

# NAVIGATING STRESS IN HOSPITALITY: A THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF SELF-COPING MECHANISMS AMONG MALAYSIAN HOTEL EMPLOYEES

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(Received 18<sup>th</sup> October 2025; revised 28<sup>th</sup> November 2025; accepted 05<sup>th</sup> December 2025)

**Abstract.** The hospitality industry is recognized as a high-stress environment, where employees frequently face emotional labor, demanding workloads, and constant guest interactions. With employees at the core of hospitality operation, understanding how they manage their well-being through effective coping strategies become a crucial concern. This study explores self-coping mechanisms among hotel employees in Malaysia. Using a qualitative approach, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 18 hotel employees from four-and five-star hotels in Malaysia. Thematic analysis was employed to identify themes and subthemes in self-coping mechanism. Four primary themes emerged: recreational activities, social system, time management, and emotional regulation. The findings suggest that these coping strategies not only enhance individual well-being but also contribute to organizational resilience, as employees maintain performance and adaptability in a demanding work environment. The study contributes theoretically by extending literature in hospitality human resources and practically by providing insights for human resources mental illness intervention strategies.

**Keywords:** *hospitality, hotel industry, self-coping, mental health, employee well-being*

## Introduction

Coping mechanisms are critical in helping employees navigate stressors in the workplace, improving their overall well-being and job performance. The relationship between coping strategies and workplace conditions is highlighted in studies focusing on different industries such as medical and hospitality (Alexe et al., 2023; Ma et al., 2021; Purnawati et al., 2021). Particularly, in the hospitality industry effective coping strategies can significantly mitigate stress (Ma et al., 2021). As hospitality industry possesses challenging nature of work such as expectations for high-quality service and toxic stakeholders (Bi et al., 2021; Mulvaney et al., 2007), understanding effective coping mechanisms is crucial for enhancing employee's mental well-being and job performance. Hospitality employees who often perceive their jobs as highly stressful can face burnout and decrease in job satisfaction (Ghazali et al., 2020). Past studies indicate that employees employ a variety of coping strategies to manage workplace stress effectively. Ma et al. (2021) said that hospitality employees often employ individualized stress coping strategies, which can be categorized into dimensions such as 'distraction' and 'sharing'. These strategies serve not only to alleviate immediate stress but also to foster a supportive work environment by encouraging social interaction among colleagues, thereby reducing feelings of isolation during stressful times. In contrast, Hu et al. (2023), highlighted how leader's humor positively affects employee creativity and stress coping. Ultimately, it helps to enhance occupational

coping self-efficacy among hospitality employees. Past studies also shown that when employees are equipped with adequate resources and training, it will help them to improve their coping capacity and psychological outcomes performance (Ruhela and Pandya, 2024).

This heightened stress environment in hospitality industry necessitates a robust set of coping mechanisms to help employees navigate these ongoing challenges (Bhuiyan et al., 2024). Additionally, stress coping method varies among different demographics and generations (Ma et al., 2021), demonstrated the many changes in today's work landscape. With stress coping scales were established almost 40 years ago, it may not be applicable in today's hospitality context (Ma et al., 2021). Thus, it is necessary to conduct an investigation in self-coping mechanism in the hotel industry. This study aimed to explore the self-coping mechanism among hospitality employees in four- and five-star hotels in Malaysia.

