

Hospitality Management Students' Challenges, Professional Growth, Workplace Culture Adaptation, and Service Experiences: Basis for an Enhanced Internship

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ABSTRACT

Internship or on-the-job training (OJT) is a core component of Hospitality Management education that exposes students to actual industry practice. This study explored the lived experiences of Hospitality Management students during their internship, focusing primarily on the outcomes and patterns that emerged from their narratives. A qualitative phenomenological research design was employed. Ten Hospitality Management students who had completed internships in various hospitality establishments were selected through purposive sampling. Data were gathered through semi-structured in-depth interviews, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis framework. Findings revealed five major experiential themes: theory–practice transition difficulty, workplace adaptation strain, professional identity development needs, work ethic and discipline internalization, and service interaction challenges. Participants described internship as a transformative experience that enabled them to apply classroom knowledge in actual hospitality operations while progressively developing professional confidence and competence. Communication skills, teamwork, technical abilities, and emotional regulation were significantly enhanced through repeated workplace exposure. However, students also experienced challenges including fast-paced operational demands, workload pressure, communication barriers, and emotional labor in guest interactions. These difficulties contributed to stress but also fostered resilience, adaptability, and problem-solving skills. Workplace socialization further shaped students' understanding of hospitality values, discipline, and service excellence. Based on these findings, an evidence-based Enhanced OJT Program is proposed to strengthen internship preparation and support structured skill development through simulation, phased exposure, mentorship, and service competency training.

Keywords: Hospitality Management, Internship, On-the-Job Training, Professional Growth, Workplace Adaptation, Workplace Culture, Service Experience

INTRODUCTION

Internship or on-the-job training (OJT) is widely recognized as a critical component of Hospitality Management (HM) education, serving as a bridge between theoretical learning and professional practice. Globally, hospitality programs integrate internships to enhance students' employability by developing practical skills, professional competencies, and industry awareness (Baum, 2006; Kusluvan et al., 2010). Recent studies further emphasize that internships contribute significantly to students' communication skills, adaptability, and career readiness, which are essential in the highly dynamic and service-oriented hospitality industry (Seyitoğlu, 2019; Chen & Shen, 2012). These experiences provide students with exposure to real-world operations and allow them to apply academic knowledge in authentic workplace settings.

Despite these recognized benefits, international literature also highlights several challenges associated with hospitality internships. Students frequently encounter heavy workloads, long working hours, communication barriers, and difficulties in adapting to fast-paced and demanding work environments (Collins, 2002; Seyitoğlu, 2019). Moreover, issues such as inadequate supervision, unclear training structures, and mismatches between academic preparation and industry expectations continue to affect the quality of internship experiences (Chen &

Shen, 2012). These challenges suggest that while internships are valuable, their effectiveness largely depends on how training programs are structured and implemented.

In the Philippine context, where hospitality and tourism remain key drivers of economic growth and employment, internships play an equally vital role in preparing students for industry demands. However, local studies focusing on the holistic experiences of HM students—particularly in terms of their challenges, professional growth, workplace culture adaptation, and service experiences—remain limited. Existing research often examines internships in terms of skill acquisition or satisfaction but provides less emphasis on the lived experiences of students and how these dimensions interact to shape their professional development.

Furthermore, adaptation to workplace culture and service engagement are critical yet underexplored aspects of internship experiences. Drawing on Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory, learning occurs through direct experience and reflection, making internships a vital context for developing professional identity and workplace competence. In hospitality settings, interns are expected not only to perform technical tasks but also to embody organizational values, demonstrate professionalism, and deliver quality service through direct guest interaction (Kim & Park, 2013). These dimensions highlight the complexity of internship experiences, which extend beyond skill development to include cultural adaptation and service-oriented learning.

Despite the growing body of literature, a clear gap remains in understanding how HM students simultaneously experience challenges, develop professionally, adapt to workplace culture, and engage in service during their internships, particularly within a unified qualitative framework. Most studies treat these aspects in isolation, limiting a comprehensive understanding of the internship experience as a whole. This gap underscores the need for an in-depth exploration of students' lived experiences to better inform the design and improvement of OJT programs.

