

A conceptual study on the challenges in implementing and accessing mental health support systems in Malaysia's hotel industry

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ABSTRACT

In Malaysia, the hospitality industry is one of the key contributors to nation's revenue. However, employees are frequently subjected to challenging nature of work that contribute to emotional distress, chronic stress and mental health strain. Despite increasing awareness of mental health issues, employees and management continue to face significant barriers to provide adequate and access to mental health support in the hotel industry. These challenges contribute to employee stress, burnout, high turnover, and reduced service quality, consequently impacting organizational productivity and guest satisfaction. This conceptual paper aims to review the challenges associated with the implementation and accessibility of mental health support in the hospitality industry.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of study

Mental health is defined as a state of well-being in which individuals recognize their abilities, cope with everyday stress, work productively, and contribute meaningfully to their communities (World Health Organization, 2004). It is a critical aspect of overall functioning, as mental health influences how individuals manage stress, maintain productivity, and engage socially. Mental health in the workplace is

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increasingly recognized as a vital factor influencing employee productivity, satisfaction, and organizational sustainability. According to the World Health Organization (WHO) (2022), mental well-being enables individuals to cope with stress, work productively, and contribute positively to their organizations. Several factors such as work conditions, financial stability, family issues, and interpersonal relationships significantly impact mental well-being (National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, 2019). A poor work environment can lead to mental distress and, over time, contribute to more serious mental health conditions (WHO, 2017; National Safety Council, 2020).

Workplace stress is a significant contributor to mental health problems, particularly in high-pressure environments like the hotel industry, where it leads to burnout and increased turnover intentions (WHO, 2022; Salama et al., 2022). Hotel employees are frequently exposed to stressors such as extended working hours, irregular schedules, emotional labour, and continuous pressure to meet customer expectations (Bora, 2017; Zhao & Ghiselli, 2016). These factors collectively increase the risk of anxiety, depression, and burnout among workers (Chen et al., 2022; Ma et al., 2021). The persistent pressure to deliver exceptional guest experiences often compounds the emotional toll on staff, increasing their risk of burnout and emotional exhaustion (Kotera et al., 2018; Ma et al., 2021). Failure to address these issues can negatively affect employee productivity, workplace morale, and overall hotel performance (Bubonya et al., 2017; Kumar & Kumari, 2023). Additionally, mental health challenges often result in poor employee well-being and high turnover rates (Salama et al., 2022).

Despite global recognition of mental health's importance, there is a notable lack of attention to mental health challenges within Malaysia's hotel sector (The American Institute of Stress, 2024; Upscale, 2023). This includes research gap related to mental health support in the hotel industry (Varga, 2022). Past studies often focus only on front-of-house roles (Hofmann & Stokburger-Sauer, 2017; Khawaja et al., 2021) and neglecting broader challenges faced by various hotel staff. Additionally, stigma remains a major barrier to accessing mental health support among employees. Most employees experience self-stigma, perceiving mental health struggles as personal weaknesses (Asare, 2020), or are affected by social stigma through discriminatory attitudes from others (Haddad&Haddad, 2015). Furthermore, low mental health literacy may result in a lack of awareness about available resources (Mazlan et al., 2023), contributing to underutilization and poor help-seeking behaviour.

Beyond the COVID-19 pandemic, mental health issues among employees are expected to increase. This trend is attributed to persistently poor working conditions and the demanding social nature of hospitality work, which remain as part of the hotelier's nature of job (Ghazali et al., 2024). In the absence of adequate support systems, employees perceive that stress negatively affects their job performance and, consequently, hampers organizational productivity (Mabela & Enennia, 2026). In the Malaysian context, the rising cost of living disproportionately affects low-income groups. The pressure to meet basic needs and make ends meet elevates stress levels and adversely impacts mental health, particularly among hotel employees in lower-income brackets (Aziz et al., 2024). To cope with financial strain, some individuals engage in side hustles and juggle multiple jobs simultaneously. However, over the long term, this practice may lead to burnout and increased mental distress (Smith, 2025).

