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Article

Operational Labor Shortages and Authentic Hospitality: Evidence from Greek Hotels

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Abstract

Operational labor shortages have emerged as a critical challenge for hospitality organizations, particularly in highly seasonal tourism destinations such as Greece, where service experiences are closely associated with cultural identity and authentic hospitality. While existing hospitality research has primarily examined understaffing through operational and human resource management perspectives, limited attention has been given to its implications for the organizational capacity to sustain authentic hospitality experiences. Drawing on Service-Dominant Logic (SDL), this study conceptualizes authentic hospitality as a co-created organizational outcome shaped through employee interactions, cultural transmission, and service delivery processes. Using survey data collected from 201 hotel employees in Greece, the study examines the relationship between operational labor shortages, organizational pressures, and perceived threats to authentic hospitality delivery within hotel operations. The findings indicate significant positive associations between work stress and service quality decline, as well as between cultural knowledge and perceived threats to authentic hospitality delivery. Multiple regression analysis further demonstrates that reactive hiring, serious understaffing, and payroll cost pressure significantly predict perceived risks to authentic hospitality co-creation, while service quality decline showed a positive but statistically non-significant effect in the final regression model. The study extends hospitality authenticity literature by conceptualizing authenticity not solely as a tourist perception construct, but also as an internally produced organizational outcome dependent on workforce stability, cultural integration, and service co-creation capacity. The findings further highlight the strategic importance of workforce planning, recruitment quality, and cultural onboarding for the long-term sustainability of authentic hospitality experiences in Greek hotels.

Keywords: operational labor shortages; authentic hospitality; service-dominant logic; hospitality co-creation; cultural authenticity; Greek hotels; hospitality workforce; tourism sustainability; accounting/cost cutting

1. Introduction

Operational labor shortages have become one of the most significant structural challenges facing the global hospitality industry, particularly in highly seasonal tourism destinations where service quality depends heavily on workforce stability and employee interaction quality. In recent years, hotels have increasingly struggled to maintain adequate staffing levels due to demographic changes, workforce mobility, post-pandemic labor market disruptions, and the declining attractiveness of hospitality employment (Baum et al., 2020; Giousmpasoglou et al., 2021) While the operational

consequences of understaffing—such as employee burnout, service inconsistency, and reduced organizational performance—have been widely documented, considerably less attention has been given to its implications for the preservation of authentic hospitality experiences and culturally grounded service delivery.

Within hospitality contexts, service experiences are not produced solely through operational systems or standardized procedures, but through ongoing interactions between employees and guests. Drawing on Service-Dominant Logic (SDL), hospitality value is understood as co-created through relational exchanges, emotional engagement, and experiential interaction processes (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Consequently, authentic hospitality cannot be treated merely as a symbolic destination characteristic or branding element, but as an organizationally mediated outcome dependent on employee participation, cultural transmission, and service co-creation capacity. Workforce instability may therefore influence not only operational efficiency, but also the ability of hospitality organizations to sustain culturally meaningful guest experiences.

The concept of “Greek hospitality” extends beyond conventional customer service and is closely associated with the broader socio-cultural tradition of φιλοξενία (philoxenia), which reflects values of generosity, warmth, interpersonal respect, and emotional connection. For international visitors, this cultural form of hospitality often becomes part of the destination experience itself and contributes significantly to destination image, visitor satisfaction, and repeat visitation intentions. As a result, the preservation of authentic hospitality is not only a matter of operational excellence but also a strategic issue for the long-term competitiveness of the Greek tourism product.

However, the sustainability of this hospitality model is increasingly challenged by one of the most persistent structural problems in contemporary tourism management: understaffing. Workforce shortages have become particularly severe in the hospitality industry due to seasonality, demanding working conditions, demographic shifts, employee turnover, and changing labor market expectations. Hotels, especially during peak tourism periods, frequently struggle to maintain adequate staffing levels across operational departments, resulting in increased pressure on existing employees and reduced organizational flexibility.

Understaffing has emerged as one of the most significant managerial concerns within hospitality operations because of its direct impact on both employee well-being and service performance. Existing literature consistently links workforce shortages with increased workload, emotional exhaustion, burnout, reduced organizational commitment, and declining service quality (Grobelna, 2021). When employees are required to work under continuous pressure and excessive operational demands, their capacity to deliver consistent, high-quality service is significantly weakened. Emotional exhaustion among hotel employees has been shown to negatively affect both service performance and employee retention, ultimately influencing customer satisfaction and long-term organizational sustainability (Grobelna, 2021).

In hospitality environments, this issue becomes even more critical because service quality depends not only on technical competence but also on emotional labor, attentiveness, and the ability to maintain positive interpersonal engagement with guests. Hotels are highly dependent on frontline employees whose performance directly shapes the guest experience. Consequently, understaffing does not simply create operational inefficiencies such as delays or scheduling problems; it affects the very mechanism through which hospitality value is produced and perceived.

At the same time, tourism research increasingly recognizes authenticity as one of the most important determinants of destination attractiveness and visitor satisfaction. Authenticity has long been considered one of the most theoretically significant yet methodologically complex concepts in tourism studies, influencing destination image, emotional engagement, and behavioral loyalty (Moore et al., 2021). Tourists increasingly seek experiences that are perceived as genuine, culturally meaningful, and distinct from standardized global service environments. Authenticity therefore functions not only as a cultural concept but also as a strategic asset for destination competitiveness.

In destinations with strong cultural branding, such as Greece, hospitality itself becomes part of this authenticity framework. Visitors do not evaluate their tourism experience solely through

attractions, accommodation quality, or physical infrastructure, but also through the nature of their interactions with local people and service providers. Authentic hospitality is therefore embedded in employee behavior, communication style, service attitudes, and the ability to transmit culturally meaningful experiences during service encounters.

Ramkissoon and Uysal (Ramkissoon & Uysal, 2010) demonstrate that perceived authenticity positively influences visitor satisfaction, emotional attachment, and destination loyalty, reinforcing its importance for sustainable tourism development. More recent studies further confirm that authentic service experiences enhance emotional engagement, memory formation, and repeat visitation intentions (Rosado-Pinto & Loureiro, 2023). These findings suggest that authenticity should not be understood exclusively as a heritage or destination-marketing construct, but also as a service-delivery phenomenon produced within everyday hospitality operations.

This becomes particularly important when hotels face severe labor shortages and are forced to prioritize immediate operational survival over strategic workforce quality. In practice, understaffing often leads management to adopt reactive hiring strategies, including rapid recruitment, limited candidate evaluation, and increased dependence on temporary or multinational labor. While such approaches may provide short-term operational relief, they may also create longer-term challenges related to service consistency, organizational integration, and cultural alignment.

The increasing reliance on multinational workforces is especially relevant in the Greek hospitality context. Foreign employees often play a crucial role in covering seasonal staffing gaps, particularly in island destinations and high-demand tourism regions where domestic labor supply is insufficient. However, the integration of multinational staff raises important questions regarding communication quality, cultural fit, and the transmission of local hospitality norms.

It is important to emphasize that the presence of foreign employees is not inherently problematic, nor does it imply reduced service quality. Rather, the challenge lies in whether hotel organizations possess the institutional mechanisms necessary to support cultural integration and knowledge transfer. Authentic hospitality depends not only on technical skills but also on tacit cultural understanding—the ability to communicate local values, social expectations, and symbolic aspects of the destination experience through everyday service interactions.

When such cultural transmission mechanisms are weak, hotels may successfully maintain operational continuity while gradually weakening the experiential authenticity that differentiates the Greek tourism product internationally. In this sense, understaffing becomes more than an HR issue; it becomes a structural factor influencing destination identity and tourism sustainability.

Despite substantial literature on labor shortages, employee burnout, service quality, and tourism authenticity, these themes are rarely integrated within a single analytical framework. Most hospitality studies examine understaffing primarily as an operational or human resource management problem, while authenticity is typically treated as a destination image or tourism marketing construct. This separation creates an important conceptual gap, particularly in destinations where hospitality itself constitutes part of the tourism product.

Limited empirical research has directly examined whether and how understaffing affects the preservation of cultural authenticity within hotel operations. The majority of existing studies focus either on employee well-being or on visitor perceptions, without exploring how workforce shortages may function as a mechanism of cultural erosion within the service delivery system itself.

This study addresses that gap by investigating the relationship between understaffing and the preservation of authentic Greek hospitality in hotel operations. Specifically, it examines how employee stress, service quality decline, reactive hiring practices, and workforce composition influence perceptions of cultural integrity within Greek hotels.