In response to this gap, this study employed a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of HM students during their internship in the hospitality industry. Specifically, it examined the challenges they encountered, their professional growth, adaptation to workplace culture, and service experiences. The findings of this study provide a basis for proposing an enhanced On-the-Job Training (OJT) program aimed at improving internship structure, strengthening student competencies, and aligning academic preparation with industry expectations.

Statement of the Problem:

This study aimed to examine the internship experiences of Hospitality Management (HM) students in the hospitality industry, with particular emphasis on the challenges they encounter, their professional growth, their adaptation to workplace culture, and their service-related experiences. The study sought to generate an in-depth understanding of how these dimensions shape students' overall internship experience and professional preparation.

Specifically, this study sought to answer the following questions:

1. How do Hospitality Management students describe and interpret their internship experiences in the hospitality industry?
2. What challenges do HM students encounter during their internship?
3. How do HM students describe their professional growth during their internship?
4. How do HM students adapt to the workplace culture during their internship?
5. What service-related experiences do HM students encounter while performing their internship duties?
6. Based on the findings of the study, what enhanced On-the-Job Training (OJT) program may be proposed to improve the internship experience of HM students?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Internship or on-the-job training (OJT) has been widely recognized in international literature as a fundamental component of hospitality management education. Globally, internships are regarded as a structured form of experiential learning that enables students to integrate theoretical knowledge with actual workplace practices

(Kolb, 1984). Through direct engagement in industry settings, students develop not only technical competencies but also interpersonal and professional skills essential for employability in the hospitality sector (Zopiatis & Theocharous, 2013). This global perspective emphasizes internships as a critical educational strategy for bridging the gap between academic preparation and industry expectations.

International studies further highlight that hospitality internships contribute significantly to the development of soft skills such as communication, teamwork, adaptability, and problem-solving. These competencies are consistently identified as essential for success in service-oriented industries (Zopiatis & Theocharous, 2013; Seyitoğlu, 2019). In addition, internships have been associated with improved confidence levels and clearer career direction among students as they are exposed to real workplace dynamics and responsibilities (Gad & El-Nagar, 2020; Jackson, 2015). These findings suggest that internship programs play a vital role in preparing students for professional practice beyond academic settings.

However, despite these advantages, international literature also identifies several challenges in internship implementation. Studies indicate that students often encounter issues such as insufficient supervision, limited reflective learning opportunities, heavy workloads, and communication barriers in the workplace (Seyitoğlu, 2019; Zopiatis & Theocharous, 2013). These concerns point to inconsistencies in how internship programs are structured and implemented, which may affect the quality of student learning experiences. Moreover, studies emphasize that without adequate mentoring and structured feedback mechanisms, the potential benefits of internships may not be fully realized (Jackson, 2015).

In response to these concerns, recent literature underscores the importance of mentorship and supervisory support in enhancing internship outcomes. Effective guidance from industry supervisors has been shown to contribute to students' professional development, satisfaction, and workplace adjustment (Jackson, 2015). Mentorship not only facilitates skill acquisition but also helps interns navigate workplace culture and expectations, which are crucial for their transition into professional roles.

Transitioning to the Philippine context, hospitality internship programs are similarly embedded in higher education curricula as a requirement for degree completion. In the Philippines, OJT programs are designed to expose students to actual industry operations, allowing them to apply classroom-based learning in real hospitality environments. However, studies suggest that while these programs are widely implemented, variations in training quality, supervision, and learning experiences still exist across institutions and training establishments (Commission on Higher Education [CHED], 2017; Orbeta & Paqueo, 2017). These inconsistencies raise concerns regarding the overall effectiveness of internship programs in fully achieving their intended learning outcomes.

Local studies also highlight that Filipino hospitality interns often experience both enriching and challenging workplace conditions. On one hand, internships provide opportunities for skills enhancement, professional exposure, and industry familiarity. On the other hand, students may encounter difficulties such as inadequate supervision, limited engagement in meaningful tasks, and adjustment issues in workplace culture (Aguila, De Castro, & Dolot, 2016). These experiences suggest that while internships are valuable, their effectiveness largely depends on the quality of implementation and support provided by host institutions.