## ***Literature review***

### ***Challenging nature of hospitality industry***

Work environment particularly in the hospitality have been associated with deleterious effects on physical and mental health (Varga et al., 2021). This industry possesses challenging nature of work to fulfill high service standard such as a lot of hard work, multitasking, handle crises, cope with various situations using proper knowledge and emotions (Bora, 2017). Additionally, hotel employees are required to work long hours, adhere to irregular work schedules, work on public holidays, manage multiple shifts, and accept low pay (Zhao and Ghiselli, 2016). It is known as a very labour-intensive industry (Elshaer and Marzouk, 2019) and the working hours caused the employees to have antisocial lifestyle and the workload is physically demanding (Chiang et al., 2010). Besides that, hospitality employees also face difficulties from stakeholders such as difficult customers, toxic co-workers, demanding supervisors, and inconsiderate management (Mulvaney et al., 2007; Tepeci and Bartlett, 2002). Based on the various stressors, Zhao and Ghiselli (2016) stated that characteristics of hospitality jobs appear to increase job stress, which could affect the employees' mental health (Menon, 2021). Moreover, when hotel employees fail to get any resources to manage the stress, they will consider leaving the organization (Wen et al., 2020).

### ***Coping mechanism***

Coping strategies are traditionally categorized into problem-focused, emotion-focused, and avoidance-oriented approaches. Problem-focused strategies aim to address the source of stress, such as planning or seeking solutions, while emotion-focused strategies involve managing the emotional response to stress through activities like journaling or talking to a friend. Avoidance-oriented coping, though sometimes effective in the short term, often leads to maladaptive outcomes. All of these strategies are part of self-coping mechanism where the individual's uses own ability and approach to cope with the undesirable circumstances (Li et al., 2014). Past studies highlighted the practice of self-coping among hospitality employees. Kızanlık and Şener (2012) found that managers typically use self-confident and optimistic approach coping with stress because they are problem-focused coping. In contrast, front liners employees use emotion-based coping mechanism when facing stressful interactions with customers (Hofmann and Stokburger-Sauer, 2017; Ereno et al., 2014) as they are expected to show

positive emotions such as cheerfulness, friendliness or empathy during service interactions (Saxena, 2016). Other self-coping mechanism includes thinking positively (Tiwari and Bansal, 2016), relying on religion belief and denial to cope with work stress (Ereno et al., 2014).

## **Materials and Methods**

### ***Research design***

This study employed a qualitative method through phenomenology approach to self-coping mechanism from the employees' perspectives in Malaysia hotel industry. Due to limited information pertaining to self-coping mechanism in the hotel industry, qualitative method looks to offer more advantages in terms of allowing flexibility to the researcher to probe further into the data, which usually lead to more unexpected data (Mack et al., 2005). Phenomenology approach is appropriate in elucidate self-coping mechanism which may varies from one perspective to another (Boru, 2018). This study is considered as cross-sectional research where the data was collected in the duration of six months. The unit of analysis was individuals, and this study was conducted in non-contrive setting.

### ***Sample***

Purposive sampling was used, with eighteen (n=18) hotel employees from four- and five-star hotels in Malaysia participated in this study. Hotel employees comprised of permanent employees who have at least three years experiences working in operation or supportive departments. As qualitative study does not have specific sample size (Marshall et al, 2013; Baker and Edwards, 2012), long interviews with up to ten participants is considered sufficient to reach data saturation (Creswell, 2007; Boyd, 2001).

### ***Instrumentation***

Open-ended questions were designed as it provides the informants freedom and flexibility to answer the questions. The researchers also came up with potential probing questions for clarifications and obtain in-depth information from the informants. The interview questions were developed based on the requirement of research objectives. The researchers performed questions review and familiarization interview with experienced academicians to check on the quality of the interview questions and improve its trustworthiness. Some of the questions asked to the hotel employees were, 'How do you manage challenges in daily duties?' and 'What internal factors that motivates you to carry out your daily duties'.

### ***Data collection***

Due to confidential policy of employee listings, the researchers identified potential informants from the list of four- and five-star hotels as rated in Malaysia Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture website. The researchers first contacted the hotels' general line and explained the purpose of research to the human resources (HR) representatives. Once agreement was made with HR department, the researchers arranged interview sessions with the informants. The interview session was recorded with the consent of

informants. The researchers also took note of important points, noticeable non-verbal cues, and any internal or external issues which may affected the interview session.