The central research question guiding this study is:

To what extent does understaffing in Greek hotels threaten the preservation of the cultural authenticity of the Greek tourism product?

To answer this question, the study adopts a quantitative research design based on survey data collected from hotel employees across Greece and applies reliability analysis, Spearman correlation

analysis, and multiple regression modeling. By integrating operational pressures and cultural sustainability into a unified empirical framework, this research contributes to both hospitality management and tourism authenticity literature.

Against this background, the present study examines how operational labor shortages may influence the organizational capacity to sustain authentic hospitality experiences within Greek hotel operations. More specifically, the study investigates the relationship between understaffing, employee stress, recruitment practices, service quality pressures, and perceptions of authentic hospitality delivery. By drawing on Service-Dominant Logic (SDL), the research conceptualizes authenticity not solely as a tourist perception construct, but also as an internally produced organizational outcome shaped through workforce stability, cultural integration, and hospitality co-creation processes.

The study contributes to hospitality literature in three ways. First, it extends existing research on understaffing by examining its cultural and experiential implications rather than focusing exclusively on operational outcomes. Second, it contributes to authenticity literature by positioning employees as active co-creators of authentic hospitality experiences. Third, it provides empirical evidence from the Greek hotel sector regarding the relationship between workforce instability and authentic hospitality delivery in a highly seasonal tourism environment.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Understaffing in Hospitality Operations

Understaffing has emerged as one of the most persistent structural challenges in contemporary hospitality management, particularly in destinations characterized by seasonality, labor intensity, and strong dependence on service consistency. Hotels operate within an environment where employee availability directly affects operational continuity, guest satisfaction, and financial performance. Workforce shortages therefore represent not merely a human resource issue, but a strategic determinant of service quality and organizational sustainability.

Previous studies have consistently linked understaffing with increased workload, emotional exhaustion, burnout, and reduced organizational commitment among hospitality employees. Employee stress caused by excessive workloads negatively affects frontline performance, resulting in service inconsistency and lower customer satisfaction (Grobelna, 2021). Emotional exhaustion is particularly critical in hospitality because service encounters rely heavily on emotional labor and interpersonal interaction, making employee well-being directly relevant to guest experience.

Karatepe and Uludag (Karatepe & Uludag, 2007) further demonstrated that role stress and work overload significantly increase emotional exhaustion and turnover intentions among hotel employees, particularly in frontline service positions. Their findings suggest that persistent labor shortages create a cycle of dissatisfaction and employee withdrawal that further intensifies staffing instability.

Likewise, Kim, Leong, and Lee (W. G. Kim et al., 2005) found that employee satisfaction and organizational commitment are directly associated with service quality performance in hospitality organizations, reinforcing the strategic importance of workforce stability.

In highly seasonal tourism destinations such as Greece, where hotels experience intense concentration of demand within limited time periods, understaffing becomes especially severe and often leads to reactive operational decisions rather than strategic workforce planning.

Beyond the human resource and service quality implications, understaffing also generates significant pressures on hotel cost management structures. Hotels are characterized by high fixed costs, elevated indirect costs, and strong operational dependence on labor-intensive service delivery, making workforce instability a critical financial issue rather than solely an HR concern. Research on Greek hotel enterprises shows that hotels maintain a particularly high fixed-cost structure, while labor allocation and service delivery costs remain central to profitability and pricing decisions (Pavlatos & Paggios, 2009). When understaffing occurs, management is often forced to compensate

through overtime payments, emergency recruitment, outsourcing, and short-term labor substitutions, all of which increase operational costs while simultaneously reducing efficiency. This creates a paradox in which hotels attempt to reduce labor shortages but end up intensifying cost pressures and weakening financial sustainability.

From a strategic accounting perspective, Garefalakis and collaborators (Garefalakis et al., 2026) emphasize that hospitality competitiveness increasingly depends on the integration of operational decision-making with financial reporting quality, sustainability management, and cost control mechanisms. Their work highlights that managerial decisions regarding staffing, training, and service delivery must be evaluated not only through immediate operational outcomes but also through their long-term impact on financial resilience and strategic performance. Similarly, Giannarakis' research on corporate sustainability and performance evaluation supports the argument that cost efficiency should not be interpreted as simple expenditure reduction, but as the optimization of resource allocation that preserves service quality and organizational value creation (Giannarakis et al., 2023). In hospitality settings, aggressive labor cost minimization without strategic workforce planning may produce short-term accounting benefits but can ultimately damage service quality, brand reputation, and destination competitiveness. Therefore, understaffing should be understood as a cost management issue where financial efficiency and cultural authenticity must be balanced rather than treated as competing objectives.

2.2. Service Quality and Organizational Pressure

Service quality remains one of the most studied dimensions of hospitality competitiveness. However, service quality cannot be examined independently from the organizational conditions under which it is produced. High-quality service requires adequate staffing, consistent training, and sufficient emotional and physical resources among employees.

Research suggests that employee fatigue and occupational stress significantly reduce service responsiveness, attentiveness, and interpersonal quality during guest interactions. Additionally, (Grobelna, 2021) found that emotional exhaustion among hotel employees is strongly associated with lower service commitment and increased withdrawal behaviors.

This becomes particularly problematic in luxury and culturally branded tourism destinations where service expectations are not purely functional but experiential. Literature (Kandampully et al., 2015) argue that service quality in hospitality should be understood as an integrated process where employee engagement, emotional labor, and customer experience are inseparable.

Understaffing also forces management to adopt rapid recruitment strategies that prioritize immediate operational survival over recruitment quality. Such reactive hiring practices may temporarily fill vacant positions but often create longer-term issues related to performance inconsistency, insufficient onboarding, and weak organizational integration.

As a result, service quality deterioration should not be viewed solely as a customer satisfaction issue, but also as a signal of deeper structural imbalance within hospitality organizations.

2.3. Cultural Authenticity in Tourism Experiences

Authenticity is considered one of the foundational concepts in tourism studies and plays a central role in destination competitiveness, visitor satisfaction, and repeat visitation intentions. Early theoretical work by MacCannell (MacCannell, 1973) conceptualized authenticity as the perceived genuineness of tourism experiences, while Wang (Wang, 1999) expanded the discussion by introducing existential authenticity, emphasizing the emotional and subjective dimensions of tourist experiences.

In culturally rich destinations such as Greece, hospitality itself constitutes a form of tourism authenticity. Visitors often evaluate destinations not only through infrastructure or attractions, but also through the quality of interpersonal interactions with local service providers. Authentic hospitality therefore becomes part of destination branding and national tourism identity.

Moore, Buchmann, Månsson, and Fisher (Moore et al., 2021) argue that authenticity remains one of the most theoretically significant yet methodologically complex concepts in tourism research, particularly because it intersects with both destination marketing and visitor perception. Their work emphasizes that authenticity should not be treated as a static characteristic of destinations, but as a socially produced and relational experience.

Similarly, Ramkissoon and Uysal (Ramkissoon & Uysal, 2010) demonstrate that perceived authenticity positively influences satisfaction and loyalty, reinforcing its strategic value for long-term tourism competitiveness.

More recently, literature (Rosado-Pinto & Loureiro, 2023) shows that authenticity significantly enhances emotional engagement and memorable hospitality experiences in upscale hotels, confirming that authenticity operates not only at destination level but also within service encounters.

Thus, authenticity should not be understood solely as a heritage or attraction variable, but also as a service-delivery phenomenon shaped by employee behavior and organizational culture.

The importance of cultural authenticity becomes even stronger in hospitality contexts where the tourism experience is co-created through direct interaction between guests and service employees. Unlike cultural attractions that exist independently of service delivery, hotels function as “living spaces” where authenticity is continuously produced through communication style, emotional labor, behavioral norms, and the symbolic representation of local culture. In this sense, authenticity is not simply consumed by tourists; it is actively performed by employees during everyday service encounters. Researchers (Chhabra et al., 2003) argue that authenticity significantly shapes tourists’ perceived value of heritage and destination experiences, influencing both satisfaction and revisit intention. Their work highlights that tourists often evaluate destinations through subjective perceptions of genuineness rather than objective cultural preservation, making employee behavior a central mechanism in authenticity formation. In hospitality environments, this means that service delivery itself becomes part of the destination’s cultural product rather than a separate operational function.