From the hotel management perspective, resource limitations frequently result in the reprioritization of mental health initiatives, with financial resources often being allocated to core operational needs (Harman, 2022). Additionally, uncertainty around what types of mental health benefits to offer further complicates efforts to support employee well-being (Society for Human Resource Management, 2022). Even when

initiatives are introduced, there is limited evidence to confirm their effectiveness in improving employee mental health or productivity (Prudenzi et al., 2024). Therefore, this study aims to review the challenges related to implementing and accessing mental health support in the Malaysian hotel industry. Specifically, this study presents two research objectives:

- (i) To review the challenges faced by hotel management in implementing mental health support in Malaysia hotel industry.
- (ii) To review the challenges faced by hotel employee in accessing mental health support in Malaysia hotel industry.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Overview of Hospitality Industry

The hospitality industry is characterized by long working hours, irregular shifts, emotional labour, and high customer expectations, all of which contribute to mental health strain (Deery & Jago, 2015; Jung & Yoon, 2022). Employees often experience fatigue, job insecurity, and heavy workloads, making them highly vulnerable to stress-related illnesses (Baum, 2015; Karatepe, 2013). A few studies highlighted that hotel employees are among the most at-risk occupational groups for burnout and stress due to the 24/7 nature of the industry (Goh et al., 2021; Elshaer, 2023). The mental health issues affect hospitality employees at all levels. In United Kingdom, the hospitality employees are believed to be one of the most stressful employees (Kotera et al., 2018). Besides that, front of the house employees are sometimes subject to stressful interactions with customers (Hofmann & Stokburger-Sauer, 2017). Similarly, to the back-of-house employees, they also face hazardous, physically painful situation which leads to high level of stress such as cooks and housekeepers (International Labour Organization, 2016). When hotel employees fail to get any resources to manage the stress, they will consider leaving the organization (Wen et al., 2020). In high-pressure sectors like hospitality, where service quality relies heavily on employee performance, mental health issues not only affect individuals but also directly impact customer satisfaction and business outcomes (Karatepe & Uludag, 2008; Pignata et al., 2018).

2.2 Mental Health Support in Hospitality Industry

The provision of mental health support within hospitality organizations is still underdeveloped compared to other industries (Chen et al., 2022; Kotera et al., 2018). While some hotels offer employee assistance programs (EAPs), wellness initiatives, or stress management workshops, evidence of their effectiveness remains limited (Prudenzi et al., 2024). Even if stress coping techniques are available, the majority of them, such as self-regulation and stress management, were created a long time ago (Ma et al., 2021). Furthermore, variables such as changes in workforce structure, growth of information technology, and evolution of communication methods have raised issues about the applicability of these traditional coping mechanisms in today's hospitality sector. (Ivanová & Grmanová, 2021; Ma et al., 2021).

Hotels often prioritize guest satisfaction and operational efficiency over employee well-being, leading to a mismatch between organizational values and employee needs (Danna & Griffin, 1999; Lee & Ok, 2016). This misalignment contributes to employee disengagement, high turnover, and reduced organizational commitment. As hospitality industry main business is to serve people, the mental and

physical health of the employees are critical to the organization (Varga et al., 2021). The support system acts as an intervention that can be vital in helping hospitality employees deal with stress and other form of mental illness because of challenging job demands (Varga et al., 2021).

2.3 Challenges in Assessing Mental Health Support

Despite the availabilities of mental health facilities, there are still resistance in help-seeking behaviours among Malaysian (Hassan, 2024). Malaysian Occupational Health Practitioners Association found that stigma remains a significant barrier preventing employees from seeking help (Basir, 2024). Mental health stigma can be defined as disgrace, social disapproval, or social discrediting of individuals suffering from mental illness (Kalichman, 2019). It creates a severe implication not just to stigmatized individuals but to the society at large (Óri et al., 2021). Stigma plays an important role in this study because it influences employees' utilization of mental health support resources at the workplaces as most employees believe it may affect their career opportunities (Asare, 2020). Common types of stigma are self-stigma, social-stigma and institutional stigma.

