

Managerial Stress, Emotion Regulation, and Consumer Decision-Making in Sabah's Hotel Industry

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the relationship between emotion regulation, stress, and consumer decision-making within the context of the Sabah hotel industry, where both consumers and managers face mounting psychological pressures. The research examines how external stressors such as job-related, financial, and situational stress shape consumers' emotional states, perceptions, and marketing choices. It also investigates how managerial stress influences service quality, marketing communication, and brand experience. Using a qualitative exploratory design, the study collected data through semi-structured interviews with 10 hotel marketing managers and 15 hotel consumers across Kota Kinabalu, Sandakan, and Kundasang. Thematic analysis revealed four dominant themes: (1) stress-induced emotional shifts in consumers, (2) coping and emotion regulation strategies, (3) managerial emotional contagion and service quality, and (4) emotionally intelligent marketing interventions. The findings underscore the critical need for stress-sensitive and emotionally intelligent management approaches to improve consumer experience and brand loyalty in Sabah's hospitality sector.

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Contribution/Originality: This study integrates emotion regulation and marketing within Sabah's hotel context, revealing how managerial stress shapes consumer decisions via emotional contagion and how emotionally intelligent marketing mitigates anxiety. Using qualitative, inductive analysis of managers and consumers, it advances an emotion-centred framework for stress-sensitive service design and leadership in

emerging tourism markets.

1. Introduction

The hospitality industry is often characterised as one of the most emotionally charged sectors within the service economy. It is built upon continuous human interaction, high service expectations, and the need for rapid responsiveness to consumer demands. Within this context, both service providers and consumers are subject to emotional fluctuations that shape decision-making, satisfaction, and performance outcomes. As hospitality depends on consistent emotional labour and interpersonal engagement, it becomes a domain where stress and emotion regulation critically influence daily operations and overall organisational effectiveness (Grandey et al., 2019).

In the context of Sabah's hotel industry, emotional dynamics are particularly significant. Sabah, located on the island of Borneo, is a globally recognised tourism destination famed for its natural landscapes, cultural diversity, and eco-tourism potential. However, its hotel sector operates in an environment of increasing market competition, fluctuating tourist arrivals, and seasonal instability, all of which amplify emotional and operational stress among both managers and consumers (Sabah Tourism Board, 2023). Managers face constant pressure to deliver personalised services, manage limited staff resources, and maintain brand standards amidst unpredictable visitor patterns. Simultaneously, consumers especially tourists navigate financial limitations, time constraints, and travel uncertainties that heighten emotional vulnerability during their stay experiences (Yusoff & Kian, 2020).

Previous studies have shown that stress in hospitality settings can have cascading effects on service quality and consumer satisfaction. On the managerial side, occupational stress stemming from workload, time pressure, and emotional labour can impair empathy, communication clarity, and leadership effectiveness (Karatepe & Tizabi, 2020). Managers under persistent stress may engage in surface acting projecting positive emotions while suppressing negative feelings, leading to emotional exhaustion and diminished authenticity in service delivery (Bettencourt & Brown, 2003; Grandey et al., 2019). This phenomenon can inadvertently affect subordinates, triggering what Hatfield, Cacioppo, and Rapson (1994) describe as emotional contagion, whereby the emotional tone of leaders permeates through the organisation, shaping employee morale and consumer perceptions alike.

From the consumer perspective, stress influences cognitive processing, emotional regulation, and behavioural outcomes during hotel experiences. Travellers under stress caused by logistical disruptions, uncertainty about accommodation quality, or financial concerns tend to rely on emotional heuristics rather than rational deliberation (Kahneman, 2011). They may choose familiar hotel brands, perceive risks more intensely, or make decisions driven by a need for reassurance rather than price or value (Luce, Bettman, & Payne, 2001). As a result, stress alters not only purchasing behaviour but also post-purchase satisfaction, loyalty, and brand perception (Riaz, Bukhari, & Azam, 2020).

Emotion regulation, defined as the ability to monitor, evaluate, and modify emotional reactions in accordance with situational demands (Gross, 2015), serves as a vital psychological mechanism in mitigating the negative impact of stress for both managers

and consumers. For consumers, effective emotion regulation facilitates reflective and satisfying purchasing decisions, reduces buyer's remorse, and enhances brand trust (Andrade, 2019). For managers, emotional self-regulation contributes to maintaining empathy, composure, and strategic clarity in customer interactions, particularly under high-pressure circumstances (Wang & Netemeyer, 2021). In the service environment, emotionally intelligent management practices such as calm communication, perspective-taking, and emotional authenticity can substantially improve both employee wellbeing and customer satisfaction (Humphrey, 2022).

In Sabah, where cultural values emphasise harmony (*gotong-royong*) and interpersonal respect, emotion regulation assumes an additional cultural dimension. Local hospitality practices often integrate community-oriented and relational approaches, where managing emotional balance is not only a professional skill but also a cultural expectation (Kasim et al., 2021). However, the interplay between cultural expectations, stress management, and decision-making has received limited empirical attention within the Sabah context. Understanding how these factors intersect is essential for developing emotionally sustainable tourism and hospitality practices aligned with both local culture and global service standards.

This study, therefore, aims to examine the intersection between stress, emotion regulation, and consumer decision-making within managerial stress environments in Sabah's hotel industry. It investigates how external stressors such as job strain, financial limitations, and situational uncertainty affect consumers' emotional states and decision-making processes. Moreover, it explores how hotel managers, operating under their own occupational stress, can design emotionally intelligent interventions to buffer these effects. Examples of such interventions include mindful marketing promotions, empathetic service communication, and simplified decision environments that help consumers manage emotional overload. By integrating consumer psychology and managerial behaviour perspectives, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how emotion regulation functions as a bridge between stress and decision outcomes in the hospitality sector.

Ultimately, the findings of this research aim to inform the design of emotionally intelligent marketing and management strategies tailored to Sabah's unique hospitality landscape. In doing so, it supports the development of sustainable, empathetic, and culturally grounded service practices that enhance consumer wellbeing, improve managerial resilience, and strengthen the competitive advantage of the Sabah hotel industry.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Stress and Consumer Behaviour

Stress has long been recognised as a critical psychological and physiological factor influencing human cognition, perception, and behaviour. According to Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) *Transactional Model of Stress and Coping*, stress occurs when individuals perceive environmental demands as exceeding their coping resources. This imbalance activates emotional and cognitive responses that alter how people interpret and react to stimuli. Within the field of consumer psychology, stress is known to affect decision-making by narrowing attentional focus, reducing cognitive flexibility, and amplifying emotional dependence (Schmeichel & Tang, 2015). Under such conditions,

consumers shift from systematic, rational evaluation to heuristic decision-making that is, making fast, intuitive judgments guided by emotions or familiar cues rather than deliberate reasoning (Kahneman, 2011).