### **Data analysis**

Data was collected, translated and transcribed into verbatim. Minimal adjustments were made to further enhance the understanding and accuracy of the information without jeopardizing the essence and actual meaning of the information. Member-checking with the informants was conducted to ensure accuracy of the information transcribed. Then, the researchers identified initial codes through process of inductive. Codes were generated through repetitive readings to ensure no significant data is left behind. These codes were evaluated to identify its attributes and frequency. Then, thematic analysis was employed to identify prominent themes and subthemes within the data. Finally, the researchers reviewed and compared the themes and subthemes to eliminate redundancy and to accurately capture informants' insights.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Informant profile**

In total, eighteen hotel employees (n=18) from four- and five-star hotels in Malaysia participated in this study. *Table 1* demonstrates the informant profiles of employees and employers.

**Table 1.** Demographic profile of hotel employees (n=18).

| Category                 | Frequency` | Percentage |
|--------------------------|------------|------------|
| Gender                   |            |            |
| Male                     | 7          | 38.89      |
| Female                   | 11         | 61.11      |
| Age                      |            |            |
| 20-30                    | 8          | 44.44      |
| 31-40                    | 7          | 38.89      |
| 41-50                    | 3          | 16.67      |
| Star Rating              |            |            |
| Four-star                | 7          | 38.89      |
| Five-star                | 11         | 61.11      |
| Education Level          |            |            |
| High school certificate  | 4          | 22.22      |
| Professional certificate | 2          | 11.12      |
| Diploma                  | 6          | 33.33      |
| Bachelor Degree          | 6          | 33.33      |
| Department               |            |            |
| Food and beverage        | 4          | 22.22      |
| Front office             | 5          | 27.78      |
| Housekeeping             | 3          | 16.67      |
| Maintenance              | 1          | 5.56       |
| Administration           | 2          | 11.12      |
| Finance                  | 1          | 5.55       |
| Sales                    | 1          | 5.55       |
| Human Resources          | 1          | 5.55       |

### ***Themes related to self-coping mechanism***

In total, there are 4 (four) main themes and nine (9) subthemes related to self-coping mechanism produced as shown in *Table 2*.

***Table 2. Themes and subthemes related to self-coping mechanism.***

| Themes                  | Subthemes                                        |
|-------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| Recreational activities | Hobbies<br>Physical activities                   |
| Social system           | Communicating struggles<br>Mentorship            |
| Time management         | Me-time<br>Micro-breaks<br>Organizing priorities |
| Emotional Regulation    | Positive thoughts<br>Gratitude therapy           |

#### ***Themes 1: Recreational activities***

Majority of informants explained how the availability of recreational facilities in the hotel allows them to engage in non-work related activities. These facilities commonly are accessible at certain times with the permission from the management. Several employees (n=9) enjoyed doing their hobbies by utilizing the hotel's recreational facilities. Employee 15 stated, "I love working out, but the gym membership fee is too much for me. So, to get access to gym here, even though just twice a week, it's refreshing." Employee 17 added, "We have game room here where we can get together for Mobile Legend (e-sport games) with the boys (male employees)." In addition, fifteen (n=15) informants highlighted the provision of recreational facilities such as badminton court and ping-pong table encourage physical activities among employees. Employee 10 said, "If we want to use like tennis court or ping pong table, we can book with the recreation department. They allow the staff to use after working hours." Past studies evidenced the benefits of physical activity and exercise in reducing symptoms of depression and anxiety (Conn, 2010a; 2010b), produce higher energy (Street et al., 2007), as well as affecting mental health through improved moods (Penedo and Dahn, 2005). Due to repetitive task in the hotel industry, doing different activities which are outside the usual scope of work, allow employees to reduce boredom and refresh their mind.

