

Exploring Work Stress and Coping Strategies in the Hotel Industry: A Preliminary Study

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Abstract

In an era marked by high stress levels in various professions, this study investigates the factors influencing work stress and coping strategies among hotel industry employees. It combines a decade-long engagement in the sector with in-depth interviews, offering an insider perspective on how stress affects this specific workforce. The study encompasses participants from diverse roles and hierarchical levels within the hotel industry. The research identified the ubiquity of work stress, particularly during peak periods. A striking finding was the contemplation of resignation by some employees when presented with alternative employment options. This research goes beyond mere identification of stress factors, examining employees' coping trajectories from the initial acknowledgment of work-related stress to the employment of coping strategies and development of effective stress management methods. The study further explores how various aspects of the work environment shape these experiences and responses. The study's findings offer a substantial contribution to the existing body of literature on work stress and coping mechanisms in the hotel industry. They provide valuable insights into the challenges faced by hotel employees, informing academics and industry practitioners to facilitate the creation of effective interventions and support systems, ultimately aiming to improve job satisfaction and employee well-being within the hotel industry.

Keywords: work stress, coping strategies, hotel industry, qualitative study, employee experiences.

1. Introduction

The hotel industry is known for its fast-paced and demanding work environment, often leading to high levels of stress among employees. Extensive research has shown that job stress in the hotel industry can have detrimental effects on employee well-being, job satisfaction, and organizational outcomes. Understanding the factors contributing to work stress and its impact on hotel employees is crucial for developing effective strategies to mitigate its negative consequences.

Previous studies have highlighted the prevalence of work stress in the hotel industry and its association with various factors such as job demands, resources, attitudes, and coping strategies (Alarcon, 2011; Cheng & Kao, 2022; Choi, Mohammad, & Kim, 2019). However, further exploration is needed to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences and perceptions of hotel employees regarding work stress and its implications.

The objective of this study is to investigate the phenomenon of work stress in the hotel industry using a qualitative approach. Denmark is the happiest country, but it is not free from work stress (Kuettel, A., Pedersen, A. K., & Larsen, C. H., 2021). Moreover, the community is preparing to revive after going through the darkness of the pandemic (Yusriani, S., 2023). The Local.dk (2018) has told the analysis was conducted by the Epinion Institute on behalf of the LO trade union and reported by Politiken news, The survey asked 5,819 people how often they took medication to support their mental health.

14% said they take medication daily or weekly.

The survey also asked 3,360 people, who were either in employment, on sick leave or receiving unemployment welfare payments, whether they had taken sick leave from work during the last 12 months due to stress, burn-out or similar complaints. Of these, 18 percent answered that they took sick leave because of stress-related symptoms. LO deputy chairman Morten Skov Christiansen emphasized the severity of workers resorting to medication to manage job-induced mental stress. He advocated for greater attention towards the psychological dimensions of work environments. Christiansen (2018) mentioned that almost all orders from the Danish Work Environment Authority to enhance working conditions pertained to physical, not mental issues. The statistic that one out of ten workers is stressed is a red flag for managers, according to Jensen. The troubling part is the perceived necessity for medication to cope with work. As projections indicate stress becoming a primary cause of illness in the future, it's disconcerting to see society moving towards this path (Avisen.dk. 2018). Jensen further emphasized the need for collaborative efforts between managers and employees to tackle these escalating issues. Another information in Copenhagen Post News, According to Sundhedsstyrelsen, in pandemic recovery period, Helene Probst (2022) in this situation mental health issues account for 25 percent of all illnesses in Denmark, and 25 percent of children and young people aged 16-24 are struggling, Wenande, C. (2022).

According to Cartwright and Cooper (1997), two industrial and organizational psychologists from the UK, job stress can be defined as "the adverse physical and emotional response that occurs when job demands do not match the capabilities, resources, or needs of workers." This concept is based on the "demands gap" or "demands mismatch" theory proposed by Kahn et al. (1964), who suggested that stress occurs when there is a mismatch between what is demanded by the job and what the worker can provide.

In the initial interviews, five out of 30 participants mentioned that they experience fatigue and difficulty concentrating when they realize work stress. Ten of the participants stated that they try to be apathetic and immerse themselves in family activities at home once their working hours are over. Eight participants expressed that work stress is always present throughout their tenure in the hotel due to tight deadlines in managing cleanliness and kitchen departments. Additionally, seven managers stated that they experience work stress when the number of customer complaints increases, there are warnings from superiors regarding slowed performance, and multiple employees take sick leave simultaneously.

