

Workload Dynamics and Employee Adaptation Strategies in Coping with Burnout in Three-Star Hotels in Surabaya: A Qualitative Study

Zainul Arifin^{1*}, Abdul Halik², Siti Mujanah³

¹⁻²⁻³Universitas 17 Agustus 1945, Surabaya, Indonesia

Email: ¹zaen.ariief@yahoo.com , ²halik@untag-sby.ac.id , ³sitimujanah@untag-sby.ac.id

*) Corresponding Author

Received: 29 April 2026

Revised: 14 May 2026

Accepted: 25 May 2026

Published online:

Abstract

This study addresses the limited attention given to workload dynamics and burnout adaptation strategies among employees of three-star hotels in Surabaya, particularly within a business-city context. The originality of this research lies in its focus on “organic adaptation strategies” that emerge naturally from employees’ social interactions rather than formal organizational systems. The objective of this study is to explore the dynamics of employee workload and identify the adaptation strategies used to mitigate burnout. A qualitative descriptive approach with a case study design was employed, using in-depth semi-structured interviews, participatory observation, and documentation. Informants were selected through purposive sampling from operational departments. The findings reveal that workload is fluctuating yet consistently high, driven by multitasking demands, limited human resources, and high service expectations. These conditions trigger burnout manifested in emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment. Employees respond through individual coping (e.g., prioritization and withdrawal) and social coping (e.g., teamwork and humor), with social strategies proving more effective in sustaining resilience. The study implies that hotel management should integrate psychological well-being into operational policies and formalize informal adaptive practices to create a more sustainable and human-centered work environment.

Keywords:

Workload Dynamics; Burnout; Adaptation Strategy; Hotel Employees; Organizational Behavior

INTRODUCTION

The hospitality industry in Surabaya, particularly within the three-star hotel segment, has experienced significant growth following digital economic transformation and the recovery of the tourism sector (Abdelaziz et al., 2024). As the second-largest business city in Indonesia, three-star hotels have become a primary choice due to their balance between affordability and facilities (Zhao et al., 2021). However, behind this growth lies substantial operational pressure on employees (Tweneboah & Machani, 2023). The fluctuating dynamics of workload ranging from sudden reservations to high service standards with limited human resources create intense physical and psychological strain on workers in this sector (El-Sherbeeney et al., 2024).

The phenomenon of burnout, or mental exhaustion, has become an inevitable consequence of such work pressure (Channawar, 2023). In the context of three-star hotels, employees are often required to engage in multitasking beyond their primary job descriptions (Abdou et al., 2024). This exhaustion extends beyond ordinary fatigue, encompassing depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment, which ultimately diminish the overall quality of hotel services (Osei et al., 2023). If not properly managed, burnout has the potential to increase employee turnover rates, posing significant risks to the operational stability of hotels (Ahmad et al., 2021).

Adaptation strategies are key for employees to survive and function optimally under pressure. These strategies involve coping mechanisms, both proactive such as time management and social support and passive approaches (Ahmad et al., 2021). In Surabaya, the work culture, which is characterized as straightforward yet collective, adds a distinctive nuance to how employees interact with their workload (Mahmud et al., 2023). Understanding how these strategies are implemented in daily practice is essential to assess the extent to which employees' mental resilience is formed within the competitive hospitality ecosystem (Ho et al., 2023).

Although workload issues have been widely discussed, there remains an academic debate regarding the primary factors that trigger burnout (Jensen & Olsen, 2023). Some scholars argue that structural organizational factors (such as wages and working hours) are the main determinants. However, other researchers contend that individual psychological factors and self-efficacy play a more significant role in determining whether a person experiences burnout. This debate leaves room for further discussion on whether organizational interventions or individual mental strengthening are more effective in mitigating the risk of work-related exhaustion.

Specifically, three-star hotels occupy a unique position that is often overlooked in human resource management literature. Unlike five-star hotels, which generally have well-established employee welfare support systems, or non-star hotels, which tend to have lower service expectations, three-star hotels operate within a "moderate pressure" zone (Tupiatman et al., 2023). They are required to deliver high service standards while facing operational budget constraints. This condition creates a highly specific workload paradox that requires in-depth examination to understand the objective realities faced by their employees.

Therefore, this study aims to explore in greater depth the narratives of participants regarding their experiences in dealing with work pressure through a qualitative approach. By employing in-depth interviews, the researchers seek to capture the meaning behind the adaptation strategies used by employees. Through this study, it is expected that new patterns will emerge regarding how social interactions and local culture in Surabaya influence the effectiveness of employees' adaptation strategies in coping with burnout risks in the hospitality industry.

