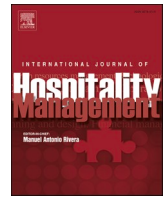




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Shattered but smiling: Human resource management and the wellbeing of hotel employees during COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to explore the human resource management (HRM) practices adopted by hotels during COVID-19 and to examine the impact of COVID-19 on the wellbeing of hotel employees using qualitative thematic analysis. This study presents HRM practices that organizations can use to effectively manage employees in uncertain times. There is compelling evidence that employee-centered HRM practices strongly impact employee wellbeing. This paper integrates the insights from an HRM framework for wellbeing using a job demands-resources model. The paper identifies themes that confirm and extend existing theories and models of wellbeing. The findings are important for policy makers by offering guidance for managing people effectively during tough times.

1. Introduction

COVID-19 is expected to cost the tourism sector at least USD 22 billion as the travel sector is anticipated to shrink by up to 25 percent in 2020, resulting in a loss of 50 million jobs. International tourist arrivals are expected to decline by 1–3 percent in 2020 globally, resulting in anticipated losses of USD 30 billion to USD 50 billion in international visitor spending (World Tourism Organization, 2020). Fig. 1 presents the significant drop in hotel revenues across regions (Eisen, 2020). Fig. 2 demonstrates the crisis in the accommodation sector for the week of March 21, 2020, in comparison to the same week in 2019. Hotel occupancy in all countries has declined by 50 % or more (Gössling et al., 2020).

The main objective of this paper is to explore the HRM practices that hotels are using to manage their employees during COVID-19. The second focus of this study is to investigate the wellbeing of employees working in hotels during COVID-19. The media has reported that layoffs and the psychological impacts of COVID-19 lead to stress, depression, and loneliness (World Health Organization, 2020). This study is relevant because it is imperative to identify and frame innovative HRM practices and unique dimensions of these practices during a crisis. The study builds an understanding of the factors that impact the wellbeing of employees. By understanding these factors, hotels can design practices and processes that increase employee wellbeing (Teo et al., 2019). Employee wellbeing in hotels is significantly more important than that in other sectors because the positive experience of customers depends on

the positive state of hotel employees (Karatepe, 2013). This study also responds to the call to investigate the relationship between HRM and employee wellbeing in the hospitality sector (Teo et al., 2019). Despite an increase in research examining the impact of HRM practices in the hospitality sector, there remains a significant gap in the HRM literature on this sector (Kloutsiniotis and Mihail, 2020). Further, the investigation of HRM practices under contexts of uncertainty is limited (Sanyal and Sett, 2011). It is time for organizations to have practices that are fit for an environment characterized by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA).

We address our research objectives by applying the tenets of the job demands-resources model (Demerouti et al., 2001) and wellbeing (psychological wellbeing and subjective wellbeing). The job demands-resources model (JD-R model) is based on the premise that various types of job characteristics can be classified into two categories that differ in terms of their effects. Job demands are “physical, social, or organizational aspects of the job that require sustained physical or mental effort and are therefore associated with certain physiological and psychological costs” (Demerouti et al., 2001, p. 501). Job resources are “physical, psychological, (i.e., cognitive and emotional), and social, or organizational aspects of the job that may do any of the following: (1) be functional in achieving work goals, (2) reduce job demands at the associated physiological and psychological costs, and (3) stimulate personal growth and development” (Demerouti et al., 2001, p. 501). The model predicts outcomes through two dual processes: (a) the health impairment process, where job demands predict job strain, which in turn

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predicts organizational outcomes, and (b) the motivational process, where resources predict engagement, which in turn predicts organizational outcomes (Demerouti et al., 2001).

This study will make a significant contribution to both theory and practice. First, this study responds to the call by several scholars for the investigation of HRM in hotels (Hewagama et al., 2019) and employee wellbeing (Steverink et al., 2020). Lockyer and Scholarios (2004) argued that HRM practices provide a strategic edge to hotels in all functions and consequently influence hotel operations. The role of HRM is critical during COVID-19 because HRM practices determine how employees cope with uncertain work environments (Salanova and Schaufeli, 2008). We integrate tenets from the JD-R model to develop a conceptual framework that delineates the mechanisms by which different factors impact employee wellbeing. Consistent with this theory, our work is positioned within an environmental context of the COVID-19 pandemic. By doing so, we advance scholarly understanding of HRM practices and employee wellbeing, particularly in situations characterized by high levels of threat and lack of control (e.g., pandemics, wars, and natural disasters). COVID-19, unfortunately, is here to stay until 2021 as per the WHO, and a quick assessment of wellbeing factors will have implications for practitioners in mitigating the negative impact of the pandemic.

This paper first presents a review of the literature on the hospitality sector (specifically hotels) in India, the impact of COVID-19, HRM in the hospitality sector, HRM practices during COVID-19, wellbeing, and the HRM-wellbeing link. The second section explains the methodology used to meet the research objectives. The third section presents the results, and the fourth section discusses the findings of the study and its implications. The last section outlines the limitations and proposes future research directions.

