

Maintaining a customer-inclusive environment among hospitality businesses for services-obsessed clientele

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Abstract

Despite the growing recognition of inclusivity as a normative ideal, a critical gap exists in understanding how equitable service is sustained when frontline staff must simultaneously manage the high-pressure demands of a service-obsessed clientele. This study examines how hospitality professionals negotiate this tension in selected establishments—spanning from mid-scale business hotels to premium resorts—across the Zamboanga Peninsula and Western Visayas. Using an exploratory qualitative approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 18 managers and front desk attendants. Reflexive thematic analysis uncovered that inclusivity is not treated as a fixed policy, but as a dynamic regulatory mechanism interdependent with emotional labor and service quality. Participants highlighted the necessity of structured service standards, controlled flexibility, and emotional boundary management to distribute attention fairly, prevent the unintentional marginalization of less assertive guests, and protect staff from emotional exhaustion. The study proposes the Inclusive Service Equilibrium framework, demonstrating how inclusive service management acts as a balancing mechanism, aligning personalization, fairness, and operational limits in performance-driven environments. By positioning inclusivity as an operational system rather than a reactive gesture, the research illustrates how service quality and equity can practically coexist, offering a replicable model for global high-contact service settings managing diverse clienteles.

Keywords

customer-inclusive environment, hospitality businesses, services-obsessed clientele, inclusive service management, service equity

1. Introduction

Despite the growing recognition of inclusivity as a normative ideal in hospitality, a critical empirical gap exists regarding how inclusive service is practically operationalized and sustained when frontline staff must simultaneously manage the high-pressure demands of a service-obsessed clientele [Line and Hanks, 2019]. Contemporary hospitality markets are characterized by rapid technological integration, real-time feedback systems, and heightened global mobility. This environment has cultivated a segment of customers who demand highly personalized, immediate, and seamless service experiences [Piccoli et al., 2017; Zhao et al., 2019]. While meeting these intensified expectations is closely associated with customer satisfaction and repeat patronage [Suh et al., 2022], the operational pursuit of flawless, bespoke service creates inherent tensions with broader organizational commitments to equity.

Customer inclusivity—defined as ensuring all guests feel respected, valued, and equitably served regardless of background, identity, or specific needs [Jung and Yoon, 2023]—has transitioned from an ethical goodwill gesture to a structural pillar of

sustainable hospitality [Zopiatis et al., 2017]. Inclusive climates are now recognized as powerful drivers of brand differentiation and long-term guest loyalty [Kandampully et al., 2018; Saltouridou and Poullos, 2024]. However, traditional service quality models, which evaluate satisfaction primarily through expectation-performance gaps [Parasuraman et al., 1988], are complicated by digital transformations where guests co-produce service narratives and amplify public scrutiny [Dang and Nguyen, 2023]. When highly assertive guests dominate staff attention to meet their customized needs, inclusion risks being unevenly enacted, inadvertently marginalizing less assertive guests.

Studying these concepts in isolation is no longer sufficient; the integration of service quality, emotional labor, and inclusivity is essential due to their deep operational interdependence. Frontline employees operate at the intersection of emotional regulation, policy adherence, and personalized engagement. Managing accelerated service responsiveness requires substantial emotional labor, which carries recognized psychological strain [Grandey et al., 2015]. When service-obsessed customers consume a disproportionate amount of staff attention and emotional resources, acute emotional exhaustion sets in. Consequently, a staff member's capacity to intentionally practice culturally responsive and inclusive behaviors toward other guests naturally diminishes. Because relational consistency is

central to positive guest experiences [Sithole *et al.*, 2025], the accumulation of emotional burdens intensifies vulnerability to staff burnout and service inequity.

To address this theoretical and practical gap, this study proposes an integrated conceptual framework: the Inclusive Service Equilibrium. Rather than treating inclusivity as a static compliance policy [Barak, 2016] or an isolated ethical commitment, this framework posits that inclusive service management functions as a dynamic, regulatory balancing mechanism. Through this framework, hospitality organizations mediate competing customer expectations, finite emotional labor resources, and structural limitations [Hartel and Fujimoto, 2010]. By viewing inclusivity through the interdependent lens of emotional labor and service quality, this study provides a more realistic understanding of how ethical and performance imperatives intersect in high-demand environments.