In hospitality and tourism contexts, these effects are magnified because travel and service consumption often take place under dynamic and uncertain conditions. Consumers under stress due to travel disruptions, information overload, or budget constraints tend to rely on emotionally comforting decisions such as brand familiarity or perceived safety (Luce, Bettman, & Payne, 2001). For example, a traveller who experiences flight delays or financial anxiety may prefer to book a well-known hotel chain rather than exploring new or less familiar accommodation options. This tendency toward risk aversion is not necessarily indicative of brand loyalty, but rather of emotional coping a psychological strategy to regain control in uncertain circumstances (Riaz, Bukhari, & Azam, 2020).

Stress also influences consumers' perceived value and satisfaction thresholds. When under emotional strain, consumers are less sensitive to objective indicators such as price or amenities and more responsive to affective cues such as friendliness, reassurance, and empathy from service personnel (Ladhari, 2009). In this sense, stress reshapes the value equation of hospitality consumption, shifting it from a rational cost-benefit calculation to an emotional evaluation based on trust and perceived care. This phenomenon underscores why emotionally intelligent service delivery emphasising calm communication, active listening, and positive emotional contagion can significantly buffer negative perceptions during stressful service encounters (Mattila & Enz, 2002; Wirtz & Jerger, 2016).

Within the Sabah hotel industry, these dynamics are further complicated by contextual and environmental stressors unique to the region. As a tourism-dependent economy, Sabah's hospitality sector is highly sensitive to fluctuations in international arrivals, environmental conditions of such as weather and natural hazards, and economic volatility (Sabah Tourism Board, 2023). Tourists visiting Sabah often face unpredictable circumstances such as delayed flights, monsoon seasons, or limited infrastructure in rural destinations, which can heighten emotional tension and anxiety (Kasim, Goh, & Chan, 2021). Such stress not only affects travel satisfaction but also influences booking choices, risk tolerance, and overall destination loyalty.

At the same time, financial stress especially among domestic travellers affects how consumers interpret marketing messages and promotions. During periods of economic uncertainty, consumers tend to favour emotionally reassuring messages rather than aggressive price-based advertisements. This suggests that emotionally sensitive marketing strategies, such as highlighting comfort, community, and authenticity, may be more effective than purely transactional ones in a stress-influenced market (Kim & Mattila, 2013). Hotels in Sabah that adopt empathetic communication such as transparent pricing, flexible cancellation policies, and accessible staff support, can thus position themselves as emotional stabilisers, helping guests regain a sense of security and control amid stressful conditions.

The interaction between stress and consumer behaviour also has implications for post-purchase evaluation. Consumers experiencing stress before or during their stay are more likely to exhibit heightened sensitivity to minor service failures (Huang & Rust, 2021). However, when staff respond with emotional intelligence acknowledging guests'

frustrations and offering supportive communication the negative impact of stress diminishes, leading to higher recovery satisfaction and positive word-of-mouth. Consequently, understanding consumer stress is not merely a psychological concern but a strategic necessity for hotels aiming to sustain customer loyalty and resilience in volatile tourism environments like Sabah.

In sum, stress significantly shapes consumer cognition, emotion, and behaviour in hospitality contexts. It narrows consumers' attention, limits rational processing, and elevates the importance of emotional reassurance in purchase and post-purchase experiences. For the Sabah hotel industry, recognising these stress-driven patterns provides an opportunity to reframe marketing and service design strategies towards empathy-driven, psychologically safe experiences. In doing so, hotels can transform moments of consumer vulnerability into opportunities for trust-building, thereby enhancing overall satisfaction and competitive differentiation.

2.2. Emotion Regulation in Decision Contexts

Emotion regulation is a critical psychological process that allows individuals to influence which emotions they experience, when they experience them, and how these emotions are expressed and acted upon (Gross, 2015). Within consumer behaviour and service contexts, emotion regulation plays a pivotal role in shaping judgments, preferences, and satisfaction outcomes. Emotions serve as both *inputs* and *outputs* of the decision-making process: they inform choices by signalling personal relevance, while also being regulated in response to stress or disappointment (Baumeister et al., 2007). Without effective emotional management, stress and impulsive affective reactions can cloud cognitive reasoning, leading to maladaptive decisions and post-purchase dissatisfaction.

According to Gross's (2015) Process Model of Emotion Regulation, individuals typically manage their emotions through two dominant strategies: cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression. Cognitive reappraisal involves reinterpreting a potentially distressing situation in a way that alters its emotional impact, an adaptive approach that helps individuals maintain psychological balance and goal-directed behaviour (Cutuli, 2014). In contrast, expressive suppression involves consciously inhibiting outward emotional expressions while internal feelings remain unchanged. Although suppression may maintain surface-level composure, it often increases physiological stress and reduces emotional authenticity, leading to decision fatigue and regret (Fedorikhin & Patrick, 2010; Suri et al., 2023).

In consumer contexts, adaptive emotion regulation contributes to reflective and value-aligned purchasing decisions. For example, consumers who engage in cognitive reappraisal during stressful situations such as unexpected travel changes or budget limitations are more likely to reinterpret the experience positively and choose services that align with long-term satisfaction rather than short-term emotional relief (Andrade, 2019). Conversely, those who rely on emotional suppression tend to make impulsive purchases, driven by immediate affective responses, and later experience regret or cognitive dissonance (Fedorikhin & Patrick, 2010). Studies in behavioural marketing demonstrate that consumers with higher emotional intelligence exhibit stronger self-control, higher brand satisfaction, and reduced susceptibility to manipulative marketing tactics (Kidwell et al., 2008; Stanton & Low, 2020).

Emotion regulation also holds critical importance for hospitality managers and frontline employees, who are expected to display consistent warmth and empathy even under stressful conditions. Within the hotel industry, employees frequently perform emotional labour, defined as the effort required to manage and display organisationally desired emotions during customer interactions (Grandey et al., 2019). Managers, in particular, are required to regulate their emotions not only to maintain service quality but also to act as emotional anchors for their teams. During peak tourist seasons or crisis situations such as overbookings, guest complaints, or unexpected staff absences; emotion regulation enables managers to remain composed and model calm, solution-oriented behaviour (Karatepe & Tizabi, 2020). This process not only mitigates internal stress but also influences team morale and customer perceptions through emotional contagion (Hatfield et al., 1994).

For hotel employees, surface acting (displaying emotions not genuinely felt) can maintain service quality temporarily but often results in emotional exhaustion and decreased authenticity (Brotheridge & Lee, 2003). In contrast, deep acting, where individuals attempt to genuinely align their emotional expressions with service expectations, leads to greater customer satisfaction and employee wellbeing (Humphrey, 2022). Therefore, training hospitality staff in emotional awareness and regulation strategies is essential for sustaining both psychological resilience and service consistency.