2. Review of the literature

2.1. The hospitality sector in India

The hospitality industry in India has generally enjoyed incremental growth year-on-year, and it was expected to grow exponentially in 2022. However, due to COVID-19, India's hospitality sector is facing its largest crisis ever (Confederation of Indian Industry, 2020). COVID-19 caused a severe drop in foreign and domestic travel across the world, in both the business and leisure travel segments, and dealt a heavy blow to the hospitality industry (Confederation of Indian Industry, 2020). Tourism and hospitality were liberalized by the Government of India (GOI),

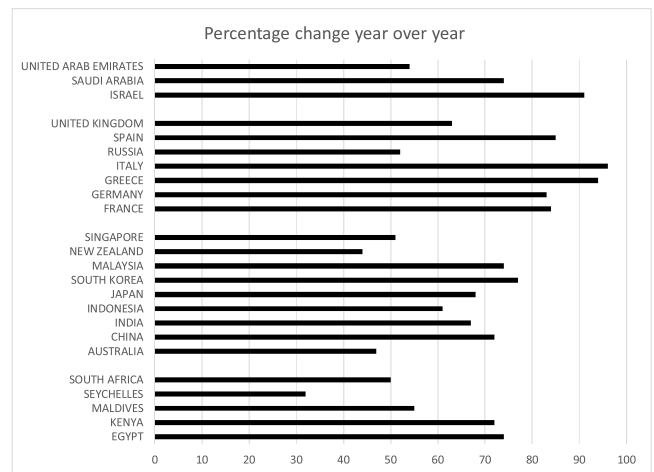


Fig. 2. Accommodation occupancy rate change for the week of March 21, YOY. Data source: STR (2020).

which permitted 100 % foreign direct investment in tourism and hospitality. The tourism sector's contribution to GDP was USD125.2 billion in 2014, and was expected to reach USD259 billion in 2025 (accounting to 7.6 per cent of India's GDP (KPMG, 2016).

At present, the hospitality industry is operating at 10–15 % occupancy. A growing decline of 30–50 % in revenue per available room during FY 2021 (IANS, 2020) is reported. Indian tourism and hospitality industry faces approximately 38 million potential job losses, representing approximately 70 % of the total workforce (IANS, 2020).

In the face of COVID-19, hotels have become vulnerable to several macro-level factors that have changed hotel ecosystems. COVID-19 has pushed hotels to transform their customer management processes by aligning these processes with security and government guidelines. Therefore, the examination of practices during COVID-19 will have immense value for the hospitality sector.

2.2. HRM practices in the hospitality sector

The investigation of the HRM-performance relationship has shifted from individual HRM practices to bundles of HR practices or HRM systems. The system approach considers the influence of both HRM content

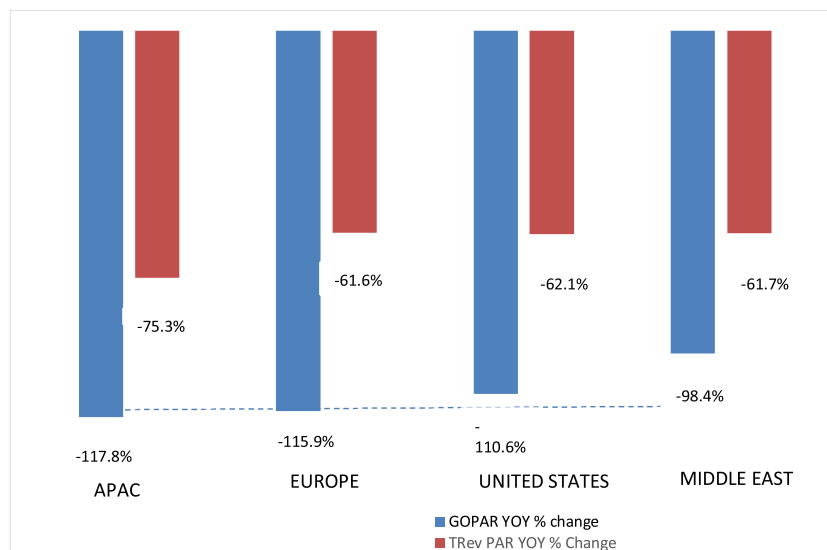


Fig. 1. March 2020 Regional YOY (year-over-year) % change in GOPPAR (gross operating profit per available room) and TRRevPAR (total revenue per available room).

and HRM process on outcomes. HRM content refers to individual practices (such as recruitment, selection, learning and development, performance appraisal, compensation, incentives, and career progression) that make up the HRM system. The HRM process refers to how HRM content is communicated and implemented by organizations (e.g., Sikora et al., 2015). The examination of HRM practices in the hospitality sector is imperative because HRM in this sector is associated with service-recovery performance, employee empowerment (Hewagama et al., 2019), perceived organizational support, affective commitment (Teo et al., 2020), and reduced intentions to leave (Karatepe, 2013). Further, the industry has a high level of customer interaction, and the customer experience is based on service quality. Any mishandling of customers during COVID-19 is likely to invite significant negative reactions from customers as well as media attention and may cause long-term reputation damage for hotels. COVID-19 also means that employees have to learn new ways of hosting guests. Service excellence depends upon the competence of employees, which in turn depends upon HRM practices and how employees are treated by hotels (Sen and Bhattacharya, 2019). HRM practices are critical because to provide a good customer experience, it is crucial for hotels to treat their employees well (Ford et al., 2012). Hotels can achieve a competitive edge by creating a warm culture and an inclusive environment and by taking care of their employees (Sen and Kaushik, 2016).

COVID-19 has impacted the HRM process by eroding person-job fit and having disproportionate family effects on employees (Carnevale and Hatak, 2020), in turn affecting the wellbeing of employees (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). Due to COVID-19, HRM professionals are under significant pressure to reskill their workforce rapidly. There is pressure on hotels to strategically design HRM systems and processes to meet the pressing market demands caused by the pandemic (Carnevale and Hatak, 2020).