Guided by this conceptualization, this study investigates how hospitality professionals negotiate fairness, responsiveness, and operational limitations simultaneously. The research is driven by two central objectives: first, to understand how inclusivity is reflected in everyday service interactions; and second, to identify the strategies used to balance fairness with increasing service expectations. Drawing on in-depth interviews with eighteen (18) frontline professionals across the Zamboanga Peninsula and Western Visayas, and utilizing reflexive thematic analysis [Braun and Clarke, 2006], this research uncovers the adaptive strategies that define inclusive service delivery. Ultimately, it offers contextually grounded, actionable insights for sustaining ethical service systems in performance-driven hospitality economies.

2. Methods

2.1 Research design

This study employed a qualitative exploratory research design, rooted in an interpretivist paradigm, to examine how hospitality businesses sustain customer inclusivity while managing service-obsessed clientele. Because the intersection of inclusive practices and intensified expectations remains under-theorized, this approach facilitated the generation of conceptually grounded insights rather than testing predefined hypotheses. By recognizing service inclusivity as socially constructed through staff-guest interactions, this design allowed for a deep analytical interpretation of underlying rationales, tensions, and structural constraints shaping real-time decision-making under operational pressure.

2.2 Population and sampling

Purposive sampling was utilized to select eighteen (18) information-rich managers and front desk attendants from diverse hospitality establishments in the Zamboanga Peninsula and Western Visayas. Inclusion criteria required active frontline involvement, direct engagement with high-demand customers, and experience managing inclusive practices. Participants represented a mix of early-career staff and experienced managers to capture both operational and supervisory perspectives.

To provide context, Table 1 details the participants' demo-

Table 1: Participant demographic profile

Participant ID	Role	Gender	Age
R1	Front Desk Attendant	Female	24
R2	Front Office Manager	Male	35
R3	Front Desk Attendant	Female	22
R4	Guest Relations Officer	Male	28
R5	Duty Manager	Female	42
R6	Front Desk Attendant	Male	26
R7	Concierge	Female	31
R8	Front Desk Supervisor	Female	34
R9	Front Desk Attendant	Male	23
R10	Operations Manager	Male	45
R11	Front Desk Attendant	Female	25
R12	Front Desk Attendant	Female	27
R13	Guest Services Manager	Female	38
R14	Front Desk Attendant	Male	24
R15	Concierge	Female	29
R16	Front Desk Supervisor	Male	33
R17	Front Desk Attendant	Female	26
R18	Duty Manager	Female	40

graphic profiles, demonstrating diverse ages (22-45), genders (11 female, 7 male), and tenures (1-15 years), factors that inherently influence emotional resilience and service approaches.

To contextualize service dynamics, participants were drawn from three mid-scale business hotels, two premium leisure resorts, and one large-scale convention hotel. Zamboanga Peninsula establishments primarily serve domestic corporate travelers prioritizing procedural efficiency, while Western Visayas properties cater to international leisure tourists expecting bespoke hospitality. Sampling across this spectrum ensured a robust analysis of inclusive service under varying financial and structural constraints.

Data saturation was achieved by the fifteenth interview, with three additional interviews conducted to confirm thematic consistency. While statistical generalization is not the goal, this regional sampling enhances the transferability of findings to comparable service-intensive hospitality environments.

2.3 Instrument

Data were collected via a semi-structured interview guide aligned with the study's research objectives (Table 2). The instrument, designed to elicit detailed accounts of inclusive practices and expectation management, underwent structured validation by academic peers and industry professionals to ensure clarity, conceptual alignment, and neutrality. The semi-structured format maintained consistency while permitting context-specific elaboration, utilizing follow-up probes to explore underlying rationales and situational constraints.

2.4 Data gathering procedure

One-on-one interviews (30-45 minutes) were conducted

Table 2: Instrument of the study

Objectives	Interview question
1. To explore how hospitality based businesses maintain a customer-inclusive environment while serving their clientele.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How do you ensure that all customers feel included and valued in your hospitality services? 2. Can you share examples of practices that help foster inclusivity while meeting diverse customer needs? 3. What challenges do you encounter In maintaining inclusivity, especially when dealing with demanding or service-obsessed clientele?
2. To examine the strategies that promote inclusivity and balance customer expectations in hospitality settings.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What specific strategies do you use to balance inclusivity with high customer service expectations? 2. How do these strategies help prevent customer dissatisfaction or conflict In service delivery? 3. Can you describe a situation where Inclusive practices successfully met customer expectations without compromising service quality?

face-to-face or via video conferencing. Following informed consent and confidentiality briefings, sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were standardized for analysis; informal expressions were retained for authenticity in raw data but refined for academic clarity during reporting, supporting reflexive transparency.