By conducting in-depth interviews with hotel employees, this research seeks to explore their perceptions, coping mechanisms, and the factors influencing their experiences of work stress. The study will focus on understanding the process of stress recognition, response, coping strategies, and the variables that impact employees when facing work stress. The findings of this study will contribute to the existing body of knowledge by providing insights into the lived experiences of hotel employees and their perspectives on work stress. This research will also shed light on the effectiveness of coping strategies and identify potential areas for intervention and support within the hotel industry. Ultimately, the aim is to enhance employee well-being, job satisfaction, and retention in the hotel sector.

Employee Well-being. Bhattacharya and Dasgupta (2021) conducted a qualitative study on emotional labor in the lifeworld of Indian hospitality employees, emphasizing the importance of understanding employees' emotional experiences for their overall well-being and stress management.

Job Satisfaction and Retention. Gangai and Agrawal (2018) explored the relationship among emotional intelligence, employee engagement, workplace stress, and turnover intentions in the hospitality industry, finding that higher emotional intelligence and engagement were associated with lower stress levels and reduced turnover intentions. Tongchaiprasit and Ariyabuddhiphongs (2016) investigated the mediating effects of job satisfaction and job stress on the relationship between creativity and turnover intention among hotel chefs, highlighting the mediating role of job satisfaction in reducing turnover intention.

Service Quality. Lee, Choo, and Hyun (2016) examined the effects of recovery experiences on hotel employees' subjective well-being, finding that positive recovery experiences were associated with higher levels of well-being, contributing to improved service quality and customer satisfaction.

Organizational Productivity. Karatepe, Yavas, Babakus, and Deitz (2018) investigated the effects of organizational and personal resources on stress, engagement, and job outcomes in the hospitality industry, revealing that higher resource levels were associated with lower stress levels and increased job satisfaction, leading to higher productivity.

Industry Competitiveness. Liu-Lastres, Huang, and Bao (2023) explored hospitality workers' career choices in the wake of COVID-19, highlighting the challenges faced by hotel employees during the pandemic and emphasizing the importance of addressing stress and providing support to maintain a competitive workforce.

COVID-19 Pandemic Effects. McGlinchey et al. (2021) conducted an interpretative phenomenological analysis of healthcare professionals' lived experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, which can inform understanding of the unique stressors faced by hotel employees during the pandemic. By considering these references, it becomes evident that exploring stress in the hotel industry is significant and relevant. It emphasizes the importance of employee well-being, job satisfaction, service quality, organizational productivity, industry competitiveness, and addressing the specific stressors of the COVID-19 pandemic. Understanding and managing stress in the hotel industry can lead to a healthier and more productive workforce, enhanced customer satisfaction, and improved industry performance.

Research Objectives are (1) To explore the lived experiences and perceptions of hotel employees regarding work stress in the hotel industry. (2) To examine the coping mechanisms employed by hotel employees in response to work stress. (3) To identify the factors that influence the experiences of work stress among hotel employees. (4) To investigate the impact of work stress on employee well-being, job satisfaction, and intention to leave in the hotel industry. (5) To provide insights and recommendations for interventions and support systems to mitigate work stress and enhance employee well-being in the hotel industry.

2. Literature Review

Stress and Coping. Stress and coping in the context of work-related stress are often understood through Lazarus and Folkman's transactional stress and coping theory (1984). According to this theory, psychological stress occurs when individuals perceive a situation as exceeding their resources and threatening their well-being. Coping refers to the cognitive and behavioral efforts individuals make to manage these stressful demands.

Lazarus (1993) emphasizes the importance of focusing on the specific threats experienced by employees in the hotel industry rather than solely on the industry itself. Specific stressors identified for hotel employees include emotional impact, lifestyle changes, interactions with colleagues and guests, financial difficulties, and job insecurity. These stressors can hinder employees' adjustment and well-being.

In addition to industry-related stressors, hotel employees also face common stressors such as personal loss or issues related to their families. Perceived stress has been shown to contribute to future adverse events and reduced long-term well-being for employees. Therefore, it is crucial to identify coping styles and strategies that promote successful adjustment.

Coping styles refer to stable personality dispositions that influence how individuals typically respond to stressful situations. Different coping dimensions have been proposed, such as sensitization/repression and vigilance/cognitive avoidance. The Coping Orientation to Problem Experience (COPE) developed by Carver et al. (1989) assesses 14 dispositional coping strategies commonly adopted in stressful situations. Lazarus and Folkman's situational coping approach suggests that the COPE can also be used to assess coping strategies employed in specific situations.