2.3. Wellbeing

The concept of wellbeing is rooted in clinical (Jung, 1933), developmental (Erikson, 1959), existential (Frankl, 1959), humanistic (Maslow, 1968; Rogers, 1961), and social (Allport, 1961) psychology. Different schools of thought identify different characteristics of a psychologically healthy person, and the conceptualization of wellbeing varies depending upon the domain and scope of the study (Ryff, 2020). Wellbeing is measured as welfare, happiness, mental health, material possession, social life, vitality, self-actualization, or quality of life (Andrews and Withey, 1976; Bradburn, 1969; Campbell, 1981; Diener, 1984; Larson, 1978; Keyes et al., 2002). Despite these variations, subjective wellbeing (SWB) and psychological wellbeing (PWB) are considered to be empirically and theoretically more comprehensive than other dimensions. SWB refers to the hedonic aspect of wellbeing. It is composed of a person's cognitive and affective evaluations of his/her life as a whole (Diener, 1984), and it is a combination of life satisfaction and the balance between positive and negative affect (Ryan and Deci, 2001). PWB focuses on the eudaimonic aspect of wellbeing. It includes six related yet distinct components: positive evaluation of oneself and one's past (self-acceptance), a sense of continued growth and development (environmental mastery), the belief that one's life is purposeful and meaningful (purpose in life), quality relations with others (positive relationships), a sense of capacity to manage one's life and the surrounding world effectively (personal growth), and a sense of self-determination (autonomy) (Ryff and Keyes, 1995). PWB is based on the premise that individuals strive to function fully and realize their unique talents.

SWB and PWB are related but distinct constructs and are distinctly related to positive psychological functioning. For instance, goals and the importance of aspirations have stronger associations with the dimensions of PWB than with the dimensions of SWB (Chen et al., 2013). PWB and SWB are differently associated with organizational-level outcomes. PWB predicts variance in employee performance (Wright and

Cropanzano, 2004), while SWB reduces absenteeism (Ramsey et al., 2008) and increases intrinsic motivation (Van De Voorde et al., 2012).

Wellbeing studies in the corporate world focus on general wellbeing, SWB, PWB or the specific construct of business and work (Benz and Frey, 2008; Block and Koellinger, 2009; Bradley and Roberts, 2004; Cooper and Artz, 1995; Uy et al., 2013). Wellbeing is a critical construct for organizations to consider, as it is not just an outcome but an antecedent to numerous organizational-level outcomes such as creativity, productivity, cooperation in the workplace, and increased social capital (De Neve et al., 2013; Lyubomirsky, 2008). Wellbeing in hospitality is particularly relevant because the hospitality industry faces unique challenges such as extended operation hours, intensive job demands, and daily or seasonal fluctuations (Ariza-Montes et al., 2019). Given the stressful nature of jobs in hospitality, hospitality employees become vulnerable if their organization fails to promote employee wellbeing (Ariza-Montes et al., 2019). Wellbeing for hotels has business implications because service quality determines the success of hotels, which in turn depends upon the wellbeing of employees (Ariza-Montes et al., 2019). Therefore, the wellbeing of employees during COVID-19 is likely influenced by HRM practices.

2.4. HRM practices and wellbeing

The relationship between HRM practices and wellbeing is equivocal. Several studies have found a positive relationship between HRM and wellbeing (e.g., Fan et al., 2014; Huang et al., 2016), while other studies have suggested that the effects of HRM on work wellbeing depend on the configuration of the HRM system (Kooij et al., 2013; Korff et al., 2017). The relationship between HRM and wellbeing is also complicated by conflicting theoretical explanations (Okay-Somerville and Scholarios, 2019). We argue that HRM practices fulfill several psychological needs, such as competence, autonomy, and relatedness, which in turn increase psychological growth and wellbeing (Ryan and Deci, 2001). HRM practices not only add to the job resources of employees but also mitigate the effects of job demands (Demerouti et al., 2001). HRM practices increase psychological resources in the form of self-efficacy, optimism, hope, resilience, and psychological safety (Agarwal and Fardale, 2017), which in turn is likely to increase wellbeing. Luthans et al. (2010) argued that HRM practices enhance employee wellbeing by mobilizing employees' motivational and cognitive resources.

3. Method

3.1. Sample

An integrated list of hotels was generated from Capitaline and the CRISIL research database. We contacted the 50 largest hotels based on size through their HR heads. Nine hotels volunteered to participate. We interviewed approximately 4–5 employees from every hotel, for a total of 41 participants. Interviews were conducted over the telephone. In addition to contacting HR personnel at the managerial level from each hotel, we contacted employees based on their function, such as area management, housekeeping, operations, sales, business development, guest services, and corporate social responsibility (CSR), to ensure functional diversity, as the pandemic might have different impacts on employees with different functions. The demographic information of the participants is presented in Table 1.

3.2. Data collection

Considering the exploratory nature of the study, we used in-depth semi-structured interviews for our investigation. The interview format was derived using a topic list and the literature on COVID-19, HRM practices, and wellbeing. The interview sessions were conducted with an exploratory perspective on the new ideas raised by participants. The interviewer was careful to avoid leading questions and assumption-

Table 1
Sample Details.

