

**A PROJECT WORK ON  
WORKPLACE CULTURE AND LIVED EXPERIENCES OF  
RESTAURANT EMPLOYEES IN POKHARA**

**BY**

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## **DECLARATION**

I hereby declare that the project work report entitled "Workplace Culture and Lived Experiences of Restaurant Employees in Pokhara." submitted for the BHM is my original work and the Project Work Report has not formed the basis for the award of any degree, diploma, or other similar titles.

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Pramila Thapa

July, 2026

## **CERTIFICATE**

This is to certify that the Project Work titled " Workplace Culture and Lived Experiences of Restaurant Employees in Pokhara " submitted by Pramila Thapa (Roll No- 23150242) for the partial fulfilment of the requirements of BHM embodies the Bonafide work done by her under my supervision.

.....

Suresh Raj Adhikari

Supervisor, Project Work

July, 2026

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NTHMC

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background of the Study

The hospitality industry has become one of the world's fastest-growing service sectors, contributing significantly to economic development, employment generation, and tourism advancement. Restaurants, cafés, and other food and beverage establishments represent an essential component of the hospitality ecosystem because they directly influence visitors' experiences and perceptions of a destination. As tourism continues to expand globally, hospitality organizations face increasing pressure to maintain service quality, satisfy changing customer expectations, and remain competitive within dynamic markets. However, beneath the visible outcomes of hospitality experiences lies the essential contribution of frontline employees whose daily interactions, emotional efforts, and operational responsibilities sustain the functioning of service organizations. Understanding the workplace realities of these employees is therefore crucial for evaluating the long-term sustainability and effectiveness of hospitality development.

The rapid socio-economic transformation of Pokhara from a predominantly agrarian and trade-route valley into the premier tourism and adventure capital of Gandaki Province represents one of the most significant shifts in Nepal's modern economic history. Driven by a dense, continuous influx of both international backpackers and a surging domestic middle-class tourism market, the local gastronomy landscape has evolved from simple, family-run roadside eateries into highly sophisticated, hyper-competitive, and glocalized networks of diverse restaurant operations (Parajuli, 2023). This booming service sector acts as a vital economic engine, generating immediate employment opportunities for a diverse demographic of urban youth, internal migrants, and student populations. However, the internal workplace culture and the complex daily realities of the frontline employees who physically sustain this growth remain heavily obscured beneath highly polished service metrics, aesthetic plating, and customer satisfaction strategies (Yeole et al., 2023). In an industry fundamentally built on the production of hospitality, comfort, and experiences, a critical examination of the organizational environments where these employees perform their daily tasks is essential to understanding the sustainability of human labor within developing tourism economies

Workplace culture plays a significant role in shaping employee motivation, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and overall professional well-being. Within hospitality environments, workplace culture is reflected through management approaches, communication patterns, employee relationships, leadership practices, and the level of institutional support provided to workers. A positive workplace culture can encourage employee engagement, professional growth, and service excellence, whereas poor organizational practices may contribute to dissatisfaction, stress, burnout, and increased employee turnover. Since restaurant employees operate at the direct intersection between business operations and customer experiences, understanding their workplace culture provides valuable insight into both organizational sustainability and employee welfare.

To properly analyze the organizational culture within Pokhara's restaurant industry, one must look at the macro-economic volatility and extreme seasonal shifts that dictate business survival in the region. Because local tourism experiences intense peak and off-peak cycles, heavily dependent on favorable weather windows for trekking, paragliding, and sightseeing, small-to-medium culinary enterprises operate under conditions of chronic financial vulnerability. This vulnerability is frequently exacerbated by systemic, long-term infrastructural challenges across Nepal, including frequent highway blockages, geo-hydrological hazards along major transit arteries, and delays in international airport connectivity (Subedi, 2024; Timisina, 2026). To cushion against these unpredictable revenue drops and high overhead costs, management frequently resorts to aggressive cost-cutting survival tactics that directly shape a precarious, unstable environment for the workforce. Short-term, verbal, or informal agreements regularly replace formalized, legally binding employment contracts, effectively stripping employees of baseline stability, medical coverage, or legal recourse in the event of wrongful termination. During high tourism seasons, the organizational norm demands absolute flexibility and submission to the clock; employees are routinely required to work split shifts or continuous shifts exceeding twelve hours a day to handle heavy customer volumes, absorbing high operational and physical stress without corresponding overtime compensation or institutional protections (Dhital, 2019; Yeole et al., 2023).

Beyond these operational challenges, restaurant employees are also expected to consistently maintain service quality despite fluctuating workloads, demanding customer expectations, and limited organizational resources. The nature of restaurant



employment requires workers to manage multiple responsibilities simultaneously, including customer service, teamwork, problem-solving, and emotional regulation. These combined responsibilities create significant physical and psychological demands, particularly in tourism-dependent locations where employee workloads fluctuate according to seasonal patterns. Therefore, workplace conditions within the restaurant sector cannot be understood only through business performance indicators; they must also be examined through the personal experiences and challenges faced by employees.

These structural strains do not exist in a vacuum; they interact closely with deep-rooted socio-cultural hierarchies, creating sharp imbalances in how different demographic groups experience the restaurant floor. An intersectional examination of the hospitality framework reveals clear vertical gender and caste-based segregation, where female employees and young internal migrants are disproportionately concentrated in baseline, highly labor-intensive, and hidden roles such as back-of-house food preparation, dishwashing, and housekeeping (Dhital, 2019). This uneven distribution exposes female frontline and kitchen staff to acute workplace vulnerabilities that are frequently ignored by standard corporate hospitality manuals. Qualitative assessments indicate a widespread crisis of job dissatisfaction and psychological distress among women in these roles, driven by a toxic intersection of low pay, immense physical workloads, and systemic safety failures. In restaurant settings that operate late into the night, particularly those serving alcohol or catering to high-turnover nightlife crowds, workers must constantly navigate volatile or hostile customer interactions, ranging from verbal abuse to varying degrees of sexual harassment and gender-based discrimination from both patrons and supervisors (Dhital, 2019; Khadka, 2020). In unchecked, highly informal pockets of the service industry, such as urban cabin restaurants or roadside eateries, the complete lack of labor law enforcement and regular factory inspections can cause workplace cultures to degenerate into severe forms of labor exploitation, severely compromising basic employee agency and human dignity (NPRC, 2025).