Previous studies on burnout in the hospitality industry have predominantly employed quantitative approaches that focus on variable generalization without deeply exploring the essence of human experience. Furthermore, many studies concentrate on five-star hotels in tourist destinations such as Bali, thereby overlooking the unique dynamics of three-star hotels in business cities like Surabaya, which have different work rhythms. There is a gap in the literature in explaining how employees internally interpret workload and why certain adaptation strategies are chosen over others within the sociocultural context of urban communities in East Java.

The novelty of this research lies in its focus on “organic adaptation strategies” emerging from interactions among employees of three-star hotels in Surabaya, which have not been widely documented in human resource management studies. Unlike previous research that views adaptation as a mechanical reaction, this study portrays adaptation as a dynamic process influenced by local work culture and resource limitations typical of three-star hotels. The use of in-depth qualitative interviews provides fresh, first-hand perspectives on employees’ survival tactics that are not captured in standard questionnaires.

This study aims to deeply explore the dynamics of workload experienced by employees of three-star hotels in Surabaya and to identify the forms of adaptation strategies they implement to mitigate burnout risks. In addition, this study seeks to uncover the supporting and inhibiting factors in the adaptation process from the employees’ subjective perspectives. The findings are expected to provide practical recommendations for hospitality management in formulating more humane and context-sensitive employee welfare policies.

METHODS

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach with a case study design to explore in depth the phenomenon of workload and employee adaptation strategies from the perspective of the research subjects themselves (Harvey, 2023). This design enables the researcher to capture emotional complexity as well as the dynamics of the work environment in three-star hotels in Surabaya, which are often difficult to explain comprehensively through numerical data alone.

The selection of informants in this study was conducted using purposive sampling, in which individuals were chosen based on specific criteria relevant to the research objectives. These criteria included active employees working in three-star hotels in Surabaya, particularly from the Front Office, Housekeeping, or Food and Beverage (F&B) Service departments. Additionally, informants were required to have a minimum of one year of work experience to ensure a deep understanding of workplace dynamics, and to exhibit symptoms of or have previously experienced high workload pressure based on prior observations conducted by the researcher.

Primary data were collected through in-depth interviews using a semi-structured format, allowing the researcher to flexibly develop questions based on informants’ responses in order to obtain richer insights. In addition to interviews, this study was supported by participatory observation to directly examine employee interactions and workload conditions in the field, as well as documentation studies through the review of attendance records, turnover reports, and operational hotel documents relevant to workload issues.

In this qualitative research, the primary instrument is the researcher (human instrument). To support the data collection process, the researcher utilized an interview guide consisting of four main pillars: perceptions of daily workload, physical and psychological indications related to burnout, coping mechanisms or adaptation strategies implemented, and forms of organizational support expected by employees.

Furthermore, the data analysis technique follows the interactive model proposed by Matthew B. Miles, A. Michael Huberman, and Johnny Saldaña, which consists of three main stages. The first stage is data reduction, where the researcher summarizes, selects key points, and discards irrelevant data from interview transcripts. The second stage is data display, presented in the form of narratives, matrices, or charts to facilitate the identification of relational patterns. The final stage is conclusion drawing, accompanied by a verification process to derive deeper meaning from all collected data.

Table 1. Preliminary Data on Workload Phenomena and Burnout Indicators.

Phenomenon Category	Empirical Indicators (Preliminary Findings)	Employee Impact	Short-Term Adaptation Strategies
Workload Dynamics	Disproportionate staff-to-guest ratio: a single receptionist is required to manage check-in/check-out procedures while concurrently responding to guest complaints via telephone.	Severe physical fatigue accompanied by disrupted rest periods due to double-shift work arrangements.	Rushed task execution in order to meet time constraints.
Service Standard Pressure	Service standards equivalent to higher-tier hotels, despite constrained organizational support systems.	Elevated anxiety levels during peak occupancy periods, especially on weekends and holiday seasons.	Informal interdepartmental collaboration (cross-exposure) conducted without formalized procedures or protocols.
Burnout Symptoms (Emotional Exhaustion)	Heightened sensitivity to guest feedback accompanied by rising interpersonal cynicism among employees.	Declining empathy toward guests (depersonalization), with work performed solely as a routine obligation.	Withdrawing from social interactions in the workplace during break times.
Compensation vs. Workload	Salary levels in three-star hotels tend to be close to the minimum wage standard in Surabaya, despite high multitasking demands.	Feelings of being professionally undervalued (reduced personal accomplishment).	Seeking additional side income, which further increases physical workload.
Work Environment	The work culture in Surabaya, which tends to be fast-paced and direct, increases communication tension under stress.	Interpersonal conflicts between departments (e.g., Front Office vs. Housekeeping)	The use of humor or local “guyonan” to alleviate tense situations

		during high-pressure situations.	
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The preliminary data supporting this study highlights three crucial aspects, the first of which is the phenomenon of extensive multitasking patterns in three-star hotels in Surabaya. Initial findings indicate that employees frequently assume multiple operational roles. For instance, food and beverage staff are often assigned to assist in banquet services without receiving proportional additional incentives, thereby increasing their workload burden.