S.No	Position	Gender	Hotel	Location
1	VP Finance	Male	Hotel 1	Mumbai
2	Hospitality Trainer	Male	Hotel 1	Mumbai
3	Security Guard	Male	Hotel 1	Mumbai
4	HR President	Male	Hotel 1	Mumbai
5	Janitor	Male	Hotel 2	Mumbai
6	Chief Human Resource Officer	Male	Hotel 2	Mumbai
7	CSR Manager	Female	Hotel 2	Mumbai
8	Guest Services Manager	Male	Hotel 2	Mumbai
9	Receptionist	Female	Hotel 3	Udaipur
10	HR Director	Female	Hotel 3	Udaipur
11	Bartender	Male	Hotel 3	Udaipur
12	Institutional Sales Manager	Male	Hotel 3	Udaipur
13	Area Manager	Male	Hotel 4	Jaipur
14	HR Manager	Female	Hotel 4	Jaipur
15	Waiter	Male	Hotel 4	Jaipur
16	Sales Manager	Male	Hotel 4	Jaipur
17	Executive	Male	Hotel 5	Goa
18	Front Office Manager	Male	Hotel 5	Goa
19	Food & Beverages Manager	Male	Hotel 5	Goa
20	Head Chef	Male	Hotel 5	Goa
21	HR Director	Male	Hotel 5	Goa
22	Chef	Male	Hotel 6	Hyderabad
23	Reservations Associate	Female	Hotel 6	Hyderabad
24	Training Manager	Male	Hotel 6	Hyderabad
25	Guest Relations Executive	Male	Hotel 6	Hyderabad
26	VP-HR	Male	Hotel 6	Hyderabad
27	Regional Director -Sales	Male	Hotel 7	Bangalore
28	Finance and Accounts Manager	Male	Hotel 7	Bangalore
29	Hotel Receptionist	Female	Hotel 7	Bangalore
30	HR Head	Male	Hotel 7	Bangalore
31	Housekeeping Manager	Male	Hotel 7	Bangalore
32	Porter	Male	Hotel 8	Delhi
33	Decorator	Male	Hotel 8	Delhi
34	Steward	Male	Hotel 8	Delhi
35	IT Manager	Male	Hotel 8	Delhi
36	HR Director	Male	Hotel 8	Delhi
37	HR Manager	Female	Hotel 9	Delhi
38	VP-CSR	Female	Hotel 9	Delhi
39	Operational Manager	Male	Hotel 9	Delhi
40	Banquet Sales Executive	Male	Hotel 9	Delhi
41	Store Manager	Male	Hotel 9	Delhi

based questions. The interview questions were split into the following sections:

Section 1: Participants' demographic information and a brief history of their employment with the hotel to build rapport between the interviewer and the participant.

Section 2: Hotel response to COVID-19 in terms of processes and practices.

Section 3: HRM practices followed by hotels during COVID-19.

Section 4: Impact of COVID-19 on the professional life of the participants and processes of performing job roles.

Section 5: Any further comments and views the participants want to share.

3.3. Data analysis

The objective of the study is addressed using the thematic analysis process recommended by Braun and Clarke (2019). Thematic analysis allows an in-depth, rich description of the entire data set and conceptualization of a specific construct (Braun and Clarke, 2019). We first conducted four pilot interviews to confirm that the questions would be properly understood by the participants. All interviews lasted between 40 and 90 min. Interviews were recorded with the permission of the interviewee. We followed the ethical protocol of informed consent and voluntary participation. All participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity and were given the contact details of the author's institute for further assurance and transparency. In the first stage, the interview data were repeatedly read, all transcripts were recorded, and

initial notes were taken. In the second stage, codes were generated as the first list to begin the data analysis. In the third stage, the first sets of codes were grouped into common categories. Categories were colored to facilitate data analysis and draw a thematic map. In the fourth stage, the categories were fine-tuned until the objective of a representative overview was achieved. To rule out the possibility of bias, the author discussed the initial codes with two other scholars to establish interrater reliability and increase the trustworthiness of the data (Bazeley and Jackson, 2013; Podsakoff et al., 2003). The author wrote down his/her thoughts and feelings after the interviews to further manage biases and prejudices (Polit and Beck, 2004).

4. Results

We identified a list of HRM practices that hotels are using during COVID-19 and the factors that impact the wellbeing of hotel employees. Factors that positively influence wellbeing are labeled resources, and factors that negatively impact wellbeing are labeled demands. Overall, 33 participants reported having episodes of deep stress, fearfulness, frustration, aggression, sadness, anxiety, or symptoms of depression.

4.1. HRM practices

4.1.1. Compensation and incentives

All hotels had removed all incentives and benefits. All but three hotels had cut approximately 50–60% of all employees' pay. One hotel had not cut or announced any pay cuts. Two hotels had not cut the pay of employees at the lowest level, such as housekeeping and janitors. One hotel had started the practice of handwritten letters from top management to lower-level employees as a token of appreciation. One participant stated that,

"We have closed 50 % of our property. The first to take pay cuts were top management employees. At this moment, we have no plans to cut the pay of the lower-level employees."

4.1.2. Training and development

Four hotels reported having increased the number of trainings offered to employees. All trainings were online and all of the interviewed employees of these hotels appreciated the trainings.

The employees of the hotels that conducted training reported feeling less fearful. New training topics included COVID-19 safety training, coping with stress and anxiety, and lifestyle-based training. One HR manager noted,

"As an HR training and development manager, my role has significantly increased. We have never conducted so many trainings in such a short duration of time in the past."

Another participant said,

"I benefitted a lot from training sessions conducted by the hotel."

4.1.3. HRM flexibility

Two hotels had flexible HRM systems that sought skill flexibility, pay flexibility, numerical flexibility, and process flexibility (explained in the discussion section) by design. Two other hotels were adaptable in quickly designing new HRM practices within a span of one week. Employees were trained in multiple roles. The flexible HRM systems allowed the application of the same HRM practices across roles and functions. One HR manager stated,

"We train our employee to play at least three roles during an emergency. We are emotional about the job loss, but we did not face any legal or ethical hassle while making the decision of layoffs and pay cuts."

One participant mentioned

“Our recruitment, training, and pay are flexible by design. While it is sad to ask employees to leave, it is comforting that our expectations were realistic and employees were prepared for it.”

Another participant noted,

“All the employees who are with us are happy and devoted to the hotel. We rationalize the manpower using the roles or functions that are not relevant. The HR team did not sleep for approximately 2 weeks from the date of the lockdown announcement.”