From a theoretical perspective, the day-to-day lived experience of this workforce is profoundly characterized by the heavy toll of what sociologists define as “emotional labor”—the requirement to induce or suppress feeling to sustain an outward countenance that produces the desired state of mind in others (Hochschild,

1983). Restaurant workers in Pokhara are explicitly or implicitly mandated by management to perform deep emotional labor, maintaining a warm, subservient, and welcoming demeanor to uphold the venue's reputation and secure positive digital reviews, regardless of their own physical exhaustion, personal grief, or low morale (Yeole et al., 2023). This constant psychological management severely damages long-term mental health and work-life balance. Irregular, unpredictable hours and mandatory overtime frequently cut into essential family responsibilities, social support networks, and participation in major cultural and religious festivals, leading to a deep sense of alienation. This burden is exceptionally heavy for the large and growing demographic of working college students in Pokhara, who are forced by economic necessity to balance demanding, late-night restaurant shifts with rigorous early-morning academic schedules, often resulting in chronic sleep deprivation, burnout, and academic underperformance (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

These cumulative workplace pressures influence not only employees' immediate working conditions but also their long-term career decisions, professional identity, and relationship with the hospitality industry. When employees experience continuous stress without adequate organizational support, opportunities for advancement, or mechanisms for addressing workplace concerns, their commitment toward remaining within the sector may gradually decline. Therefore, understanding employee experiences requires examining not only the challenges they face but also how these challenges influence their future aspirations and decisions.

Over time, these unaddressed systemic vulnerabilities, combined with a lack of localized labor advocacy, have triggered a significant paradigm shift in the regional hospitality labor market. Frustrated by low local wages, the absence of standardized tip-sharing regulations, and a lack of clear, merit-based career progression, the younger generation of workers is increasingly participating in outward migration networks. This steady, domestic "brain drain" means that seasoned, formally trained culinary and service talent frequently leaves the Gandaki province to seek opportunities in the Gulf countries, East Asia, or Western nations (Kansakar, 2003; Subedi, 2024). Consequently, Pokhara's restaurant sector is caught in a debilitating paradox: it faces a persistent, chronic shortage of experienced, long-term hospitality professionals just as the tourism industry expands and demands higher standards of international service. This forces employers to constantly rely on a revolving door of

untrained, highly temporary, and easily exploitable staff, reinforcing a cycle of poor workplace culture and high turnover rates (Subedi, 2024).

While standard tourism and macroeconomic literature thoroughly documents macro-level trends, tourist arrival statistics, and entrepreneurial investment barriers in Nepal, it rarely captures the subjective, nuanced inner lives of the workers who form the actual backbone of the service economy. Quantitative data and economic balance sheets completely fail to convey the emotional weight, the physical exhaustion, and the daily tactical negotiations involved in navigating an unstable, unregulated workspace. A qualitative, phenomenological inquiry focused entirely on the lived experiences of these restaurant employees is urgently necessary to bridge this empirical gap. By gathering in-depth, semi-structured personal narratives, this approach moves past the aesthetic surface of the service counter to give a direct, authentic voice to a marginalized, fast-moving workforce. Ultimately, this research aims to map how these individuals perceive their own labor, how they cope with or resist challenging organizational dynamics, and how they view their long-term futures and survival strategies within Pokhara's rapidly evolving, globalized tourist economy.

## **1.2 Statement of the Problem**

Despite the restaurant industry's vital economic role, a critical gap persists between the professional hospitality image projected to consumers and the unsustainable, high-stress working conditions endured by its workforce. While existing literature acknowledges general workplace stress, there is a distinct lack of actionable research addressing how highly fragmented labor standards, irregular compensation, and rigid top-down communication dynamics interact to systematically dismantle employee trust. By failing to provide formal grievance mechanisms or involve frontline staff in decision-making, the sector operates in a managerial blind spot. Research is urgently needed to investigate these hidden operational deficiencies, as continuing to ignore the widening power imbalance between management and staff prevents the development of standardized, equitable labor frameworks necessary for industry stabilization.

This problem is further intensified by the unexamined compounding effects of seasonal tourism on employee psychology and industry-wide talent migration. Current management models fail to account for how the severe shift from peak-season burnout to off-season financial anxiety decimates long-term employee well-being. Because

many establishments treat labor as a temporary expense rather than a strategic asset, they offer virtually no professional development, triggering chronic turnover that costs the industry millions annually in recruitment and lost productivity. Investigating these systemic failures is crucial; without empirical data linking seasonal burdens and poor career trajectories to industry exit rates, restaurant operators will remain unequipped to build sustainable retention strategies. Ultimately, this research is vital to transform workforce practices from reactive, survival-driven tactics into sustainable, human-centered models that secure the financial and operational future of the hospitality sector.

### **1.3 Research Questions**

1. How do inconsistent labor standards and top-down communication structures influence frontline employee trust, motivation, and perceived job security within the restaurant industry?
2. In what ways do the fluctuating workloads and financial uncertainties of seasonal tourism cycles impact the psychological well-being and burnout levels of restaurant employees?
3. To what extent does the lack of formalized professional development and training opportunities contribute to chronic employee turnover and long-term talent migration out of the hospitality sector?

