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The Catalytic Role of Work Engagement and Craftsmanship Spirit in Driving Sustainable Innovation Performance: Evidence from China's Hospitality Industry

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Abstract

Background and Aims: The hospitality industry in China is navigating an era of unprecedented competition, necessitating a strategic transition toward sustainable innovation. This research aims to: (1) evaluate the impact of work engagement and craftsmanship spirit on sustainable innovation performance; and (2) analyze the underlying mechanisms through the mediating role of emotional labor and the moderating effects of digitalization and leadership support.

Methodology: Utilizing a quantitative longitudinal tracking design, data were collected from 425 frontline hotel employees across major economic hubs in China. The study employed Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to test the hypothesized relationships, ensuring rigorous validation of the measurement and structural models.

Results: The empirical findings demonstrate that both work engagement ($\beta = 0.43$, $p < 0.001$) and craftsmanship spirit ($\beta = 0.52$, $p < 0.001$) are significant antecedents of sustainable innovation performance. Notably, craftsmanship spirit emerged as the dominant driver. Furthermore, emotional labor (deep acting) was confirmed as a significant partial mediator, while digitalization and leadership support were found to significantly amplify the positive effects of emotional labor on innovation outcomes.

Conclusion: The study confirms that sustainable innovation is a systemic outcome of individual dedication, facilitated by deep emotional regulation and reinforced by organizational support. For hotel managers, fostering a craftsmanship culture and providing digital-social scaffolds are imperative for maintaining long-term competitiveness.

Keywords: Work Engagement; Craftsmanship Spirit; Sustainable Innovation; Hospitality Industry; China's Hospitality Industry

Introduction

The global hospitality industry is currently navigating a volatile and complex landscape, profoundly shaped by urgent environmental challenges and the growing necessity for sustainable operations (Gomezelj, 2016). In the specific context of China, the rapid expansion of the tourism

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sector has intensified market competition, rendering traditional service models insufficient for long-term survival. To maintain legitimacy and secure a competitive advantage, organizations are increasingly required to transition toward Sustainable Innovation Performance. This concept transcends basic service delivery by harmonizing operational excellence with environmental stewardship and social responsibility—a paradigm shift rooted in the foundational theories of organizational creativity (Amabile, 1988). To achieve this transformation, enterprises require more than just capital investment; they need robust strategic decision-making logic to respond effectively to macro-environmental shifts (Slåtten & Mehmetoglu, 2011). However, strategy alone is inert without human execution. The core driver of this innovation lies within the psychological state of the workforce. Work Engagement, conceptualized as a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption, has been empirically proven to be a critical antecedent of organizational performance and innovative behavior (Schaufeli et al., 2002). Furthermore, in the cultural context of the Chinese service industry, this engagement is increasingly viewed through the lens of the "Craftsmanship Spirit" (Li et al., 2019). This spirit, which emphasizes meticulousness, the pursuit of excellence, and the preservation of professional heritage, parallels the conservation of folk culture in tourism development (Li et al., 2019). Consequently, integrating these psychological resources—engagement and craftsmanship—has shifted from being a managerial option to a strategic imperative for sustaining the industry's ecosystem (Gomezelj, 2016).

Despite the strategic recognition of these factors, hospitality businesses face significant operational limitations. A primary challenge lies in the tension between modern efficiency requirements and the time-intensive nature of craftsmanship. While digital transformation offers promising pathways for resource integration, co-construction, and sharing (Lam & Law, 2019), many organizations struggle to realize these benefits due to a lack of understanding regarding the underlying human mechanisms. A significant theoretical gap remains: existing literature often examines strategic frameworks and psychological traits in isolation, failing to explain how these traits translate into tangible innovation. Specifically, the mechanism of Emotional Labor—the regulation of feelings and expressions to fulfill organizational goals (Grandey, 2000)—remains an under-explored mediator. According to Social Exchange Theory, employees reciprocate organizational support with higher engagement (Blau, 1964). However, current research has not sufficiently addressed how craftsmanship interacts with emotional labor, particularly regarding whether digitalization acts as a supportive "structural scaffold" or an additional burden that widens the "Digital Divide" (Lam & Law, 2019). Furthermore, there is a lack of integrated management theories explaining how authorization and empowerment can be systematically structured to support these complex dynamics (Qiu et al., 2020).