Despite the growing body of literature on hospitality internships, several research gaps remain evident. First, there is limited localized qualitative research that deeply explores how hospitality management students interpret and make meaning of their lived internship experiences in specific institutional and regional contexts. Most existing studies tend to focus on outcomes such as employability, skill acquisition, or satisfaction levels, rather than the nuanced personal and experiential narratives of interns. Second, there is a need for more context-specific understanding of how students navigate challenges, adapt to workplace culture, and construct professional identity during OJT, particularly within Philippine hospitality settings.

These gaps highlight the importance of examining internship experiences from an interpretive and experiential perspective, focusing on how students themselves understand and give meaning to their OJT journey. Addressing these gaps is essential in providing deeper insights into how internship programs can be improved in terms of structure, supervision, and learning support.

In summary, existing literature affirms that hospitality internships are essential in developing professional

competencies and bridging academic learning with industry practice. However, inconsistencies in implementation quality and limited qualitative understanding of student experiences indicate the need for further investigation. These gaps provide the rationale for the present study, which seeks to explore the lived internship experiences of Hospitality Management students, particularly in relation to their challenges, professional growth, and adaptation to workplace culture within the Philippine context.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of Hospitality Management (HM) students during their internship in the hospitality industry. Phenomenology is appropriate for this study because it seeks to understand how individuals make meaning of their lived experiences in specific contexts, focusing on their perceptions, feelings, and interpretations of events as they occur in real-life situations (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

In line with this approach, the study aimed to capture the essence of students' internship experiences, particularly in relation to the challenges they encountered, their professional growth, their adaptation to workplace culture, and their service experiences. These dimensions were explored as lived experiences rather than as predefined variables, allowing for a deeper understanding of how students perceive and interpret their On-the-Job Training (OJT) journey.

To analyze the data, thematic analysis was used as an interpretive procedure within the phenomenological framework. This involved identifying significant statements from participants' narratives, grouping them into meaning units, and organizing these into emerging themes that reflect the essence of their internship experiences. This analytical process allowed the researcher to develop a rich and structured interpretation of participants' lived realities while remaining grounded in their actual accounts.

Participants

The study involved ten (10) Hospitality Management (HM) students who had recently completed their On-the-Job Training (OJT) or internship in various hospitality establishments, including hotels, resorts, and restaurants. These participants were selected through purposive sampling, specifically choosing individuals who had completed a full internship program and were able to provide rich, reflective, and in-depth accounts of their lived experiences.

To ensure relevance and depth of data, the study applied the following inclusion criteria: (1) participants must be officially enrolled HM students who had completed their required OJT program; (2) they must have completed their internship within the last academic cycle to ensure freshness and accuracy of recall; (3) they must have been assigned to actual operational departments such as front office, food and beverage, housekeeping, or kitchen operations; and (4) they must be willing to participate and share their experiences in detail.

The participants had completed internships with a standard duration of 600 hours. These internships exposed students to various operational departments, allowing them to experience different workplace roles and responsibilities within the hospitality industry.

In addition, the sample included students with varying demographic backgrounds and differing levels of prior work exposure, which contributed to a more comprehensive understanding of internship experiences across contexts. This variation was important in capturing diverse perspectives on challenges encountered, professional growth, adaptation to workplace culture, and service experiences during their OJT.

Limitations of the Study

This study was limited to ten Hospitality Management student participants, which may have restricted the transferability of the findings to a broader population of Hospitality Management interns. Additionally, the study relied exclusively on the perspectives of student interns and did not include the viewpoints of internship

supervisors, faculty coordinators, or industry partners. The absence of these stakeholder perspectives limited opportunities for data triangulation and may have constrained the comprehensiveness of the findings. Future studies may benefit from incorporating multiple stakeholder perspectives to provide a more holistic understanding of internship experiences within the hospitality industry.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews; an approach appropriate for phenomenological inquiry as it allows participants to provide detailed accounts of their lived experiences while maintaining a flexible guide anchored on the study objectives. This method enabled the researcher to explore participants' internship experiences in depth, particularly in relation to their challenges, professional growth, adaptation to workplace culture, and service experiences.