Consumers, too, engage in emotion regulation when navigating hospitality experiences. Travellers often face stressors such as flight delays, accommodation errors, or unmet expectations. In these moments, emotion regulation determines whether consumers respond with anger, understanding, or empathy. Research suggests that emotionally regulated consumers are more forgiving of service failures and more responsive to recovery efforts, especially when staff demonstrate empathy and transparency (Mattila & Enz, 2002; Lin et al., 2020). Thus, effective emotion regulation not only benefits the individual consumer but also facilitates mutual emotional equilibrium between guests and service providers.

The interaction between managerial and consumer emotion regulation processes creates what Pera and Viglia (2016) refer to as an “emotional ecosystem”, a dynamic, reciprocal exchange of emotions between service providers and customers. In this ecosystem, every emotional display (positive or negative) shapes the other’s psychological state and behavioural response. For instance, when managers regulate their own stress effectively and respond to guest complaints with empathy, consumers often mirror these positive emotions, leading to mutual regulation and conflict resolution (Kernbach & Young, 2020). Conversely, unregulated frustration from either side can escalate tension, deteriorate satisfaction, and damage brand relationships.

Within Sabah’s hotel industry, this emotional ecosystem is influenced by cultural factors, such as collectivism and *interpersonal harmony* (Kasim et al., 2021). Managers and staff are often expected to maintain emotional composure and politeness, reflecting Malaysia’s cultural emphasis on respect and community. However, this cultural inclination towards emotional suppression may lead to hidden stress accumulation, which, if unaddressed, can impair long-term service quality and employee wellbeing (Yusoff & Kian, 2020). Recognising this, emotion regulation training programmes that integrate both cultural sensitivity and psychological resilience could enhance managerial effectiveness and guest satisfaction in the Sabah hospitality sector.

In summary, emotion regulation in decision contexts serves as a foundational mechanism linking stress, cognition, and behaviour in hospitality settings. Adaptive regulation strategies such as cognitive reappraisal enhance satisfaction and decision quality, while maladaptive suppression undermines authenticity and wellbeing. Both consumers and managers contribute to the emotional tone of the service environment, and their mutual regulation establishes the foundation for positive hospitality experiences. Understanding and applying emotion regulation principles within the Sabah hotel industry can therefore strengthen emotional resilience, service quality, and the overall consumer–manager relationship dynamic.

2.3. Managerial Stress and Its Spillover Effects

Managerial stress has a profound and multifaceted impact on organisational performance, employee wellbeing, and consumer experience within the hospitality industry. It arises when the demands of the managerial role exceed an individual's coping resources, leading to emotional strain, cognitive fatigue, and impaired decision-making (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Within the hotel sector, particularly in Sabah, these pressures are intensified by the nature of service delivery, which requires sustained emotional engagement, rapid responsiveness, and interpersonal sensitivity. Managers are frequently responsible for balancing operational efficiency with the delivery of personalised service, while simultaneously meeting performance targets and managing diverse teams. Such competing demands often result in role overload and emotional exhaustion, especially in mid-scale and independent hotels that operate with lean management structures and limited resources (Yusoff & Kian, 2020). The cyclical nature of tourism demand in Sabah fluctuating between high seasons and low occupancy periods, adds further instability, compelling managers to adjust constantly to staffing shortages, cost constraints, and variable guest expectations (Sabah Tourism Board, 2023).

The hospitality industry is inherently high in emotional labour, as managers are required not only to perform technical tasks but also to regulate their own emotions and those of their staff and guests. Karatepe (2013) describes such environments as “emotionally charged” workplaces where service quality depends on the ability of employees and leaders to manage emotions effectively. However, when work demands exceed psychological capacity, emotional depletion occurs, reducing empathy and cognitive flexibility (Kundu & Gahlawat, 2022). In Sabah, where managers often undertake multiple operational roles, this constant strain leads to resource depletion, a phenomenon explained by Hobfoll's (2011) Conservation of Resources theory, which posits that individuals strive to acquire and protect limited emotional and cognitive resources. Once depleted, managers are more likely to experience irritability, fatigue, and disengagement, which can cascade down the organisational hierarchy and shape the broader emotional tone of the hotel environment.

This cascading phenomenon is primarily driven by emotional contagion, a social-psychological process in which emotions are unconsciously transmitted from one individual to another through behavioural cues, tone of voice, and facial expressions (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1994). Within hospitality settings, managers act as emotional anchors for their teams, and their mood and stress levels significantly influence employee motivation and customer service behaviour (Barsade, Coutifaris, & Pillemer, 2018). When managers exhibit signs of frustration, anxiety, or detachment,

employees often internalise these negative cues, leading to a decline in morale, teamwork, and emotional authenticity in service interactions. This effect is particularly detrimental in hotels, where guest satisfaction depends not only on tangible service outcomes but also on perceived warmth and sincerity. Studies have shown that when employees engage in surface acting, an act of displaying emotions that they do not genuinely feel, it results in emotional exhaustion and diminished authenticity, which consumers readily detect (Grandey, Melloy, & Fisk, 2019). As a result, guests perceive the service as impersonal and mechanical, weakening their emotional connection to the brand (Wirtz & Jerger, 2016; Huang & Rust, 2021).

Managerial stress also spills over into broader organisational culture and consumer perception. Under pressure, managers often resort to reactive decision-making, focusing on short-term outcomes such as cost minimisation or occupancy maximisation at the expense of long-term strategic goals (Lee, Lee, & Park, 2021). In such environments, training budgets are reduced, employee support systems are neglected, and workloads are intensified, leading to higher turnover and reduced service consistency (Kim & Wang, 2018). Over time, this contributes to a workplace culture defined by burnout, low morale, and emotional disengagement. For consumers, the result is inconsistent service delivery, communication breakdowns, and a diminished sense of hospitality. This is particularly problematic in Sabah, where hospitality is culturally associated with warmth, humility, and community values (*mesra*) (Kasim, Goh, & Chan, 2021). Guests, both local and international, interpret emotional detachment not merely as poor service but as a cultural deviation from the expected Malaysian standard of graciousness. Thus, the effects of managerial stress extend beyond internal organisational issues to influence how the hotel brand and destination itself are perceived by visitors.

In contrast, emotionally intelligent leadership has emerged as a critical buffer against the detrimental effects of managerial stress. Emotional intelligence (EI), defined as the ability to perceive, understand, and regulate one's own emotions as well as those of others (Goleman, 1998), equips managers with the tools to navigate stress constructively. Leaders with high EI demonstrate empathy, maintain composure under pressure, and foster open communication, which in turn enhances employee trust and psychological safety (Humphrey, 2022). Empirical evidence suggests that emotionally intelligent managers not only mitigate their own stress but also reduce emotional exhaustion among employees, improving service performance and customer satisfaction (Wang & Netemeyer, 2021). By modelling calm and compassionate behaviour, emotionally intelligent leaders create a positive emotional contagion loop, whereby team members mirror their emotional regulation and adopt similar coping mechanisms. This dynamic strengthens team cohesion, promotes authenticity in service delivery, and enhances the emotional quality of customer interactions.