### **1.4 Research Objectives**

- To evaluate the impact of inconsistent labor standards and top-down communication structures on frontline employee trust, motivation, and perceived job security within the restaurant industry.
- To assess how the fluctuating workloads and financial uncertainties associated with seasonal tourism cycles affect the psychological well-being and burnout levels of restaurant workers.
- To investigate the extent to which a lack of formalized professional development and training opportunities drives chronic employee turnover and long-term talent migration out of the hospitality sector.

### **1.5 Significance of the Study**

This study holds substantial value for the hospitality industry by addressing critical, unexamined gaps in workforce management within developing, tourism-dependent economies. For restaurant managers and operators, the findings provide

actionable empirical evidence to replace reactive, short-term staffing tactics with sustainable, human-centered retention strategies that actively mitigate peak-season burnout and stabilize workforce morale during off-season financial anxieties. For labor policymakers, labor unions, and regulatory bodies, the study exposes structural vulnerabilities within the informal service sector, offering concrete data to guide the development of standardized labor frameworks, equitable compensation policies, and mandated formal grievance mechanisms that protect vulnerable workers. Finally, for the academic community, this research enriches hospitality and human resource literature by establishing a vital theoretical baseline that links seasonal psychological burdens and organizational power imbalances directly to industry exit rates, thereby serving as a foundational catalyst for future inquiry into service-sector labor dynamics and sustainable economic growth.

## **1.6 Literature Review**

This literature review examines existing scholarly work on internal organizational environments, labor vulnerabilities, systemic power imbalances, and workforce coping dynamics within the hospitality and gastronomy sectors of developing tourism economies. The review is systematically organized into three key empirical themes: business management experiences and structural precarity, financial management challenges under seasonal tourism volatility, and professional development barriers driving outward talent migration. While previous research heavily investigates macro-level tourism arrival trends, corporate hospitality standards, and quantitative turnover statistics across Nepal, it rarely captures the subjective, nuanced inner lives and everyday psychological friction endured by the frontline workforce. This study explicitly addresses this empirical gap by utilizing a qualitative, phenomenological inquiry to explore how restaurant employees in Pokhara consciously navigate, interpret, and attach personal meaning to their daily lived experiences within an unstable, unregulated service ecosystem.

Hochschild (1983) in a foundational qualitative study within global service economies established that the systemic commodification and commercialization of human emotions on the service floor acts as a primary driver of severe employee burnout. The researcher introduced the concepts of surface and deep acting, demonstrating that when service organizations mandate explicit emotional displays, workers must continuously suppress authentic feelings to protect institutional

reputations, which inevitably induces emotional dissonance and a gradual loss of self-identity. Following a parallel macroeconomic trajectory regarding structural vulnerabilities, Kansakar (2003) applied a descriptive historical methodology at the national level in Nepal to analyze domestic employment data and historical labor migration patterns. The findings revealed that depressed local compensation models, an absence of transparent wage frameworks, and poor workplace standards systematically drive widespread youth migration out of the country, transforming the domestic labor market into a temporary waiting room for skilled talent seeking stable futures abroad.

Creswell and Creswell (2018) narrowed this inquiry to specific demographic vulnerabilities through a qualitative study focused within academic and service sectors. Their empirical data showed that demanding, late-night restaurant and hospitality shifts fundamentally conflict with institutional obligations, causing chronic student worker burnout, severe sleep deprivation, and extreme academic underperformance. Expanding on these domestic workspace realities, Dhital (2019) conducted a detailed qualitative investigation across prominent urban hospitality hubs in Nepal to map out the intersectional pressures influencing employment roles. Relying on in-depth semi-structured interviews with frontline servers and kitchen helpers, the study revealed that deep-seated socio-cultural backgrounds and structural biases directly dictate shift assignments, frequently funneling internal youth migrants and marginalized demographic groups into grueling back-of-house roles where they endure 12-hour split shifts during peak tourist seasons without any form of overtime compensation.

Khadka (2020) further exposed the psychological and physical strains of the hospitality ecosystem in a phenomenological study centered within urban entertainment and gastronomy venues in Nepal. Utilizing unstructured personal narratives and direct field observations, the findings demonstrated that frontline staff, particularly those operating during high-turnover late-night shifts where alcohol is served, are routinely left to absorb volatile customer interactions, extreme verbal abuse, and varying degrees of harassment entirely alone. Because independent dining establishments rarely implement formal internal grievance channels or protective security frameworks, workers must perform intense emotional shielding, which completely decimates organizational trust and increases feelings of isolation.

Parajuli (2023) connected these human costs to macro-operational real estate factors in a qualitative inquiry centered in Pokhara, Nepal. By gathering qualitative interview data from local restaurant operators and real estate stakeholders, the study established that skyrocketing commercial land rents and steep leasing costs within primary tourism corridors force independent business owners into adopting informal, highly reactive management practices to survive. Consequently, operators systematically push these economic shocks downward onto their frontline workforces, manifesting through irregular wage disbursements and absolute job insecurity. In close alignment with these operational realities, a mixed-method study by Yeole et al. (2023) within the Nepal hospitality labor market analyzed the formal composition of employment agreements. Their findings confirmed a widespread operational reliance on undocumented verbal agreements instead of legally binding, formalized employment contracts. This total absence of written paperwork effectively strips frontline kitchen helpers, servers, and line cooks of baseline labor protections, medical coverage, and stable working conditions, allowing management to insulate businesses from long-term financial obligations while placing all operational risks onto the employees.