4.1.4. Life and family support

To meet business needs during lockdown, all hotels required corporate office employees to work from home (WFH). The remaining employees worked on the hotel property. Three hotels provided WFH employees with laptops, printers and scanners and began delivering food to employees who were living alone or were not able to cook a meal. One hotel provided temporary accommodation on hotel property to employees who were facing housing or travel-related problems. This increased the efficiency of employees. One participant stated,

“I feel privileged that I am working for such caring organizations. They delivered everything possible that I needed to do my work.”

4.1.5. Mental health support

Two hotels had formally appointed a counselor, and one hotel had members of its HRM team acting as counselors. One participant noted,

“We have employed a counselor to help people cope with mental health issues due to COVID-19 and the difficulty facing the hospitality sector.”

Another hotel's HR head shared,

“There is an open door policy; anyone who wants to talk to management can initiate the process through a helpline number. We can't give them money, but we can give them our time.”

The hotel provided employees professional and direct help to manage mental health issues. This enhanced the overall wellbeing of employees.

4.1.6. Transactional approach

Three hotels followed a transactional approach by firing employees or placing employees on unpaid leave. Employees were notified of these changes through emails or letters. These hotels did not follow any specific methodological process or approach to layoffs. They fired employees based on the hotels' finances.

4.2. Wellbeing

As mentioned in the section on the wellbeing literature, wellbeing is multifaceted. Therefore, we are mindful about the sub-elements of PWB (Ryan and Deci, 2001) and SWB (Diener et al., 2010) and seek to discover new elements of wellbeing instead of treating them as one. See Fig. 3 for a graphical representation of wellbeing.

4.2.1. Resources

4.2.1.1. Communication. In organizations that consistently communicated with their employees, employees were less anxious. Even if the communication conveyed bad news, it gave employees clarity and allowed them to plan their life and work. The participants of three hotels confirmed that their hotels were very consistent and transparent in their communication. Healthy and informative interpersonal interaction with supervisors and management increased employees' positive emotional energy. Employees who were well informed felt more psychologically secure and optimistic and less fearful. Three hotels organized town hall

meetings (as per COVID-19 safety guidelines), virtual meetings, and a member of senior management called employees individually. As one participant said,

“It is very heart-warming to receive a call from the president of the hotel asking about your wellbeing.”

4.2.1.2. History of a positive relationship. Employees who had a rich history and a strong positive bond with their employing hotel were more forgiving of the response of their employer (even if it was perceived as unfair). Participants from four hotels shared that their hotel was very caring and supporting of employees. A history of good behavior on the part of hotels made it easier for employees to accept the turnaround due to COVID-19. They acknowledged that their employers were helpless and that firing and pay cuts were the need of the hour. Therefore, they had no hard feelings toward their employer.

“This hotel has given me bread and butter from the time that I was 18 years old; they have taken care of me always. At no time was I treated unfairly. All employees are deeply respected by the employer. Now, when they are going thorough business loss and want to save costs by firing me, I can't complain, as these are unique circumstances.”

4.2.1.3. Authentic leadership. The employees of 4 hotels shared that the genuineness and honesty of their leaders mitigated the impact of COVID-19. Top management and supervisors who displayed authentic leadership had a positive impact on employees. Employees were supportive of their employers' decisions and reported being less stressed.

“The director of my function was genuine and transparent with us. He was equally sad about the state of affairs.”

4.2.1.4. Corporate social responsibility. Hotels with a history of extensively engaging in CSR and hotels that supported underprivileged people during COVID-19 had a positive influence on employees. Five hotels were actively involved in CSR. Two participants felt that their hotels should have first taken care of their own employees. CSR had a positive emotional impact by creating a sense of pride among employees.

4.2.1.5. Healthy relationships. Approximately 23 participants reported having a healthy relationship with their families. Family increased the personal resources of employees, thereby mitigating the possible stress associated with their changed work experiences due to COVID-19. Five participants reported that WFH brought them closer to their spouse. Additionally, participants receiving family support had less fear of job loss or pay cuts. One participant reported:

“I really don't know what I would have done, how I would have managed this turmoil in life. My family supported me immensely.”

4.2.1.6. Household work support. Participants whose families shared the workload at home reported being less frustrated and more efficient in their work. Approximately 13 participants reported that their families chose to take on most of the household work to give them time to relax and consider alternative careers. The remaining employees shared that there was a significant amount of household work. One participant stated,

“We have equally divided the workload, and that allows me to plan my day properly.”

Another participant noted,

“I get a hot cooked meal, ironed clothes, and a ready bed. My family is awesome. I forget everything once I get inside the home.”