The interview guide was researcher-developed and grounded in relevant literature on hospitality internships, experiential learning, and on-the-job training. To ensure content validity and clarity, the initial set of interview questions was reviewed by experts in hospitality management and qualitative research. Their feedback was used to refine the wording, improve the sequencing of questions, and enhance alignment with the research objectives. Prior to the actual data collection, the interview guide underwent a pilot test with one Hospitality Management student who met the inclusion criteria but was not part of the final sample. The pilot testing helped assess the clarity of the questions, estimate the duration of the interview, and ensure that the questions elicited rich and meaningful responses.

Individual interviews were conducted in quiet and accessible locations agreed upon by the participants, such as designated rooms within the academic institution or other private spaces that ensured comfort, confidentiality, and minimal distractions. This setting encouraged participants to openly share their experiences without external influence or interruption.

Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes and was conducted on a one-on-one basis to allow for in-depth exploration of individual perspectives. With the informed consent of the participants, all interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accurate documentation of responses and to support rigorous transcription and analysis.

To address language and communication considerations, participants were given the option to express their responses in English, Filipino, or their preferred local dialect. During transcription and analysis, the researcher carefully translated non-English responses into English while preserving their original meaning and context to maintain the integrity of the data.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006), applied within a phenomenological interpretive framework. While phenomenology focuses on understanding the essence of lived experiences, thematic analysis was employed as a systematic and rigorous method for organizing, interpreting, and presenting participants' narratives in a structured yet meaning-preserving manner.

The analysis began with verbatim transcription of all audio-recorded interviews to ensure accuracy and fidelity to participants' accounts. The researcher then engaged in repeated reading of the transcripts to achieve familiarization with the data, allowing for an in-depth understanding of the participants' lived internship experiences.

Following this, initial meaning units and significant statements were identified in relation to the phenomenon under investigation. These statements were then coded inductively, capturing recurring patterns and important aspects of the participants' experiences without imposing pre-existing categories.

The generated codes were subsequently organized into preliminary categories, which reflected broader patterns across the data. These categories were then reviewed, refined, and synthesized into emerging themes that represent the shared meanings and essential aspects of the participants' internship experiences, including their challenges, professional growth, adaptation to workplace culture, and service-related experiences.

Consistent with phenomenological principles, the analysis also involved an iterative process of interpretation and meaning-making, wherein the researcher sought to move beyond surface descriptions toward a deeper understanding of the essence of the lived experience. Through continuous comparison of themes against the original transcripts, the researcher ensured that the final thematic structure accurately reflected participants' perspectives while preserving the richness and depth of their narratives.

Themes were reviewed multiple times to ensure coherence, consistency, and alignment with the research objectives. This process of refinement supported the development of a structured yet nuanced interpretation of the data, consistent with both thematic analysis procedures and phenomenological inquiry.

The analysis of the participants' experiences informed the development of a proposed enhanced On-the-Job Training (OJT) program for HM students. This program was designed to address identified challenges, strengthen professional competencies, facilitate workplace adaptation, and improve service experiences during internships.

Trustworthiness

To ensure the credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability of the findings, the study implemented several strategies consistent with qualitative research standards.

Credibility was enhanced through member checking, wherein participants were provided with a summary of the preliminary findings and interpretations. This allowed them to verify the accuracy of the researcher's representation of their experiences and to clarify or confirm key points where necessary. This process helped ensure that the findings remained grounded in the participants' actual accounts.

To support dependability and confirmability, the study employed peer debriefing. Selected colleagues with expertise in qualitative research were invited to review the coding process, thematic development, and interpretation of findings. Their feedback helped ensure that the analysis remained consistent, logical, and free from researcher bias.