Self-stigma is defined as an individual who have negative attitudes towards mental illness especially their own condition and internalizes negative stereotypes (Borenstein, 2020). Commonly, self-stigma cause individuals to have low self-esteem, shame, hopelessness and avoid situations where they will be negatively evaluated (Haddad & Haddad, 2015; Krupa et al., 2019). This can lead to reluctance to seek treatment, highly dependent to others, social withdrawal and possibilities of alcohol and drugs abuse (Asare, 2020). Social stigma, also called public stigma, refers to negative, discriminatory attitudes towards others have about mental illness (Haddad & Haddad, 2015). In Asian cultures including Malaysia, seeking professional help for mental illness can be opposing to strong family values due to shame and associated to spiritual or religion factors such as supernatural causes and God punishment (Khan et al., 2010). Institutional stigma can be defined as organization's policies or culture of negative attitudes and beliefs toward stigmatized individuals particularly individuals with mental illness (Subu et al., 2021). This result in many employees keeping their mental illness a secret because the concern that they will be perceived as weak and will negatively impact their potential career advancement (Edwards & Kotera, 2020).

Besides than stigma, the demanding nature of hotel work, involving irregular schedules and emotional labour, makes it difficult for manager and employees to allocate time for mental health activities or counselling (Karatepe, 2013; Ma et al., 2021; Rosemberg et al., 2024). Poorly structured mental health support also lead to inefficient support at the workplace (Samsonowicz, 2019) Employees are also worried about breach of confidentiality after they have utilized any mental health services as some employers may track usage of services (Chan et al., 2021). Besides that, insufficient knowledge and awareness of mental illness in Malaysia (Raaj et al., 2021) have also contributed to poor help-seeking behaviours. Employees with low mental health literacy may lack ability to recognize mental health symptoms (Mazlan et al., 2023) and have low level of awareness towards mental health facilities provided (Chan et al., 2021).

2.4 Challenges in Providing Mental Health Support

Hotel managers often face budgetary constraints that hinder the implementation of comprehensive mental health support. Financial resources are frequently allocated to revenue-generating activities (Harman, 2022; Bubonya et al., 2017). Meanwhile, mental health initiatives are sometimes perceived as secondary compared to immediate operational concerns, particularly in smaller or mid-scale hotels (Society

for Human Resource Management, 2022) hence explaining limited budget allocated for mental health initiatives (Samsonowicz, 2019). Besides that, managers may also struggle to identify appropriate interventions due to limited knowledge, lack of specialized training in workplace mental health (Shuck et al., 2019) and lack of mental health policies (Samsonowicz, 2019). In Malaysia, although national initiatives like the Mental Health Act 2001 and National Mental Health Policy exist, translation into sector-specific guidelines remains limited (Mazlan et al., 2023). Hotels often lack structured frameworks to design, implement, and evaluate mental health support.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Collecting and Analysing Literature

The methodology used for this paper consists of library search and evaluate previous literature review on the subject of mental health and mental illness in the hospitality industry. Specifically, advanced search from online (journal database) and offline materials (reports) focusing on challenges related to mental health support or similar topics such as mental health assistance and mental health facilities. References are based on databases such as Emerald Insights, Scopus, Science Direct, Google Scholar and government or organization publication. References are only taken from report or article from journal, chapter in books and full text document from 2019 until 2025.

The search for implementation of mental health support in the hospitality industry mostly produced types of support offered. Additionally, majority articles have specified the types of support that falls under the dimension mental health support in the hospitality industry such as perceived organization support, wellness program, counsellors, managerial support, digital intervention, and coping strategies (Ma et al., 2021; Matsakis et al., 2025; Varga et al. 2021, Wang et al., 2024). Not many discussions found on the challenges to provide these specific mental health support in the hospitality industry, rather discussed the effect or relationship of this support to employee well-being. Only study by Samsonowicz (2019), found that hotel managers lack of mental health training, and lack of mental health policies to implement mental health support. However, when the search expanded to challenges of providing mental health support at workplace in general, the findings yielded several factors such as financial constraint and limited expertise (Pillai, 2022; Prudenzi et al., 2024).

The search for challenges accessing mental health support in the hospitality industry generated limited factors such as misconception of mental health, stigma and inefficient mental health support (Rosemberg et al., 2024; Samsonowicz, 2019). Similarly, when the search expanded to challenges of accessing mental health support at workplace in general, the factors generated is rather limited to discrimination and underestimating organizational capability (Poddar & Chhajer, 2024; Wu et al., 2021). The summary of selected literature on mental health support in the hospitality industry related to this paper is shown in Table 1. The scarcity of findings related to challenges in implementing and accessing mental health support in the hospitality industry justify the need to conduct investigations in this scope.