Furthermore, the implementation of mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) and emotional intelligence training programmes can foster resilience among hospitality managers. These interventions help individuals recognise emotional triggers, regulate physiological stress responses, and cultivate empathy in professional interactions (Robertson & Cooper, 2023; Fu, Zhang, & Li, 2023). In the Sabah context, hotels can integrate culturally sensitive EI initiatives that emphasise collective harmony and community support, aligning with the local cultural framework while improving managerial wellbeing. These practices not only enhance stress management but also strengthen organisational stability and consumer trust.

In conclusion, managerial stress in the hospitality industry is both a psychological and systemic challenge that transcends individual coping capacity. Through mechanisms such as emotional contagion and organisational spillover, stress experienced by managers affects employee morale, service authenticity, and ultimately consumer satisfaction. However, emotionally intelligent leadership provides an effective countermeasure, transforming stress into an opportunity for adaptive growth, empathy, and team resilience. For hotels in Sabah, where operational pressures and cultural expectations intersect, developing emotionally intelligent management frameworks can ensure service consistency, preserve emotional authenticity, and sustain the human connection that lies at the heart of hospitality.

2.4. Emotionally Intelligent Marketing Interventions

Emotionally intelligent marketing represents a progressive shift from conventional persuasive strategies towards a more empathetic, mindful, and ethically grounded approach to consumer engagement. Rooted in [Goleman's \(1998\)](#) theory of emotional intelligence (EI), this perspective recognises that emotions are not secondary influences but central determinants of how consumers perceive, evaluate, and act on marketing stimuli. Emotionally intelligent marketers possess the capacity to understand and respond to the emotional needs of their target audiences, creating campaigns that nurture psychological comfort rather than exploit emotional vulnerabilities. This form of marketing integrates empathy, mindfulness, and authenticity into communication strategies, recognising that sustainable consumer relationships are built on trust, emotional safety, and mutual respect ([Kidwell, Hardesty, & Childers, 2008](#)).

In the hospitality industry, emotionally intelligent marketing is particularly relevant because service experiences are inherently emotional and co-created through interactions between providers and guests. Every touchpoint, from brand advertisement and booking to arrival and post-stay engagement, elicits affective responses that shape overall satisfaction and loyalty ([Mattila & Enz, 2002](#)). Emotionally intelligent marketing thus extends beyond the aesthetic presentation of services to managing consumer emotions throughout the decision-making process. Mindful brand messaging, wellbeing-oriented campaigns, and simplified choice architectures have been found to alleviate decision anxiety and enhance consumer wellbeing ([Thaler & Sunstein, 2008](#); [Ladhari, Gonthier, & Lajante, 2020](#)). These approaches encourage consumers to engage with brands that demonstrate understanding and care, fostering emotional alignment and reducing stress during high-stakes or time-sensitive decisions such as travel planning or accommodation booking.

Empathy is the cornerstone of emotionally intelligent marketing. By understanding and mirroring consumer emotions, brands can communicate messages that validate feelings and address psychological needs rather than relying on manipulation or fear-based persuasion ([Kotler, Kartajaya, & Setiawan, 2021](#)). Mindful marketing complements this by urging companies to communicate with awareness and intention—acknowledging the emotional context in which consumers encounter promotional content ([Sheth, 2020](#)). For example, calm visual design, gentle tone, and authentic storytelling evoke feelings of reassurance and safety, while over-stimulating advertisements may aggravate stress or decision fatigue. Within Sabah's hotel industry, empathetic marketing can manifest through storytelling that reflects the region's cultural warmth, natural tranquillity, and community values. Campaigns that highlight local authenticity, sustainability, and the emotional essence of connection with nature rather than material

luxury, resonate deeply with both domestic and international travellers. Such practices reflect the broader principles of conscious tourism marketing, where emotional resonance and social responsibility are seen as sources of brand differentiation (Kasim, Goh, & Chan, 2021).

Emotionally intelligent interventions in hospitality marketing also include wellbeing-focused experiences that address consumer stress directly. The concept of wellbeing marketing, as outlined by Pansari and Kumar (2017), links business success with consumer emotional health, suggesting that the promotion of holistic wellbeing can serve as both a commercial and social value proposition. Hotels may design packages that encourage relaxation, mindfulness, and digital detoxification, responding to the post-pandemic rise in emotional burnout among travellers. Examples include spa-based retreats, eco-therapy experiences, and cultural immersion programmes that promote serenity and balance. For hotels in Sabah, such offerings could include nature-integrated activities like guided forest walks, river meditation experiences, or community-based cultural exchanges that reduce psychological stress while deepening emotional connection to place. These wellbeing-oriented campaigns not only enhance satisfaction but also strengthen destination loyalty and social sustainability by linking emotional restoration with local empowerment (Lin, Mattila, & Wang, 2020).

Another important component of emotionally intelligent marketing lies in choice architecture, or the deliberate design of decision environments to facilitate clarity and reduce anxiety (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008). In digital marketing, this translates into user-friendly interfaces that simplify booking processes, reduce information overload, and provide transparent pricing. Emotionally intelligent digital design, sometimes referred to as “digital compassion,” uses supportive visual elements, minimalistic layouts, and empathetic language to reduce cognitive strain during online transactions (Kim & Fesenmaier, 2017). For example, hotel websites could use soothing colour palettes, personalised confirmation messages, and flexible refund policies to instil a sense of calm and control in users. In Sabah’s tourism context, where many guests are international and may face uncertainty related to travel logistics, visa requirements, or weather conditions, emotionally intelligent digital tools can significantly reduce pre-travel stress and increase booking confidence.

Furthermore, emotionally intelligent marketing requires a commitment to ethical persuasion, which prioritises transparency, fairness, and mutual benefit over manipulation. This aligns with the principles of transformative service research and sustainable marketing, which view marketing as a force for enhancing human wellbeing (Singh & Chouhan, 2022). Ethical persuasion rejects exploitative tactics such as scarcity pressure, fear appeals, or unrealistic imagery. Instead, it embraces truthful representation and value congruence, allowing consumers to make informed, emotionally satisfying choices. In the hospitality context, this could involve accurate descriptions of facilities, honest portrayal of environmental sustainability practices, and culturally sensitive messaging. Such ethical communication enhances brand trust and aligns with global shifts toward responsible tourism and wellbeing capitalism, where success is measured not only in financial terms but also in emotional and social impact (Kotler et al., 2021).