2.5 Data analysis

Transcripts were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's six-phase reflexive thematic analysis. Following deep immersion, data regarding inclusivity, emotional negotiation, and expectation management were manually and inductively coded. Similar codes were grouped into conceptual clusters, transitioning from descriptive labels to interpretive higher-order themes through iterative comparison. This process emphasized interpreting why patterns emerged and how structural constraints shaped decision-making, rather than merely summarizing data. To mitigate researcher bias, reflexive journaling and peer debriefing were continuously employed.

Furthermore, to ensure transparency in data summarization, a thematic framework was developed. Table 3 visually maps the analytical progression from raw frontline codes to the central conceptual themes defining the Inclusive Service Equilibrium.

2.6 Trustworthiness

Methodological rigor aligned with qualitative standards was established through four key criteria: Credibility was strengthened via peer debriefing sessions to critically examine emerging interpretations. Transferability was supported through detailed contextual descriptions of participants and hotel environments, allowing readers to assess applicability. Dependability was reinforced by maintaining a systematic audit trail of coding decisions and analytic reflections. Finally, confirmability was addressed through reflexive journaling, documenting assumptions and interpretive shifts to minimize the influence of personal predispositions on thematic construction.

3. Results

Research Objectives 1. To explore how hospitality-based businesses maintain a customer-inclusive environment while serving their clientele.

4.1 Structural inclusivity and standardized training

Ten respondents emphasized that inclusivity is institutionalized through structured staff training and organizational systems rather than being treated as an informal practice. Participants described intentional efforts to integrate inclusive principles into recruitment, communication protocols, reserva-

Table 3: Thematic framework

Overarching Theme	Sub-Themes	Example Core Concepts/Codes
1. Structural Inclusivity & Standardization	Staff Diversity & Training	Inclusive language, avoiding assumptions, diversity training, representative staffing.
	Menu & Service Accessibility	Dietary planning, structural labeling, spatial mobility solutions.
	Policy Consistency	Uniform application of rules, transparent communication, internal coordination.
2. Emotional Labor & Boundary Regulation	Managing Emotional Exhaustion	Absorbing frustration, maintaining warmth under pressure, burnout prevention.
	Mediating Fairness	Preventing VIP monopolization, equitable time distribution, avoiding neglect of quiet guests.
3. Adaptive Flexibility in Service Delivery	Creative Problem Solving	Offering viable alternatives when resources are limited, understanding underlying needs.
	Situational Attentiveness	Reading body language, adjusting tone, proactive engagement for diverse physical needs.

tion systems, and service delivery standards. They ensure that employees are mindful of how they address guests and avoid making assumptions about relationships, identities, or preferences. To reinforce this, five respondents mentioned implementing structured learning programs to enhance staff awareness and cultural competence. Real-life experiences shared by invited speakers strengthen staff empathy and awareness, ensuring consistent service standards across all departments.

“We train our staff to use inclusive language and avoid assumptions about guests’ needs or preferences.”

“We schedule regular diversity and sensitivity training for staff. This includes understanding accessibility needs, cultural norms, and even unconscious bias, so everyone can serve guests with empathy.”

4.2 Operationalizing inclusive accommodations

Ten respondents shared that they continuously evaluate their food and service offerings to ensure inclusivity for guests with different cultural, religious, and health-related backgrounds. Participants reported implementing structured labeling systems, staff briefings, and kitchen coordination procedures to ensure that dietary accommodations are handled systematically. Inclusive hospitality was framed not merely as offering alternatives, but as designing service environments that prevent guests from feeling marginalized due to specific physical or dietary considerations. Furthermore, information about guest preferences is properly documented to improve coordination between departments and remove potential barriers for guests.

“We review our menu and service offerings regularly to ensure they meet dietary and religious needs.”

