



## Gender stereotyping and hospitality leaders

Although most managers in the global hospitality industry are still male, an increasing number of women are taking on leadership roles. But how exactly do employees perceive masculine and feminine leadership styles? New research led by UCF Rosen College of Hospitality Management's Associate Professor Bendegul Okumus and the research team she works with looks at gender stereotypes and finds that the most successful managers, in the eyes of their staff, have a management style that combines both masculine and feminine leadership traits.

**D**espite decades of fighting for equality in the workplace, female employees in hospitality and other industries still experience sexism at work. According to research conducted by UCF Rosen College of Hospitality Management's Associate Professor Bendegul Okumus and the research team she works with, discrimination is a particular problem in Asian contexts, where women have strong career ambitions and female managers have significantly contributed to the rapid development of the tourism sector.

Published in the prestigious journal *Tourism Management*, the study looks at gender stereotyping and the effects of masculine stereotypes on female workers. The research was conducted with university colleagues and participants in Guangzhou—the third-largest city in China. A major port on the Pearl River, about 75 miles north of Hong Kong, Guangzhou is seen by many global brands as a gateway to the rest of the country.

According to social role theory, gender is a social construct and gender stereotypes are shaped by the behaviors that individuals observe in other people. Behaviors are held to be either 'communal' or 'agentic'. Strongly associated with women, 'communal' attributes are based on concern for the welfare of others, and demonstrated in qualities such as kindness, helpfulness, and sympathy. Usually associated with men, 'agentic' attributes focus on independence

and self, and are shown in qualities such as confidence, control, and assertiveness.

In a leadership context, social role theory implies that women usually have a more communal, emotional leadership style and are able to build a positive emotional atmosphere in the workplace—especially valuable in times of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic. However, feminine stereotypes are still not adequately understood. For example, the academic literature has studied the benefits of emotional leadership for such things as public relations, but until now little attention has been paid to employees' perceptions of female managers' leadership styles.

### LEADERSHIP PERCEPTIONS

This research is therefore timely. The mixed-methods study was conducted with the help of participants who were either interns or employees in mainland China hotels. There were three main research questions: whether masculine leadership traits and feminine emotional traits are common in the hospitality industry; whether a counter-stereotype exists of androgynous leadership, combining both masculine and feminine traits; and to what extent participants' ideal gender roles of leadership (IGRL) affect their perceived emotional leadership (PEL).

Three independent but complementary studies were conducted for the research. These comprised two 'implicit association tests'—widely-used, computer-based classical



research tests which use word association to check unconscious bias—and a survey that investigated the impact of gender stereotype on the perceived emotional leadership of front-line hospitality employees.



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## PARTICIPANTS WERE MORE LIKELY TO ASSOCIATE MALE MANAGERS WITH POSITIVE ATTRIBUTES, AND FEMALE MANAGERS WITH NEGATIVE ATTRIBUTES.

### BOLD MEN AND JOYFUL WOMEN

The first test considered the masculinity stereotype about hotel leadership traits. With an average age of 22, 31 male and 32 female hospitality students took part, all of whom had completed hotel internships. Their task was to look at online images of male and female managers. Using different keys on their computer keypad, participants were then asked to respond quickly to a series of words flashed onto the screen, indicating whether they associated each word with the male or female image.

After preliminary exercises, the target words were narrowed down to ten positive and ten negative attitudes, for example,

laziness, confidence, enthusiasm, impatience, indolence, selfishness, intelligence, and boldness. The results were moderated and analyzed using recognized computer software. As the researchers anticipated, they confirmed that the masculine stereotype of hospitality leaders still exists. Participants were more likely to associate male managers with positive attributes, and female managers with negative attributes.

The second test looked at the femininity stereotype about emotional traits. This time, 61 hospitality students with an average age of 22 took part, all of whom had completed hotel internships. As before, participants were asked to look at online images of male

and female managers and indicate whether they associated a series of words with the male or female image.

The target attributes for this study were words suggesting happiness and anger. The words were chosen according to widely used psychological studies and previous research, and the validity of the words in Chinese contexts was also tested. As in the first test, the target words were narrowed down to ten 'happy' words and ten 'angry' words, for example, joyful, outraged, amused, indignant, pleased, irate, irritated, and cheerful. These results were also moderated and analyzed as before. As the researchers anticipated, the results confirmed that the feminine stereotype regarding emotional traits still exists. Participants were more likely to associate male managers with angry emotions, and female managers with happy emotions.

### ANDROGYNOUS LEADERSHIP

The third study explored gender stereotypes and hotel leadership traits. In particular,



Dr. Bendegul Okumus investigates gender stereotyping in hospitality and its impact on employees' perceived emotional leadership.

it considered to what extent participants' ideal gender roles of leadership affect their perceived emotional leadership.