Overall, emotionally intelligent marketing interventions ranging from empathetic communication and wellbeing-oriented packages to simplified digital experiences enable brands to foster emotional connection, trust, and long-term loyalty. For the Sabah

hotel industry, where cultural values, emotional labour, and tourism experiences are deeply intertwined, adopting emotionally intelligent marketing practices offers a strategic pathway to differentiation and sustainability. These approaches align brand success with consumer emotional health, transforming marketing from a persuasive tool into a relational practice grounded in care, empathy, and authenticity. By doing so, hospitality organisations not only enhance guest satisfaction and retention but also contribute to a more compassionate, mindful, and emotionally sustainable tourism ecosystem.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative exploratory design to investigate how stress and emotion regulation influence consumer decision-making and managerial behaviour within the Sabah hotel industry. The qualitative approach is appropriate for exploring complex, context-dependent psychological and social phenomena, as it allows for a deeper understanding of participants' lived experiences rather than relying on numerical generalisations (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This design facilitates an interpretive analysis of the ways in which stress and emotion are perceived, experienced, and managed by both hotel managers and consumers.

The research is grounded in a constructivist paradigm, which assumes that reality is socially constructed through human interactions and contextual meanings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Within this paradigm, knowledge is co-created between the researcher and participants through dialogue and reflection. This orientation is particularly relevant for hospitality studies, where emotional labour, customer engagement, and service experience are shaped by interpersonal relationships and cultural values. The qualitative exploratory design thus enables an interpretive understanding of emotionally charged decision-making, providing insights that would not be accessible through quantitative measurement alone.

3.2. Research Approach

An inductive research approach was adopted to allow theories and conceptual patterns to emerge organically from the data, rather than imposing predefined frameworks. The inductive approach supports the bottom-up discovery of meaning, making it suitable for exploring under-researched contexts such as Sabah's hotel industry, where stress-related consumer and managerial behaviours have not been extensively studied. This approach also aligns with grounded theory traditions, where rich, contextually grounded insights form the basis for conceptual understanding (Thomas, 2006). Through iterative engagement with data, emerging themes were developed to explain the relationship between emotional regulation, stress, and marketing decision-making.

3.3. Population

The target population for this study comprised two distinct but interrelated groups. The first group included hotel marketing managers working in three to five-star hotels located across Kota Kinabalu, Kundasang, and Sandakan. These individuals were selected because they play a critical role in designing, implementing, and communicating marketing interventions that directly influence consumer experiences. Their

responsibilities typically encompass managing advertising campaigns, overseeing digital communication, and ensuring guest satisfaction through various service initiatives. In performing these roles, managers frequently encounter high levels of stress due to performance expectations, multitasking demands, and workload pressures, making them ideal participants for examining the effects of stress and emotion regulation in managerial contexts.

The second group consisted of hotel consumers who had stayed in Sabah hotels within the past six months and had encountered stressful or emotionally charged decision-making experiences, such as booking uncertainty, financial limitations, or time constraints. These consumers were purposefully included to provide insight into how emotional and cognitive processes influence purchasing behaviour, choice preferences, and post-stay satisfaction. By combining both managerial and consumer perspectives, the study sought to capture the bidirectional relationship between marketing practices and emotional responses, offering a holistic understanding of how stress and emotion regulation shape decision-making in Sabah's hospitality environment.

3.4. Sample Size

A total of 25 participants were purposively selected for this study, consisting of 10 hotel marketing managers and 15 hotel consumers as shown in [Table 1](#) below. The managers were chosen for their professional experience in the hospitality and marketing sectors, as they could provide insights into stress management, emotional regulation, and consumer engagement from an organisational perspective. Meanwhile, the consumers offered valuable perspectives on emotional and behavioural responses during stressful decision-making processes related to hotel stays.

The selected age ranges reflect generational diversity and ensure representation across different stages of professional and consumer maturity. This balance was essential for capturing varied experiences of stress, coping strategies, and emotional regulation. The sample size adheres to the qualitative research principle of data saturation, which occurs when additional interviews no longer yield new insights or themes ([Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006](#)). A total of 25 participants was deemed sufficient to achieve thematic depth while maintaining manageability in qualitative data analysis.

Table 1: Sample Size Distribution

Participant Group	Number of Participants	Age Range (Years)	Key Characteristics / Criteria
Hotel Marketing Managers	10	30–55	Minimum of two years of professional experience in hotel marketing or management; employed in 3–5-star hotels across Kota Kinabalu, Kundasang, and Sandakan.
Hotel Consumers	15	21–50	Individuals who stayed in Sabah hotels within the past six months and experienced stress or emotional decision-making (budget limitations, booking uncertainty, time pressure).

3.5. Sample Size Justification

The choice of 25 participants was guided by both practical feasibility and theoretical saturation. According to [Guest et al. \(2006\)](#), saturation in qualitative interviews typically occurs within the first 12 interviews for homogeneous groups, but additional participants may help refine subthemes and cross-group variations. Including two participant categories which is the managers and consumers, justified a slightly larger sample to ensure comparative depth and validity. This number also allowed for triangulation of perspectives, strengthening the credibility and richness of findings.

3.6. Sampling Method

A purposive sampling technique was employed to identify participants who possessed direct, relevant experience with stress, emotional regulation, and marketing or consumer decision-making in the hospitality context. Purposive sampling is commonly used in qualitative research when participants are selected based on their ability to provide information-rich cases ([Palinkas et al., 2015](#)). Hotel managers were recruited through professional networks, tourism associations, and direct contact with hotel marketing departments in Sabah. Consumers were recruited via hotel feedback forms, online travel communities, and social media platforms. This method ensured that participants had firsthand experience of emotional and behavioural phenomena relevant to the study's objectives.

3.7. Data Collection

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured, in-depth interviews, each lasting approximately 45–60 minutes. The semi-structured format allowed flexibility to probe deeper into emerging issues while maintaining consistency across core topics. This approach was chosen because it enables participants to express emotions, reflections, and contextual meanings in their own words which is critical for exploring the emotional dimensions of stress and decision-making ([Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015](#)).

Interviews were conducted face-to-face for participants based in Kota Kinabalu and online via Zoom for those located in Kundasang or Sandakan, in order to maximise accessibility and reduce logistical constraints. Each interview was audio-recorded with participants' consent, supplemented by detailed field notes to capture non-verbal cues, emotional tone, and environmental context. Recording interviews ensured accuracy and facilitated a detailed analysis, while field notes enriched interpretation by providing contextual depth.

Participants were asked open-ended questions designed to elicit rich narratives about their experiences with stress, emotional regulation, and decision-making. The following were examples of guiding questions used in both participant groups:

- i. How do you define or experience stress in your work or travel decisions?
- ii. What emotional strategies do you use to manage stress during these situations?
- iii. How does stress influence your decision-making process as a consumer or a manager?
- iv. In your view, how do marketing promotions or service designs affect emotional reactions and satisfaction?
- v. What can hotels do to reduce emotional strain for guests or staff?

- vi. These questions were flexible enough to allow natural conversation flow while ensuring coverage of key themes related to emotion, stress, and marketing interventions.