In addition, an audit trail was maintained throughout the research process. This included raw interview transcripts, coding notes, category development records, and documentation of theme refinement. Maintaining this systematic record of analytical decisions enhanced the transparency of the research process and allowed for potential review of how findings were derived from the data.

Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with established ethical standards for research involving human participants. Prior to data collection, ethical clearance was obtained from the appropriate institutional research ethics committee (or equivalent approving body), ensuring that the study complied with institutional and academic research guidelines.

Informed consent was secured from all participants before the interviews commenced. Participants were fully briefed on the purpose of the study, the nature of their involvement, and how the data would be used. They were assured that participation was entirely voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any point without penalty or negative consequences.

To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, all identifying information was removed from transcripts and reports, and pseudonyms or participant codes were used in presenting the findings. Audio recordings, transcripts, and related research materials were securely stored and accessible only to the researcher. All collected data were used strictly for academic research purposes and handled with utmost confidentiality throughout the study.

RESULTS

Hospitality Management Students' Internship Experiences in the Hospitality Industry

Theme 1: Internship as a Reality-Based Transition from Classroom to Industry Practice. Participants described their internship as a transition from classroom learning to actual hospitality operations. They viewed the

experience as an opportunity to apply theoretical knowledge in real workplace settings characterized by fast-paced operations, guest interactions, and organizational expectations. Participant 1 stated:

“My internship felt very different from school because everything in the hotel was fast-paced and real. You really have to apply what you learned immediately.”

Similarly, Participant 2 explained:

“It felt like reality hit me because the tasks were not as easy as in our laboratory. You need to be alert all the time and really apply what you learned in school.”

Participant 3 added:

“Sa internship ko, na-realize ko na ibang-iba talaga ang actual hotel operations compared sa classroom. Dito mo matutunan kung paano mag-handle ng real guests and real situations.”

(Translation: In my internship, I realized that actual hotel operations are very different from the classroom. This is where you learn how to handle real guests and real situations.)

Theme 2: Learning Through Immersive Workplace Engagement. Participants described learning through direct involvement in workplace activities and service operations. Their experiences included guest handling, food and beverage service, housekeeping functions, and front office responsibilities. Participant 4 shared:

“I learned more when I was already doing the tasks. It helped me understand things better than just studying them in class.”

Theme 3: Emotional Adjustment and Gradual Professional Familiarization. Participants recounted feelings of nervousness, uncertainty, and pressure during the early stages of their internship. Over time, they became more familiar with workplace routines and expectations. Participant 5 stated:

“At first I was overwhelmed, but as time passed, I learned how to handle pressure and became more confident.”

Challenges Encountered by Hospitality Management Students During Their Internship

Theme 1: Workload Pressure and Physical Exhaustion. Participants described experiencing demanding workloads, extended working hours, and physically exhausting tasks, particularly during peak operational periods. Participant 6 shared:

“There were days when the workload was too heavy, especially during busy hours. It was really tiring.”

Theme 2: Communication Barriers in Professional Settings. Participants reported difficulties communicating with guests and workplace personnel, particularly during the initial stages of their internship. Participant 7 explained:

“I had difficulty talking to guests at first because I was nervous and not confident with my English.”

Theme 3: Limited Supervision and Guidance in Workplace Training. Participants recounted situations in which instructions were unclear or workplace guidance was limited, requiring them to learn through observation and experience. Participant 8 stated:

“Sometimes we were not properly guided, so we had to figure things out on our own.”

Professional Growth of Hospitality Management Students During Their Internship

Theme 1: Enhancement of Technical and Operational Competence. Participants described improvements in their ability to perform hospitality-related tasks and responsibilities through direct exposure to workplace operations. Participant 9 shared:

“I improved my skills in handling guests and performing actual hotel tasks.”

Theme 2: Increased Confidence and Workplace Independence. Participants reported becoming more confident and capable of performing assigned duties independently as their internship progressed. Participant 10 explained:

“Before internship, I was shy, but now I can handle tasks on my own.”