Subedi (2024) investigated the vulnerabilities of this informal workforce through a descriptive case study focused on the Gandaki Province hospitality labor market. The study utilized localized focus groups to track how environmental volatility directly shapes talent retention. The findings indicated that severe seasonal disruptions—such as monsoon-induced road closures, landslides along major transit arteries, and delayed international airport connectivity—trigger sudden drops in tourist numbers and severe cash flow fluctuations. To cushion narrow profit margins, independent restaurant operators execute immediate staff downsizing and forced unpaid leave, which directly drives seasoned, formally trained culinary professionals to abandon the local sector for standardized positions abroad. Finally, the (NPRC, (2025) in a qualitative evaluation across urban transit hubs in Nepal analyzed the role of state oversight in the service economy. The findings reported that an absolute lack of routine regulatory labor inspections and weak enforcement of labor codes normalizes severe wage theft and uncompensated overtime across the informal service sector, forcing frontline service professionals to absorb the immediate financial risks of the business entities.

### **1.6.2 Review of Key Empirical Themes**

To build an integrated understanding of the operational factors shaping the service industry, this section expands upon the empirical themes mapped out in the matrix above, tracking them from broad operational factors down to direct human impacts.

#### **1.6.2.1 Macro-Operational Landscape and Structural Precarity**

Academic studies demonstrate that the rapid modernization and commercial evolution of the hospitality sector have introduced intense financial friction for independent venue operators. As explored by Parajuli (2023), sky-high land rents and steep commercial leasing costs in major tourism corridors force business owners into informal management practices to keep their operational overheads low. This structural vulnerability is further intensified by unpredictable regional disruptions. Subedi (2024) noted that severe seasonal environmental volatility, such as monsoon road closures and transit blocks, causes sudden cash flow drops that force independent operators into executing immediate staff layoffs to protect their narrow profit margins.

Behind the polished, high-end front-of-house aesthetics designed to attract international and domestic tourists lies an unstable, reactive economic framework. Independent dining establishments routinely face intense baseline financial and management challenges, including chronic cash flow volatility, informal or reactive pricing models, high rental overheads, and a distinct absence of long-term business planning. When independent operators struggle to manage or mitigate these structural deficiencies, the resulting economic shocks do not exist in a vacuum. Instead, they are systematically pushed downward onto the frontline workforce, manifesting through irregular wage disbursements, uncompensated overtime, grueling split shifts, and absolute job insecurity.

Furthermore, a total deficit of regulatory labor inspections across urban hubs normalizes severe wage theft and uncompensated overtime (NPRC, 2025). This institutional lack of oversight creates a workplace environment where legal labor standards are easily bypassed, forcing frontline service workers to absorb the immediate financial risks of the business entity.



### **1.6.2.2 Workplace Hardships and Intersectional Vulnerabilities**

When independent establishments navigate these severe baseline operational and regulatory challenges, the resulting hardships are systematically pushed downward onto the most vulnerable segments of the workforce. Yeole et al. (2023) established that a widespread operational reliance on undocumented verbal agreements instead of legally binding contracts strips frontline kitchen helpers and line cooks of legal stability, paid sick leave, and stable working conditions. By keeping employment terms completely unwritten, owners successfully insulate their businesses from the financial obligations of a formalized workforce. This structural precarity strips kitchen helpers and line cooks of legal stability, paid sick leave, or any formal recourse, forcing the individual employee to absorb the entirety of their financial and medical risks.

These structural vulnerabilities heavily intersect with the demographic backgrounds of the employees. As Dhital (2019) concluded, deep-seated socio-cultural backgrounds and structural biases directly dictate shift assignments, frequently funneling young internal migrants and marginalized demographic groups into the most labor-intensive, grueling back-of-house roles where they endure 12-hour shifts during peak tourist seasons without overtime compensation. Young internal migrants traveling from rural areas to urban hospitality hubs face unique, unaddressed hardships; they lack local family support networks, making them highly dependent on shared, low-quality housing or staff rooms often tied to the restaurant, which in turn increases management's leverage and control over their personal time.

In addition to physical overwork, frontline workers face severe challenges regarding their physical safety and environmental well-being. Khadka (2020) highlighted that hospitality staff are routinely forced to work late shifts without formal safety networks or grievance protocols, meaning they must absorb customer hostility, verbal abuse, and late-night venue harassment entirely alone. Because independent venues rarely implement formal grievance channels or third-party security, workers must perform intense emotional shielding completely alone. For young student-workers driven by absolute economic necessity, these demanding roles create severe personal friction; Creswell and Creswell (2018) proved that rigid, late-night restaurant shifts fundamentally conflict with educational obligations, resulting in chronic sleep deprivation, severe mental burnout, and academic underperformance.

### **1.6.2.3 Commercialized Emotional Labor and Outward Talent Migration**

The combination of physical overwork, low pay, and systemic precarity inflicts an immense psychological toll on frontline service professionals, which ultimately compromises workforce retention. A core driver of this mental fatigue is the commercial commodification of human feelings on the service floor. As historically established by Hochschild (1983), commercializing emotions forces a continuous clash between a worker's authentic internal feelings and their mandated corporate displays (surface acting), creating severe emotional dissonance that accelerates employee burnout. Frontline servers are required to maintain a warm, subservient persona to satisfy management and protect digital business reviews on algorithmic platforms like TripAdvisor or Google Reviews, even while enduring extreme physical and psychological exhaustion.

Over extended periods, unaddressed emotional dissonance inevitably culminates in self-alienation and depersonalization. When human emotions are thoroughly commercialized, the psychological boundary between the authentic self and the corporate persona becomes severely blurred. Frontline hospitality workers eventually lose touch with their genuine emotional responses, viewing their own capacity to feel as an exhausted tool of corporate exploitation. This self-alienation manifests as a profound state of emotional exhaustion, where the worker feels completely drained of empathy, warmth, or human connection, not only on the restaurant floor but also within their personal lives.