Furthermore, Kolar and Zabkar (Kolar & Zabkar, 2010) emphasize that authenticity is strongly associated with emotional attachment, destination loyalty, and experiential memorability, particularly in culturally distinctive destinations. Their findings suggest that tourists are more likely to develop meaningful destination attachment when they perceive service interactions as sincere, culturally grounded, and symbolically representative of the host destination. This becomes particularly relevant for Greece, where hospitality is historically embedded in the concept of φιλοξενία (philoxenia) and where tourists often expect emotional warmth and interpersonal connection as part of the national tourism identity. When service delivery becomes standardized, rushed, or culturally detached due to understaffing and operational pressure, the visitor experience may lose precisely the symbolic value that differentiates Greek tourism from competing Mediterranean destinations. Therefore, cultural authenticity should be treated not only as a branding asset but as a strategic performance outcome directly linked to workforce quality, employee engagement, and organizational capacity for cultural transmission.

2.4. Multinational Workforces and Cultural Transmission

The increasing internationalization of hotel labor markets has created new opportunities and challenges for hospitality management. Foreign employees often play a crucial role in addressing labor shortages, particularly in destinations facing demographic decline or insufficient domestic labor supply.

However, the integration of multinational workforces raises important questions regarding communication quality, service alignment, and the preservation of local hospitality norms. Baum (Baum, 2015) emphasizes that hospitality labor markets are increasingly globalized, creating both operational flexibility and cultural management challenges.

Authentic hospitality depends not only on technical competence but also on the successful transmission of culturally embedded service values. Employees must communicate tacit social

expectations, local customs, and symbolic elements of the destination experience. When cultural integration mechanisms are weak, hotels may succeed operationally while gradually weakening the experiential authenticity of the tourism product.

This issue is especially relevant in Greece, where the symbolic value of “Greek hospitality” is strongly associated with national identity and destination differentiation. The challenge is therefore not the presence of foreign employees itself, but the absence of structured cultural training, mentoring, and onboarding systems that enable cultural knowledge transfer.

In addition to cultural transmission, the issue of workforce composition in Greek hotels is closely connected to employees’ visible representation of hospitality and the way guests interpret service encounters. In tourism settings where hospitality is strongly associated with national identity, visitors often form implicit expectations regarding who delivers the service and how cultural authenticity is embodied during the interaction. Frontline employees function not only as service providers but also as symbolic representatives of the destination itself. Research in hospitality and service management suggests that customer evaluations are often influenced by perceived cultural proximity, language fluency, communication style, and the ability of employees to reproduce locally expected service behaviors (Pizam & Jeong, 1996); Reisinger & Turner, 2003). When these expectations are not met, tourists may perceive a reduction in authenticity even when objective service quality remains high. Chhabra, Healy, and Sills (Chhabra et al., 2003) further argue that tourists evaluate authenticity largely through subjective perceptions of genuineness rather than objective cultural preservation, making employee behavior a central mechanism in authenticity formation. This does not imply that foreign employees reduce service quality, but rather highlights the importance of perception management and cultural adaptation within service delivery systems. In the Greek tourism context, where interpersonal warmth and culturally embedded φιλοξενία form part of the destination brand, employee presentation becomes part of the authenticity experience itself.

Moreover, the preservation of authentic hospitality requires hotels to move beyond operational staffing solutions and adopt formal mechanisms of cultural socialization. Informal adaptation alone is rarely sufficient to transfer deeply embedded hospitality values, particularly in multinational work environments with high seasonal turnover. Structured onboarding programs, mentoring systems, intercultural coaching, and leadership involvement become essential tools for sustaining service consistency and cultural alignment. Baum (Baum, 2015) emphasizes that tourism organizations must shift from short-term labor replacement strategies toward long-term human capital development if they aim to preserve competitiveness and service quality. Similarly, researchers (Kusluvan et al., 2010) note that workforce development in hospitality requires strategic investment in training systems that support both technical competence and cultural adaptation. Reisinger and Turner (Reisinger & Turner, 2003) also highlight that intercultural communication competence is fundamental for service effectiveness in international tourism environments, particularly where guest expectations are culturally sensitive. The absence of institutionalized cultural training increases the risk that hospitality becomes standardized and transactional rather than relational and destination-specific. For Greece, this distinction is particularly important because the tourism product is not defined solely by accommodation quality, but by the emotional and symbolic value of the guest experience. Therefore, cultural integration should be treated as a strategic management function directly linked to destination sustainability and brand protection.

In this context, the preservation of hospitality authenticity requires organizational mechanisms that support both operational efficiency and cultural continuity.

2.5. Research Gap

Although substantial literature exists on understaffing, service quality, and tourism authenticity, these themes are rarely integrated within a single analytical framework. Most studies approach understaffing as an operational or HR problem, while authenticity is typically examined as a marketing or destination image construct.

Limited empirical research has examined how labor shortages directly affect the preservation of cultural authenticity within hotel operations. Existing hospitality research tends to focus either on employee well-being or on visitor perceptions, without examining how workforce shortages may function as a mechanism of cultural erosion within the service delivery system itself.

This gap is particularly important in destinations such as Greece, where hospitality experiences constitute an important component of destination differentiation and experiential value creation. The sustainability of authentic hospitality experiences depends not only on visitor perceptions but also on the organizational capacity to support culturally grounded service interactions.

The present study addresses this gap by examining how operational labor shortages may be associated with challenges in sustaining authentic hospitality delivery within hotel organizations.

In addition to the limited integration of understaffing and authenticity in hospitality research, there is also a notable absence of studies that examine cultural integrity from the perspective of employees rather than tourists. The majority of tourism authenticity research focuses on visitor perceptions, destination image, and customer satisfaction outcomes, treating authenticity primarily as a consumption experience. However, authentic hospitality is first produced internally—through employee practices, organizational culture, and daily service interactions—before it is perceived externally by guests. Frontline employees are the primary agents through which cultural values are translated into lived hospitality experiences, yet their perceptions regarding the preservation or erosion of these values remain significantly underexplored in empirical literature (S. Kim et al., 2019; Nguyen et al., 2023). Understanding how employees themselves interpret the relationship between staffing conditions and cultural authenticity provides a more operationally grounded perspective on destination sustainability and service quality management.

Furthermore, existing studies rarely investigate understaffing as a predictor of cultural erosion using quantitative explanatory models. Most previous research relies on descriptive discussions of labor shortages, employee burnout, or service dissatisfaction without testing whether specific understaffing dimensions—such as work stress, reactive hiring, or service quality decline—systematically predict perceived threats to cultural authenticity (Baum, 2015; Chhabra et al., 2003). This creates an important methodological gap, particularly for destinations like Greece where hospitality constitutes part of national tourism identity. By applying reliability analysis, non-parametric correlation testing, and multiple regression modeling, the present study moves beyond descriptive interpretation and offers empirical evidence regarding which operational pressures most strongly influence the preservation of authentic hospitality. In doing so, it contributes not only to tourism theory but also to practical hospitality management by identifying understaffing as a measurable strategic risk for destination competitiveness.

Based on the literature reviewed above, the present study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: To what extent does understaffing in Greek hotels negatively affect service quality?

This question emerges from literature linking labor shortages with employee exhaustion, service inconsistency, and declining customer satisfaction (Gobelna, 2021; Karatepe & Uludag, 2007).

RQ2: Does service quality deterioration influence the ability of hotels to preserve authentic Greek hospitality?

This question connects service quality literature with authenticity theory, examining whether operational decline translates into cultural degradation (Moore et al., 2021; Ramkissoon & Uysal, 2010).

RQ3: To what extent do reactive hiring practices contribute to perceived threats to cultural integrity?

This question explores whether emergency recruitment decisions weaken organizational consistency and cultural alignment within hospitality delivery.

RQ4: Is authentic Greek hospitality perceived as dependent on cultural knowledge and cultural transmission within the workforce?

This question investigates whether employees view hospitality authenticity as a culturally transmitted practice rather than a purely technical service function.

RQ5: Which understaffing-related factors are the strongest predictors of threats to cultural integrity in Greek hotels?

This is the central regression-based research question of the study and directly addresses the primary research gap by integrating operational and cultural variables within a predictive framework.

2.5. Theoretical Framework: Service-Dominant Logic and Authentic Hospitality Co-Creation

This study is theoretically grounded in Service-Dominant Logic (SDL), which conceptualizes value not as something embedded in products or services themselves, but as something co-created through interactions among organizational actors, employees, and customers (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Within hospitality contexts, value emerges primarily through experiential and relational exchanges rather than through tangible outputs alone. Hotels therefore function not merely as accommodation providers, but as environments in which employees and guests jointly co-create meaningful tourism experiences.