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This theoretical disconnect implies severe practical consequences, particularly for the frontline hotel employees in China who bear the brunt of these demands (Xu et al., 2017). Drawing on the Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory, individuals strive to protect their resources (Hobfoll, 1989). When employees invest heavy emotional resources in surface acting without adequate support, they risk resource exhaustion, which stifles innovative behavior (Hobfoll, 1989). In light of these issues, this research aims to decode the mechanisms driving sustainable innovation performance (Cooksey, 2020). By employing the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007) as the overarching theoretical framework, this study posits that Work Engagement and Craftsmanship Spirit act as key resources that can transform the demands of Emotional Labor into positive outcomes. This approach seeks to provide valuable insights for evaluation use (Johnson et al., 2007) and offer evidence-based solutions for integrated operations (Qiu et al., 2020). Ultimately, this research contributes to a unified framework for enhancing the resilience and innovation of the hospitality industry (Gomezelj, 2016).

Objectives

1. To investigate the impacts of Work Engagement and Craftsmanship Spirit on Sustainable Innovation Performance.
2. To analyze the mediating role of Emotional Labor.
3. To examine the moderating effects of Digitalization and Leadership Support.

Literature Review

1. Theoretical Foundation: JD-R Model and Sustainable Innovation

The pursuit of Sustainable Innovation Performance in the hospitality sector is not merely an operational goal but an ecological and social imperative. To decode the drivers of this performance, this study employs the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model as its theoretical backbone (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Unlike traditional performance metrics, sustainable innovation encompasses Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) legitimacy, necessitating a holistic approach to organizational survival (Sun, 2024). Foundational theories posit that innovation is fundamentally fueled by domain-relevant skills and intrinsic task motivation (Amabile, 1988). Within the JD-R framework, this study argues that sustainable innovation is the ultimate positive outcome derived from strategic ecosystem monitoring and resource optimization inherent in high-performance organizations (Gomezelj, 2016).

2. The Drivers: Work Engagement and Craftsmanship Spirit

Innovation demands more than mere compliance; it requires the proactive vitality of Work Engagement. Defined as a persistent, positive affective-cognitive state of vigor, dedication, and

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absorption, engagement acts as a catalyst that transforms potential into performance (Schaufeli et al., 2002). Engaged employees function as strategic assets, driving the entrepreneurial decision-making logic essential for competitive adaptation (Slåtten & Mehmetoglu, 2011).

Notably, contemporary research emphasizes that engagement is not a static trait but a dynamic state highly responsive to organizational support systems. According to Kongphetch & Jhantasana (2025), the "support-engagement loop" functions as a primary driver for organizational commitment; when employees perceive high levels of organizational support, their engagement levels escalate, directly fueling their propensity for innovation. In the Chinese context, this engagement is deepened by the "Craftsmanship Spirit." Mirroring the meticulous conservation of folk culture in tourism development, this spirit prioritizes professional heritage, precision, and identity (Li et al., 2019). When employees embody this spirit, they transcend standard service delivery, actively defining the scope of service excellence and driving project success (Banda & Pretorius, 2016).

3. The Mediator: Emotional Labor

The translation of psychological resources into innovation is mediated by a metabolic cost: Emotional Labor. In high-touch services, employees must regulate their emotions to align with organizational display rules (Grandey, 2000). Empirical evidence confirms that this regulation is a double-edged sword, significantly impacting work performance (Xu et al., 2017). Drawing on the Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory, individuals seek to protect their resource reserves; "surface acting" (feigning emotions) depletes these reserves, leading to exhaustion (Hobfoll, 1989). Conversely, psychological stability allows for "deep acting" (internalizing emotions), which preserves cognitive energy (O'Kearney, 1996). This research argues that high engagement and craftsmanship act as buffers, facilitating deep acting and preserving the cognitive resources required for innovative behavior.

4. The Moderators: Digitalization and Leadership Support

The efficacy of emotional labor is further contingent upon structural and social scaffolds. Digitalization serves as a critical structural moderator. While digital frameworks can ameliorate workload burdens through co-construction and resource sharing (Lam & Law, 2019), the digital divide continues to pose a significant challenge, as disparities in technology access and adoption can increase stress and negatively affect performance if organizations lack adequate IT readiness (Vassilakopoulou & Graca, 2020). Simultaneously, Leadership Support functions as a vital social resource. Grounded in Social Exchange Theory, supportive leadership and effective authorization frameworks encourage employees to reciprocate with higher innovation, creating a safety net for emotional risks (Blau, 1964; Qiu et al., 2020). Thus, digital readiness and supportive leadership

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synergistically amplify the conversion of emotional effort into sustainable innovation outcomes (Johnson et al., 2007).

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study integrates the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007) and Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory (Hobfoll, 1989) to delineate the pathways toward sustainable innovation. The model proposes that individual psychological resources—specifically Work Engagement and Craftsmanship Spirit—serve as critical antecedents that empower employees to navigate the demands of Emotional Labor (Deep Acting). Within this framework, emotional regulation is viewed not merely as a requirement but as a resource transformation process that ultimately drives Sustainable Innovation Performance.

