute the survey to participants, where it could be accessed via both mobile and desktop devices.

Participants were presented with an introductory page outlining the participation criteria and ethical considerations (confidentiality and right to withdraw), before going on to demographic information and the main part of the survey.

Depending on the depth of answers given, the survey took around **5-10 minutes** to complete.



Discussion

INVISIBLE LABOUR AND EMOTIONAL BURDENS

It has been agreed by authors that there is a high expectation for hospitality workers to consistently provide 'service with a smile' (6). If customers were to be served by a worker who appeared ill tempered, easily distracted and stressed, they may view the worker as lazy and/or uncaring about their job.

The customer isn't asked or expected to hypothesise if their working environment isn't one that supports their wellbeing and/or their working environment isn't one which supports their wellbeing and/or if they are having a 'bad day'. The expectation is not on the customer to do the emotional work to understand another's reality, it is on the employee to do the emotional labour. It is important to look beyond our potential initial assumptions and consider what challenges employees may be truly facing.

A prominent theme, seen predominantly within the survey's qualitative answers, refer to the plethora of unseen emotional burdens placed on hospitality workers.

EQUALITY VS EQUITY IN PERCEPTIONS OF PAY



Although statistics suggest hospitality workers tend to receive the same pay as co-workers under the same job title within their respective workplaces, it is not to say that the perception of pay is fair as shown in our quantitative and qualitative answers.

When examining levels of agreement on various statements, it was found 'I believe my pay is fair when taking into consideration my daily expenses' and 'I believe my pay reflects level of effort and capabilities' was rated 0 (strongly disagree) more than any other statements.

In alignment with this, qualitative answers explored the factors which appeared to contribute towards this discrepancy.

Participants described many factors they believed their pay should be conditional on. The most common themes were hidden emotional and physical hardships endured; unreliable hours, late nights and difficult customers that caused feelings of stress, frustration and being underappreciated, which are further enhanced when accounting for the pay discrepancy.

EQUALITY VS EQUITY IN PERCEPTIONS OF PAY

Some respondents reported receiving incentives to compensate for this, but this was generally inconsistent. These sentiments may be reflected in research findings, where 72% of those in precarious work reporting feelings of burnout and stress, reflecting potentially broader implications to the industry regarding their consideration towards their employees and meeting their needs.

Although **62%** of our participants strongly agreed their pay was equal to their coworkers, it is not necessarily equitable. Qualitative answers reported instances in which people feel as though they should be paid more than other workers for direct costs incurred; including transportation costs, living expenses, as well as additional responsibilities; training other staff and length of time working with the company.

This aligns with Equality and Human Right Research Commission, who highlighted fairness in pay should not be solely attributed to job titles but the physical and emotional impact inflicted by the job itself. Whilst factors do need to be considered on a collective basis, the report emphasizes the requirement for pay to differ based on personal circumstances to foster and respectful and cohesive environment for everyone.

HIDDEN REALITIES IN WORKPLACE TREATMENT

In our data, qualitative answers provided insight to the invisible emotional tax placed on hospitality workers that is also present when exploring workplace treatment.

Qualitative questions included feeling valued and respected by colleagues and managers, receiving equal treatment to co-workers and feeling confident any issues can be resolved; the majority of which had at least 50% of participants in agreement and only 12% or less in disagreement.

On the surface, this might suggest hospitality workers perceive their treatment as positive and fair, however, the qualitative answers paint a different story.



This can perhaps be explained by the choice of using a 0-5 point likert scale in the survey, and upon reflection is somewhat of a **reductionist measure** when discussing personal experiences of treatment across a long period of time. This is reflected in the quantitative answers in the survey as responses dispersed around neutral scores (2, 3, 4) as it is difficult to attribute a number to a variety of feelings and scenarios.

MANAGERS VS COLLEAGUES VS CUSTOMERS

Our respondents reported **managers** being overly critical, feeling talked down to, and managers over-delegating tasks to either avoid responsibility or taking over tasks when they perceived someone else as incapable and taking tasks away as punishment.

In addition, it appears managers know and expect their staff to complete emotional labour (6) too.

A relevant example comes from an 18 year old female food runner - who reported after explaining to her manager she had completed 2 GCSEs that day, her manager told her she looked exhausted and didn't want to fire her for being tired so she needs to 'put on a better face' to avoid issues (with customers).



Where people that work in the industry have empathy towards each other and are aware of the negative aspects of the role, **customers can only see what is presented to them**. Here then the manager seems to be aware of and reinforcing the view customers are observers, and workers as actors and so 'the emotional style of the service itself' is crucial for their sustained employment.