Theme 3: Career Awareness and Professional Direction. Participants expressed gaining clearer perspectives regarding their future career interests and preferred areas of specialization within the hospitality industry. Participant 1 stated:

“Now I know which department I want to work in after graduation.”

Adaptation to Workplace Culture During Internship

Theme 1: Adoption of Professionalism and Work Discipline. Participants described learning workplace expectations related to punctuality, appearance, behavior, and professional conduct. Participant 10 shared:

“We had to always be punctual, neat, and respectful in the workplace.”

Theme 2: Adjustment to Organizational Hierarchy and Protocols. Participants discussed their experiences in learning organizational structures, workplace procedures, and reporting relationships. Participant 2 explained:

“In the hotel, you must follow instructions from supervisors and respect authority.”

Theme 3: Development of Interpersonal and Cultural Sensitivity. Participants described interacting with guests from diverse backgrounds and learning how to respond appropriately in different service situations. Participant 4 stated:

“We learned how to deal with different types of guests politely and professionally.”

Service-Related Experiences Encountered During Internship Duties

Theme 1: Direct Guest Interaction and Service Delivery Engagement. Participants described their involvement in guest-facing activities, including assisting customers, responding to requests, and providing service support. Participant 1 shared:

“I enjoyed assisting guests because it helped improve my communication skills.”

Theme 2: Exposure to Service Recovery and Complaint Handling. Participants recounted situations involving guest concerns and service-related issues that required attention and resolution. Participant 5 explained:

“There were situations where we had to assist in resolving guest complaints.”

Theme 3: Experience of High-Pressure Service Environments. Participants described working in fast-paced environments where maintaining service quality was essential despite operational demands. Participant 7 stated:

“During busy hours, everything was fast, but we had to maintain good service.”

Proposed Enhanced On-The-Job Training (OJT) Program

The proposed Enhanced On-the-Job Training (OJT) Program was developed based on the collective findings of the study. Rather than repeating individual themes, the program consolidates the major developmental needs identified by participants, including operational readiness, workplace adaptation, professional competence, professional behavior, and service excellence. The program is intended to strengthen existing internship practices by providing structured support before, during, and after deployment.

The proposed framework consists of five integrated components: (1) Hospitality Operations Simulation Boot Camp, which prepares students for actual workplace conditions through realistic simulations; (2) Phased

Internship Entry System, which promotes gradual adaptation to workplace responsibilities through structured supervision and coaching; (3) Competency-Based Enhancement Workshops, which reinforce essential hospitality competencies such as communication, problem-solving, and service recovery; (4) Hospitality Professional Standards Induction Module, which emphasizes professionalism, workplace ethics, and organizational expectations; and (5) Guest Service Mastery Program, which develops students' ability to manage guest interactions, service recovery situations, and emotional demands associated with hospitality work.

Collectively, these interventions address the developmental areas identified by participants while strengthening the alignment between academic preparation and industry expectations. By integrating experiential preparation, mentorship, competency development, professional socialization, and service training, the proposed OJT Program seeks to enhance student readiness, improve internship outcomes, and support the formation of competent and industry-responsive Hospitality Management graduates.

Table 2 Evidence-Based OJT Enhancement Program for Hospitality Management Students

Theme Derived from Findings	Evidence-Based Intervention (Program Content)	Responsible Office/Person	Expected Outcome and Evaluation Basis
Theory–Practice Transition Difficulty	Hospitality Operations Simulation Boot Camp (front office role-play, housekeeping simulation, F&B service drills based on hotel SOPs prior to deployment)	HM Program Chair, Internship Coordinator, Partner Hotel Training Supervisor	Improved operational readiness and reduced adjustment shock. Evaluated through pre- and post-readiness assessments and supervisor evaluations
Workplace Adaptation Strain	Phased Internship Entry System (observation → supervised practice → independent execution with weekly coaching sessions)	Internship Coordinator & Department Supervisors	Reduced stress and improved adaptation to workload. Evaluated through supervisor checklists and reflective journals
Professional Identity Development Needs	Competency-Based Enhancement Workshops (communication, service recovery, problem-solving, time management simulations)	HM Faculty Trainers & Industry Partners	Increased confidence and task independence. Evaluated through competency rubrics and simulation performance scores
Work Ethic and Discipline Internalization	Hospitality Professional Standards Induction Module (ethics, punctuality, grooming, teamwork protocols, case discussions)	Dean, HR Managers, Internship Coordinator	Improved discipline and professional conduct. Evaluated through attendance records, behavior ratings, and compliance reports
Service Interaction Challenges	Guest Service Mastery Program (complaint handling simulations, emotional labor training, reflective debriefing sessions)	Hotel Training Supervisors & Internship Coordinator	Improved guest handling, emotional regulation, and service professionalism. Evaluated through guest feedback, incident reports, and reflection journals