Furthermore, the model recognizes that this internal transformation does not occur in a vacuum. It posits that contextual resources, namely Digitalization and Leadership Support, function as essential moderators. These factors are hypothesized to amplify the positive impact of deep acting on innovation outcomes by reducing cognitive strain and providing a "structural scaffold" for creative execution (Lam & Law, 2019; Qiu et al., 2020). The structural relationships are illustrated in the figure below:

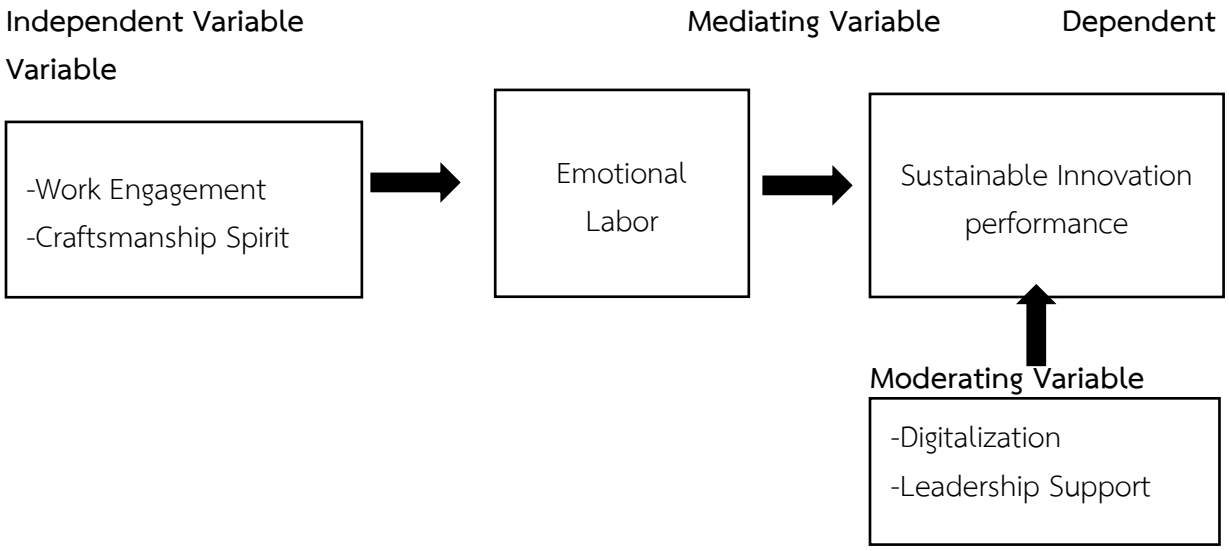


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework of the Study

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Methodology

1. Research Design and Participants

This study employs a quantitative research design to empirically test the hypothesized relationships within the proposed model. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire distributed to frontline employees in China's hospitality sector, specifically targeting star-rated hotels in major economic hubs. Using a stratified random sampling technique (Mash, 2014), a total of 600 questionnaires were distributed. After screening for incomplete or inconsistent responses, 425 valid questionnaires were retained for analysis, representing an effective response rate of 70.8%. This sample size exceeds the minimum requirements for Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to ensure statistical power and parameter stability (Johnson et al., 2007).

2. Measurement Instruments

To ensure content validity, all constructs were measured using established scales adapted from prior literature and translated into Chinese using a back-translation procedure.

Work Engagement was assessed using the 9-item Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES-9), focusing on vigor, dedication, and absorption (Schaufeli et al., 2002).

Craftsmanship Spirit was measured through a scale capturing dimensions of meticulousness, pursuit of excellence, and professional identity, adapted for the service context (Li et al., 2019).

Emotional Labor focused on "Deep Acting" strategies, measured using the emotional labor scale developed by Grandey (2000).

Sustainable Innovation Performance utilized a multi-dimensional scale encompassing service innovation quality and long-term sustainability outcomes (Amabile, 1988; Gomezelj, 2016).

Moderating Variables: Digitalization was measured based on IT readiness and perceived technological support (Lam & Law, 2019), while Leadership Support was assessed using scales focused on empowerment and resource provision (Qiu et al., 2020).

3. Data Analysis Procedure

The data analysis followed a two-step approach using AMOS 26.0. First, a Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was conducted to evaluate the measurement model's reliability and validity. Following the recommendations of Cooksey (2020), internal consistency was verified using Cronbach's alpha and Composite Reliability (CR), while construct validity was assessed through Average Variance Extracted (AVE), ensuring all values met the threshold of > 0.50. Second, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) with bootstrapping (2,000 iterations) was employed to test the mediation and moderation effects, providing a rigorous estimation of the path coefficients and their significance levels (Cooksey, 2020; Johnson et al., 2007).