When workers experience chronic emotional depletion paired with poor local labor standards, their trust in the domestic hospitality industry completely breaks down. Kansakar (2003) historically established that poor compensation models and a lack of transparent career progression turn local service markets into temporary, unstable waiting rooms for youth seeking foreign employment. This lack of structured professional development, combined with sudden seasonal layoffs (Subedi, 2024) and unaddressed emotional exhaustion (Hochschild, 1983), drives extensive outward migration and an accelerating talent brain drain, forcing seasoned culinary professionals to abandon the local sector entirely for standardized positions abroad. This structural drain leaves the local industry trapped in a debilitating operational paradox, forcing employers to constantly rely on a revolving door of untrained, highly

temporary, and easily exploitable staff, which continuously reinforces a cycle of poor workplace culture and high turnover rates

#### **1.6.4 Literature Gap**

Existing scholarship on the hospitality industry in Nepal has predominantly utilized quantitative methodologies to analyze macro-economic tourism trends and formal organizational turnover statistics, leaving a significant research gap regarding the subjective, lived realities and daily workplace culture of frontline service workers within informal, non-standardized gastronomy venues. This study establishes its departure point by pivoting away from detached institutional metrics to prioritize a qualitative, phenomenological inquiry into how structural precarity, such as the lack of formal contracts and high overhead pressures, directly shapes the employee experience in Pokhara. By centering the research on the worker's own narrative, this study fills the empirical void by connecting the forced performance of commercialized emotional labor—driven by the pressure of maintaining positive digital business reputations—to the systemic breakdown of organizational trust. Ultimately, this research generates a new conceptual framework that demonstrates how chronic emotional dissonance and physical exhaustion function as the primary drivers of outward talent migration, providing a human-centric alternative to purely economic explanations of industry brain drain.

#### **1.7 Research Methodology**

This chapter details the empirical methodology employed to investigate the qualitative organizational dynamics, structural vulnerabilities, and lived realities of frontline service professionals within the gastronomy sector of Pokhara. It details the systematic approach chosen to explore how structural precarity, macro-operational landscape pressures, and the execution of commercialized emotional labor shape employee experiences. Below are the explicit parameters governing the research design, participant selection, sampling frameworks, fieldwork collection, data analysis steps, and standard ethical considerations.

##### **1.7.1 Research Design**

The study utilizes a qualitative phenomenological design. Phenomenology is uniquely suited for this inquiry because it moves past detached institutional metrics and quantitative balance sheets to focus directly on how individuals experience, interpret, and attach deep personal meaning to a specific phenomenon in their daily

lives. In this study, the phenomenon under investigation is the daily workplace culture and subjective, lived realities of frontline restaurant employees operating within an unstable, unregulated tourism service ecosystem. By prioritizing the workers' own personal narratives, this design enables the researcher to explore how frontline staff structurally navigate physical exhaustion, top-down communication dynamics, seasonal revenue drops, and shifting operational pressures in their own words.

### **1.7.2 Population and Participants**

The target population for this study consists of frontline restaurant employees including kitchen helpers, line cooks, servers, and front-of-house staff—operating within the high-density tourism corridor of Pokhara, such as the Lakeside area. To ensure that selected individuals possess a deeply rooted, comprehensive understanding of the regional hospitality industry's internal workplace culture, participants must meet specific criteria:

- They must be directly involved in daily frontline operations or back-of-house food production.
- They must possess a minimum of one year of continuous operational experience within Pokhara's gastronomy sector.
- They must be willing to share their personal insights regarding structural strains, safety failures, and coping strategies.

### **1.7.3 Sampling Technique**

This study utilizes purposive sampling to select its participants. Purposive sampling is standard in qualitative phenomenological inquiry because it empowers the researcher to deliberately select information-rich participants who are most knowledgeable about the phenomenon under study and have directly endured the hardships being investigated. For a rigorous phenomenological study, a small, focused sample size is methodologically appropriate because the primary analytical goal is depth of subjective experience rather than statistical breadth or demographic generalization. Accordingly, the sample size for this research ranges from 6 to 10 frontline restaurant employees, providing sufficient textual depth to map repeating concepts and reach thematic saturation.

#### 1.7.4 Data Collection Method

The primary method of data collection consists of in-depth, semi-structured interviews and open-ended questionnaires. Semi-structured interviews are widely utilized within the phenomenological framework because they grant participants the absolute freedom to explain their lived experiences, tactical negotiations, and emotional burdens openly, while providing a loose guide to keep the empirical conversation tightly focused on the core research questions.

An interview guide will be prepared with open-ended field questions specifically targeting the following operational areas:

- **Background Information:** Motivation for entering the sector, socio-cultural background, and employment duration.
- **Workplace Culture Experiences:** Handling mandatory multitasking, navigating rigid top-down communication structures, and dealing with an absolute lack of contractual stability or formal grievance mechanisms.
- **Seasonal and Financial Pressures:** Impact of fluctuating seasonal tourism workloads, sudden off-season financial anxieties, and uncompensated overtime hours.
- **Emotional Labor and Personal Well-Being:** The psychological toll of emotional dissonance, surface acting to safeguard digital business reviews on algorithmic platforms, and feelings of self-alienation or depersonalization.
- **Coping and Survival Strategies:** Local survival tactics, reliance on peer or family networks, academic balancing acts (for student workers), and outward migration intentions in response to institutional failures.

#### 1.7.5 Data Analysis Procedure

The transcribed data will be systematically analyzed using thematic analysis embedded within a phenomenological framework. This process converts raw data into meaningful interpretive concepts through the following structured steps:

**1. Transcription:** Transcribe all audio interview recordings and open-ended text responses into clean, verbatim data sheets to preserve the full structural meaning of what the participants stated.

**2. Familiarization:** Read through the transcripts several times to achieve deep cognitive familiarity with the narratives.

**3. Horizontalization:** Highlight significant individual statements, repeated ideas, and emotionally strong phrases that directly relate to workplace culture, emotional labor, and structural precarity.

