

A Phenomenological Inquiry into Hotel Employees' Lived Experiences, Job Innovation, and Performance in the Philippine Hospitality Sector

Christian Anthony C. Agutaya¹, Emma Vida R. Liwanag², Mercy Grace A. Maming³, Zernan R. Maling⁴, Mariane Lee B. Linesis⁵, Climber John Rosales⁶, Ronald Lumanglas⁷, Billy Joseph Atienza⁸, Clark Rojas⁹, Donne Fernando Guerrero¹⁰, Angelo Palmero¹¹, Michelle S. Villan¹² and Norman Campo¹³

¹College of Business and Management, Mindoro State University, Philippines

²College of Business and Management, Mindoro State University, Philippines

³College of Business and Management, Mindoro State University, Philippines

⁴College of Business and Management, Mindoro State University, Philippines

⁵College of Business and Management, Mindoro State University, Philippines

⁶College of Business and Management, Mindoro State University, Philippines

⁷College of Business and Management, Mindoro State University, Philippines

⁸College of Business and Management, Mindoro State University, Philippines

⁹College of Business and Management, Mindoro State University, Philippines

¹⁰College of Business and Management, Mindoro State University, Philippines

¹¹College of Business and Management, Mindoro State University, Philippines

¹²College of Business and Management, Mindoro State University, Philippines

¹³College of Business and Management, Mindoro State University, Philippines

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary transformations in the global hospitality industry have significantly reshaped work conditions, heightening the demand for employee adaptability, continuous innovation, and sustained high performance. These evolving operational environments require hospitality employees to navigate complex service expectations, technological integration, and organizational change while maintaining service quality and competitiveness. While prior research has examined hospitality recovery largely through organizational and economic indicators, limited attention has been given to hotel employees' lived experiences, particularly within developing country and provincial contexts. This study explores how hotel employees experience job innovation and performance in the Philippine hospitality sector through a qualitative phenomenological approach. Data were collected from ten hotel employees in selected provincial destinations, including Oriental Mindoro, using individual semi-structured interviews and a focus group discussion. Reflexive thematic analysis revealed four interrelated themes: innovation as everyday adaptation, lived experiences of constraint and responsibility, meaning-making and performance, and organizational support and innovation sustainability. Findings indicate that job innovation is embedded in daily adaptive practices shaped by resource limitations, emotional labor, and intrinsic motivation, while performance is primarily understood through guest satisfaction, teamwork, and personal dignity at work. The study highlights the central role of employees' subjective experiences in sustaining service quality and organizational resilience. By foregrounding employee perspectives, this research contributes to hospitality scholarship by bridging macro-level tourism policies and micro-level workplace practices and offers practical insights for human resource management and tourism policy development in post-pandemic contexts.

1. Introduction

The global hospitality industry has undergone profound restructuring in recent years, characterized by shifting travel patterns, rapid digital transformation, and rising expectations for service flexibility, personalization, and operational resilience. These structural changes have reshaped hotel work environments, intensified performance demands, and expanded the need for employee-driven innovation to sustain competitiveness and service excellence. Hotels worldwide have adopted contactless technologies, reconfigured service processes, and redefined workforce roles in response to labor shortages and volatile market

conditions (UNWTO, 2022; OECD, 2023). Within this environment, competitive advantage increasingly depends not only on physical assets or technological systems but also on employees' capacity to innovate at the point of service. Frontline employees are now expected to engage in continuous problem solving, service recovery, and adaptive decision-making that directly shape guest satisfaction and operational efficiency (Karatepe & Olugbade, 2023).

Recent hospitality research emphasizes that employee-driven innovation often manifests through incremental and informal practices rather than formal research and development activities. These include modifying work routines, introducing creative service solutions, and proactively responding to guest needs under constrained conditions (Hu et al., 2021; Li et al., 2022). Such forms of job-level innovation are strongly influenced by employees' lived experiences, emotional labor, and perceptions of organizational support. As global hotels navigate post-pandemic uncertainty, human-centered innovation has emerged as a strategic priority, reinforcing the need to understand how employees experience and enact innovation in their everyday work contexts (Baum et al., 2023).

In the Philippines, the hotel and tourism sector plays a critical role in economic recovery and employment generation. The government's post-pandemic tourism strategies emphasize capacity expansion, digital transformation, sustainability, and workforce development as interconnected priorities (Department of Tourism [DOT], 2023). National tourism roadmaps highlight the importance of service quality and human capital in strengthening destination competitiveness, particularly as the country seeks to attract higher-value and longer-staying tourists (DOT, 2023; World Bank, 2024).