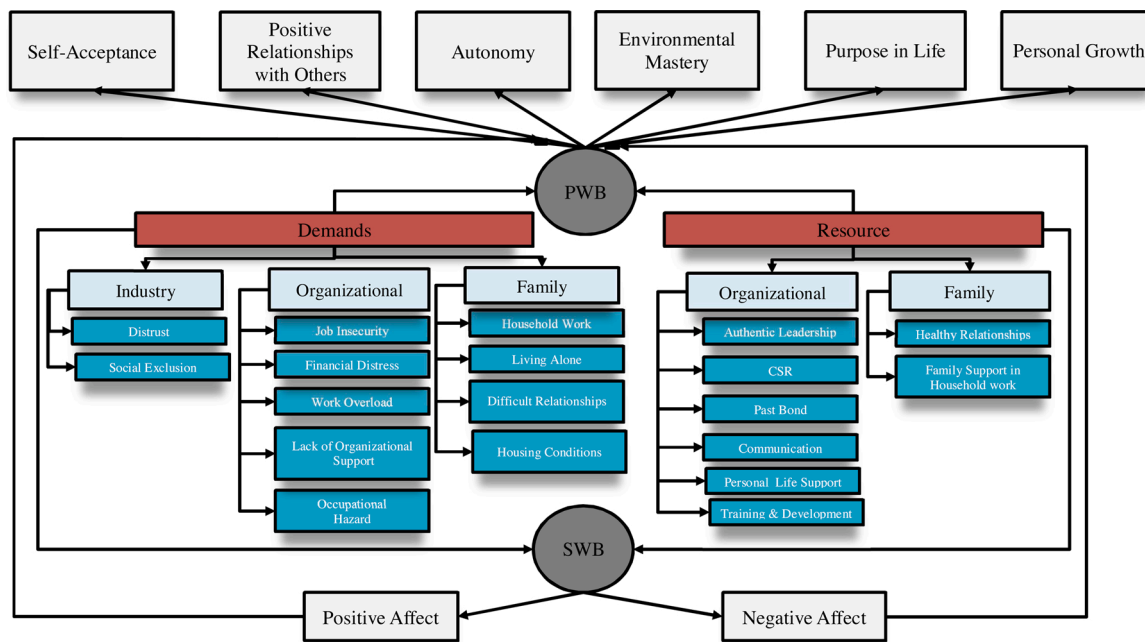


Fig. 3. Graphical representation of wellbeing.

4.2.2. Demands

4.2.2.1. *Distrust.* Twenty-nine participants stated that they had lost their trust in the hospitality sector. Hotels were previously regarded as highly trusted employers because they cared for their employees; all participants felt that hotels across India were very caring toward their employees. The sense of distrust led to emotional discomfort. Even if the hospitality industry resumes, people are likely to view their employment contracts as transactional. One participant said,

“I will never come back to the hospitality sector; in the past, I never felt that this industry was so vulnerable. I think healthcare and FMCG are the best sectors to work in.”

4.2.2.2. *Inequality and exclusion.* Six participants said that they were poor and came from a scheduled caste¹ (the author did not ask about the participant’s caste) and that a layoff would expose them to discrimination in society. These participants said that working at a hotel protected them from caste-based hostility because when they were working at a hotel, an outsider could not see them washing dishes or cleaning floors unless they were cleaning public areas in the hotel. They felt that the COVID-19 crisis systematically led to the layoffs of poor and scheduled-caste people. Twenty-three participants said that they were constantly angry and restless thinking about the other poor employees, and they felt that employees from lower strata were deeply impacted. Employees at higher levels were also fired, but they were fired because of their high salaries. They had enough resources to survive a layoff even if they did not resume work for another year. The firing of employees at lower strata combined with the lack of preparation by the government to deal with labor issues added to the social and financial consequences for employees working as receptionists, luggage porters, waiters and kitchen helpers. The process of layoffs has systematically left employees from poor backgrounds and scheduled castes without jobs, adding to the

¹ India has a caste system that has its origin in ancient India and still influences people’s behavior. This system discriminates against people belonging to categories of castes that are considered inferior to such an extent that they are considered untouchable in certain parts of India (Bayly, 2001).

problems of inequality and exclusion. One participant stated,

“I can’t control my anger and frustration at the mere thought of these laborers and poor people. Neither the government nor the employer seems to have any plans for these people. They are left to die of hunger.”

Another participant noted,

“I will count my hotel as one of the most caring and socially conscious organizations. However, all the employees who have been asked to leave are either poor or from a scheduled caste. COVID-19 has exposed how society and organizations systematically have a negative social impact.”

4.2.2.3. *Work overload.* The employees who were not fired were working around the clock. Fear of job loss was one of the reasons employees chose to work instead of requesting work rationalization. The situation was also troubling for employees, as WFH led to extra work. Employees reported being physically and mentally exhausted. One participant indicated,

“My working hours have increased because of layoffs. So, I am expected to do the additional work. We have to take care of our guests just like before; the only difference is social distancing and masks.”

4.2.2.4. *Less work or No work.* Participants with limited work and no work were feeling lonely and fearful about losing their jobs. One participant said,

“Sitting idle is not my thing. I might just go mad.”

Another participant said,

“I am not given enough work; I am afraid that I might lose my job.”

4.2.2.5. *Occupational hazard.* Employees working as hotel staff reported that being constantly alert had taken a physical toll. They were constantly exposed to people who could be carriers of the coronavirus. Constant exposure to such an environment had led to fear and anxiety about catching the coronavirus. While the hotels were following all procedures and necessary precautions, working for guests during

COVID-19 instilled a sense of fear. One participant stated,

"We have to be on constant alert while interacting with our guests. I am tired and exhausted from being alert all the time."

4.2.2.6. Financial distress. Thirty-four participants shared that their hotels had resorted to pay cuts of at least 50 %, and approximately 20–30% of employees had been asked not to come to work from June/ July onwards. These pay cuts had not deeply impacted managerial employees. However, non-managerial employees and manual workers were in a state of distress and worry due to a lack of financial resources. Some of them decided to move back to their villages and hometowns. One participant shared,

"I get 10,000 rupees. After paying rent, I have nothing left to even buy a meal for my family. I am thinking of relocating to a cheaper location."

4.2.2.7. Job insecurity. Participants who were not fired were insecure about their jobs. Employees reported being anxious about job loss. One participant stated,

"The organization has fired whatever employees they wanted to fire. I know logically there is nothing to worry about, but hospitality as an industry is going through its worst times. If things deteriorate further, what can anyone do? Even if the employer wants to keep all of us, they don't have money to pay us."