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Results

The empirical analysis was conducted using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to test the proposed hypotheses. Before evaluating the structural paths, the measurement model was assessed to ensure data integrity. The results indicated satisfactory model fit indices (χ2/df = 2.14, CFI = 0.96, RMSEA = 0.05), and all constructs demonstrated robust reliability and validity (Cronbach's alpha > 0.80), fulfilling the statistical requirements for advanced analysis (Johnson et al., 2007).

1. The Impact of Work Engagement and Craftsmanship Spirit

To address the first objective, the direct effects of the independent variables on Sustainable Innovation Performance were examined. The structural model explained a significant portion of the variance in the dependent variable (R2 = 0.48). The results, presented in Table 1, reveal that both psychological resources significantly drive innovation. Specifically, Craftsmanship Spirit (H2) exerts a dominant influence (β = 0.52, p < 0.001), surpassing the impact of Work Engagement (H1:β = 0.43, p < 0.001). These findings suggest that while general engagement is vital, the specific pursuit of professional excellence and meticulousness—rooted in the craftsmanship heritage—is the primary engine of sustainable innovation in the Chinese hospitality context

Table 1 Path Coefficients for Direct Effects

Hypothesis	Path	Std.Beta	S.E.	T-value	P-value	Result
H1	Work Engagement – Sustainable Innovation	0.43	0.05	8.60	0.000***	supported
H2	Craftsmanship Spirit – Sustainable Innovation	0.52	0.06	9.15	0.000***	supported
Control	Gender – Sustainable Innovation	0.02	0.03	0.65	0.514	n.s.
	Tenure – Sustainable Innovation	0.05	0.02	1.88	0.061	n.s.

Note: *** p < 0.001. Sustainable Innovation Performance is the dependent variable.

2. The Mediating Role of Emotional Labor

Addressing the second objective, the study analyzed the mediating role of Emotional Labor (specifically, Deep Acting strategies). Using the bootstrapping method with 5,000 resamples(Cooksey, 2020), the indirect effects were tested. As shown in Table 2, the confidence intervals (95% CI) for both indirect paths (H_3) do not include zero, confirming that Emotional Labor acts as a significant partial mediator. This indicates that Work Engagement and

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Craftsmanship Spirit do not merely influence innovation directly; they also empower employees to engage in deep emotional regulation, which subsequently enhances innovation performance by preserving cognitive resources (Hobfoll, 1989).

Table 2 Mediation Analysis Results (Bootstrapping)

Path	Effect Size	S.E.	95% LLCI	95% ULCI	Result
Work Engagement - Emotional Labor-Sustainable Innovation	0.182	0.041	0.105	0.268	Sig.
Craftsmanship Spirit - Emotional Labor-Sustainable Innovation	0.215	0.048	0.124	0.312	Sig.

Note: WE = Work Engagement, CS = Craftsmanship Spirit. CI = Confidence Interval. LLCI = Lower Limit, ULCI = Upper Limit.

3. The Moderating Effects of Digitalization and Leadership Support

Finally, to address the third objective, the moderating effects of Digitalization (H4) and Leadership Support (H5) on the relationship between Emotional Labor and Innovation were examined. The interaction analysis, detailed in Table 3, demonstrates that both moderators significantly amplify the positive impact of Emotional Labor. Notably, this synergistic effect is most potent when employees are supported by high levels of digital readiness (Lam & Law, 2019). This confirms that technology acts as a "structural scaffold," reducing the cognitive burden of emotional labor and facilitating the conversion of effort into sustainable innovation outcomes (Lam & Law, 2019; Qiu et al., 2020). Furthermore, the presence of empowering leadership provides a "psychological safety net," ensuring that the risks associated with innovation do not lead to emotional exhaustion (Qiu et al., 2020).

Table 3 Moderation Analysis Results

Interaction Path	Std.Beta	T-value	P-value	Result
Step1: Main Effects				
Emotional Labor-Sustainable Innovation	0.35	7.42	0.000***	
Digitalization-Sustainable Innovation	0.18	3.56	0.000***	
Leadership Support-Sustainable Innovation	0.22	4.12	0.000***	
Step2: Interaction Effects				
Emotional Labor X Digitalization	0.24	5.33	0.000*	Sig.
Emotional Labor X Leadership Support	0.21	4.89	0.000*	Sig.