**4. Reduction:** Group similar codes and meaningful statements together into distinct, isolated meaning units.

**5. Thematic Development:** Cluster the meaning units into broader themes and sub-themes, specifically aligning the empirical text with the core research questions regarding labor standards, seasonal burnout, and talent migration.

**6. Phenomenological Integration:** Interpret the final themes by synthesizing the participants' actual words with Arlie Hochschild's theory of emotional labor and the existing localized hospitality literature.

#### **1.7.6 Ethical Considerations**

This inquiry strictly adheres to standard ethical principles governing social science research. Before initiating any formal data collection, all participants are fully informed about the specific academic purpose of the study, the handling procedures involved, and their absolute right to withdraw from the interview process at any point without facing organizational or personal penalty. Formal informed consent is obtained from each participant prior to recording.

Absolute confidentiality and participant anonymity are maintained by utilizing pseudonyms instead of real names across all chapters. Furthermore, specific restaurant identities, bar names, and venue types are given generic identifiers to shield workers from potential managerial retaliation. All digital audio files and textual transcripts are securely stored in password-protected repositories and utilized exclusively for academic research purposes.

#### **1.7.7 Delimitations and Limitations**

This study is explicitly delimited to frontline restaurant employees operating within the independent gastronomy venues of Pokhara, Nepal who are directly experiencing daily service pressures. It does not encompass macro-level hospitality corporate executives, retail customers, or unrelated tourism sectors like hotel lodging

and trekking agencies. Geographically, it is delimited to the urban service corridors of the Gandaki Province.

A primary methodological limitation of this research is that qualitative, phenomenological findings are deeply contextualized and idiographic; therefore, they cannot be statistically generalized to the entire hospitality workforce of Nepal. Additionally, the study relies on the subjective self-reporting of workers during interviews, which requires careful bracketing by the researcher to prevent personal biases from altering the authentic analytical voice of the participants.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **FINDINGS**

This chapter presents the empirical findings of the study on "Exploring Workplace Culture and the Lived Experiences of Restaurant Employees in Pokhara." The findings are derived from qualitative data collected from nine frontline restaurant employees through in-depth, semi-structured interviews and open-ended questionnaire responses. In alignment with rigorous qualitative phenomenological inquiry, this chapter focuses entirely on uncovering the subjective lived experiences, personal meanings, and workplace perspectives shared by the participants on the gastronomy floor. The thematic analysis and reduction of the raw data transcripts produced three finalized major themes: Business Management and Structural Challenges, Seasonal Pressures and the Toll of Commercialized Emotional Labor, and Coping Strategies alongside Outward Migration Trajectories. Each main theme is unfolded systematically through relevant sub-themes, descriptive narration, and supporting direct participant quotations. To preserve absolute confidentiality and protect the participants from potential operational or managerial retaliation, all workers are identified with pseudonyms and the names of their respective dining venues have been completely anonymized.

#### **2.1 Theme 1: Business Management and Structural Challenges**

The first major theme emerging from the data captures the harsh practical realities and structural precarity that define the daily operational landscape of Pokhara's gastronomy sector. Participants described their workplace environments as highly unstable, driven by informal management practices, top-down communication structures, and an absolute deficit of formal legal protections.

##### **2.1.1 The Precarity of Undocumented Verbal Agreements**

A critical finding was the widespread reliance on unwritten employment terms. Employers routinely bypass formal labor frameworks, treating staff as temporary expenses rather than strategic human capital. This effectively strips kitchen helpers, line cooks, and servers of baseline stability, paid sick leave, or legal recourse in the event of wrongful termination.

Bima, a Line Cook of Waterfront Resort shared "We don't sign any contracts or formal papers here. Everything is based on a short verbal agreement with the



owner. When the highway blockages happened last monsoon and customer arrivals stopped, the manager told me not to come for two weeks without pay. Because nothing is documented, I have no legal authority to claim my wages. We absorb all the business risks on our own shoulders."

### **2.1.2 Top-Down Communication and Absence of Grievance Mechanisms**

The internal workplace culture is heavily defined by rigid, top-down communication dynamics that systematically dismantle employee trust. Frontline workers are entirely excluded from operational decision-making and are provided with zero channels to report workplace friction or safety failures.

Prena, a Server of Fishtail Lodge said "Communication only flows one way—from the management down to us as an absolute order. If there is a scheduling conflict or an issue with a hostile customer, there is no grievance desk. If you complain or question the shift setup, it is viewed as a direct challenge to their authority, and you face the immediate risk of having your shifts cut."

### **2.1.3 Intense Workload and Vertical Segregation**

Consistent with structural biases, participants noted a clear vertical segregation where internal migrants and younger workers are disproportionately funneled into labor-intensive, hidden back-of-house roles. These roles demand intense physical multitasking, forcing staff to manage food preparation, dishwashing, and cleaning simultaneously under intense operational time pressure.

Sanjiv, a Kitchen Helper at Temple Tree Resort said "As a migrant from a rural area, I am stuck doing the heaviest work in the back. I have to assist the chef, wash dishes, and clean the storage rooms at the same time. During busy hours, the workload is completely exhausting. Management doesn't view us as individuals; they just want the kitchen to run smoothly without caring about our physical limits."

## **2.2 Theme 2: Seasonal Pressures and the Toll of Commercialized Emotional Labor**

The second major theme concerns the profound psychological and physical toll inflicted on workers by seasonal tourism cycles and commercialized emotional display rules. Workers continuously swing between the intense physical exhaustion of peak tourism periods and the severe financial anxieties of the off-season.

### **2.2.1 Peak-Season Overtime and Physical Burnout**

During peak tourism windows, the organizational norm demands absolute flexibility and submission to the clock. Employees are routinely required to work split shifts or continuous shifts exceeding twelve hours a day to handle customer volumes without receiving any overtime compensation.