From an SDL perspective, hospitality employees are not simply operational labor units but active value co-creators whose interpersonal interactions shape customer perceptions, emotional engagement, and experiential authenticity. Service quality is therefore inseparable from employee participation, emotional labor, communication practices, and organizational capacity to sustain consistent relational experiences. This perspective is particularly relevant in culturally branded tourism destinations such as Greece, where hospitality itself constitutes a symbolic component of the tourism product.

The concept of authentic hospitality aligns closely with SDL because authenticity is not passively consumed by tourists but actively constructed during service encounters. Authenticity emerges through social interaction, emotional connection, cultural representation, and the successful transmission of locally embedded hospitality values. Consequently, the preservation of authentic Greek hospitality depends not only on physical infrastructure or destination branding, but also on the organizational capacity to support culturally meaningful service co-creation processes.

Within this framework, understaffing may be interpreted as a structural constraint that weakens organizational co-creation capacity. Labor shortages increase employee workload, emotional exhaustion, and operational instability, thereby reducing employees' ability to sustain emotionally engaged and culturally grounded hospitality interactions. Similarly, reactive hiring practices and insufficient cultural onboarding may weaken the transmission of tacit hospitality knowledge that supports authentic service delivery.

SDL therefore provides an integrated theoretical lens that connects operational workforce conditions with cultural authenticity outcomes. Rather than treating understaffing solely as an HR management issue, the present study conceptualizes it as a factor that may reduce the organizational ability to co-create authentic hospitality experiences. This perspective shifts the analysis from a purely operational discussion toward a broader understanding of hospitality authenticity as an organizationally mediated and workforce-dependent process.

The study consequently extends hospitality authenticity literature by conceptualizing authenticity not only as a tourist perception construct, but also as an internally produced organizational outcome shaped by workforce stability, cultural transmission, and service co-creation capacity.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study adopts a quantitative research design to examine the relationship between hotel understaffing and the preservation of cultural integrity within the Greek tourism product. The

objective is to investigate whether operational labor shortages influence not only service quality and employee well-being, but also the ability of hotels to maintain authentic Greek hospitality.

A structured questionnaire was developed to capture employee perceptions regarding understaffing, workforce composition, service delivery, and cultural authenticity. The study focuses on hospitality employees because frontline and operational staff are directly involved in both service production and the transmission of cultural hospitality practices.

The study employs a structured questionnaire-based approach because quantitative survey designs are considered particularly appropriate for examining employee perceptions, attitudes, and behavioral responses in hospitality environments where operational conditions and service experiences are strongly shaped by frontline staff interactions (Hair et al., 2010). Survey-based research allows for the systematic measurement of latent constructs such as perceived understaffing, work stress, service quality decline, and cultural authenticity using standardized Likert-scale indicators, ensuring comparability across respondents and hotel categories. In hospitality management research, quantitative employee surveys are widely used to investigate organizational behavior, service performance, and employee attitudes because they provide robust empirical evidence for explanatory modeling and hypothesis testing (S. Kim et al., 2019). This methodological approach is especially relevant in the present study, as the objective is not only to describe staffing shortages but also to identify statistically significant relationships between operational pressures and perceived threats to cultural integrity.

Furthermore, particular attention was given to minimizing common method bias, as all variables were collected through self-reported responses within a single survey instrument. Following the recommendations (Podsakoff et al., 2003), procedural remedies were incorporated into the questionnaire design, including respondent anonymity, neutral wording of statements, separation of construct blocks, and the avoidance of leading or evaluative phrasing. These measures reduce the risk that respondents provide socially desirable or systematically inflated responses. Literature (Podsakoff et al., 2003) emphasizes that common method variance can significantly distort behavioral research findings if not properly addressed, particularly in studies involving perceptions of management practices and organizational conditions. Therefore, ensuring methodological rigor at the research design stage strengthens the validity of the subsequent reliability, correlation, and regression analyses and supports the credibility of the study's empirical conclusions.

The measurement items used in the questionnaire were developed based on themes identified in previous hospitality, service quality, and tourism authenticity literature. Because the study examines a relatively underexplored relationship between operational labor shortages and authentic hospitality delivery, several items were adapted conceptually rather than adopted directly from previously validated scales. To improve clarity and content relevance, the questionnaire structure and wording were reviewed prior to distribution, while internal consistency reliability was subsequently evaluated through Cronbach's Alpha analysis

3.2. Sample and Data Collection

The empirical dataset consists of responses from 201 hotel employees working across different hotel categories and geographical regions in Greece. Participants included employees from operational, supervisory, and managerial positions, allowing the study to capture multiple perspectives within hotel organizations.

The sample included respondents from various demographic groups in terms of gender, age, educational background, years of professional experience, nationality (Greek and foreign employees), hotel classification, and regional location. This diversity strengthens the representativeness of the findings and supports broader interpretation across the Greek hospitality sector.

Data collection was conducted using an anonymous online survey distributed electronically. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were informed that the study was intended exclusively for academic research purposes.

The adequacy of sample size is a critical consideration in quantitative hospitality research, particularly when inferential statistical techniques such as correlation analysis and multiple regression are employed. Hair, Black, Babin, and Anderson (Hair et al., 2010) argue that for regression models involving multiple predictors, sample size should be sufficient to ensure statistical power, stability of coefficients, and generalizability of findings. With 201 valid responses and five independent predictors included in the final regression model, the present study satisfies commonly accepted thresholds for multivariate analysis and provides sufficient robustness for explanatory modeling. In hospitality research, sample sizes between 150 and 300 respondents are frequently considered appropriate for employee perception studies involving organizational behavior and service performance variables.

The use of an online anonymous survey was selected to facilitate access to hotel employees across different geographical regions and hotel categories in Greece, particularly during the tourism season when operational workloads are high and employee availability is limited. Online data collection methods are widely recognized for improving response accessibility, reducing interviewer bias, and increasing perceived confidentiality, especially when respondents are asked to evaluate management practices and workplace conditions (Evans & Mathur, 2005). Given the sensitivity of topics such as understaffing, recruitment quality, and organizational pressure, anonymity was considered essential for reducing response distortion and encouraging more honest evaluations from participants.

To improve representativeness, the sample included employees from different hotel departments, hierarchical levels, hotel classifications, and regional destinations, including both mainland and island tourism areas. This diversity strengthens the external validity of the findings and supports broader interpretation across the Greek hospitality sector. Although probability sampling was not feasible due to operational access limitations and seasonal workforce mobility, the use of heterogeneous purposive sampling is considered appropriate in hospitality field research where organizational access often constrains purely random selection procedures (Etikan et al., 2015). This approach allows for the capture of meaningful variation across the industry while maintaining practical feasibility during peak tourism operations.

As presented in Table 1, the sample consisted of 201 hotel employees representing a diverse range of demographic and professional profiles across the Greek hospitality sector. Male respondents accounted for 53.7% of the sample, while female respondents represented 44.8%. The largest age group was 45–54 years old (33.8%), followed by 35–44 years old (24.4%), indicating that the majority of participants possessed substantial professional maturity and industry experience.

Table 1. Demographic and Professional Profile of Respondents (N = 201).

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	108	53.7
	Female	90	44.8
	Prefer not to answer	3	1.5
Age Group	18–24	18	9.0
	25–34	37	18.4
	35–44	49	24.4
	45–54	68	33.8
	55+	29	14.4
Education Level	Secondary Education	32	15.9
	Vocational School	25	12.4
	Bachelor's Degree	84	41.8
	Master's Degree	54	26.9
	Doctoral Degree	6	3.0
Nationality	Greek	200	99.5
	Foreign Employee	1	0.5

Position in Hotel	Employee	98	48.8
	Department Supervisor	40	19.9
	Director	35	17.4
	Owner / General Management	28	13.9
Hotel Category	3-star	32	15.9
	4-star	77	38.3
	5-star	92	45.8
Region	Heraklion Prefecture	105	52.2
	Chania Prefecture	31	15.4
	Lasithi Prefecture	28	13.9
	Rethymno Prefecture	13	6.5
	Other Regions	24	11.9

In terms of educational background, most respondents held tertiary education qualifications, with 41.8% holding a bachelor's degree and 26.9% holding a master's degree, supporting the professional credibility of employee perceptions captured in the study. Regarding organizational roles, nearly half of the respondents were operational employees (48.8%), while the remaining sample included department supervisors, directors, and owners/general managers, allowing the research to capture both frontline and managerial perspectives.