All employees reported that the major layoffs, particularly concerning manual laborers such as housekeeping, receptionists, and facility office workers, created fear about job loss. Furthermore, COVID-19 has impacted the hospitality industry as a whole. Approximately 5 interviewed employees had been asked to leave in July.

"More than 60 % of the property of my hotel is closed. They have decided to fire employees accordingly. I am one of them."

All but three hotels had started firing employees. One hotel used its networks to find jobs for employees who were asked to leave. Another hotel had the financial resources to remain afloat until the end of 2020. Job insecurity has several negative impacts, such as fear, anxiety, worry, hopelessness, and cynicism.

4.2.2.8. Lack of organizational support. Employees who were WFH, primarily corporate employees, were frustrated by the lack of technological support. This was the case for 12 participants. Internet bandwidth was a major issue for most participants. Furthermore, 13 participants had small homes, and some did not have tables or chairs for a workspace. All of these factors increased the sources of stress by increasing the complexity associated with work. One participant revealed,

"I am facing lot of pressure as my home is not WFH friendly. I did not have a study room or office space to work. I had to buy a table and chair. Second, I have a young toddler at home, and I live in a one-bedroom apartment."

4.2.2.9. Household work overload. Indian families in middle and upper classes are heavily dependent on servants/assistants because of the availability of cheap labor. Sixty percent of participants reported having a servant or paid help in performing household chores. COVID-19 restricted the entry of help/servants, consequently increasing the workload of the employees. Nine participants were single and living with their parents; hence, their parents were taking care of the household work. The household work demands added to the participants' workload and increased their stress and physical exhaustion. One participant said,

"I feel psychologically and physically exhausted because I am supposed to contribute to finishing the household work."

4.2.2.10. Living alone. Approximately 15 participants were living away from their families. They reported suffering from extreme loneliness. Before COVID-19, they had never felt alone because there were many ways to spend time constructively, such as learning a hobby, spending time with colleagues, engaging in leisure activities, and watching movies. The day-to-day casual conversation with their colleagues fulfilled their psychological need for affiliation and substituted for family relationships. The sense of loneliness added to their stress and anxiety.

4.2.2.11. Difficult relationships. Twelve participants shared that COVID-19 had increased the difficulty of conversing with family members and contributed to conflict. For 4 participants, work was a coping mechanism to handle difficult interpersonal relationships and life challenges. Difficult family dynamics and communication increased the level of stress and frustration. One participant said,

"I live in a joint family. I can't even sleep peacefully because either I am fighting with my spouse or my parents are fighting with each other."

4.2.2.12. Poor housing conditions. Approximately 15 participants reported being frustrated due to poor or moderate living conditions that restricted the supply of electricity, water, or necessary furniture. This made it difficult for them to work and reduced their efficiency. One participant stated,

"I used to work in this 5-star hotel for more than 12 h. It provided me good food, good air conditions, and a neat and clean space. Such is not the scenario at home."

5. Discussion and implications

The first objective of this study was to understand the HRM practices employed by hotels to manage their employees during COVID-19. Hotels and employees benefitted when HRM practices crossed the conventional boundaries of HRM at the workplace and moved into employees' personal lives to enhance their job performance and express concern for them. Our study is unique in highlighting that organizations need to design HRM practices that consider the personal lives of employees, as the lines between personal life and professional life are becoming blurred. Current HRM theories and frameworks are limited to considering the factors within the boundaries of an organization and its core business. Further, the findings contradict the view that HRM practices exclusively benefit the employer and can cost the organization if the HRM practices are designed to suit employees' needs (Legge, 2005). Our results strongly support the notion that wellbeing-based HRM practices can positively and collectively impact both employees and hotels, supporting the "mutual-gain" perspective of HRM (Huettermann and Bruch, 2019).

Second, our study reveals that hotels have benefitted from flexible HRM practices. Flexibility in HRM practices refers to the "extent to which they are adapted to a variety of situations and how quickly the practices are resynthesized, reconfigured and redeployed" (Wright and Snell, 1998). HRM flexibility made it easier for hotels to manage their employees by reducing the stress and anxiety associated with ambiguity and uncertainty.

Third, the rapid response of hotels to configure HRM practices as per the new demands of employees fared well. Last, an increase in training and development was successful for most of the hotels. Training and development during the pandemic increased the capabilities of employees and had a motivational effect. Training overall increased the psychological resources of employees to perform their job roles. Our

study confirms that HRM practices create sustainable market value for firms operating in uncertain environments (Sanyal and Sett, 2011).

Our study has several theoretical and practical implications. First, it confirms the JD-R model (Conway et al., 2016). Consistent with our theorizing, the results confirm that job demands and resources reduce and increase wellbeing, respectively. In addition, our study illustrates the dynamic nature of the JD-R model by highlighting that the model is limited in its implications for organizational and employee performance if it fails to consider resources and demands at the family, industry, and society levels. This could be a starting point to consider family- and society-level stressors to understand organizational performance. Our study confirms the self-determination postulation that fulfillment of autonomy and affiliation needs activates the motivational process toward role performance (Deci & Ryan, 2001). Third, our study challenges earlier findings in the HRM literature indicating that job insecurity is negatively related to job performance (Hu et al., 2018). In our study, job insecurity increased work efforts and performance due to fear of job loss. Job insecurity in the literature is treated as a stressor; while it might impact employees' wellbeing, it might not necessarily impact their performance. The emergence of several HRM practices facilitating wellbeing corroborates the sense of coherence (SoC) perspective (Antonovsky, 1987), which argues that individuals cope better if they perceive life events as structured, predictable, and explicable. Our study found that HRM practices and organizational support reduced helplessness. When employees are confident about the availability of future resources and perceive demands as challenge, they begin to believe that work is worth the investment of resources.