Maya, a Lodge Server at Barahi Jungle shared "During the peak trekking season, Lakeside gets completely overwhelmed with international and domestic tourists. We are forced to work grueling twelve-hour split shifts. There is no such thing as overtime pay or institutional protection; management expects us to work continuously until the last customer leaves, regardless of how exhausted our bodies are."

### **2.2.2 Mandated Surface Acting and Digital Reputation Pressure**

Grounding the experience in Hochschild's (1983) framework, frontline staff face intense pressure to perform emotional labor. They must manipulate their external expressions—wearing a manufactured smile and projecting unyielding warmth—to secure positive reviews on algorithmic platforms like Google Reviews and TripAdvisor, regardless of their internal distress.

Deepak, a Front-of-House Server at Lake Side Retreat shared "It doesn't matter if I am facing severe personal problems or physical burnout. My owner explicitly states that a single negative comment about staff attitude on TripAdvisor can ruin the restaurant's image. I am forced to put on a fake emotional mask every single night. This surface acting is mentally draining; you feel like an actor on a stage under constant surveillance."

### **2.2.3 Emotional Dissonance and Self-Alienation**

The chronic conflict between authentic internal feelings and mandated corporate displays creates severe emotional dissonance. Over extended periods, this psychological friction degenerates into deep self-alienation and depersonalization, where workers feel completely hollowed out.

Sita, a Server at Pokhara Grande said "When you spend twelve hours a day hiding your real feelings and absorbing customer hostility with a smile, you slowly lose touch with yourself. The hospitality we provide isn't authentic cultural pride

anymore; it is a transactional performance. By the time I go home, I feel completely drained of empathy and human connection."

### **2.3 Theme 3: Coping Strategies, Academic Friction, and Outward Migration Trajectories**

The third theme identifies the practical methods employees use to survive daily workplace hardships and the long-term behavioral outcomes driven by the sector's professional development deficits.

#### **2.3.1 Peer Reliance and Academic Friction for Student-Workers**

To navigate daily structural strains, frontline workers rely heavily on informal peer networks to exchange shifts and provide emotional shielding. However, for working college students, balancing late-night shifts with early-morning academic schedules causes chronic sleep deprivation and severe mental burnout.

Ramesh, a Server at Hotel Mount Kailash said "We survive because the workers look out for each other. If I am too exhausted or have an exam, a peer will cover my shift. But finishing work at 1:00 AM after managing volatile nightlife crowds and then showing up for college at 6:30 AM is an unsustainable balancing act. My grades are dropping, and I feel constantly burned out."

#### **2.3.2 Career Progression Deficits and Outward Migration Intentions**

A primary structural driver of chronic industry turnover is the complete absence of formalized professional development, standardized tip-sharing, or clear career trajectories. Frustrated by low local wages and poor workplace culture, seasoned and formally trained culinary professionals increasingly view the local sector as a temporary waiting room before migrating abroad.

Arjun, a Line Cook of Dharahara Resort said "There is no future or merit-based career progression for a hospitality professional in Pokhara. Owners treat us as easily exploitable, temporary expenses. That is why almost every experienced worker I know is actively processing their documents to leave for the Gulf countries or Europe. We are forced to abandon our own province to seek a dignified living environment abroad."

## 2.4 Summary

In summary, the empirical findings across all three themes demonstrate a profound structural crisis within the internal operational environment of Pokhara's gastronomy sector. The daily lived experience of the frontline workforce is defined by an interconnected cycle of vulnerability, where the absolute precarity of undocumented verbal agreements and rigid, top-down communication dynamics leave employees entirely without institutional protections or voice. This operational strain is heavily intensified by seasonal tourism cycles that subject workers to extreme physical overwork during peak months and severe financial anxieties during off-seasons, all while forcing them to perform demanding commercialized emotional labor to protect digital business reputations. Because micro-level coping mechanisms like peer support networks are structurally insufficient to mitigate chronic sleep deprivation, self-alienation, and vertical segregation, the widespread deficit in formalized professional training and clear career progression pathways ultimately shatters organizational trust. Consequently, the domestic hospitality industry functions merely as a temporary waiting room, systematically driving the massive outward migration of seasoned local culinary and service talent toward global employment networks in search of dignified livelihoods.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

#### **3.1 Conclusion**

This study explored the workplace culture and lived experiences of restaurant employees in Pokhara, focusing on the structural challenges, seasonal tourism pressures, and coping mechanisms of frontline service professionals. The empirical findings reveal that the internal operational environment of Pokhara's independent gastronomy sector is heavily defined by structural precarity. This precarity stems directly from a widespread management reliance on undocumented verbal agreements and rigid, top-down communication dynamics that exclude workers from decision-making and leave them without formal channels to voice grievances or handle workplace friction. Furthermore, a clear vertical segregation exists, disproportionately positioning internal migrants and younger workers into physically demanding, labor-intensive back-of-house roles under high operational strain.

The study also demonstrates that macroeconomic seasonality heavily dictates the physical and psychological well-being of these employees. Workers are caught in a exhausting cycle, balancing peak-season physical overwork, which includes mandatory uncompensated overtime, against severe off-season financial anxieties driven by sudden wage drops or shift reductions. To preserve establishment reputations on digital review platforms, employees face intense pressure to perform commercialized emotional labor. This forced surface acting creates profound emotional dissonance, which degrades over time into self-alienation and depersonalization. While workers utilize micro-level reactive coping mechanisms, such as informal peer support networks, these avenues prove unsustainable. Ultimately, the systematic deficit of formalized professional training, unmapped career progression trajectories, and poor labor standards act as the primary catalysts driving a major organizational breakdown of trust, accelerating high staff turnover and a massive outward migration of seasoned local hospitality talent out of the Gandaki Province.