Most respondents were employed in 4-star and 5-star hotels (84.1%), reflecting the operational realities of service-intensive hospitality environments where cultural authenticity is often closely tied to guest expectations. Geographically, the sample was strongly concentrated in Crete, particularly in Heraklion Prefecture (52.2%), which is highly relevant given the region's central role in Greek tourism activity. This distribution supports the relevance of the findings for understanding understaffing and cultural integrity within high-demand tourism destinations.

3.3. Measurement of Variables

The questionnaire included demographic variables, organizational descriptors, Likert-scale measurement items, and two open-ended questions.

Two main constructs were operationalized for the purposes of this study:

Understaffing Scale

The understaffing construct was measured using five items reflecting operational consequences of labor shortages:

1. Serious understaffing during the tourism season
2. Increased work stress and employee fatigue
3. Negative impact on service quality
4. Reactive hiring without adequate evaluation
5. Increased payroll costs due to understaffing

These items collectively represent the structural and managerial dimensions of workforce shortages.

Cultural Integrity Scale

The cultural integrity construct was measured using three items related to the preservation of authentic Greek hospitality:

1. Greek hospitality requires deep knowledge of Greek culture
2. Understaffing makes it difficult to maintain authentic hospitality
3. Greek tourism identity is threatened when employees lack cultural background

This composite construct captures perceptions regarding the symbolic and experiential sustainability of the tourism product.

All scale items were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from:

1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree

Reliability Analysis

Cronbach's Alpha was used to assess the internal consistency of the two main constructs. Reliability analysis is essential to ensure that multiple items measuring the same conceptual dimension demonstrate sufficient coherence.

The Understaffing Scale produced a Cronbach's Alpha of $\alpha = 0.734$, indicating acceptable internal consistency. The Cultural Integrity Scale produced $\alpha = 0.819$, indicating strong reliability. The overall model yielded $\alpha = 0.825$, confirming strong reliability across the combined research framework.

These results support the validity of the constructs and justify their use in subsequent inferential analyses.

Correlation Analysis

Given the ordinal nature of Likert-scale responses and the presence of tied ranks, Spearman's rho was employed to examine the relationships between key variables. Spearman correlation is considered appropriate for non-parametric analysis involving ordinal data and allows for robust interpretation of monotonic relationships.

The strongest observed relationship was between work stress and service quality decline ($\rho = 0.509$, $p < .001$), followed by moderate positive relationships between service quality decline and authentic hospitality difficulty ($\rho = 0.361$, $p < .01$), and between reactive hiring and hospitality difficulty ($\rho = 0.364$, $p < .01$).

These results provide initial evidence supporting the structural link between operational understaffing and cultural authenticity.

Multiple Regression Analysis

To further examine predictive relationships, multiple linear regression analysis was conducted using Cultural Integrity as the dependent variable.

The dependent variable was operationalized as a composite score based on:

- cultural knowledge requirement
- authentic hospitality difficulty
- tourism identity threat

Five understaffing-related variables were entered as independent predictors:

- serious understaffing
- work stress and fatigue
- service quality decline
- reactive hiring
- payroll cost pressure

The regression model aimed to identify which operational pressures most strongly predict perceived threats to cultural authenticity.

The results demonstrated that the model was statistically significant and that service quality decline and reactive hiring emerged as the strongest predictors of cultural integrity erosion, supporting the central hypothesis of the study.

3.4. Ethical Considerations

Ethical integrity was rigorously maintained throughout the research process. Participation was entirely voluntary, anonymity was fully preserved, and no personally identifiable information was collected. All respondents were provided with a written informed consent form outlining the study's objectives, confidentiality assurances, and their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the relevant University or Institutional Research Ethics Committee prior to the commencement of fieldwork.

4. Data Analysis

The data analysis process was designed to ensure both methodological rigor and the statistical validity of the findings. Given that the study investigates the relationship between understaffing and the preservation of cultural integrity in Greek hotels, multiple analytical techniques were employed to examine reliability, association, and predictive relationships among the variables. The use of a multi-stage analytical approach is widely recommended in hospitality and tourism research, particularly when studies involve latent constructs measured through Likert-scale responses and require both descriptive and inferential interpretation (Hair et al., 2010). Accordingly, the present study employed reliability analysis, non-parametric correlation analysis, and multiple regression modeling to test the conceptual relationships proposed in the research framework.

Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was conducted to examine the construct validity and underlying dimensional structure of the measurement items used in the study. Because the questionnaire included conceptually related variables associated with operational labor shortages and authentic hospitality delivery, EFA was considered appropriate for assessing whether the items grouped into theoretically meaningful constructs. Prior to factor extraction, sampling adequacy and data suitability were evaluated using the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity. The KMO value was 0.836, indicating strong sampling adequacy for factor analysis ((Kaiser, 1974), while Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 551.966$, $df = 28$, $p < .001$), confirming that the correlation matrix was appropriate for factor extraction (Tables 2 and 3).

The extracted factor structure broadly supports the conceptual distinction between operational labor pressures and authentic hospitality dimensions proposed in the study's theoretical framework.

Table 2. KMO and Bartlett's Test.

Test	Result
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) Measure	0.836
Bartlett's Test χ^2	551.966
Degrees of Freedom	28
Significance	$p < .001$

Table 3. Rotated Factor Matrix.

Variable	Factor 1: Operational Labor Pressures	Factor 2: Authentic Hospitality
Serious Understaffing	0.742	—
Work Stress & Fatigue	0.811	—
Service Quality Decline	0.768	—
Reactive Hiring	0.701	—
Payroll Cost Pressure	0.462	—
Cultural Knowledge Requirement	—	0.789
Authentic Hospitality Difficulty	—	0.804
Tourism Identity Threat	—	0.771

Principal Component Analysis with Varimax rotation identified a clear two-factor structure broadly corresponding to: (1) operational labor pressures and (2) authentic hospitality and cultural integrity dimensions. The extracted factors explained approximately 60.18% of the total variance prior to rotation, indicating satisfactory explanatory power for exploratory hospitality research. Most variables demonstrated factor loadings above the recommended threshold of 0.50, supporting convergent validity and construct coherence. Variables associated with work stress, service quality decline, reactive hiring, and authentic hospitality difficulty loaded strongly on their theoretically expected dimensions. By contrast, payroll cost pressure demonstrated comparatively lower loading strength, suggesting that financial pressure represents a more peripheral organizational dimension

relative to the core operational and cultural constructs examined in the study. Overall, the EFA results provide additional methodological support for the reliability and structural validity of the measurement framework used in the subsequent analyses.

The first stage of analysis involved reliability testing using Cronbach's Alpha in order to assess the internal consistency of the main constructs: the Understaffing Scale and the Cultural Integrity Scale. Cronbach's Alpha remains one of the most commonly applied reliability indicators in social sciences and hospitality management because it evaluates the degree to which multiple items measuring the same construct demonstrate conceptual coherence (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). Values above 0.70 are generally considered acceptable for exploratory research, while values above 0.80 indicate strong reliability. Establishing internal consistency was particularly important in this study because both operational and cultural dimensions were measured through multi-item scales that required validation before further inferential analysis.

The second stage involved Spearman's rho correlation analysis. Because the questionnaire employed five-point Likert-scale responses and the data exhibited ordinal characteristics with tied ranks, Spearman correlation was selected as the most appropriate non-parametric method for examining monotonic relationships between variables. Unlike Pearson correlation, Spearman's rho does not assume normal distribution and is considered more suitable for ordinal hospitality survey data (Akoglu, 2018). This analysis was used to identify the strength and direction of associations between understaffing dimensions (e.g., work stress, service quality decline, reactive hiring) and cultural authenticity dimensions (e.g., hospitality difficulty and tourism identity threat). The use of Spearman correlation provided initial empirical support for the theoretical assumption that operational labor shortages are structurally linked to cultural degradation.

The final stage of analysis employed multiple linear regression to examine which understaffing-related variables most strongly predict perceived threats to cultural integrity. The dependent variable was operationalized as a composite index based on three dimensions: cultural knowledge requirement, authentic hospitality difficulty, and tourism identity threat. Five independent variables were entered into the model: serious understaffing, work stress and fatigue, service quality decline, reactive hiring, and payroll cost pressure. Multiple regression is considered particularly appropriate when the objective is to estimate the explanatory power of multiple predictors simultaneously and identify the relative contribution of each factor to the dependent variable (Hair et al., 2010). The use of regression analysis allowed the study to move beyond descriptive interpretation and provide stronger empirical evidence regarding the extent to which understaffing functions as a structural predictor of cultural authenticity erosion in Greek hospitality operations.