3.8. Data Analysis

Data analysis followed [Braun and Clarke's \(2012\)](#) six-phase framework for thematic analysis, which provides a structured yet flexible method for identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns within qualitative data. The process involved (1) familiarisation with the data through repeated reading of transcripts, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for potential themes, (4) reviewing themes against the data corpus, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) writing the final analytical narrative.

The qualitative analysis was supported by NVivo 12 software, which facilitated systematic coding, retrieval, and organisation of data. NVivo was used to visualise co-occurrence of codes between consumer and managerial groups, allowing comparative interpretation of emotional dynamics. An inductive coding process was applied, meaning that codes were derived directly from participants' narratives rather than from pre-existing theories. The emerging themes were refined through iterative analysis and peer debriefing with academic supervisors to enhance credibility and confirmability.

3.9. Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to strict ethical standards to ensure participant safety, privacy, and integrity of the research process. Ethical approval was obtained from the Ethics Review Committee of Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) prior to data collection. All participants provided written informed consent after being briefed about the study's objectives, procedures, confidentiality, and voluntary nature. Pseudonyms were used to protect identities, and all data which includes audio files, transcripts, and field notes, were stored securely in encrypted digital folders accessible only to the researcher.

Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. Sensitive topics related to emotional stress were approached with empathy, and debriefing was offered after each interview to ensure emotional closure. These measures align with the [British Psychological Society's \(BPS\) \(2018\)](#) ethical principles and ensure compliance with institutional research integrity standards.

4. Findings and Discussion

The thematic analysis revealed four major themes explaining how stress, emotion regulation, and managerial behaviour intersect to influence consumer decision-making within the Sabah hotel industry. The findings draw upon both consumer and managerial perspectives, integrating participant quotations to illustrate the lived realities of stress and emotional coping in hospitality settings.

4.1. Theme 1: Stress-Induced Emotional Shifts in Consumers

Consumers frequently reported that stress whether financial or situational, significantly shaped their decision-making behaviour. Financial strain, in particular, was linked to reduced cognitive flexibility and a heightened preference for "safe" decisions. As one participant expressed,

“When I’m anxious about money, I stick to the same hotel because it feels familiar and less risky.” (Consumer 4)

This reflects the concept of risk aversion under stress, where consumers prioritise emotional reassurance over novelty (Riaz, Bukhari, & Azam, 2020). Participants indicated that during periods of financial uncertainty, they preferred well-established hotel brands, perceiving them as more reliable and emotionally stabilising. This finding supports Kahneman’s (2011) dual-process model, in which stress triggers a reliance on intuitive, heuristic-based decisions rather than rational evaluation.

Time pressure further compounded these emotional responses. Participants described booking decisions made “in a hurry” or “without much thought” when under time constraints. For instance, one participant stated:

“When I have little time to choose, I just pick what I already know—it saves me the stress.” (Consumer 9)

This aligns with Luce, Bettman, and Payne (2001), who found that time-related stress narrows decision frames and prompts emotionally guided rather than deliberative reasoning.

In Sabah’s tourism environment, such behaviours were particularly common among domestic travellers managing tight budgets or unpredictable travel schedules. Hotels that maintained clear communication and consistent service standards were perceived as emotionally dependable, fostering brand trust and comfort amid uncertainty. As one participant noted,

“I always go back to the same resort in Kundasang. It’s not the cheapest, but I know what to expect.” (Consumer 2)

This finding echoes Ladhari’s (2009) argument that emotional satisfaction, rather than financial optimisation, is a key predictor of hospitality loyalty. In this way, consumer stress acts as a signal for hoteliers to prioritise emotional reassurance, transparent policies, and empathetic engagement to counteract anxiety and cognitive overload.

4.2. Theme 2: Coping and Emotion Regulation Strategies

Both managers and consumers described employing various emotion regulation strategies to navigate stress within the hospitality setting. Emotion regulation, defined by Gross (2015) as the monitoring and adjustment of emotional responses to meet situational demands, emerged as a core mechanism influencing both decision quality and wellbeing.

Consumers reported using adaptive strategies such as cognitive reappraisal, self-talk, and distraction to manage emotional strain during travel. For example, one consumer reflected:

“When something goes wrong, I tell myself it’s not the end of the world—I try to focus on enjoying my stay.” (Consumer 6)

This approach corresponds to [Cutuli's \(2014\)](#) findings that cognitive reappraisal promotes psychological flexibility, helping individuals reinterpret stressful events in more positive ways. Similarly, consumers who reframed negative service encounters often reported higher post-stay satisfaction, suggesting that effective emotion regulation buffers against dissatisfaction.

Managers, meanwhile, highlighted the importance of mindfulness and humour in managing workplace stress. One marketing manager explained:

"When I feel overwhelmed, I try to breathe, smile, and remind myself that everyone is doing their best—it helps me not to pass my stress to my team." (Manager 3)

This quote illustrates [Andrade's \(2019\)](#) assertion that mindfulness fosters emotional composure and enhances reflective decision-making. Another manager noted,

"We joke around sometimes to release the pressure—it keeps the mood lighter even when things are hectic." (Manager 7)

This mirrors [Karatepe and Tizabi's \(2020\)](#) argument that humour and emotional flexibility can diffuse tension, maintaining team morale and guest satisfaction in high-stress settings.

Empathy emerged as a critical subtheme within emotion regulation. Consumers repeatedly described how empathetic communication from staff alleviated distress and restored trust. As one traveller recalled,

"The receptionist just said, 'Don't worry, we'll sort this out,' and I felt instantly calmer." (Consumer 10)

Such emotionally attuned interactions reflect [Gross's \(2015\)](#) and [Andrade's \(2019\)](#) findings that empathy functions as a social regulator, helping both service providers and customers co-regulate emotions in real time. Collectively, these insights show that emotional empathy operates as a stabilising mechanism, bridging the affective gap between stressed consumers and pressured staff.

4.3. Theme 3: Managerial Emotional Contagion and Service Quality

A significant pattern observed among hotel marketing managers was the spillover effect of managerial stress on employee performance and service quality. Managers acknowledged that their emotions often influenced team dynamics, particularly during busy or high-demand periods. One participant stated,

"During high season, I'm running on autopilot—everything feels rushed, and I can tell my stress affects how my staff behave with guests." (Manager 5)

This supports [Hatfield, Cacioppo, and Rapson's \(1994\)](#) Emotional Contagion Theory, which posits that emotions are transmitted through non-verbal and behavioural cues. When managers displayed irritability or exhaustion, employees mirrored these affective states, resulting in lower service consistency.

Conversely, managers who demonstrated emotional intelligence (EI) fostered positive emotional climates. One remarked:

"I try to stay calm, no matter how stressful things get. If I panic, the whole team feels it." (Manager 1)

This aligns with [Wang and Netemeyer \(2021\)](#), who found that emotionally intelligent leaders enhance employee motivation and customer satisfaction by modelling emotional control. Employees in such environments described their managers as "understanding," "encouraging," and "approachable," suggesting that emotionally intelligent leadership promotes psychological safety, a climate of openness and mutual respect.