Note: ** p< 0.01. The dependent variable is Sustainable Innovation Performance.

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Discussion

The empirical findings confirm that sustainable innovation in the hospitality sector is not merely a structural output but a result of complex psychological and contextual interactions. The following sections discuss these dynamics in light of existing theories and empirical evidence.

1. The Drivers of Innovation: Beyond Engagement to Craftsmanship.

The significant impact of Work Engagement and Craftsmanship Spirit confirms that innovation is internally driven. While general engagement provides the necessary vigor for performance (Schaufeli et al., 2002), craftsmanship spirit acts as a "refinement engine," ensuring that innovation is both meticulous and sustainable (Li et al., 2019). Notably, this study advances the understanding of work engagement by viewing it as a dynamic, responsive state rather than a static trait. As suggested by Kongphetch & Jhantasana (2025), the "support-engagement loop" is vital; employees who perceive strong organizational backing exhibit higher engagement, which directly fuels their propensity for sustainable innovation. This mirrors the meticulous conservation of folk culture, where professional heritage and identity drive excellence (Li et al., 2019; Banda & Pretorius, 2016).

2. The Mediating Mechanism: Emotional Labor as a Resource Transformation Process.

The results highlight Emotional Labor (specifically Deep Acting) as a vital mediator. It appears that employees with high craftsmanship spirit do not find emotional regulation burdensome; instead, they utilize it as a tool for professional expression (Grandey, 2000; O'Kearney, 1996). This finding aligns with the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, where psychological resources act as buffers against exhaustion (Hobfoll, 1989). In this context, work engagement functions as a pivotal bridge—or a mediator—that transforms internal psychological resources into tangible innovation outcomes, a mechanism supported by the work of Srimata et al. (2019) and Pompuang et al. (2019). This transformation process suggests that when employees internalize organizational goals through deep acting, their innovative output becomes more resilient and consistent.

3. The Contextual Amplifiers: Digitalization and Leadership Support.

A major contribution of this study is identifying the contextual conditions that amplify innovation. Digitalization significantly strengthens the link between emotional effort and innovation performance. By serving as a "structural scaffold," technology automates routine tasks and reduces the cognitive load on frontline staff, allowing them more "bandwidth" for deep emotional acting and creative problem-solving (Lam & Law, 2019). However, this effect is highly contingent upon Leadership Support. Grounded in Social Exchange Theory, supportive leadership provides the psychological safety net required for employees to navigate the "Digital Divide" and experiment with new service models without fear of failure (Blau, 1964; Qiu et al., 2020).

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Furthermore, the effectiveness of these amplifiers may be nuanced by demographic factors. Specifically, the response to technological change and organizational support can vary by Gender, as different emotional regulation styles may influence how resources are utilized (Oentoro, 2019). This implies that hotel managers must adopt gender-sensitive strategies to ensure that both digitalization and leadership interventions effectively support all employees in driving sustainable innovation (Oentoro, 2019).

Conclusion

This research empirically validates the structural mechanisms driving Sustainable Innovation Performance in China's hospitality industry. The findings confirm that while Work Engagement remains a significant predictor, Craftsmanship Spirit functions as the superior antecedent, underscoring the vital role of professional heritage and meticulous dedication in achieving long-term excellence. Furthermore, the study establishes that Emotional Labor (Deep Acting) serves as a critical mediator, transforming internal psychological resources into tangible innovation outcomes rather than depleting them. Notably, this transformation is contingent upon the organizational environment; Digitalization and Leadership Support act as synergistic amplifiers, proving that sustainable innovation is not merely an individual effort but a systemic outcome supported by technological readiness and empowering management.

Recommendation

1. Strategic Pivot to Craftsmanship and Deep Acting

Managers should move beyond generic engagement strategies and prioritize the cultivation of a "Craftsmanship Spirit" within their workforce. Given that meticulous dedication is a primary driver of innovation, organizations must redesign support systems to facilitate Deep Acting. This can be achieved through Craftsmanship Mentorship Programs, where senior staff transmit professional heritage and emotional regulation techniques to junior employees, thereby reducing the stress of emotional labor and sustaining high-performance outcomes.

2. Bridging the Digital Divide and Enhancing Social Scaffolds

To maximize the benefits of digitalization, hotel operators must address the Digital Divide by providing customized IT training for diverse age groups, ensuring that technology serves as a "structural scaffold" rather than a cognitive burden. Coupled with empowering leadership, these digital-social scaffolds create a safety net that encourages innovation. Organizations should implement "Emotionally-Intelligent AI Interfaces" that streamline routine tasks, allowing employees the cognitive bandwidth required for creative guest interactions.

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