“Beyond the food, we make sure our dining area is comfortable and accessible for everyone, whether it’s a large family, someone in a wheelchair, or a solo traveler.”

4.3 The emotional and structural limits of fairness

While attempting to maintain inclusivity, ten respondents expressed that maintaining composure during difficult interactions with service-obsessed clientele can be mentally and emotionally exhausting. Participants admitted that this sustained emotional suppression takes a severe toll, noting that after absorbing the frustration of a demanding guest, their emotional capacity to engage warmly with subsequent guests is notably depleted. This creates a significant negative consequence: while attempting to placate a service-obsessed guest, quieter or less assertive guests are often unintentionally marginalized, resulting in extended wait times and visible frustration. Additionally, five respondents explained that physical layouts and staffing capacities restrict how much customization they can provide. Having to outright deny major structural requests often triggers immediate conflict, demonstrating the operational

limits of adaptive solutions.

“When guests are extremely demanding, they sometimes speak rudely or dismissively to staff. It’s emotionally draining when we have to absorb a guest’s frustration while staying cheerful.”

“One of the hardest parts is balancing personalized service with fairness. Some guests expect VIP treatment no matter what, and if we adjust too much for one person, others might feel overlooked.”

Research Objective 2: To examine the strategies that promote inclusivity and balance customer expectations in hospitality settings.

4.4 Controlled flexibility and creative problem solving

Ten respondents explained that they maintain a structured approach to service delivery while allowing reasonable discretion for frontline staff. By establishing clear operational policies, they ensure fairness and consistency in handling guest requests, but provide controlled flexibility within defined limits to address unique needs. When requests cannot be fully met due to limited resources, five respondents shared that they focus on exploring practical alternatives that address the guest’s underlying concern. This adaptability was demonstrated when staff successfully rearranged assignments to accommodate a guest with mobility challenges, ensuring convenience without disrupting other reservations.

“We create clear service standards so everyone is treated fairly, but we empower staff to make small adjustments when needed for example, offering a quieter room for a guest who requests it for religious reflection, if available.”

“Sometimes I can’t grant a specific request, but I offer something that meets the spirit of it—like if they want a certain floor but it’s full, I offer a room with a similar view.”

4.5 Relational consistency and proactive communication

Ten respondents emphasized that uniformity in service delivery helps create an inclusive environment for all guests. Applying the same standards of courtesy, information sharing, and professionalism prevents perceptions of bias or unequal treatment. Furthermore, ten respondents highlighted that clearly outlining policies, services, and limitations serves as the foundation for preventing misunderstandings and reducing unrealistic expectations. A respectful and welcoming approach creates an atmosphere of openness, which encourages guests to communicate their needs calmly. This strategy was practically applied when assisting a guest with hearing difficulties, where staff adapted their communication approach using notes and gestures to ensure clarity while maintaining dignity.

“Clear communication with guests helps us set the right expectations. When customers know what to expect, there’s less chance of disappointment or complaints.”

“One time, a guest with hearing difficulties checked in. Instead of just speaking louder, I used written notes and clear gestures to explain the details of their stay.”

4.6 Internal coordination and procedural clarity

Ten respondents explained that organized internal systems play a crucial role in preventing service-related conflicts. Clearly defined procedures allow employees to perform their responsibilities with confidence, making service more predictable and reliable. Structured processes also improve coordination among departments, significantly reducing delays and miscommunication. This systematic approach was essential when accommodating families with varying dietary preferences; staff utilized clear internal communication to ensure food preparation aligned with specific requirements efficiently. By maintaining operational clarity, establishments provide consistent service experiences that minimize friction.

“By standardizing service procedures, we minimize errors and ensure consistency, which reduces potential conflicts and ensures that every guest receives the same reliable experience.”

“The staff communicated clearly with the family about what options were available. By involving them in the choices, we avoided misunderstandings and built trust, showing that inclusivity doesn’t mean lowering standards.”

5. Discussion

This study examined how hospitality businesses sustain customer inclusivity while managing the expectations of service-obsessed clientele. While previous literature has examined service quality and diversity management as analytically separate, the present findings demonstrate that inclusivity and service intensity are operationally interdependent processes. Inclusivity functions not merely as an ethical aspiration but as a regulatory mechanism that mediates fairness, personalization, and feasibility in high-demand service contexts [Zopiatis et al., 2017; Jung and Yoon, 2023].