In the Sabah hospitality context, where hotels often operate with lean staffing and high workloads, emotionally intelligent leadership emerged as a vital moderating factor. Managers capable of regulating their own stress not only mitigated burnout but also cultivated empathy-driven service cultures. These findings affirm [Humphrey's \(2022\)](#) conclusion that emotionally intelligent leaders create sustainable organisational climates through empathy, trust, and relational transparency.

4.4. Theme 4: Emotionally Intelligent Marketing Interventions

The final theme highlights the role of emotionally intelligent marketing as both a business strategy and a psychological support mechanism for stressed consumers. Participants across both groups emphasised the importance of stress-reducing communication, wellbeing-oriented campaigns, and transparent booking policies. One consumer stated:

"I felt calmer booking with hotels that showed clear refund policies and friendly messages—it made me trust them more." (Consumer 8)

This sentiment echoes [Thaler and Sunstein's \(2008\)](#) nudge theory, which argues that thoughtful design and transparent communication can guide consumer choices and reduce anxiety.

Managers, too, recognised the emotional dimension of marketing. One marketing executive described:

"After the pandemic, we focused on wellbeing packages—spa treatments, digital detox retreats, and calm visual designs in our ads—to make guests feel relaxed even before arriving." (Manager 4)

This aligns with [Ladhari, Gonthier, and Lajante \(2020\)](#), who highlight that affective consistency between brand tone and customer emotion enhances e-loyalty and satisfaction. Several managers also described implementing simplified booking interfaces and mindful brand messages, which reduced cognitive overload and improved user experience.

In the Sabah context where tourism often centres on eco-cultural experiences, emotionally intelligent marketing resonated deeply with consumers seeking relaxation and authenticity. Such initiatives reflect [Pansari and Kumar's \(2017\)](#) perspective that

emotionally driven engagement fosters brand resilience and long-term loyalty. As one consumer summarised:

"I remember the hotel's ad said, 'Come to relax, not to rush.' It stuck with me—it felt human." (Consumer 13)

Collectively, these findings reinforce that emotionally intelligent marketing—grounded in empathy, mindfulness, and ethical persuasion—enhances both consumer wellbeing and brand differentiation in emotionally charged markets.

4.5. Summary of Thematic Findings

Table 2 summarises the main findings from the thematic analysis, illustrating how stress, emotion regulation, and emotionally intelligent marketing practices interrelate within the Sabah hotel industry. The table presents four overarching themes, each broken down into subthemes that capture specific dimensions of participants' lived experiences. The inclusion of representative quotes, accompanied by participant identifiers (e.g., Consumer 4, Manager 3), provides empirical grounding and ensures transparency in the interpretation of qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

Theme 1: Stress-Induced Emotional Shifts in Consumers highlights that stress, particularly financial or situational narrows cognitive capacity and amplifies emotional dependency in decision-making. Consumers under stress sought familiarity and predictability, which they associated with reduced psychological risk. The quotes demonstrate that brand familiarity and emotional comfort act as protective mechanisms in times of uncertainty, supporting the theoretical connection between stress, cognitive load, and heuristic choice (Kahneman, 2011; Riaz et al., 2020).

Theme 2: Coping and Emotion Regulation Strategies captures both consumer and managerial responses to stress. Consumers used cognitive reappraisal and self-talk to reinterpret stressful situations positively, while managers relied on mindfulness and humour to maintain composure under operational pressure. The emergence of empathy as a key regulatory factor underscores the bidirectional emotional exchange between consumers and service providers, consistent with Gross's (2015) framework of emotion regulation and Andrade's (2019) emphasis on emotional empathy in consumer behaviour.

Theme 3: Managerial Emotional Contagion and Service Quality identifies the spillover effects of managerial stress within hotel environments. The quotes reveal how leaders' emotional states can "trickle down" to employees, shaping team morale and service consistency through emotional contagion (Hatfield et al., 1994). Conversely, managers exhibiting emotional intelligence (EI) fostered positive service climates and staff motivation, aligning with Wang and Netemeyer's (2021) evidence that EI-based leadership enhances both employee engagement and customer satisfaction.

Theme 4: Emotionally Intelligent Marketing Interventions demonstrates how emotionally attuned marketing can mitigate consumer stress and enhance loyalty. Participants cited stress-reducing practices (e.g., flexible bookings), wellbeing-oriented promotions (e.g., spa and detox packages), and humanised messaging as effective strategies for emotional engagement. These findings affirm the principles of wellbeing marketing (Ladhari et al., 2020) and nudge theory (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008), suggesting

that emotionally intelligent communication fosters psychological safety, trust, and long-term brand resilience.

Table 2: Summary of Key Themes, Subthemes, and Representative Quotes

Theme(s)	Subtheme	Description	Representative Quote (with Participant ID)
Theme 1: Stress-Induced Emotional Shifts in Consumers	Financial and Situational Stress	Consumers under financial strain tend to prioritise emotional safety and familiarity in decision-making.	<i>“When I’m anxious about money, I stick to the same hotel because it feels familiar and less risky.”</i> (Consumer 4)
	Time Pressure and Cognitive Narrowing	Time constraints reduce cognitive control, leading consumers to rely on heuristic, low-effort decisions.	<i>“When I have little time to choose, I just pick what I already know—it saves me the stress.”</i> (Consumer 9)
	Emotional Dependence on Brand Familiarity	Familiar hotels provide psychological comfort during stressful conditions.	<i>“I always go back to the same resort in Kundasang. It’s not the cheapest, but I know what to expect.”</i> (Consumer 2)
Theme 2: Coping and Emotion Regulation Strategies	Cognitive Reappraisal and Self-Talk	Consumers use cognitive reappraisal and self-talk to reinterpret stress and maintain positive emotions.	<i>“When something goes wrong, I tell myself it’s not the end of the world—I try to focus on enjoying my stay.”</i> (Consumer 6)
	Managerial Mindfulness and Humour	Managers rely on mindfulness and humour to regulate stress and maintain morale.	<i>“When I feel overwhelmed, I try to breathe, smile, and remind myself that everyone is doing their best—it helps me not to pass my stress to my team.”</i> (Manager 3)
	Empathy and Emotional Support	Empathetic communication from hotel staff helps consumers regulate distress and rebuild trust.	<i>“The receptionist just said, ‘Don’t worry, we’ll sort this out,’ and I felt instantly calmer.”</i> (Consumer 10)
Theme 3: Managerial Emotional Contagion and Service Quality	Stress Spillover to Staff	Managerial stress spreads to employees through emotional contagion, affecting service quality.	<i>“During high season, I’m running on autopilot—everything feels rushed, and I can tell my stress affects how my staff behave with guests.”</i> (Manager 5)
	Emotionally Intelligent Leadership	Managers with high emotional intelligence model calmness and empathy, inspiring team cohesion.	<i>“I try to stay calm, no matter how stressful things get. If I panic, the whole team feels it.”</i> (Manager 1)
Theme 4: Emotionally Intelligent	Stress-Reducing Marketing	Transparent policies, flexible bookings, and empathetic	<i>“I felt calmer booking with hotels that showed clear refund policies and friendly messages—it made</i>