Despite renewed investment and policy support, national assessments continue to identify structural challenges confronting Philippine hotels. These include skills mismatches, uneven access to training, high employee turnover, and disparities in digital readiness across regions (ADB, 2022; World Bank, 2024). As a result, employee innovation and performance are increasingly viewed as critical levers for organizational resilience and service excellence. Recent Philippine-focused studies note that hotel employees are frequently required to assume expanded roles, manage emotional demands, and generate creative solutions under resource-constrained conditions, yet their subjective experiences remain insufficiently documented (Rivera & Gutierrez, 2022; Dela Cruz et al., 2024).

Although international and national literature on hospitality recovery, service innovation, and human resource management has expanded since 2021, significant gaps remain, particularly in the Philippine hotel context. First, a substantial portion of recent studies relies on quantitative indicators such as occupancy rates, financial performance, and sustainability metrics, offering limited insight into how employees themselves experience post-pandemic work realities (Karatepe et al., 2021; Li et al., 2022). The everyday meanings employees attach to innovation, adaptability, and performance are often treated as secondary variables rather than as central explanatory mechanisms.

Second, while contemporary research increasingly acknowledges the role of leadership, engagement, and psychological resources in fostering employee creativity, relatively few studies adopt a phenomenological approach that foregrounds employees' lived experiences and sense-making processes (Hu et al., 2021; Baum et al., 2023). This methodological gap is particularly evident in developing country contexts, where institutional constraints, cultural norms, and local labor conditions shape how innovation is enacted at the job level. Consequently, there remains a disconnect between macro-level tourism policies and micro-level employee practices that actually produce adaptive service innovations and performance outcomes within hotels.

At the provincial level, hotels in Oriental Mindoro operate within a distinctive tourism environment characterized by ecological sensitivity, seasonal demand, and community-based tourism development. Key destinations such as Puerto Galera continue to attract domestic and international visitors, while provincial initiatives promote sustainable and green tourism practices aligned with national goals (Provincial Government of Oriental Mindoro, 2023). However, local assessments indicate persistent challenges related to human resource capacity, including limited access to continuous training, informal work arrangements, and uneven organizational preparedness for crises and market fluctuations (Provincial Tourism Office, 2022; Dela Cruz et al., 2024).

2. Literature Review

Recent scholarship emphasizes that hospitality work has become increasingly complex due to post-pandemic restructuring, labor shortages, and accelerated digitalization, all of which have reshaped employees' everyday experiences. Studies published within the last five years argue that hotel employees are no longer passive service providers but active agents who continuously adapt their roles to sustain service quality under volatile conditions (Baum et al., 2023; Karatepe & Olugbade, 2023). This shift has redirected scholarly attention toward the human-centered dimensions of hospitality recovery, highlighting how employees' lived experiences influence innovation and performance outcomes.

Job innovation in hospitality is increasingly conceptualized as an informal, employee-driven process embedded in daily work routines rather than as a formal organizational initiative. Empirical studies show that frontline hotel employees often innovate by adjusting service processes, personalizing guest interactions, and solving operational problems in real time, particularly when resources are limited (Hu et al., 2021; Li et al., 2022). These micro-level innovations are shaped by employees' perceptions of autonomy, responsibility, and situational demands, underscoring the need to understand innovation as an experiential phenomenon.

Recent literature also underscores the role of lived experience in shaping how hotel employees interpret and enact performance. Rather than relying solely on standardized metrics, employees frequently define performance through guest satisfaction, teamwork, and emotional engagement (Karatepe et al., 2021; Nguyen & Kim, 2023). This perspective aligns with service-dominant logic, which positions value creation as co-produced through employee-guest interactions, thereby linking subjective experience directly to organizational outcomes.

Emotional labor remains a central theme in contemporary hospitality research, particularly in post-pandemic contexts. Studies indicate that heightened emotional demands, coupled with expanded role expectations, significantly influence employees' capacity to innovate and sustain performance (Zhang et al., 2022; Baum et al., 2023). Employees' lived experiences of stress, responsibility, and moral obligation to guests often act as both constraints and motivators, shaping how innovation emerges in practice.