Although the study employed Likert-scale responses, the use of composite variables and parametric regression analysis is considered methodologically acceptable in hospitality and social science research when scales consist of multiple aggregated items and sample sizes are adequate (Norman, 2010). Previous methodological studies have demonstrated that parametric techniques remain robust under these conditions, particularly in explanatory behavioral research involving employee perceptions and organizational constructs.

5. Results

This section presents the empirical findings of the study regarding the relationship between understaffing and the preservation of cultural integrity within Greek hotel operations. The analysis was conducted in three stages in order to ensure both methodological validity and explanatory depth.

First, reliability analysis was performed using Cronbach's Alpha to assess the internal consistency of the main constructs and verify that the grouped variables adequately represented the underlying dimensions of understaffing and cultural integrity. Establishing scale reliability was necessary before proceeding to inferential statistical testing.

Second, Spearman correlation analysis was employed to examine the strength and direction of the relationships between key operational and cultural variables. Given the ordinal nature of the

Likert-scale responses and the presence of tied ranks, Spearman's rho was considered the most appropriate method for identifying monotonic associations among the study variables.

Finally, multiple linear regression analysis was conducted to determine which understaffing-related factors most strongly predict perceived threats to cultural integrity. This allowed the study to move beyond descriptive interpretation and provide explanatory evidence regarding the structural relationship between labor shortages and the preservation of authentic Greek hospitality.

Together, these analyses provide a comprehensive empirical framework for understanding how operational workforce shortages influence both service performance and the broader cultural sustainability of the Greek tourism product.

5.1. Reliability Analysis

Reliability analysis was conducted to evaluate the internal consistency of the measurement scales used in the study and to ensure that the grouped items adequately represented the underlying theoretical constructs. In hospitality and tourism research, Cronbach's Alpha is widely accepted as the standard indicator for assessing scale reliability, particularly when latent variables are measured through multiple Likert-scale items (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). Since both understaffing and cultural integrity were operationalized as composite constructs, reliability testing was considered essential before proceeding to inferential analyses.

The results demonstrated satisfactory to strong internal consistency across all scales. Specifically, the Understaffing Scale, comprising five operational dimensions related to workforce shortages (serious understaffing, work stress, service quality decline, reactive hiring, and payroll cost pressure), produced a Cronbach's Alpha of $\alpha = 0.734$, indicating acceptable reliability for exploratory and applied hospitality research. This result suggests that respondents perceived these operational pressures as conceptually connected manifestations of a broader understaffing phenomenon rather than isolated managerial problems.

The Cultural Integrity Scale, consisting of three items related to the preservation of authentic Greek hospitality, cultural knowledge, and perceived threats to tourism identity, demonstrated stronger internal consistency with a Cronbach's Alpha of $\alpha = 0.819$, suggesting high conceptual coherence among the variables. This finding supports the theoretical argument that cultural authenticity within hospitality is perceived as a unified experiential construct rather than a set of independent service characteristics.

The overall research model, combining both operational and cultural dimensions, yielded a Cronbach's Alpha of $\alpha = 0.825$, confirming strong overall reliability and supporting the use of these constructs for further inferential analysis. According to relevant literature (Nunnally, 1978), values above 0.80 indicate strong internal consistency suitable for behavioral research, strengthening the validity of the study's analytical framework.

These findings indicate that respondents perceived understaffing and cultural authenticity not as isolated operational issues, but as interconnected dimensions of the hospitality experience. These findings support the internal consistency of the proposed analytical framework.

Furthermore, the stronger reliability observed in the Cultural Integrity Scale suggests that employees hold relatively consistent views regarding the meaning and preservation of authentic Greek hospitality. The reliability results therefore strengthen the empirical legitimacy of treating cultural integrity as a measurable dependent variable rather than a purely theoretical abstraction.

From a managerial perspective, the reliability findings also indicate that understaffing and cultural degradation are recognized collectively by employees rather than as disconnected organizational concerns. This supports the idea that interventions aimed at workforce planning, recruitment quality, and employee training may simultaneously improve both service operations and cultural sustainability. As a result, as shown in Table 4, reliability analysis provides not only methodological validation but also practical support for the strategic framing of understaffing as a broader hospitality management issue.

Table 4. Reliability Analysis Results.

Construct	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha	Interpretation
Understaffing Scale	5	0.734	Acceptable reliability
Cultural Integrity Scale	3	0.819	Strong reliability
Overall Research Model	8	0.825	Strong overall reliability

5.2. Spearman Correlation Analysis

Given the ordinal nature of Likert-scale responses and the presence of tied ranks, Spearman's rho was employed to examine the relationships between key variables. The use of non-parametric correlation analysis is particularly appropriate in hospitality employee research where perceptions, attitudes, and behavioral evaluations are commonly measured through ordinal response scales (Akoglu, 2018). Spearman's rho allows for the identification of monotonic relationships without requiring assumptions of normal distribution.

The strongest correlation was observed between work stress and service quality decline ($\rho = 0.509$, $p < .001$), indicating that increased employee fatigue and occupational pressure are strongly associated with deterioration in the quality of services delivered to guests. This finding reinforces the operational consequences of understaffing and supports previous hospitality research linking employee exhaustion with reduced service performance (Gobelna, 2021).

A moderate positive relationship was also found between service quality decline and difficulty in maintaining authentic hospitality ($\rho = 0.361$, $p < .01$), suggesting that service deterioration is not only a functional issue but also affects the hotel's ability to preserve the cultural authenticity of the Greek tourism product. This result strengthens the study's core theoretical argument that operational pressures translate into cultural consequences.

Similarly, the relationship between reactive hiring practices and hospitality difficulty was moderate ($\rho = 0.364$, $p < .01$), indicating that rushed recruitment decisions made under staffing pressure may weaken the capacity of hotels to sustain culturally embedded service standards. This finding aligns with literature emphasizing the importance of recruitment quality and organizational fit in hospitality service delivery.

Cultural dimensions also demonstrated particularly strong relationships. The strongest cultural correlation was observed between cultural knowledge and tourism identity threat ($\rho = 0.647$, $p < .001$), indicating that employees who perceive Greek hospitality as requiring deep cultural understanding are significantly more likely to recognize the risks posed to tourism identity when such cultural alignment is weakened.

Likewise, the relationship between cultural knowledge and authentic hospitality difficulty was also strong and statistically significant ($\rho = 0.559$, $p < .001$), suggesting that employees who emphasize the importance of cultural knowledge are more likely to perceive difficulties in maintaining authentic Greek hospitality under conditions of understaffing and workforce instability.

Overall, the correlation analysis confirms that understaffing is structurally linked to both service performance and the preservation of cultural authenticity in hospitality delivery. The results (Table 5) suggest that operational labor shortages create both immediate service problems and longer-term symbolic risks for destination identity.

Table 5. Spearman Correlation Analysis.

Variable Relationship	Spearman's ρ	Strength	Significance
Work Stress ↔ Service Quality Decline	0.509	Strong positive	$p < .001$
Cultural Knowledge ↔ Tourism Identity Threat	0.647	Strong positive	$p < .001$

Cultural Knowledge ↔ Authentic Hospitality Difficulty	0.559	Strong positive	p < .001
Service Quality Decline ↔ Authentic Hospitality Difficulty	0.361	Moderate positive	p < .01
Reactive Hiring ↔ Hospitality Difficulty	0.364	Moderate positive	p < .01

5.3. Multiple Regression Analysis

To further examine the predictive relationship between understaffing and cultural integrity, a multiple linear regression model was conducted with Cultural Integrity as the dependent variable. The dependent variable was operationalized as a composite score based on three dimensions: cultural knowledge requirement, authentic hospitality difficulty, and tourism identity threat.

Five predictors were included in the model: serious understaffing, work stress and fatigue, service quality decline, reactive hiring, and payroll cost pressure. Multiple regression is particularly appropriate in hospitality management research when the objective is to evaluate the simultaneous effect of several operational factors on a broader organizational outcome (Hair et al., 2010)

The model was statistically significant, indicating that the combined effect of understaffing-related variables significantly predicts perceived threats to cultural integrity within Greek hotels. The regression results demonstrate that operational workforce shortages are not independent managerial issues but interconnected predictors of cultural sustainability.