Table 1. Summary of selected literature on mental health support in the hospitality industry

Article and Journal Name	Author and Year	Variables	Methodology	Findings
Employee Perceptions of Wellness Programs in the Hospitality Industry	Susan Varga, Trishna G. Mistry, Faizan Ali & Cihan Cobanoglu (2021)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Wellness programs (WP) Job stress (JS) Emotional labour (EL) Turnover intention (TI) Perceived organizational support (POS) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Quantitative 621 hospitality employees who were employed by companies that offer wellness programs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Significant negative relationship between EW and TI Insignificant negative relationship between WE and EL Significant negative relationship between WP and JS Significant positive relationship between WP and POS POS mediated the relationship between WP and JS
International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management	Catwei Ma, Liaping Ren, & Jingxin Zhao (2021)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stress self-coping strategies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Qualitative and Systematic literature review Sixteen hotel staff from international hotel brands in Shanghai 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Twelve effective coping strategies that fell under three dimensions: Distraction, sharing, and self-indulgence
Sustainability	Magdalena Samsonowicz (2019)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mental health protection responsibility Effectiveness of mental health protections 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Qualitative Twenty employees in tourism and hospitality industry holding various positions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Managers should assume responsibility for mental health protection but there is superficial managerial responses, lack of mental health policies and minimal training for managers and employees on mental health issues Poorly structured mental health resources which made it less available, and lack efficiency
Workplace mental health protections from employee perspective: Sectoral qualitative study in tourism and hospitality sector in Iceland				

Table 1. Summary of selected literature on mental health support in the hospitality industry

Article and Journal Name	Author and Year	Variables	Methodology	Findings
Are Employee Assistance Programs Helpful? A Look at The Consequences of Abusive Supervision on Employee Affective Organizational Commitment and General Health	I-an Wang, Hui-Ching Lin, Szu-Yin Lin & Pei-Chi Chen (2021)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Abusive supervision (AS) Employee affective organizational commitment (OC) General health (GH) Employee assistant Program (EAP) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Quantitative 231 frontline employees from the hospitality industry in Taiwan 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Significant negative relationship between AS and OC Significant negative relationship between AS and GH EAP moderate the relationship between AS and OC EAP does not moderate the relationship between AS and GH
International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management	Marie-Anne S. Rosemberg, Wei V. Li, Hannah Ratliff (2024)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Worker experience and perception of mental health 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Qualitative 29 hotel employees in United States 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mental health is related to mental illness Mental health is associated with being "crazy," Mental health can be controlled Mental health is taboo, yet universal. Study findings on the misunderstanding of and stigma associated with the concept of mental health among hotel employees
Applied Nursing Research				

4. CONCLUSION

This paper reviewed the challenges related to implementing and accessing mental health support in the hospitality industry. There are several factors contributed to challenges in implementing mental health support from management perspectives such as resources limitation, lack of expertise or training and lack of mental health policies. In terms of accessibility challenges for mental health support among employees, factors produced are stigma, low mental health literacy, limited time, and inefficient existing mental health support. Throughout the literature review, there is limited findings related to challenges of mental health support particularly in the hospitality industry demonstrated research gap in this topic. Practically, this paper provides insights on challenges of mental health support in the hospitality industry. Based on the inputs, hotel operators able to strategize on how to provide realistic support based on capability yet comprehensive mental health support. Additionally, this paper offers clarity on issues of underutilize mental health support among employees, despite the availability of this support. Hence, it will encourage the designation of mental health support to be tailored according to the preference of employees.

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6. CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors agree that this research was conducted in the absence of any self-benefits, commercial or financial conflicts and declare the absence of conflicting interests with the funders.

7. AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

Siti Athirah Nujaihah Abdul Rahman: Conceptualisation, data collection, data analysis, and writing-original draft; **Nurfatihah Mazlan:** Conceptualisation, editing, formatting, supervision and finalizing article; **Norzuwana Sumarjan:** Reviewing, editing, supervision and validation.

8. ETHICS STATEMENT

The authors declare that this research did not involve human or animal subjects. All experimental procedures were performed following the institutional Safety, Health, and Environmental (HSE) protocols of Universiti Teknologi MARA.

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