Organizational support has been consistently identified as a critical contextual factor influencing job innovation and performance. Recent findings suggest that perceived managerial support, trust, and access to learning opportunities enhance employees' willingness to experiment with new ideas and adaptive practices (Liang et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2024). Conversely, weak support systems can lead to innovation fatigue, where continuous adaptation becomes a source of burnout rather than improvement. Within developing country contexts, scholars highlight that structural constraints such as limited training resources, high turnover, and informal work arrangements intensify the reliance on employee-driven innovation (Rivera & Gutierrez, 2022; Dela Cruz et al., 2024). These studies argue that employees' lived experiences in such contexts differ markedly from those in highly standardized hotel environments, making phenomenological approaches particularly relevant for capturing local meanings of innovation and performance.

Philippine-focused hospitality research over the past five years remains relatively limited but indicates similar patterns of adaptive innovation and meaning-based performance. Recent qualitative and mixed-method studies note that Filipino hotel employees often draw on cultural values such as hospitality, resilience, and collective responsibility when innovating under pressure (Santos & Reyes, 2021; Dela Cruz et al., 2024). These culturally embedded experiences shape how employees perceive dignity, commitment, and success at work.

Despite growing recognition of employee-centered innovation, the literature reveals a methodological gap in capturing employees' lived experiences through phenomenological inquiry. Most recent studies rely on surveys and structural models, offering limited insight into how employees make sense of innovation and performance in their everyday work lives (Nguyen & Kim, 2023; Chen et al., 2024). Addressing this gap, phenomenological research provides a rigorous lens for understanding the subjective foundations of job innovation and performance in the Philippine hospitality sector.

3. Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative phenomenological research design to examine hotel employees' lived experiences of job innovation and performance in the Philippine hospitality sector. Phenomenology was employed to capture how employees perceive, interpret, and assign meaning to their everyday work practices within post-pandemic service environments characterized by uncertainty and operational change. This approach is appropriate for hospitality research where innovation frequently emerges through experiential learning, informal problem solving, and interaction rather than formalized organizational systems (Creswell & Poth, 2021; Baum et al., 2023).

The study was conducted in selected hotel establishments in the Philippines, with emphasis on provincial destinations, including Oriental Mindoro. Ten (10) hotel employees participated in the study, comprising frontline and operational staff such as front office personnel, housekeeping staff, food and beverage employees, and first-line supervisors. Participants were required to have at least one year of hospitality work experience and employment during the post-pandemic recovery period. A purposive sampling strategy was used to recruit participants with direct experience of the phenomenon under investigation, consistent with qualitative research standards emphasizing depth over sample size (Guest et al., 2024).

Data were collected through individual semi-structured interviews and one focus group discussion (FGD) involving the same ten participants. The interview and FGD guides consisted of open-ended questions exploring daily work experiences, job innovation practices, and perceptions of performance. Data collection was conducted in English or Filipino, depending on participant preference. Individual interviews lasted approximately 45–60 minutes, while the FGD lasted about 90 minutes. All sessions were audio-recorded with informed consent and transcribed verbatim. Data analysis followed a reflexive thematic analysis process, involving iterative coding, theme development, and constant comparison across data sources (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Study rigor was established through strategies addressing credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability, including prolonged engagement with the data, reflexive memo writing, triangulation between interview and FGD data, selective member checking, and maintenance of an audit trail (Saunders et al., 2023). Ethical approval was secured prior to data collection, and participants were informed of the study's purpose, voluntary nature, and right to withdraw at any time. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured through the use of pseudonyms and secure data storage, in accordance with contemporary ethical standards for qualitative research involving human participants (American Psychological Association, 2023).

4. Findings

Analysis of the individual interviews and focus group discussion generated four interrelated themes that illuminate hotel employees' lived experiences of job innovation and performance in the Philippine hospitality sector. Collectively, these themes demonstrate how employees navigated post-pandemic work realities through continuous adaptation, expanded responsibility, personal meaning-making, and negotiated organizational support. The convergence of individual and group accounts strengthened the credibility of the findings and revealed consistent experiential patterns across roles and departments.

4.1 Innovation as Everyday Adaptation

Participants consistently framed job innovation as a form of everyday adaptation rather than as a formal or strategic activity. Innovation emerged through continuous adjustments to service routines, flexible role performance, and situational problem solving in response to operational constraints. As one front desk employee explained, "Before, we followed the manual strictly.