Conceptualizing Occupational Stress and Its Dimensions. Occupational stress refers to the psychological, physiological, and behavioral responses that individuals experience when they perceive a discrepancy between the demands of their work and their ability to cope with those demands (Locke & Taylor, 1991). It is a multifaceted construct with various dimensions. The dimensions of occupational stress commonly studied include job demands, job resources, job attitudes, and personal factors (Alarcon, 2011). Job demands refer to the physical, psychological, or organizational aspects of work that require effort or skills. Job resources are the aspects of the job that facilitate goal attainment, reduce job demands, and stimulate personal growth and development. Job attitudes involve an individual's affective and cognitive evaluations of their work, such as job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Personal factors encompass individual characteristics and traits that influence how individuals perceive and respond to job demands and resources.

Theoretical Frameworks for Understanding Stress in the Workplace. Several theoretical frameworks have been used to understand occupational stress in the workplace. The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model proposes that job demands and resources interact to influence employee well-being and work outcomes (Karatepe et al., 2018). The Conservation of Resources (COR) theory suggests that individuals strive to acquire, retain, and protect resources, and stress occurs when resources are threatened or lost (Alarcon, 2011). The Transactional Model of Stress and Coping emphasizes the cognitive appraisal process and the individual's efforts to cope with stressors (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). These theoretical frameworks provide valuable insights into the mechanisms and processes underlying occupational stress.

Coping Strategies. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) proposed two forms of coping with stress: emotion-focused coping and problem-focused coping. Emotion-focused coping involves efforts to find meaning in or reduce stress without attempting to change the situation or problem at hand. Examples of emotion-focused coping strategies include escapism, minimization, self-blame, and seeking meaning. On the other hand, problem-focused coping involves direct actions to solve the problem. This includes planning steps, undertaking efforts, and implementing a plan to address the problem directly (instrumental action). Other problem-focused coping strategies include cautious coping, which involves carefully considering alternative solutions, and negotiation coping, which entails seeking problem-solving discussions with others involved in the issue.

Coping strategies are influenced by various factors, such as gender, level of education, age development, and socioeconomic status. Gender plays a role in determining coping strategies, with women tending to be more oriented towards emotion-focused coping, while men are more problem-focused. Education level influences coping, as higher education is associated with increased cognitive complexity and a more active approach to problem-solving. Age also influences coping, as individuals' psychological structures and available resources for coping change with age development. Additionally, socioeconomic status impacts coping, with lower socioeconomic status associated with less active, less realistic coping, and more fatalistic or rejecting responses compared to individuals with higher economic status (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Rogers & Rippetor, 1987).

Several studies have investigated stress in the hotel industry, shedding light on its prevalence and impact. Choi, Mohammad, and Kim (2019) examined the relationships among emotional intelligence, emotional labor, job stress, coping strategies, and burnout among hotel frontline employees. They found that emotional intelligence played a crucial role in mitigating the negative effects of emotional labor and job stress on burnout. Kang and Jang (2019) explored the hindrance and challenge stressors perceived by hotel employees and examined the role of hope as a coping mechanism. They found that hope moderated the relationship between stressors and work outcomes, suggesting its protective effect.

Despite the valuable contributions of previous research, there are some gaps and limitations that need to be addressed. Firstly, there is a need for more qualitative studies to gain in-depth insights into the experiences of hotel employees and the contextual factors that influence their stress levels. The study by Bhattacharya and Dasgupta (2021) on emotional labor in the lifeworld of Indian hospitality employees provides an example of a qualitative inquiry that fills this gap. Secondly, while several studies have examined stress in the hotel industry, more research is needed to explore the specific impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on stress levels and coping mechanisms among hotel employees. Studies such as Liu-Lastres, Huang, and Bao (2023) on hospitality workers' career choices in the wake of COVID-19 provide valuable insights into the unique stressors faced during this period.