Marketing Interventions	Practices	communication foster emotional safety.	<i>me trust them more.”</i> (Consumer 8)
	Wellbeing-Oriented Campaigns	Hotels integrate wellness retreats and calm aesthetics to emotionally engage consumers.	<i>“After the pandemic, we focused on wellbeing packages—spa treatments, digital detox retreats, and calm visual designs in our ads—to make guests feel relaxed even before arriving.”</i> (Manager 4)
	Humanised Brand Messaging	Emotionally intelligent slogans and storytelling enhance authenticity and brand trust.	<i>“I remember the hotel’s ad said, ‘Come to relax, not to rush.’ It stuck with me—it felt human.”</i> (Consumer 13)

Table 2 provides a visual synthesis of the study’s findings, linking participants’ subjective narratives with theoretical constructs in social psychology, management, and marketing. It demonstrates how both individual emotion regulation and organisational emotional intelligence coalesce to create emotionally sustainable hospitality experiences within Sabah’s dynamic tourism landscape.

Across the four themes, this study reveals an interconnected system linking stress, emotion regulation, and decision-making in the Sabah hotel industry. Stress narrowed consumers’ decision-making capacity and heightened emotional dependence on familiarity and empathy. Both consumers and managers employed emotion regulation strategies, but their effectiveness depended on contextual and interpersonal factors. Managerial stress exhibited a trickle-down effect, influencing staff affect and service quality through emotional contagion. Finally, emotionally intelligent marketing emerged as a transformative intervention, capable of mitigating consumer anxiety and enhancing emotional wellbeing. These insights contribute to a broader understanding of emotionally sustainable hospitality management, where empathy, mindfulness, and emotional awareness become strategic assets in maintaining customer trust and organisational health.

5. Conclusion

This study underscores the pivotal role of stress and emotion regulation in shaping both managerial and consumer decision-making within Sabah’s hotel industry. The findings reveal that external stressors ranging from financial pressures and operational demands to situational uncertainties, trigger emotional responses that significantly influence purchasing behaviours, communication styles, and leadership outcomes. Stress-induced emotional shifts were found to narrow cognitive processing and increase reliance on familiarity and affective cues among consumers, while managerial stress often manifested through emotional contagion, influencing team morale and service delivery. These dynamics illustrate the intricate interdependence between emotional processes and behavioural outcomes in hospitality settings, where both consumers and service providers engage in emotionally charged interactions (Ladhari, 2009; Wirtz & Jerger, 2016).

Emotion regulation emerged as a central coping mechanism across both consumer and managerial groups. Consumers employed strategies such as cognitive reappraisal and self-talk to reinterpret stressful situations positively, while managers relied on

mindfulness, humour, and empathy to sustain composure and maintain team harmony. These findings affirm [Gross's \(2015\)](#) theoretical proposition that effective emotion regulation enhances decision quality and interpersonal functioning under pressure. Moreover, emotionally intelligent managers demonstrated superior adaptability, fostering trust, engagement, and resilience within their teams. Such emotionally intelligent leadership was shown to mitigate the spillover effects of stress and maintain service consistency even under high workload conditions, aligning with [Wang and Netemeyer's \(2021\)](#) assertion that emotional intelligence enhances employee performance and customer outcomes.

The study further identifies emotionally intelligent marketing, anchored in empathy, mindfulness, and ethical persuasion as a strategic tool for mitigating stress-related dysfunctions among consumers. Marketing practices such as transparent pricing, flexible booking policies, and wellbeing-oriented promotional messages were found to foster a sense of emotional safety, reduce decision anxiety, and enhance brand trust. These interventions align with the principles of wellbeing marketing ([Ladhari, Gonthier, & Lajante, 2020](#)) and nudge theory ([Thaler & Sunstein, 2008](#)), which propose that emotionally attuned communication and simplified choice architecture can steer consumers toward psychologically satisfying outcomes. Within the Sabah tourism context, emotionally intelligent marketing also supports destination resilience by integrating emotional wellbeing into customer experience design, contributing to more sustainable and human-centred hospitality models.

Theoretically, this research contributes to the interdisciplinary integration of psychological and marketing perspectives in the study of stress and decision-making. By contextualising these concepts within Sabah's regional hospitality sector, the study extends existing theories of emotion regulation and consumer behaviour to non-Western, culturally diverse service environments. It highlights the need to consider cultural nuances such as collectivist values and emotional expression norms in understanding how individuals and organisations navigate stress in the service economy. The findings thus enrich the broader body of knowledge on emotionally sustainable management, bridging the gap between individual emotional processes and systemic marketing strategies.

From a practical standpoint, the study offers several recommendations for hotel practitioners. Firstly, hotel managers should cultivate emotional intelligence competencies, including self-awareness, empathy, and emotional regulation, to enhance leadership effectiveness and prevent stress contagion within teams. Secondly, management training programmes should incorporate mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) techniques and emotional literacy workshops to equip staff with psychological resilience skills. Thirdly, marketers should design stress-sensitive campaigns that communicate assurance, transparency, and care—particularly during periods of travel uncertainty or economic instability. Finally, hotels should adopt service designs that promote calmness and clarity, such as soothing aesthetics, minimal cognitive load in digital interfaces, and personalised communication, thereby reinforcing trust and emotional comfort among guests.

Future research can build on these findings by employing longitudinal or cross-cultural designs to examine how emotional and stress management patterns evolve over time or differ across cultural settings within the ASEAN hospitality landscape. Comparative studies across Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia, for instance, could illuminate how

cultural norms in emotional expression and collectivist orientations influence stress responses, decision-making, and marketing effectiveness. Moreover, quantitative extensions using psychometric tools could validate the emotional and behavioural constructs identified in this qualitative exploration.

In summary, the study affirms that emotionally intelligent management and marketing practices are not peripheral, but fundamental to organisational resilience and customer wellbeing in hospitality. By acknowledging and addressing the emotional dimensions of stress, hotel organisations in Sabah can cultivate more adaptive, empathetic, and sustainable service ecosystems ones that enhance both employee fulfilment and guest satisfaction while contributing to the broader vision of psychologically sustainable tourism.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

Ethical approval was obtained from the Ethics Review Committee, Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) prior to data collection. All participants received an information sheet outlining aims, procedures, risks, and confidentiality. Written informed consent was obtained for participation and audio recording. Participation was voluntary, with the right to withdraw at any time without penalty.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest related to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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