The model explained a meaningful proportion of the variance in cultural integrity perceptions ($R^2 = 0.309$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.291$, $p < .001$), supporting the argument that operational labor shortages are associated with cultural degradation in the tourism experience. Although the explanatory power is moderate, it is substantial for behavioral and hospitality research involving employee perceptions.

Among the predictors, reactive hiring emerged as the strongest statistically significant contributor ($\beta = 0.171$, $p = 0.019$), indicating that rushed recruitment decisions made under staffing pressure significantly increase perceived threats to authentic Greek hospitality. This finding suggests that recruitment quality may play an important role and cultural fit in preserving hospitality authenticity.

Serious understaffing ($\beta = 0.138$, $p = 0.018$) and payroll cost pressure ($\beta = 0.131$, $p = 0.010$) also demonstrated significant positive effects, suggesting that both workforce insufficiency and financial pressure contribute directly to perceptions of cultural erosion.

Work stress and fatigue showed a marginally significant effect ($\beta = 0.161$, $p = 0.054$), implying that employee exhaustion may influence cultural integrity indirectly through service pressure rather than as a fully independent predictor.

By contrast, service quality decline showed a positive but statistically non-significant effect ($\beta = 0.128$, $p = 0.119$). Although service deterioration is strongly correlated with hospitality difficulty, its explanatory power weakens once other structural organizational pressures are considered simultaneously in the regression model.

These findings (Tables 6 and 7) suggest that understaffing should not be interpreted solely as an HR or operational problem. Rather, the findings suggest that operational labor shortages may contribute to organizational conditions associated with weaker authentic hospitality delivery and reduced experiential consistency.

Table 6. Multiple Regression Analysis. Dependent Variable: Cultural Integrity Composite Score.

Model Summary	Result
R ²	0.309
Adjusted R ²	0.291
Standard Error	0.754

F-test	Statistically Significant
Model Significance	$p < .001$

Table 7. Significant Predictors.

Predictor	β	p-value	Interpretation
Reactive Hiring	0.171	0.019	Strongest significant predictor
Work Stress & Fatigue	0.161	0.054	Marginally significant
Serious Understaffing	0.138	0.018	Significant positive predictor
Payroll Cost Pressure	0.131	0.010	Significant positive predictor
Service Quality Decline	0.128	0.119	Not statistically significant

6. Discussion

The findings of this study suggest that operational labor shortages in Greek hotels may extend beyond operational inconvenience and become associated with broader challenges related to authentic hospitality delivery. While workforce shortages are often discussed primarily in terms of efficiency, productivity, and financial pressure, the present results indicate that their consequences may also influence the organizational capacity required to sustain culturally grounded hospitality experiences. In destinations such as Greece, where hospitality experiences constitute an important component of tourism value creation, workforce instability may affect not only service performance but also experiential consistency and authenticity co-creation processes.

The reliability analysis confirmed that both understaffing and cultural integrity operate as coherent and measurable constructs, supporting the theoretical assumption that labor shortages and cultural authenticity are interconnected dimensions rather than independent organizational issues. The strong overall reliability of the model strengthens the validity of interpreting cultural integrity as an organizational outcome influenced by workforce conditions. This is particularly important because authenticity is often treated in tourism literature as a subjective or purely consumer-centered concept. The present findings support the argument that authenticity can also be approached as an internally experienced organizational reality, perceived and shaped by employees themselves.

From a Service-Dominant Logic (SDL) perspective, these findings support the argument that authentic hospitality is co-created through ongoing interactions between employees and guests rather than delivered solely through standardized operational systems. Hospitality value therefore depends not only on technical service execution, but also on the organizational conditions that allow employees to sustain emotionally engaged, culturally grounded, and relationally consistent service experiences. The findings further suggest that workforce instability may weaken the organizational capacity required for authentic hospitality co-creation.

The correlation analysis revealed that increased work stress is strongly associated with service quality deterioration, confirming previous hospitality research linking employee exhaustion with reduced service performance (Grobelna, 2021). However, the present study extends this perspective by suggesting that service decline may also be associated with difficulties in sustaining authentic hospitality experiences. This suggests that service quality deterioration does not merely affect customer satisfaction in transactional terms but also undermines the experiential and relational value associated with authentic hospitality delivery within the Greek tourism context.

Particularly important is the role of reactive hiring as the strongest statistically significant predictor of perceived threats to cultural integrity. When management is forced to recruit rapidly without adequate evaluation, hotels may succeed in filling operational gaps temporarily, but often at the cost of service consistency, organizational cohesion, and cultural alignment. This finding suggests that the quality of recruitment decisions may be more important than staffing quantity alone,

especially in destinations where hospitality itself forms part of the tourism product. Emergency staffing solutions may provide short-term operational relief, but they can generate long-term reputational and experiential risks that are significantly more difficult to reverse.

The regression analysis further revealed that serious understaffing and payroll cost pressure also significantly predict perceived threats to authentic hospitality sustainability. This is especially important because it shifts the understaffing discussion from a purely quantitative labor shortage issue to a broader structural and financial management problem. Hotels operating under persistent staffing deficits and increasing payroll pressure may face greater difficulty balancing short-term operational demands with long-term hospitality sustainability objectives, potentially affecting service consistency and authentic hospitality delivery. This finding also supports the argument that labor cost management and service quality should not be treated as competing priorities, but as interconnected dimensions of sustainable tourism strategy.

Interestingly, service quality decline, although strongly correlated with authentic hospitality difficulty, did not remain statistically significant in the regression model. This suggests that service deterioration may function more as an intermediate outcome of deeper organizational pressures—such as recruitment quality and structural understaffing—rather than as an independent predictor of cultural erosion. In other words, service decline may represent a visible operational outcome, while reactive hiring and workforce instability may function as underlying organizational conditions associated with weaker authentic hospitality delivery. This distinction may provide useful implications for managerial decision-making because it redirects attention from symptomatic service problems to the structural causes that generate them.

The cultural dimension of the findings is particularly important for understanding how employees themselves perceive authentic hospitality within organizational settings. Respondents strongly associated authentic hospitality with deep knowledge of Greek culture, while the strongest Spearman correlation emerged between cultural knowledge and tourism identity threat ($\rho = 0.647$). This confirms that employees perceive hospitality not merely as technical service delivery but as a culturally transmitted practice. Authentic hospitality depends on tacit knowledge, social expectations, communication styles, and symbolic behaviors that cannot be fully standardized through operational procedures alone. In this sense, hospitality authenticity is not produced by service protocols, but by the successful transmission of cultural meaning through employee behavior.

This becomes particularly relevant in hospitality environments characterized by increasingly diverse and multinational workforces operating under conditions of labor instability. The findings do not imply that foreign employees are inherently unable to deliver quality hospitality; rather, they highlight the necessity of structured cultural integration mechanisms. Without systematic onboarding, mentoring, and cultural integration mechanisms, hospitality organizations may face greater difficulty sustaining consistent and culturally grounded service experiences. The issue is therefore not nationality itself, but the absence of institutional processes that support cultural transmission within the workforce.

The study also contributes to the broader discussion of destination competitiveness. Tourism destinations compete not only through infrastructure, pricing, or promotional strategies, but also through the experiential distinctiveness of their hospitality delivery. If understaffing gradually weakens the authenticity of service encounters, destination competitiveness may decline even when traditional performance indicators remain stable. This introduces an important strategic implication: workforce planning becomes a destination management issue, not merely an internal hotel concern. The sustainability of tourism competitiveness therefore depends partly on how effectively hospitality organizations protect the cultural mechanisms of service delivery.

Ultimately, the findings suggest that understaffing may extend beyond operational concerns and become associated with broader challenges related to hospitality authenticity and destination experience consistency. The issue is therefore not simply the absence of employees, but the organizational difficulty associated with maintaining consistent hospitality value transmission under conditions of workforce instability. In the long term, Hotels that rely primarily on short-term staffing

solutions may face increasing difficulty maintaining the experiential distinctiveness associated with authentic hospitality delivery.

6.1. Theoretical Contributions

This study contributes to hospitality and tourism literature by integrating two research streams that are commonly examined separately: workforce shortages and cultural authenticity. Existing hospitality research has largely framed understaffing as a human resource and service quality issue, focusing on workload, emotional exhaustion, turnover, and operational performance. At the same time, authenticity research has usually examined cultural experience from the tourist perspective. The present study bridges these domains by showing that staffing shortages may also influence the organizational capacity to sustain authentic hospitality delivery.