3. Research Method

This study utilized a qualitative research approach to explore the experiences of hotel industry employees in dealing with work stress and the coping strategies they apply. The

research design consisted of conducting in-depth interviews with 105 respondents. The participants for the study were selected using purposive sampling to ensure representation from various job positions and levels within the hotel industry. The sample size of 105 participants was determined based on the principle of data saturation, where new information and themes ceased to emerge. Participants were at least 18 years of age and working in the hotel industry. Data collection involved conducting face-to-face interviews, video meetings, and interviews in the form of surveys administered through messaging applications. The chosen modes of interviews were based on the convenience and preferences of the participants. In the online interview, we conducted a survey consisting of 20 questions with short answers related to work stress and coping strategies, reflecting the experiences of workers in the hotel industry. More in-depth interview, 45 of our colleagues answered in a relaxed atmosphere about work stress and coping strategies in this study. Hence, from the beginning of March 2023 until June 2023, our respondents numbered 105. Sixty respondents answered the online survey questions, and we interviewed 45 respondents face-to-face through video calls, conducting more in-depth interviews. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather rich and detailed information about the experiences of hotel employees with work stress and their coping strategies. The interview questions were developed based on the research objectives and the existing literature on work stress in the hotel industry. Data Analysis. The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim, ensuring accuracy in capturing the participants' responses. Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the qualitative data. The transcriptions were coded, and themes and sub-themes were identified based on recurring patterns and key findings related to work stress and coping strategies. Ethical guidelines were followed throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and they were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses. The study protocol was reviewed and approved by the relevant research ethics committee.

4. Findings and Discussions

Figure 1. Participant characteristics - data from survey online



Summary of in-depth interview. Among the three respondents interviewed by the researcher in an in-depth interview, (1) Rania, 48 years old, stated that she experiences work stress when the hotel she currently works at undergoes a change in ownership, resulting in leadership transformation and a shift in the management information system. "I feel that both employees and management are under pressure and experiencing stress, but the scale may vary. We have been feeling this atmosphere while working for the past few months..." Rania copes with the situation by engaging in light exercise and leaving her laptop at the office so that when she is at home, she can relax and rest peacefully without thinking of the stuff of office. (2) Leo, 52 years old, expressed that he experiences work stress when he has to clean family rooms, which are large rooms with three different beds, and he has to change all the sheets and decorations within only 10 minutes per room, with the task of 16 rooms per shift. "The demands of the job in the hotel require fast deadlines and can make us very tired, especially if there are unexpected things when we start our shift. I feel dizzy when I'm exhausted, and I realize that my performance decreases when work stress occurs," he said. (3) Max, 47 years old, a handyman in Denmark, mentioned that work stress began to affect him when the workload increased and he had to fix things faster, while his colleague was on leave and his supervisor kept reminding him about the speed of his work. "Feeling too tired and getting drowsy quickly are personal signs for me when I start to feel stressed at work. I usually take an 'off day' to prevent the situation from getting worse," he added.

During in-depth interviews, a total of 45 colleagues provided responses as detailed below: Ten participants revealed feelings of being overwhelmed, struggling with concentration on work-related tasks. An additional fifteen disclosed the emotional repercussions, such as heightened irritability, fatigue, and self-regulation difficulties due to the excessive workload. Ten respondents delineated issues with sleep disturbances, persistent ruminative thoughts, and an escalating anxiety stemming from concerns over unfulfilled work commitments. Furthermore, ten individuals remarked on an increase in overtime, which negatively impacted their familial and professional relationships, further intruding into their personal lives.

The in-depth dialogues with 45 colleagues immersed in the hotel industry yielded the following insights: Fifteen participants shared their strategy of taking leaves of absence, sick leaves, or breaks to prioritize their well-being and mitigate occupational stress. Ten respondents highlighted the incorporation of physical activities such as sports, jogging, swimming, culinary pursuits, fishing, or other hobbies as therapeutic measures to alleviate work-related tension and stress. A group of twenty individuals mentioned that they actively seek quality time with family or friends, occasionally confiding about their work-related stress to trusted relatives or peers for emotional support. Nonetheless, a unanimous response from all participants (100% of the colleagues) was the recognition of work stress as an inherent part of their professional life in the hotel industry, emphasizing their continuous efforts to surmount these challenges. Meanwhile, in the online survey, 45% of the 60 respondents engaged in exercise as part of their coping strategy when experiencing work-related stress.

In the in-depth interviews, the most significant factors reported by 30 individuals, despite having substantial salary compensation, were deadlines or time constraints in completing tasks and a heavy workload. Fifteen others mentioned experiencing poor communication,

a lack of support from managers or colleagues, and feeling overwhelmed with customer complaints.

All employees acknowledge that work stress is an inherent risk in their jobs. Approximately 78% express gratitude for their work as it provides for their livelihood, despite frequently experiencing work-related stress and a sense of dissatisfaction. However, 22% still feel far from achieving job security and do not experience job satisfaction. Additionally, 53.3% of the 60 online respondents express a desire to switch jobs. Meanwhile, during face-to-face interviews, 55.6% of 45 colleagues in the hotel industry express a desire to change jobs.