#### ***Themes 2: Social system***

Social system at the workplace was frequently mentioned by nine employees (n=9) as a crucial to cope up with the demand of work in the hotel industry. Co-worker specifically plays important role for employees to communicate daily challenges at work. Employee 10 mentioned, "When I first came here, I struggled because I was incompetent. It really stressed me out, because during busy period, the chefs expected me to adapt very fast. Thankfully for the other commis (kitchen helpers), not only guiding me, but listen to my problems.". Employee 5 applauded the role of supervisors as mentor in protecting her from toxic stakeholders and helping her settle in new work environment, "There were bad boss and guests who I feel treated me like a slave. But, I always have the back up of supervisors. They don't just instruct, but also address unreasonable demands if I am too panic to speak up. They also teach me a lot on how to

become good housekeeper.” As hotel industry depends on the effective collaboration to deliver outstanding service to customers (Kellerman, 2023), promoting supportive interactions is crucial (Salas et al., 2015). The sense of togetherness during high hotel occupancy prevents employees from burnout or feeling of overwhelming, reduce loneliness in long working hours and foster better connection within department.

### ***Themes 3: Time management***

Most informants highlighted the importance of managing time wisely at work that involves having break from work, allowing me-time as self-care, and organizing duties according to priorities. As hotel duties usually involved long hours of work, half of the informants (n=9), opted taking temporary break or extended leave from work. According to the informants, when things at work gets stressful, break is required to relax themselves and get reenergize as required in Malaysia Employment Act 1955. As stated by Employee 6, “So, one of the alternatives is to travel. Put a pause in the life, get rid of that thing (work) for a while, until can get some mental health recovery. Take a break and come back again.” Five informants preferred me-time during work to reconnect with oneself and setting boundaries between work and personal life. Employee 13 explained, “I like to be alone during lunch break or after work. I interact a lot during shifts with colleague, customers, so it can be socially draining. I do feel like robots sometimes. So, to have some time alone, helps me to gain my awareness, like I feel my presence again.” Employee 18 added, “I do my best during my shift, but when it gets too overwhelming, I have to set boundaries. I speak to the chef, can I go home? I cannot stay (for overtime), cause today is extremely busy, so that I will not get burnout.” Arranging work priorities is also helpful for most informants (n=8). Employee 5 stated, “We have many rooms, many areas to cover daily. So, based on the work assignment given by supervisors, I can arrange which comes first, what time to have break, how much time I should spend on this or that.” Employee 17 supported, “Sometimes, it (work) can be overwhelming. So, I have to know how to tackle step by step. Not that I cannot multitask, but multitask can cause error and panic if it is not handle well”. Effective time management and the ability to coordinate multiple tasks efficiently are critical for delivering exceptional service. Indirectly, it helps to mitigate stress, promoting well-being, and ensuring work–life balance (Whitford, 2024).

### ***Themes 4: Emotional regulation***

Most informants are also aware of negative emotions arise due to unreasonable guests or complicated work which may affect their moods while working. Thus, they ensure to regulate their emotions to maintain calm and compose. One of common method used by most informants is having positive thoughts. Employee 5 stated. “When I am stress, I like to talk to myself. Like “no need to think anymore, focus on other things”. As long as we stay positive, just do the work. That’s the way for me to calm down.” Employee 16 supported, “If I have a bad day today, it’s just today. Tomorrow will be a brand new day. People make mistake why should I stress out.” Besides that, some informants (n=6) highlighted the practice of gratitude whether in the form of group or individual. Employee 6 pinpointed the gratitude therapy with other workers after prayers, “After solat (Muslim prayer), usually there will be one staff (who will) give ‘tazkirah’. It’s like self-reflection for what we have done at work and feeling grateful with what we have. I think that helps as well for employees’ mental health.

Employee 14 added, "What I am doing now (the job), helps me grow and help other people. I am thankful, at least I have a job and my job makes people happy, that's good enough." Prior studies indicate that emotional regulation not only alleviates negative emotions but also fosters positive emotions (Hung et al., 2022)., as individuals tend to avoid distress and employ coping strategies to maintain psychological well-being (Patias et al., 2021; Wong and Law, 2002)."