Participants generally described positive experiences with co-workers, with descriptions of feeling welcomed and supported on the whole with a few comments regarding cliques within the teams, causing them to feel judged and socially excluded.

Answers regarding kitchen staff from those that worked in front of house had mixed reviews - some described how they felt respected more from them than their own manager; others reported that they tend to be blamed for mistakes and feel like a scapegoat for those feeling pressure in stressful periods.

This is mirrored in the Newcastle University findings, where participants attributed longevity in their roles to the strong friendships acquired during times of high emotional strain.

This relationship could be explained by Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs; where basic needs such as fair pay and healthy working conditions are not met but feelings of love and familiarity are, creating feelings of imbalance, perhaps leading to toxic workplace relationships.





EMOTIONAL LABOUR

Interestingly, where people reported positive comments regarding managers, it focused on feeling supported when facing rude customers. Customer's behaviour was described as rude, rowdy, disruptive and inappropriate, especially in settings with alcohol.

The amalgamation of having numerous responsibilities, pressure from managers and experiencing rude customers, all whilst attempting to appear completely unphased remains a substantial concern within this industry.

This is notably common amongst females, where a lot of the experiences described referred to being belittled, harassed and feeling uncomfortable. That is not to say males won't or don't experience the same forms of mistreatment, and in our findings males reported their dissatisfaction regarding pay in comparison to older colleagues, rather than instances of mistreatment.

INEQUALITIES BETWEEN DIFFERENT DEMOGRAPHICS

Gender

Whilst pay and treatment are suggested as dominant factors to young people feeling vulnerable to exploitation in the hospitality industry, it is crucial to unpack demographic differences too. Our data revealed important insights which may influence degrees of exploitation with gender discrimination, pay disparities and job security.

Our qualitative data suggested males showed higher agreement with statements about equal pay and pay reflecting daily expenses compared to females. However, with a 5:1 female-to-male ratio, the distribution might not represent all samples.

On the other hand, 13:1 ratio of females strongly disagreed with receiving equal pay, supporting internal validity and aligning with ongoing pay disparities in the industry. While research shows the gender pay gap is gradually closing in hospitality, this shouldn't dismiss underlying discrimination felt by females, as shown in our qualitative findings.



Gender

When questioned about specific experiences which negatively impact wellbeing, responses generally fit within themes of job insecurity, physical and emotional labour and unfair treatment.

When delving deeper, male respondents discussed maltreatment towards generational pay gaps and how their older co-workers receive a higher hourly wage despite having the same duties.

As hospitality tends to pay the minimum wage which is aligned with age and a large proportion of hospitality workers are within younger age brackets, this is a prominent issue.

This point is supported by research conducted by Griffiths University finding economic exploitation is the leading form of injustice within hospitality with 51% reporting experiences with it (2).

Contrastingly, thematic points discussed by women in our sample revolved around **power dynamics, support systems and harassment from customers**. In the Griffiths University study, this makes up the remaining percentages of workplace issues experienced by young workers.

In terms of power dynamics, the female respondents spoke about how managers can delegate favourable tasks, distribute hours and exhibit harsher punishments based on personal preference of employees.

One participant went on to say *'I feel one member of management doesn't respect me in the same way as my other staff as I am the sole female member of staff. I am also the youngest so that as well as being a girl affects how my co-workers and managers treat me, not necessarily being disrespectful but just treated slightly differently'*.

This example indicated how underlying biases can present themselves in the workplace, and can go unnoticed by anyone that isn't actively experiencing the mistreatment, which may also extend to treatment from customers.



AGE

Our survey data and background literature highlights how younger employees face distinct challenges such as being uncompensated for extensive physical and emotional labour and the older age bracket in our survey reported lack of stability and support. Research indicates a widening generational pay gap, creating a direct influence on the well-being of workers (labour exploitation).

This reinforces the exploitative conditions that make young hospitality workers vulnerable especially in comparison to those older or of a higher professional ranking.

A central issue lies in the generational pay gap, which is a prominent concern among young workers, who are becoming increasingly dissatisfied with their pay, especially in comparison to their efforts.



This remains a relevant issue in the worsening cost of living crisis, with the survey showing only 33% of people think their pay aligns with their daily expenses and only 26% agreeing that their work reflects their capabilities (2).

This potentially creates significant financial pressure on younger workers as financial burdens are becoming an increasingly urgent issue that should be addressed in an industry with high rates of underpaying employees.

Beyond this, workplace treatment also differs significantly between age groups. Younger workers frequently reported feeling patronized by managers and dismissed when attempting to raise concerns about their working conditions.