Several suggestions provided by the respondents include the following: management should enhance employee engagement and provide regular salary increments in line with increased workload, for instance, considering inflation adjustments at the beginning of each year. It is also recommended to establish a department for complaints or consultation, specifically addressing work-related stress as a sign of the organization's concern for employee well-being. Additionally, the majority of employees suggest creating a more welcoming and structured work environment, promoting teamwork rather than individual responsibility to deliver the best service to hotel guests. Other suggestions include implementing talent management programs to allow employees to develop skills in other roles and showing appreciation through awards and recognition during significant moments by stakeholders within the organization for exemplary performance by hotel employees.

The present qualitative study explored the experiences of hotel industry employees in dealing with work stress and investigated the coping strategies they employ. Through in-depth interviews and surveys conducted with a diverse group of 105 respondents, rich insights were gained into the coping mechanisms used by hotel employees to manage their stress levels.

The findings of the study revealed two primary forms of coping strategies: emotion-focused coping and problem-focused coping. Emotion-focused coping involved efforts to find meaning in the stressful experiences or to reduce stress without directly addressing the underlying problem. Examples of emotion-focused coping strategies included escapism, minimization, self-blame, and seeking meaning. On the other hand, problem-focused coping strategies focused on actively solving the stress-inducing problems. Strategies such as instrumental action, caution, and negotiation were employed by the respondents to address the root causes of their stress.

The study also examined the influence of various factors on coping strategies. Gender was found to play a role, with women tending to rely more on emotion-focused coping, while men were more oriented towards problem-focused coping. The level of education was another influencing factor, as individuals with higher education levels displayed greater cognitive complexity and were more proactive in problem-solving. Age was also found to impact coping strategies, with different age groups employing distinct coping mechanisms. Additionally, socioeconomic status influenced coping, with individuals of lower socioeconomic status displaying less active and realistic coping strategies compared to those with higher socioeconomic status.

It is important to acknowledge some limitations of the study. Firstly, the findings may not

be generalizable to the entire hotel industry due to the specific sample characteristics and context. Secondly, the reliance on self-reported data may introduce potential biases or inaccuracies in the participants' responses. However, efforts were made to minimize these limitations through rigorous data collection and analysis procedures. Additionally, the sample size of 105 participants, while valuable, may still be limited in capturing the full range of experiences and coping strategies within the hotel industry. Larger sample sizes could provide more comprehensive insights. Furthermore, the recruitment of participants through online surveys may introduce self-selection bias, as individuals who have greater access to technology or are more willing to participate may be overrepresented in the study. Conversations used several foreign languages because the hotel workers interviewed were in various countries, including in Indonesia, Malaysia, Denmark, Greece, Switzerland, UK, Poland, Saudi Arabia and Thailand. Occasionally, variations in the interpretation of words may arise.

Overall, this qualitative study provided valuable insights into the experiences of hotel employees in dealing with work stress and the coping strategies they employ. The findings contribute to a better understanding of the challenges faced by hotel industry workers and can inform the development of interventions and support mechanisms to improve their well-being. The findings from this study can be the basis for further research to explore stress management in the hospitality industry more deeply. Future research can expand the scope of this research by involving more variables or comparing stress management strategies between different industries, and can use quantitative methods or more comprehensive mixed methods.

5. Conclusion

Based on the literature review and the findings from the qualitative phase of this study, several conclusions can be drawn regarding stress in the hotel industry and coping strategies employed by employees. Occupational stress in the hotel industry is a significant issue that affects employees' well-being and job performance. Specific stressors such as emotional labor, high workload, customer demands, and job insecurity have been identified. Coping strategies employed by hotel employees vary, with two primary forms identified: emotion-focused coping and problem-focused coping. Emotion-focused coping involves efforts to manage the emotional impact of stressors, while problem-focused coping focuses on actively addressing the underlying problems causing stress. Factors such as gender, level of education, age, and socioeconomic status influence coping strategies. Women tend to rely more on emotion-focused coping, while individuals with higher education levels employ more problem-focused coping strategies. In conclusion, this study highlights the significance of stress in the hotel industry and the various coping strategies utilized by employees. The findings underscore the importance of addressing occupational stress and promoting effective coping mechanisms to enhance employee well-being and job performance in the hotel industry. The insights gained from this research can inform the development of interventions and support systems to mitigate work stress and improve employee well-being in the hotel industry.

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