Based on the informants' responses, four themes emerged: recreational activities, social system, time management and emotional regulation. As there is lack of mental health support from companies in Malaysia (Muslim, 2023), it is not surprising that informants resorted to self-coping mechanism in managing work stress in hotel industry. Rather than avoidance coping, most informants rely on emotion-focused coping. This is because the nature of 'service with smile' and frequent customers interaction necessitates informants to emphasize on managing emotions. One of the uniqueness of the findings is the role of spiritual to regulate emotion through gratitude practice after prayers. Additionally, the informants also discussed how leisure time through recreational activities as one of coping mechanism. As hotel industry is well-known for its long working hours, most of informants only have time for hobbies and physical activities at the hotel premises. The organization of sports tournament and provision of recreational facilities by management has encouraged recreational activities among employees.

The findings also highlighted how social network within organization serves as self-coping mechanism for employees. This is aligned with study by Ma et al. (2021) where 'sharing' strategies is commonly practiced by hospitality employees. 'Sharing' strategy which include expression to colleague or supervisors is seen as effective to deliver advice, comfort and concern to reduce stress among employees (Lam and Chen, 2012). In the industry where customers expect fast and smooth services, time management is crucial to avoid last-minute rushes or bottlenecks. Time management does not only serve as self-coping mechanism, but also preventive strategy to work-related stress by reducing feeling of overwhelm and improving work-live balance.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this study is to explore the self-coping mechanism among hospitality employees in four- and five-star hotels in Malaysia. As individuals showed different coping capacity and styles (Hung et al., 2022), the finding showed various self-coping mechanism, namely recreational activities, social network, time management and emotional regulation. Collectively, these coping strategies interact synergistically. For example, time management facilitates engagement in recreational activities and social support enhances emotional regulation. Overall, the adoption of these strategies contributes to employee's psychological, and organizational well-being. Direct practice of self-coping mechanism reduces employees' stress before it escalates to burnout or severe mental illness. Besides that, employees who exhibit effective self-coping mechanisms significantly enhance organizational resilience in the hospitality context. This is because employees' ability to maintain their physical and psychological energy and perform under pressure ensure consistent service delivery in the face of operational challenges. This study contributes to literature on hospitality human resources particularly in hotel industry context. Traditional coping theories distinguished between problem-focused and emotion-focused coping. This study shows that hotel employees

integrate multiple coping strategies, blending both problem-focused (time management, social system) and emotion-focused (emotional regulation, recreational activities) mechanisms. Moreover, time management is traditionally viewed as a productivity tool, but this study positions it as a self-coping mechanism, linking it to stress reduction thus extending occupational stress literature.

The findings of this study offer several practical implications for hotel management and human resources practitioners. First, the centrality of the social system highlights the need for formalized support networks, including mentoring programs, peer support groups, and team-building activities, which can enhance employees' coping capacity and reduce burnout. Second, the role of emotional regulation suggests that training in emotional intelligence, mindfulness, and stress management can equip employees to manage the demanding roles more effectively, improving both well-being and service quality. By implementing interventions strategies aligned with these coping strategies, hotels can strengthen both employee satisfaction and organizational outcomes. Despite providing novel insights into self-coping mechanisms among Malaysian hotel employees, this study has several limitations. This study was conducted in specific timeframe, thus it may not capture longitudinal changes in coping strategies that may occur due to seasonal hotel demands, or technological advancement. While four primary themes were identified, the study may not have captured all potential coping mechanisms, such as usage of digital mental health support or social media to manage stress. In future, long-term studies could track changes in coping strategies over time. Additionally, future research could investigate other coping strategies not captured in this study, such as digital engagement.

## Acknowledgement

This research is funded by the Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia under Fundamental Research Grant Scheme 2023 (FRGS/1/2023/SS04/UITM/03/1). The researchers are grateful for research assistance provided by Universiti Teknologi.

## Conflict of interest

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest involved with any parties in this research study.

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