DISCUSSIONS

This study explored the lived experiences of Hospitality Management students during their internship and revealed that internship functions as a transformative educational experience that extends learning beyond classroom instruction. Rather than merely serving as a curricular requirement, internship facilitated the integration of theoretical knowledge, workplace adaptation, professional development, and service competence within authentic hospitality settings. The findings demonstrate that learning occurred through active participation in real operational environments, where students were exposed to the complexities, demands, and expectations of the hospitality industry.

The transition from classroom learning to professional practice emerged as a significant aspect of the internship experience. Students' narratives suggest that academic preparation alone was insufficient to fully capture the realities of hospitality work, highlighting the importance of experiential learning opportunities. This finding supports Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Theory, which posits that meaningful learning occurs through

concrete experiences followed by reflection and application. The internship environment provided students with opportunities to test and refine their knowledge in authentic contexts, enabling them to develop practical understanding beyond what could be achieved through classroom instruction alone.

The findings also underscore the importance of workplace adaptation as a critical component of professional preparation. Students encountered workload pressures, communication challenges, and varying levels of supervisory support while navigating unfamiliar organizational environments. These experiences reflect the organizational socialization process described by Van Maanen and Schein (1979), wherein newcomers gradually learn workplace norms, expectations, and behavioral standards. Although adaptation challenges initially generated stress and uncertainty, they also contributed to students' resilience, problem-solving abilities, and capacity to function effectively under pressure.

Professional growth was another significant outcome of the internship experience. Through continuous engagement in workplace tasks and interactions, students developed greater confidence, independence, and clarity regarding their future career aspirations. These findings support previous studies emphasizing that professional identity develops through participation in authentic practice and workplace communities (Trede et al., 2012). Exposure to actual hospitality operations enabled students to envision themselves as future professionals and gain a deeper understanding of the competencies required for career success.

Furthermore, the findings highlight the role of workplace culture in shaping professional behavior. Students learned the importance of discipline, punctuality, teamwork, and adherence to organizational protocols through daily interactions and observation of experienced personnel. This finding is consistent with Situated Learning Theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991), which suggests that learning occurs through participation in communities of practice where individuals gradually acquire professional norms and behaviors. Internship therefore served as a venue not only for skill acquisition but also for socialization into the professional culture of the hospitality industry.

Finally, service-related experiences exposed students to the emotional and interpersonal demands of hospitality work. Direct guest interactions, complaint resolution, and participation in high-pressure service situations required students to exercise emotional regulation, communication skills, and customer-oriented problem-solving. These experiences align with Hochschild's (1983) concept of emotional labor, which emphasizes the management of emotions as an essential component of service work. Developing these competencies is particularly important in hospitality settings where service quality is closely linked to guest satisfaction and organizational success.

Overall, the findings suggest that internship serves as a multidimensional learning experience that supports technical competence, professional identity formation, workplace socialization, and service excellence. These insights provide a foundation for strengthening internship programs and ensuring that students are adequately prepared for the realities of professional hospitality practice.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study indicate that the internship experience functions as a formative and transitional space in which Hospitality Management students progressively reconstruct their understanding of hospitality practice while developing an emerging professional identity. Rather than serving solely as a technical training requirement, the internship is experienced as a developmental process characterized by adjustment, reflection, and meaning-making within real workplace contexts.