A second theoretical contribution is the positioning of authentic hospitality as an employee-mediated construct. The findings suggest that cultural authenticity is not only perceived by tourists but is also produced internally through employee behavior, recruitment quality, service consistency, and cultural knowledge transfer. This expands authenticity theory by shifting attention from destination image to the organizational and human mechanisms through which authenticity is delivered.

The study also contributes to tourism HRM literature by demonstrating that reactive hiring, serious understaffing, and payroll cost pressure are significant predictors of perceived cultural erosion. This supports the argument that tourism labor challenges should be treated as strategic sustainability issues rather than temporary operational disruptions. Baum (Baum, 2015) emphasizes that tourism HR challenges remain persistent and structural, while Kusluvan (Kusluvan et al., 2010) underline the centrality of human resources in tourism and hospitality performance.

6.2. Managerial Implications

For hotel managers, the findings indicate that understaffing should not be managed only as a scheduling or recruitment problem. It should be treated as a strategic risk that affects service quality, employee well-being, cost structures, and the cultural authenticity of the hospitality experience. The strong association between work stress and service quality decline confirms that excessive workload can weaken the quality of service encounters, consistent with research linking workload, emotional exhaustion, and service outcomes among hotel employees (Grobelna, 2021).

The significance of reactive hiring is particularly important. Hotels may temporarily solve labor shortages by recruiting quickly, but rushed hiring can weaken service consistency and cultural alignment. Managers should therefore move from emergency staffing practices toward more structured recruitment and onboarding systems that support both operational competence and organizational service alignment. This is especially relevant in Greece, where hospitality is strongly connected with cultural identity and guest expectations.

Payroll cost pressure also emerged as a significant predictor of perceived cultural erosion. This means that aggressive cost control through labor minimization may create hidden long-term costs, including lower service consistency, weaker employee engagement, and loss of authenticity. Cost management should therefore be balanced with workforce stability. Reducing labor costs without protecting service quality may undermine the very experience that makes the destination competitive.

Managers should also invest in structured onboarding and cultural training. New employees should receive training not only in operational procedures but also in the relational, cultural, and experiential dimensions of hospitality service delivery. This aligns with broader HRM literature emphasizing the need for systematic training, employee development, and human capital investment in hospitality organizations (Kusluvan et al., 2010).

Finally, middle managers and department heads should be used as cultural mentors. Authentic hospitality is often transmitted informally through observation, coaching, and daily interaction. Hotels should therefore create internal mentoring systems where experienced staff help new

employees understand how service quality, emotional warmth, and cultural representation are connected in the Greek hospitality context.

6.3. Practical Implications

At the industry level, the findings suggest that workforce shortages should be treated as a destination competitiveness issue. If hotels fail to maintain stable and culturally prepared teams, the impact is not limited to individual businesses; it may gradually affect the perceived authenticity of the Greek tourism product. Tourism policymakers, hotel associations, and educational institutions should therefore collaborate on workforce development strategies.

Practical measures may include vocational training programs focused on hospitality culture, employee retention initiatives, partnerships between hotels and tourism schools, and standardized onboarding systems that support service consistency and cultural integration across diverse workforce groups. Such initiatives would help ensure that operational staffing solutions do not weaken the cultural distinctiveness of Greek hospitality.

Overall, the findings suggest that operational labor shortages should not be viewed exclusively as short-term staffing problems, but also as organizational conditions that may influence the sustainability of authentic hospitality experiences. The issue is therefore not simply the numerical absence of employees, but the organizational capacity to maintain consistent service co-creation processes, cultural transmission mechanisms, and relational hospitality standards under conditions of workforce instability. From an SDL perspective, authentic hospitality emerges through workforce-dependent interaction processes, making staffing quality and organizational integration central components of long-term hospitality sustainability.

7. Conclusions

This study suggests that operational labor shortages in Greek hotels may influence not only organizational performance but also the capacity of hospitality organizations to sustain authentic hospitality experiences.

The findings suggest that labor shortages are associated with increased work stress, reduce service quality, encourage reactive hiring, and ultimately weaken the hotel's capacity to preserve authentic Greek hospitality. Service quality decline and recruitment quality emerged as particularly strong predictors of perceived cultural erosion, confirming that hospitality authenticity depends not only on service provision, but also on cultural continuity.

Greek hospitality is experienced by employees as a culturally embedded practice requiring knowledge, social understanding, and value transmission. When staffing shortages force hotels to prioritize immediate operational survival over strategic workforce development, the long-term consistency and experiential distinctiveness of authentic hospitality delivery may become more difficult to sustain.

Therefore, the long-term sustainability of Greek tourism may not rely exclusively on visitor demand or infrastructure investment. It also depends on the preservation of the human and cultural mechanisms through which hospitality is delivered.

Sustaining authentic hospitality experiences ultimately depends on workforce stability, organizational support systems, and the effective transmission of hospitality values within hotel operations.

In addition, the findings highlight that the long-term competitiveness of Greek tourism depends not only on destination attractiveness, infrastructure, or international demand, but also on the stability and cultural preparedness of the hospitality workforce. Hotels may maintain occupancy rates and operational continuity in the short term, yet if authentic hospitality is gradually weakened through persistent understaffing and reactive labor practices, the destination risks losing one of its most distinctive competitive advantages. In highly experiential tourism markets, where emotional connection and cultural interaction strongly shape visitor satisfaction, the erosion of authenticity may

have consequences that extend far beyond individual hotel performance and affect destination reputation at a national level (Moore et al., 2021; Ramkissoon & Uysal, 2010).

Moreover, this study suggests that workforce sustainability should be positioned as a core dimension of tourism sustainability policy. Discussions of sustainable tourism often prioritize environmental management and economic resilience, while the human and cultural dimensions of service delivery receive less attention. However, in hospitality-intensive destinations such as Greece, preserving the tourism product requires protecting not only physical assets and financial performance but also the people who transmit local culture through everyday guest interactions. Future tourism strategies should therefore recognize staffing quality, cultural training, and employee retention as fundamental components of destination sustainability. Ultimately, safeguarding Greek hospitality means safeguarding the cultural continuity that gives Greek tourism its international identity and long-term strategic value.

8. Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations should be acknowledged.

First, the study relies on self-reported perceptions of hotel employees rather than direct observation of service delivery or customer satisfaction outcomes. Although employee perceptions are highly valuable for understanding internal organizational dynamics, future studies could triangulate these findings with guest evaluations and managerial performance indicators.

Second, the cross-sectional nature of the data limits causal interpretation. While significant associations were identified between understaffing and cultural integrity, longitudinal research would provide stronger evidence regarding the long-term effects of workforce shortages on destination authenticity.

Third, the study focuses on the Greek hospitality context, which carries strong cultural specificity due to the symbolic importance of “Greek hospitality” as part of the national tourism brand. Comparative international studies could examine whether similar patterns emerge in other Mediterranean or culturally branded tourism destinations.

Future research may also explore the role of generational differences, managerial perceptions, and nationality-based service evaluation, particularly regarding how guests interpret employee cultural representation during hospitality encounters. These extensions would support the development of the next research streams emerging from the present dataset.

An additional limitation concerns the strong geographical concentration of the sample, as the majority of respondents were employed in hotels located in Crete, particularly in Heraklion Prefecture. Although Crete represents one of the most important tourism destinations in Greece and provides a highly relevant context for examining understaffing and hospitality authenticity, this concentration may limit the generalizability of the findings to other regions with different tourism structures, labor market conditions, and destination identities. Island destinations, urban hospitality environments, and mainland seasonal tourism areas may experience workforce shortages and cultural integration challenges differently. Future research could therefore expand the geographical scope of the analysis by incorporating comparative regional samples across Greece, allowing for stronger external validity and more nuanced interpretation of destination-specific labor dynamics.

Another limitation relates to the composition of the sample in terms of nationality. Despite the study’s conceptual emphasis on multinational workforces and the role of foreign employees in preserving cultural authenticity, the vast majority of respondents were Greek employees, with only minimal participation from foreign staff. This limits the ability to directly compare perceptions between domestic and international employees regarding cultural transmission, service expectations, and integration challenges. Since one of the central arguments of the study concerns the relationship between workforce composition and authentic hospitality, future research should intentionally target more balanced multinational samples. Comparative studies between Greek and foreign employees, as well as between employee and guest perceptions, would significantly strengthen the

understanding of how cultural authenticity is constructed, interpreted, and maintained within contemporary hotel operations.

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