The second objective of the study was to understand the factors influencing the wellbeing of hotel employees during the COVID-19 pandemic. The results confirmed that wellbeing was influenced by resources and demands related to personal and situational factors. Resources were categorized at two levels, the organizational and family levels, while demands were categorized at the industry, organizational, and family levels (See Fig. 1).

Our study revealed that resources at the organizational level that enhance wellbeing include consistent communication, a history of positive relationships, authentic leadership, training, coaching, mentoring, personal life support, and CSR. Authentic leaders, training, coaching, mentoring, and personal life support increase job control, environmental mastery, and autonomy. Previous studies have argued that skill-oriented HRM practices increase wellbeing by creating a sense of welfare (Okay-Somerville and Scholarios, 2019). Our study adds support to the notion that HRM (especially training, development, and coaching) increases employees' resources to help them cope with new role-performance challenges, leading to employee wellbeing. Our research contributes to the literature by demonstrating that engaging leadership fosters effective implementation of HRM and has a direct impact on employees' performance (Salas-Vallina et al., 2020). We found that employees with a history of a positive relationship with their employer experienced low job demands despite perceived unfairness and breach of trust. The findings suggest that reservoirs of job resources can help employees cope with present job demands. This perspective is unique but similar to the conservation of resource theory, which proposes that individuals with strong resource pools invest resources with an expectation of future gains (gain cycle) and that resources are an aspect of the individual self (Hobfoll, 2002). Similarly, engaging in CSR increases employees' sense of pride in and belongingness to the firm, which is directly connected with the sense-of-purpose element of PWB.

At the family level, employees who enjoyed healthy relationships and had supportive families felt less isolated and lonely, which confirms the relevance of meaningful interpersonal relationships. In contrast, household workload, living alone, difficult relationships, demanding family members, and poor housing conditions added to the stress of employees. All of these stressors reduced the resources available to employees to cope with their job-related activities. Further, satisfaction with personal/family life builds enduring personal resources to cope

with job demands. The results suggest organizations should consider helping employees manage their personal issues to increase their wellbeing and consequently enhance their work performance in hotels. The reasons why some hotels report reduced engagement despite their efforts to control negative factors of wellbeing at the organizational level might be due to family-level stressors/demands. Instead of using all of their available resources to manage the organizational-level factors of wellbeing, organizations should consider channeling some resources to manage the personal lives of employees. Organizations can also customize HRM practices to allow employees to target organizational or personal resources depending on the aspects that require more investment.

Organizational factors that acted as demands and stressors included an extensive workload, a lack of work, less work than usual, fear of job loss, occupational hazards, financial distress, and a lack of technological or other support for WFH. Hotels across the world are notorious for long working hours (Jensen et al., 2013), but COVID-19 has exacerbated this issue. Work overload is connected to negative work attitudes and behaviors (Karatepe, 2013). Job insecurity is associated with reduced wellbeing (Probst and Jiang, 2017) and burnout (Probst and Jiang, 2017) and affects emotional regulation (Grandey, 2003).

At the industry level, the major layoff has resulted in social exclusion. The social exclusion of people who are poor and who come from lower caste (as per the caste system) has emotionally impacted both victims and observers. Social exclusion impacts wellbeing by making it harder for employees to accept themselves and to experience the wellbeing that comes from social relationships (Ryff, 2020). This has caused anger and frustration. Employees feel stressed due to a sense of distrust toward the hotel industry. People realize that it makes sense to choose to work in sectors of essential services. These findings suggest that wellbeing in the workplace is equally influenced by the larger ecosystem in which an organization operates.

COVID-19 has also dispelled several myths in people management, namely, that people will not WFH and that they need constant supervision. This study confirms the finding by D'Annunzio-Green and Ramdhony (2019) that people management need not be resource-intensive but that qualitative changes in HR management processes must be made from a psychosocial perspective. This study has implications for employers. Employers need to extend their HRM practices to support employees in their personal lives in order to help them increase their job performance. Training, coaching, and mentoring are considered most valuable during a crisis, as they add to employees' cognitive and psychological resources to cope with the depletion of resources caused by the crisis. Therefore, training and development can be designed to meet the unique needs of employees. This study reveals the relevance of flexible HRM systems that can be modified according to changing business needs. Hotels with limited financial resources may adopt a psychosocial approach to increase employee wellbeing. The most unique finding of this study is that wellbeing is influenced by the way hotels respond to societal needs. The current generation of employees is emotionally invested in supporting less privileged people. Therefore, investing in society can indirectly help hotels by increasing employee wellbeing through building goodwill among employees, leading to increased performance.

5.1. Limitations and Future Research

This study used a qualitative methodology. A qualitative study allows the exploration of new phenomena and deep investigation of a topic. The validity of the findings can be increased by using quantitative methods or mixed methods. The wellbeing themes that emerged from this study need to be further tested to establish greater clarity and to explain the relationships among different variables. The responses of the participants from HR functions might be influenced by social desirability bias. However, the study attempted to address this bias by confirming the findings with other participants employed in the same hotels.

Second, the data were collected from the 50 largest hotels. The theoretical insights can be transferred to smaller hotels, but size-related factors need to be contextualized. Scholars can study the effects of changed HR practices and layoffs or pay cuts on employee performance and work engagement. This paper highlights the need for HRM flexibility, which must be further investigated (Akingbola, 2013).

Ethical compliance

The paper follows all the ethical guidelines of International Journal of Hospitality Management

Data sharing

We have no-disclosure policy with all the participants. Some participants have been very critical of their hotels and have also revealed information about their personal life. Therefore, we would not be able to share the raw data.

Declaration of Competing Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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