The prevalence of precarious work and zero-hour contracts in the hospitality industry has left many workers feeling insecure in their roles, especially those who rely on consistent pay. Furthermore, Newcastle research found that workers who were paid inappropriately, spoke about feeling disempowered but unable to resist the exploitation.

Whilst younger workers are underpaid due to perceived lack of experience, and older workers face limited support when attempting to advance in their career, these conditions can cause an emotional strain on all age groups.

Precarious Work

Precarious work is a dominant characteristic when describing the nature of hospitality work, particularly for young people. Inconsistent hours, abrupt dismissals and antisocial shift patterns can lead to feelings of intense burnout and stress.

However, the flexibility of hours, everchanging demand for work and picking up work for easy money can produce a continuous addictive cycle of pressure and instant gratification.

This is especially utilised by small food and beverage businesses, due to increased risks of exploiting weak spots in unionisation laws paired with young people's lack of education on what their workplace rights are.

Companies can profit from these laws by exploiting staff, particularly younger ages, who often lack the resources or knowledge to question being 'disposed of.'

LACK OF TRAINING AND HIGH TURNOVER

The results from this survey highlight the interdependent relationship between the lack of training and high turnover rates within the industry. Scores indicate that younger demographics (18-20) receive more workplace training, communication and feedback than older demographics (21-25).

This can be perceived as problematic when looking at factors contributing to the high turnover rates. Companies are likely to focus their training on young employees instead of experienced employees as older employees have to be paid more, are likely to have more responsibilities and are more unlikely to see the hospitality industry as a long-term path.

Employees with experience are expected to already know what they are doing and older employees are negatively impacted especially when seeking long-term career progression in the industry.





Abrupt dismissals

Additionally, employees are generally expected to know how to adapt to different restaurant environments and policies which they may not have been taught. This can lead to them being quickly let go, with people describing instances such as people being 'dismissed for small issues' or 'sacked for no reason.'

This represents trends reflected by FLEX (1) where young workers are less likely to receive formal training but are simultaneously over-represented in precarious roles. Organisational settings that neglect structured staff acquisition, formal and consistent communication exacerbate this instability, as summarised by this participant: 'If you want your staff to perform to a high standard, treat them with the most respect.'

This highlights the importance of two-way feedback and a workplace culture that values openness and mutual respect.

Limitations of 0-hour contracts

Our research highlights the prevalent issue of 0 hour contracts in the hospitality industry. Not only do 0-hour contracts lead to workers being vulnerable within their positions, but they can also lead to inconsistent hours, whether that is weekly or seasonally, and shifts being cancelled last minute

Whilst one worker describes 'shifts were cut for weeks at a time', another's 'Christmas hours were cut', someone was 'removed from the group chat and received a p60 without being notified' and a woman even described fear of job instability due to 'needing maternity cover.'

The majority of these issues can be attributed to unclear communication surrounding 0-hour contracts. People are frequently considered 'workers' rather than employees when describing laws lending them to a lack of guaranteed hours, little notice of being dismissed, necessary training not being mandatory, and very low union visibility (7, 8, 9).

Fortunately in recent months, new labour laws have decreased the prevalence of 0-hour contracts significantly (10), meaning more secure labour rights for employees, with further refinements due to take place next year. Research like this is essential for promoting the voices of people that have been subjected to injustice within this industry.



CONCLUSION

Our research aimed to get to the heart of the challenges faced in the hospitality industry. Utilising our survey meant that we could delve into the contributing factors towards wellbeing in the workplace, why young workers are generally more susceptible to emotional exploitation and bring to light the underlying struggles faced.

Having originally decided on **fairness of pay, workplace treatment and job security** as the three key indicators of employee satisfaction, our quantitative findings confirmed how disparities in these areas can negatively impact young employees.

That being said, qualitative responses allowed for further exploration, revealing insights and comments that aligned more cohesively with broader themes, categorised into **invisible labour and emotional burdens, inequalities between different demographics and precarious work**, thus allowing for stronger connections to be made.

As a result, a range of more specific issues emerged, highlighting the underlying struggles individuals face based on their personal experiences within the hospitality industry. The most prominent theme that arose was the hidden emotional labour endured by young employees.

In terms of pay, participants perceived it as something that should be equitable rather than equal, and findings regarding treatment discussed the hardships associated with overbearing management, especially in relation to age, as well as maltreatment from customers - a factor that wasn't initially considered when designing the quantitative questions, making these answers particularly valuable for understanding the full breadth of challenges faced in the workplace.

However, peer support was commonly associated with feelings of comfortability and belonging, perhaps suggesting why workers tend to stay in their roles in spite of other emotional burdens.

CONCLUSION (CONT.)