Frontline employees were recruited from 15 five-star hotels in Guangzhou's highly competitive hospitality market. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, the researchers cooperated with managers to conduct an

stage measured 14 indicators of masculinity and 12 indicators of femininity. Participants were asked, for example, to rate their managers for traits such as self-reliance, gentleness, and independence, according to a five-point scale from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'. According to the results, managers were rated in one of four categories of leadership: predominantly masculine,

## HOSPITALITY MUST WORK TOWARDS CREATING A HEALTHY GENDER CULTURE WHICH PROVIDES PROMOTION PATHWAYS FOR ALL EMPLOYEES.

online survey of staff from various departments, from housekeeping to reception, as well as food and beverage. Data was subsequently analysed from 466 staff who completed a questionnaire which asked them to rate the personality traits of their managers.

Ideal gender roles were determined in two stages. Based on previous studies and recognized leadership evaluations, the first

predominantly feminine, androgynous (exhibiting both masculine and feminine attributes), and undifferentiated (predominantly neither masculine nor feminine).

To measure perceptions of emotional leadership, participants were asked to rate their managers according to whether they increased positive emotions and decreased negative emotions. Using a six-point scale from 'strongly

agree' to 'strongly disagree', employees assessed their managers for such things as 'motivating employees when the team is happy after fulfilling a task' and 'encouraging employees to look on the bright side when the team is in deep trouble.'

Analysis showed that employees' perception of excellent leadership was no longer confined to binary gender roles, and that the ideal role combined masculine and feminine traits and was androgynous or undifferentiated. As researchers anticipated, the findings confirmed that employees with different ideal gender roles of leadership have different degrees of perceived emotional leadership. Participants in the androgynous group had the strongest perceived emotional leadership overall.

### HEALTHY GENDER CULTURE

By measuring the implicit attitudes of hospitality employees in an Asian context, the research confirms the prevalence of gender stereotypes in the industry. Importantly for the academic literature, it also reveals that employees respond better to managers with temperaments and personality traits associated with both masculinity and femininity. The implication is that managers should adopt androgynous leadership styles.

The study shows that hotel staff have more positive implicit attitudes towards male managers than female. However, it does not suggest that in order to succeed, female managers have to adopt the more assertive behaviors commonly associated with men. As the report finds, 'Female leaders have greater potential to overcome masculine stereotypes by showing higher emotional leadership.'

Much needs to be done to address existing problems in the hospitality sector which is a notoriously demanding, low-wage, labor-intensive industry. Given that the majority of its employees are female and the majority of its managers are male, the research also suggests that hospitality must work towards creating a healthy gender culture which provides promotion pathways for all employees.

As the report concludes, 'Gender equality is promoted not only by creating a balance of masculinity-leadership and femininity-emotion stereotypes, but also by blending the emotional intelligence, passion, and caring nature commonly associated with women.'

# RESEARCHERS IN FOCUS

## RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Dr. Bendegul Okumus and the research team investigate gender stereotyping in hospitality and its impact on employees' perceived emotional leadership.

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## PERSONAL RESPONSE

### **How applicable do you think the research findings are to hospitality businesses in different cultural settings?**

Given the severity of gender discrimination that still exists in some cultures, this study once again proved to hospitality human resources (HR) professionals the importance of a healthy gender culture, fair wages, and promotion pathways for all employees in the hospitality industry. Therefore, the negative effects of gender culture and gender leadership stereotypes are important issues that should be addressed by HR management. This study gives tips in promotion and recruitment that can be considered for the entire hospitality sector.

Higher Perceived Emotional Leadership means better emotional management that can help employees respond more positively to stress from the pandemic and further enhance their perceived organizational trust or loyalty to get through such difficult times now and in the future. Similar points are emphasized in the Gender Research Report of the International Labor Office, and it is stated that many organizations expect both masculine and feminine qualities from leaders to ensure work balance and job satisfaction among employees at all levels. As a result of the global diversity of tourism and hospitality, women's cultural and political roles in the economic and employment sectors are increasing, encouraging female workers to showcase their talents at the same level as their male counterparts. As a result, hiring leaders with androgynous management traits will help establish a different management style in the workplace. Also, as our study supports, gender equality is promoted not only by creating a balance of masculinity-leadership and femininity-emotional stereotypes, but also by blending the emotional intelligence, passion, and caring nature commonly associated with women. Carefully crafted communication channels will help motivate leaders with androgynous management characteristics to showcase their talents in workplace settings. When selecting speakers or trainers for staff training, conferences or other activities, priority may be given to successful leaders (especially women) with androgynous personalities to promote social dialogue and gender equality in the workplace.

## Dr. Bendegul Okumus



Dr. Bendegul Okumus has been at UCF Rosen College of Hospitality Management since 2016. Her primary teaching areas include nutrition concepts and issues in food services, sustainability, and health and wellness management in hospitality and tourism. Her research focuses on food safety, eating behavior and habits, food and culinary tourism, food waste and sustainability, health, and wellness in hospitality, and occupational wellness.

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