This condition is further reinforced by the positioning of Surabaya as a business city, where three-star hotels are predominantly occupied by corporate guests with highly demanding expectations regarding time efficiency. Such guest characteristics generate significantly higher time pressure and require faster employee responsiveness compared to work rhythms typically found in hotels located in tourism-oriented areas.

As a consequence, specific psychological responses emerge, wherein many employees engage in what can be described as “silent adaptation.” One common form is absenteeism or taking short-term sick leave as an emergency coping mechanism to avoid peak mental exhaustion or the risk of total burnout.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that workload dynamics among employees in three-star hotels in Surabaya are characterized by high work intensity, multitasking demands, and operational pressure that fluctuates depending on occupancy levels and business activities. Based on the interviews, most informants explained that work pressure becomes particularly intense during weekends, public holidays, and corporate events, when the number of guests increases significantly while staffing levels remain limited. Employees are therefore required to perform multiple tasks simultaneously beyond their formal job descriptions.

One informant from the Front Office department stated:

“Sometimes one receptionist has to handle check-in, answer reservation calls, and respond to guest complaints at the same time. When the hotel is full, it becomes mentally exhausting because everything must be done quickly.”

Similarly, an informant from the Food and Beverage department explained:

“We are often asked to help with banquet events even after finishing regular restaurant duties. Physically, it is very tiring because there is rarely enough time to rest.”

These findings indicate that workload pressure is not merely quantitative in terms of task volume, but also qualitative because employees are required to manage different forms of service simultaneously within limited time frames. This condition supports the argument of workload theory that excessive job demands combined with limited resources create chronic occupational stress (Kamboj & A, 2025). In the context of three-star hotels, operational limitations force employees to work within what can be described as a “moderate-pressure paradox,” namely high service expectations without adequate organizational support systems.

Furthermore, the interviews demonstrate that burnout among employees manifests in three dominant dimensions: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment. Emotional exhaustion emerged as the most visible symptom, particularly among employees who interact directly with guests. Informants frequently described feelings of mental

fatigue, emotional depletion, and difficulty maintaining emotional stability after long working hours.

One participant noted:

“After dealing with guests continuously for hours, sometimes I feel emotionally empty. Even when I go home, I still think about complaints from guests.”

Another informant added:

“The hardest part is not the physical work, but having to keep smiling and stay polite even when we are already exhausted.”

The findings above strongly align with the burnout framework developed by Christina Maslach, particularly the dimension of emotional exhaustion, which refers to the depletion of emotional energy caused by prolonged interpersonal demands. Employees in hospitality industries are expected to continuously display positive emotions as part of emotional labor, even under stressful working conditions. Consequently, emotional dissonance between genuine feelings and organizational expectations intensifies psychological fatigue.

In addition to emotional exhaustion, depersonalization was also identified through cynical attitudes and emotional distancing from guests. Several informants admitted that prolonged work pressure gradually reduced their empathy toward customers.

One employee explained:

“Sometimes we become less sensitive to guests because we are already too tired. In the end, the work feels automatic, just finishing routines.”

Another participant stated:

“When the workload is too much, some employees become easily irritated and avoid interacting too much with guests or even coworkers.”

This finding reflects depersonalization as a psychological defense mechanism, where employees attempt to protect themselves emotionally by distancing themselves from work-related interactions. The emergence of cynical attitudes among employees also indicates that burnout is not only an individual psychological issue but a consequence of structural organizational pressure that continuously exceeds employees' coping capacity.

The third dimension identified in this study is reduced personal accomplishment. Informants frequently expressed feelings of being undervalued because the workload they carried was not proportional to the compensation and recognition received.

One participant mentioned:

“The workload is heavy, but salary increases are minimal. Sometimes it feels like our efforts are not appreciated.”

Another informant explained:

“We work like in higher-star hotels, but the facilities and rewards for employees are very limited.”

These findings reinforce previous studies suggesting that imbalance between effort and reward contributes significantly to burnout in service industries. Employees not only experience physical and emotional exhaustion, but also develop perceptions that their professional contributions lack organizational appreciation. Such conditions may eventually reduce work motivation and increase turnover intentions.