Now, we adjust every day depending on the situation. Innovation for me is finding ways to help guests even if the system is limited” (Participant 3). This account highlights how innovation was rooted in practical judgment and guest-centered decision making rather than compliance with standardized procedures.

Similarly, housekeeping staff described innovation as learning to respond creatively to increased workloads and staffing shortages. Participant 6 noted, “We handle more rooms now, but we also help other departments. You learn to be creative because no one else will solve the problem for you.” These narratives underscore that innovation functioned as a survival mechanism embedded in daily work practices. This finding aligns with recent hospitality research emphasizing that frontline innovation often arises informally through experiential learning and adaptive action under uncertainty (Li et al., 2022; Baum et al., 2023).

4.2 Lived Experiences of Constraint and Responsibility

Employees’ adaptive innovation was shaped by lived experiences of constraint and heightened responsibility. Participants described expanded role expectations, increased workloads, and persistent pressure to maintain service quality despite limited resources. These conditions generated emotional strain but also reinforced a strong sense of accountability to guests and colleagues. Performance, therefore, was not perceived solely in terms of task completion but as the ability to sustain service standards under difficult circumstances.

The findings reflect patterns observed in Philippine hospitality studies that document intensified emotional labor and role expansion in the post-pandemic period (Rivera & Gutierrez, 2022; Dela Cruz et al., 2024). Employees’ narratives suggest that innovation was often reactive rather than proactive, driven by necessity rather than organizational encouragement. This context of constraint shaped how employees evaluated both their own performance and the value of their innovative efforts.

4.3 Meaning-Making and Performance

Performance was commonly interpreted through personal and relational meanings rather than through formal organizational metrics. Participants emphasized guest satisfaction, teamwork, and professional pride as primary indicators of effective performance. A food and beverage employee articulated this perspective clearly: “Performance is not just speed. It’s when the guest feels taken care of, even if we are short-staffed” (Participant 9). This statement illustrates how employees linked performance to emotional outcomes and service quality rather than efficiency alone.

Job innovation was closely tied to intrinsic motivation, particularly a commitment to service and personal dignity at work. Employees derived meaning from their ability to respond creatively to guest needs despite systemic limitations. This finding supports recent evidence that performance in hospitality settings is strongly influenced by meaning-making processes and perceived purpose, especially in high-contact service roles (Karatepe & Olugbade, 2023).

4.4 Organizational Support and Innovation Sustainability

While employees demonstrated strong adaptability and willingness to innovate, participants consistently noted that such efforts were difficult to sustain without organizational support. The focus group discussion reinforced this theme, with participants collectively emphasizing that innovation was a shared responsibility shaped by teamwork and mutual support. However, they also highlighted the need for clearer communication, consistent leadership support, and access to skills development opportunities to maintain performance over time.

The FGD findings revealed convergence between individual and collective meanings of innovation and performance, strengthening analytic credibility through triangulation (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Saunders et al., 2023). Participants expressed that without recognition, training, and structural support, employee-driven innovation risks becoming a source of burnout rather than sustained improvement. These insights echo policy and industry reports calling for stronger human resource systems that align employee innovation with institutional support mechanisms (DOT, 2023; World Bank, 2024).

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

This phenomenological inquiry revealed that hotel employees’ job innovation and performance are deeply rooted in their lived experiences of adaptation, responsibility, and meaning-making within post-pandemic hospitality environments. Innovation emerged as an everyday coping and problem-solving mechanism rather than a formal organizational process. Employees’ performance was shaped not only by operational demands but also by emotional labor, intrinsic motivation, and relational dynamics with guests and colleagues.

The study demonstrates that understanding employee innovation in hospitality requires attention to subjective experiences and contextual realities, particularly in provincial destinations such as Oriental Mindoro. By foregrounding employees’ voices, this research bridges the gap between macro-level tourism policies and micro-level workplace practices, offering a nuanced understanding of how service innovation is enacted on the ground.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed: (1) For hotel management: Develop structured yet flexible training programs that recognize and build upon employees’ informal innovation practices, particularly in frontline roles; (2) For human resource units: Institutionalize mechanisms for recognizing employee-driven innovations and linking them to career development pathways; (3) For policymakers: Integrate employee-centered perspectives into tourism recovery and workforce development programs, especially in provincial destinations; and (4) For future research: Conduct comparative phenomenological studies across regions and hotel categories to deepen understanding of contextual influences on job innovation and performance.

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