Responses also exposed the present systematic inequalities based on differences in **age, gender and other demographic factors**, with examples including younger workers feeling belittled by managers, women receiving unfair treatment in comparison to their male counterparts, and males expressing frustration over generational pay gaps - these were attributed to feeling undervalued and excluded in a setting that should be collaborative and celebrate differences.

When questioned on factors that influence employee perceptions on their job security, several participants spoke on experiencing **abrupt dismissals and lack of stability** due to 0-hour contracts, indicating a strong requirement for union visibility and policy change within this sector, particularly as the younger demographic tend to be less educated on this subject matter.

Overall, the food and beverage hospitality industry seems to promote itself as an appealing industry, marketing their roles to young workers as flexible and accessible.

However, our findings suggest that the positive attributes often mask prevalent systemic issues.

These positive attributes are generally accepted at face value yet without further questioning, the prevalent systemic issues which are hidden along with the emotional tax experienced by the employees. Providing an outlet for this marginalised demographic is vital as it can spark conversations on the prevalent structural cracks that were previously dismissed.

This highlights the significance of educating ourselves and speaking up to allow positive wellbeing to be consistent across all demographics within the hospitality industry.





Recommendations

1. Educate yourself

Young Workers

Familiarise yourself with workplace policies, union laws and mental health resources.

Managers

Undergo training in creating psychological safety in the workplace, with a focus on employee rights and effective communication to foster a positive environment that better supports young workers.

Industry

Provide mandatory courses, educating young people on their legal rights and managers on how to maintain these practices in their businesses, without jeopardising the success of the business.

2. Take accountability

Use knowledge of rights to speak up when something doesn't feel right, document negative experiences so they can be taken further if necessary.

Young Workers

Align more closely with industry standards to minimise bias in the workplace, such as giving consistent schedules, delegating tasks equally and providing flexibility.

Managers

Introduce mandatory training and policies to address pay discrepancies and job security, to reposition the industry as something that can be a long-term career path rather than a short term role.

Industry



Recommendations

3. Support others

Young Workers

Use social support to retain motivation when advocating for workplace rights and equality to buffer the negative impact of weak labour practices.

Managers

Devise a system for a structured, interval-based two-way feedback session, such as monthly or bimonthly, to ensure consistent communication and improvement between managers and staff.

Industry

Address emotional wellbeing and inclusivity during onboarding to the same level as health and safety practices to recognise mental and physical wellbeing are equally important.

REFERENCES

- 1) Experiences and drivers of labour exploitation for young migrant workers. (n.d.). https://labourexploitation.org/app/uploads/2021/12/LABOUR_EXPLO_YOUNG_WORKERS_Finaledit.pdf
- 2) Contributed. (2019). Research finds majority of young workers face exploitation and harassment in their first job. News.griffith.edu.au. <https://news.griffith.edu.au/2019/02/14/research-findsmajority-of-young-workers-face-exploitation-and-harassment-in-their-first-job/>
- 3) Adams, J. S. (2015). Equity theory. In Organizational Behavior 1 (pp. 134-158). Routledge.
- 4) Farrugia et al (2020). Young hospitality workers in their own words: Working conditions, labouring practices and experiences of hospitality labour (Report No. DP190102103). Newcastle Youth Studies Network: University of Newcastle. <http://purl.org/au-research/grants/arc/DP190102103>
- 5) Maslach, C., & Leiter, M. P. (2000). The truth about burnout: How organizations cause personal stress and what to do about it. John Wiley & Sons.
- 6) Hochschild, A. R. (2015). The managed heart. In Working in America (pp. 29-36). Routledge.
- 7) Taylor Review of Modern Working Practices, 2017
- 8) Health and Safety at Work Act (1974)
- 9) United Voices of the World (UVW) and Independent Workers Union of Great Britain (IWGB) have been trying to represent precarious, migrant, and low-paid hospitality workers.
- 10) Collins, R. (2024). Zero-hours contracts: Workers react to the ban. BBC News. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cw4yvprvn94o>



Maintain Momentum

With our research recommending actions for young workers, Managers and the Industry. The following resources and services will support people feeling safe, optimistic and confident with their Emotion at Work.

The Emotion at Work podcast is a useful start with episodes on emotional exploitation, resilience and wellbeing as well as mental health. Listen [here](#) 

If you want to know just how emotionally intelligent you are AND how you can improve take our e-Factor assessment. Take your assessment [here](#) 

Speaking up can be a challenging thing to do emotionally and so the Emotion at Work guide to emotion regulation is a good place to start. Get your copy [here](#) 

Feel safer, confident, and optimistic with Emotion at Work.