Despite these pressures, employees actively construct various adaptation strategies to survive within demanding work environments. The findings reveal that adaptation occurs both individually

and collectively. Individual coping strategies include prioritizing urgent tasks, taking temporary psychological withdrawal during breaks, and engaging in short-term absenteeism as a recovery mechanism.

An informant explained:

“Usually, when the pressure becomes too high, I try to take a short break alone, even if it is only five minutes, just to calm myself.”

Another participant stated:

“Sometimes employees choose to take sick leave because mentally they are already too tired to continue working normally.”

However, this study finds that social adaptation strategies are more dominant and effective compared to purely individual coping mechanisms. Employees rely heavily on informal solidarity among coworkers to reduce psychological pressure. Humor, collective communication, and spontaneous teamwork become important mechanisms for maintaining emotional resilience.

One informant explained:

“We often joke with each other during stressful situations. Even simple humor helps reduce tension.”

Another participant added:

“If one department is overwhelmed, usually other coworkers help informally even without being asked by supervisors.”

The emergence of these “organic adaptation strategies” represents one of the main contributions of this study. Unlike previous research that conceptualizes coping primarily as an individual psychological process, this study demonstrates that adaptation is socially constructed through workplace interaction and collectivist cultural values. The work culture in Surabaya, which tends to emphasize direct communication and communal solidarity, encourages employees to create informal emotional support systems as a survival mechanism under pressure.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings strengthen sociocultural approaches in organizational behavior, which argue that employee resilience is shaped not only by personal coping capacity but also by social relationships within the workplace. Informal humor (“guyonan”), peer solidarity, and spontaneous collaboration function as emotional buffers that reduce the intensity of burnout symptoms. This finding extends burnout literature by emphasizing that collective coping mechanisms in local workplace cultures can become an important protective factor against psychological exhaustion.

Nevertheless, the effectiveness of adaptation strategies is influenced by both supporting and inhibiting organizational factors. Supportive interpersonal relationships among employees and flexible communication patterns help workers adapt more effectively to pressure. However, adaptation becomes constrained by limited staffing, insufficient compensation systems, and the absence of formal stress-management policies.

One participant stated:

“Actually, what makes us survive is teamwork, not the system.”

This statement reflects a critical organizational issue: employees often depend more on informal social support than on formal institutional mechanisms. Consequently, burnout prevention in hospitality organizations should not focus solely on operational efficiency but also on psychological well-being and human-centered management practices.

The findings therefore imply that hotel management should adopt more adaptive human resource policies, including proportional workload distribution, sufficient staffing arrangements,

mental health support, and institutionalization of positive social practices within the workplace. Informal collaboration and humor, which currently emerge organically among employees, could be transformed into supportive organizational culture through structured team-building and peer-support initiatives. By doing so, organizations can strengthen employee resilience while simultaneously improving service quality and long-term operational sustainability.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings, this study concludes that workload dynamics among employees in three-star hotels in Surabaya are characterized by high and fluctuating work pressure that is disproportionate to the available human resource capacity. Such conditions trigger burnout in the forms of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment. The study also reveals that employees actively develop adaptation strategies to cope with work pressure. These strategies operate both individually through temporary withdrawal, task prioritization, and psychological self-protection and socially through informal teamwork, emotional support, and the use of humor as coping mechanisms. Among these, social adaptation strategies appear to play a more significant role in strengthening employees' mental resilience due to the collectivist nature of the workplace culture. The findings further emphasize that burnout within the hospitality sector cannot be understood solely from the perspective of individual psychological weakness. Instead, burnout emerges from the interaction between structural organizational pressures and sociocultural workplace dynamics. Therefore, employee well-being should become a strategic organizational concern rather than merely an individual responsibility. In practical terms, hotel management is encouraged to improve staffing arrangements, reduce excessive multitasking demands, provide more adaptive workload distribution systems, and institutionalize supportive social practices such as cross-department collaboration and peer-support culture. Such approaches are expected to reduce burnout risks while improving employee performance and service quality sustainably.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the research focuses only on employees of three-star hotels in Surabaya, which limits the generalizability of findings to other hotel categories or different regional contexts. Second, the study employs a qualitative design with a relatively limited number of informants, meaning the findings emphasize depth of understanding rather than broad statistical representation. Third, data collection relies heavily on participants' subjective experiences, which may be influenced by personal perceptions and emotional conditions during interviews. Finally, this study primarily examines employee perspectives without incorporating managerial viewpoints, thereby limiting a more comprehensive organizational analysis. Future studies are therefore recommended to adopt mixed-method approaches, involve broader participant groups across multiple hotel classifications, and integrate managerial perspectives to develop a more holistic understanding of burnout and adaptation strategies in the hospitality industry.

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