This reconceptualization responds directly to the research gap by showing how inclusive practices are negotiated in real-time interactions. The findings suggest that inclusive service management operates through a dynamic balancing process composed of structured standardization, contextual flexibility, and emotional boundary regulation. Emotional boundary management emerges as critical, as frontline personnel must regulate their responses when encountering assertive guests who request policy exceptions [Grandey et al., 2015]. This triadic interaction forms the Inclusive Service Equilibrium, where inclusivity stabilizes service delivery under pressure rather than competing with service excellence, ultimately strengthening

the service climate [Sithole et al., 2025].

Furthermore, the operationalization of this balancing mechanism varies significantly depending on the establishment’s structural resources. In luxury settings, staff have greater structural latitude to utilize adaptive flexibility—such as re-allocating rooms or mobilizing extra staff—to satisfy a service-obsessed guest without noticeably detracting from the experience of others. Conversely, in mid-scale or business hotels with leaner staffing and rigid operational margins, relying heavily on bespoke customization is unfeasible. In these environments, inclusive service is sustained primarily through strict policy consistency and transparent communication. Acknowledging this resource disparity is crucial; the Inclusive Service Equilibrium is not a one-size-fits-all set of actions, but a scalable framework where specific strategies depend entirely on baseline resources and target customer bases.

The tension between inclusivity and service-obsessed clientele can also be interpreted within broader structural transformations. Contemporary service environments are characterized by digital transparency and heightened personalization expectations [Dang and Nguyen, 2023; Piccoli et al., 2017]. Under such conditions, disproportionate attention toward assertive guests may unintentionally marginalize quieter customers. The study reveals that inclusive frameworks mitigate this imbalance through standardized, documented decision-making protocols. In this context, emotional labor acts as a mechanism for preserving equitable treatment across guests, protecting staff well-being from the strain of demanding interactions [Grandey et al., 2015].

Beyond descriptive insights, inclusivity emerges as a stabilizing mechanism that regulates the distribution of service attention in environments marked by emotional demands and structural constraints. It functions as an embedded principle that informs policy clarity and staff coordination, contributing to both guest satisfaction and ethical service resilience [Kandampully et al., 2018; Suh et al., 2022]. Addressing the theoretical scope of these findings, it is important to delineate the generalizability of the proposed Inclusive Service Equilibrium framework. While empirically grounded in the specific socio-cultural context of the Zamboanga Peninsula and Western Visayas, the core mechanics of the framework—specifically the interdependent relationship between service expectations, emotional labor depletion, and inclusivity risk—are not strictly bound to this region. The framework offers a replicable analytical lens for future hospitality and management research. Scholars can apply this equilibrium model to other high-contact service sectors to investigate how ethical service mandates are structurally preserved under varying degrees of operational pressure and customer entitlement.

6. Conclusion

This study examined how hospitality businesses sustain customer inclusivity while managing service-obsessed clientele. The findings demonstrate that inclusive service is a structured, negotiated operational process requiring continuous balancing between personalization, procedural fairness, and finite

resources. Inclusivity functions as a stabilizing governance mechanism within high-pressure environments. Frontline professionals actively regulate service distribution to prevent inequitable attention toward highly assertive guests, mitigating the inherent tension where exceeding expectations for demanding customers unintentionally marginalizes quieter ones.

Conceptually, this study reframes inclusivity and service excellence as interdependent objectives rather than competing imperatives. From a managerial perspective, sustaining this balance requires codified fairness standards, transparent communication, and empowerment structures that allow staff to exercise contextual discretion responsibly. Embedding these practices into everyday operations reduces service inconsistencies and protects employee resilience against emotional burnout.

Ultimately, while this study focused on specific regional hospitality sectors, the resulting Inclusive Service Equilibrium framework offers a generally applicable model. It provides a foundational blueprint that can be adapted by researchers and practitioners across global service industries to evaluate and sustain equitable service delivery under high operational strain. Future research should extend this inquiry through comparative studies across hotel classifications, quantitative validation of the framework, and longitudinal designs incorporating formal participant validation. Positioning inclusivity as an operational system, rather than a reactive gesture, strengthens both service sustainability and organizational integrity in contemporary hospitality.

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