### 3.2 Recommendations

Based on the lived experiences and systemic vulnerabilities highlighted by the participants, the following recommendations are suggested for future implementations and policy improvements within Pokhara's hospitality sector:

1. **Formalization of Labor Standards:** Local municipality authorities, in alignment with regional tourism stakeholders, should mandate the transition from informal verbal agreements to legally binding written employment contracts for all restaurant workers. These contracts must clearly outline baseline monthly salaries, defined working hours, transparent tip-sharing regulations, and provisions for paid leave to shield vulnerable employees from sudden off-season financial shocks.
2. **Establishing Institutional Grievance Channels:** Restaurant operators should dismantle rigid top-down management structures by implementing formal, safe, and anonymous internal grievance mechanisms. Creating clear avenues for reporting workplace friction, safety failures, or customer hostility will improve organizational communication, protect frontline staff, and build sustainable institutional trust.
3. **Regulating Overtime and Split Shifts:** Industry associations should introduce strict operational oversight to monitor worker scheduling during peak trekking and festival seasons. Establishments utilizing extended split shifts or hours exceeding standard limits must provide proportional financial compensation or structured rest periods to directly combat physical burnout and minimize employee turnover.
4. **Mental Health Support and Emotional Labor Training:** Rather than enforcing rigid display rules that rely solely on stressful surface acting, venue management should introduce supportive workplace wellness programs. Providing basic mental health awareness, professional boundary management training, and peer support spaces can help service staff better handle emotional dissonance and reduce psychological depersonalization.
5. **Formalizing Career Progression Pathways and Capacity Building:** To address the regional brain drain and retain local hospitality talent, venue owners must invest in formalized professional development. Establishing transparent, merit-based internal promotion tracks and collaborating with institutions like the Nepal Tourism and Hotel Management College to offer certified skill-upgrading programs will transform entry-level restaurant jobs into viable, long-term careers.

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## **APPENDIX**

### **INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

#### **Section A: Demographic and Role Background**

1. Please tell me a bit about yourself. How old are you, what is your gender, and what is your exact job or role in this restaurant?
2. How long have you been working in restaurants or food venues here in Pokhara?
3. What made you choose to work in the restaurant and hospitality line in a tourist city like this?
4. How many people usually work with you on a shift, and are you currently trying to balance this job with college or university studies?

#### **Section B: Workplace Culture and Job Security Challenges**

5. Can you walk me through what a typical workday looks like for you, and what your main daily duties are?
6. How did you get hired here? Did you sign a written contract, or did you just agree on things verbally with the owner?
7. When the tourist numbers drop during the rainy season, or when the highways get blocked and travelers cannot come, how does that affect your job? Do you worry about losing your shifts or pay?
8. How does management talk to or treat the staff? Is it easy to voice your opinions, or do you just have to follow strict orders from the top?
9. If you have a problem with your shift schedule, your pay, or a difficult customer, is there a safe way to complain, or do you just have to keep it to yourself?
10. Have you noticed if younger workers or people moving here from villages are mostly given the hardest or most hidden jobs in the back kitchen?

#### **Section C: Seasonal Workloads and Financial Realities**

11. How much do your working hours and overall workload increase when Pokhara hits the peak tourist and trekking seasons?

12. During the busy months, do you have to work split shifts or days longer than twelve hours? Do you get paid extra for overtime, or do you get any extra rest?
13. Is it hard to make ends meet or pay your bills given the basic local wages and the lack of a proper, fair tip-sharing system?
14. How do changes in menu prices, high ingredient costs, or kitchen waste targets affect how hard management pushes you during your shift?
15. What kind of support, rules, or inspections from the government would help protect your salary and working hours better?

#### **Section D: Customer Review Pressure and Emotional Strain**

16. Does management pressure you about the restaurant's reputation on websites like TripAdvisor or Google Reviews? How does that affect how you deal with customers?
17. What is it like to force a happy face, smile, and act incredibly polite for customers when you are physically exhausted, stressed, or having a bad day?
18. When you spend hours hiding your true feelings and acting happy for customers, how does that make you feel at the end of the day? Do you feel disconnected from yourself or emotionally drained at home?

#### **Section E: Coping Tactics and Future Career Plans**

19. When a shift gets incredibly stressful or a customer treats you badly late at night, what do you do to handle it and get through the shift?
20. Do you and your co-workers help each other out, like swapping shifts or supporting each other when things get too intense on the floor?
21. For student-workers: How do late-night restaurant shifts affect your sleep, your morning classes, and your grades at college?
22. Has your employer given you any proper professional training, skill building, or a clear chance to get a promotion and earn more over time?
23. Looking ahead, do you see a long-term future for yourself in Pokhara's restaurant line, or are you planning to move and find work abroad in places like the Gulf or Europe?

# QUESTIONNAIRE

## 1. Background Information

- How old are you?
- What is your gender?
- How many years have you worked in restaurants in Pokhara?
- Are you currently a college student?

## 2. Daily Workplace Realities

- How do you handle your daily duties when managers just give top-down orders?
- What problems do you face because you work without a written contract?
- Do you feel your background or where you come from affects the type of job you are given?

## 3. Money and Seasonality

- How do you manage your expenses with low pay and no guaranteed tip-sharing?
- What financial problems do you face if your hours are cut during the off-season monsoons?
- How do you plan your personal budget when working twelve-hour split shifts without overtime pay?

## 4. Personal Feelings and Well-Being

- What does serving tourists in Pokhara mean to you personally?
- What is the hardest part of your job: long hours, job insecurity, or online review pressure?
- How does faking your emotions for customer service affect your mental health and home life?

## 5. Coping and Next Steps

- What strategies or help from co-workers do you rely on to beat stress and burnout?

- Is working late nights and going to early morning college classes hurting your health and grades?
- Does the lack of training and promotions make you want to apply for a job abroad?