The study further demonstrates that meaningful learning occurs when theoretical knowledge is applied and tested in actual hospitality operations. This interaction between academic preparation and workplace realities enables students to reframe classroom-based concepts through lived experience, observation, and participation in service delivery. In this sense, internship operates as an experiential bridge that connects academic learning with industry practice. However, the findings also reveal that this transition is accompanied by considerable challenges, particularly in relation to workload demands, communication requirements, and adjustment to fast-paced service environments. While these difficulties initially create strain, they simultaneously serve as important learning moments that foster resilience, adaptability, and growing professional confidence among students.

In addition, the internship experience contributes to the gradual internalization of professional values such as discipline, teamwork, responsibility, and service orientation. These values are not acquired instantly but are developed through continuous exposure to workplace expectations, interaction with experienced personnel, and active participation in operational tasks. Consequently, professional growth emerges as a progressive and evolving process rather than an immediate outcome. Overall, the study concludes that internship experiences are best understood as transformative and developmental in nature, shaping both the competencies and professional dispositions of Hospitality Management students within authentic workplace environments. These findings highlight the need for stronger alignment between academic preparation and industry practice to better support student transition into professional hospitality roles.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, several recommendations are proposed to enhance the effectiveness of Hospitality Management internship programs across academic institutions and industry partners.

Academic institutions and internship coordinators are encouraged to strengthen pre-internship preparation by incorporating structured experiential and simulation-based activities. Since students reported difficulty transitioning from classroom learning to actual workplace conditions, preparatory exposure to realistic hospitality scenarios may help reduce adjustment challenges and improve readiness for internship deployment.

Hospitality partner establishments are encouraged to provide consistent supervision and guided mentorship, particularly during the early stages of internship placement. The findings indicated that students experienced uncertainty, workload pressure, and adaptation difficulties at the beginning of their internships. Strengthened supervisory support, clear performance expectations, and gradual task progression may facilitate smoother adjustment and more effective skill development.

Faculty members and program administrators are likewise encouraged to enhance communication, customer service, and interpersonal skills training within the curriculum. As participants identified challenges in guest interaction and workplace communication, reinforcing these competencies before internship placement may improve students' confidence, professionalism, and effectiveness in service-oriented environments.

Industry supervisors are further encouraged to foster a supportive learning environment through mentorship, constructive feedback, and inclusive workplace practices. Since professional identity development emerged as a significant outcome of the internship experience, consistent role modeling and guided participation can help students better integrate into organizational culture and develop professional competence.

Academic institutions and partner establishments are also encouraged to implement structured reflective learning and feedback mechanisms throughout the internship period. The use of reflective journals, performance evaluations, mentoring sessions, and regular debriefing activities may enhance students' ability to critically reflect on their experiences and maximize learning outcomes.

To further improve internship effectiveness, future studies are encouraged to expand the participant pool to include internship supervisors, hospitality managers, faculty coordinators, and other relevant stakeholders. Incorporating multiple perspectives would provide a more comprehensive understanding of internship implementation and outcomes. Researchers are also encouraged to include participants from different institutions and geographical contexts to enhance the transferability and applicability of findings across diverse hospitality settings.

Future research may likewise consider conducting longitudinal studies to examine how internship experiences influence long-term career development, employability, and professional identity formation among Hospitality Management graduates. In addition, empirical evaluation and validation of the proposed Enhanced On-the-Job Training (OJT) Program are recommended to determine its effectiveness, feasibility, and practical impact on student learning and professional preparation.

Finally, future scholarly work should aim to strengthen theoretical integration and reduce repetitive discussions by more closely linking empirical findings with established theories and frameworks in hospitality education,

experiential learning, and professional development. Such efforts may contribute to a deeper understanding of internship experiences and support the continuous improvement of Hospitality Management internship programs.

Overall, these recommendations emphasize the importance of a collaborative partnership among academic institutions, industry stakeholders, and researchers to ensure that internship programs serve not merely as curricular requirements but as structured developmental pathways for producing competent, adaptable, and professionally grounded Hospitality Management graduates.

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