DEVELOPING A VALUE-RESPONSIVE QUALITY CULTURE IN ROMANIAN HOTEL CHAINS

Cristina-Mirabela Malaia[1*], Vlad Diaconescu[2], Daniela-Elena Mocanu[3]

[1]*Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Bucharest, Romania, malaiacristina10@stud.ase.ro*
[2]*Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Bucharest, Romania, diaconescuvlad17@stud.ase.ro*
[3]*Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Bucharest, Romania, mocanudaniela08@stud.ase.ro*

Abstract

The hospitality sector has been profoundly reshaped by technological innovation, societal change, and the lasting impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. These forces have redefined guest expectations, shifting focus from traditional service indicators to ethical conduct, personalization, and emotionally resonant experiences. This study explores how Romanian hotel chains address these evolving demands by fostering a value-responsive quality culture (VRQC). Using a qualitative research design with semi-structured interviews and content analysis, the paper identifies three key trends: (1) rising expectations for ethical, sustainable, and inclusive practices; (2) increased demand for personalization enabled by digital integration; and (3) greater emphasis on authenticity and emotional connection in guest experiences. Based on these findings, the article presents a VRQC framework that integrates these trends into a strategic model for improving service quality, providing practical guidance for hospitality managers and contributing to the academic discussion on quality culture in turbulent and rapidly changing environments.

1. Introduction

Tourism is a key sector of the Romanian economy, contributing 4.19% to the country's gross domestic product (GDP) in 2023 and expected to reach 5.72% in 2025 (Statista, 2025), supporting regional development by attracting investment and creating jobs. With attractions such as the Danube Delta, Transylvanian castles, historic cities like Sighișoara, UNESCO World Heritage Sites and picturesque mountainous regions, Romania attracts millions of tourists every year and challenges hotel chains to respond to increasingly complex customer demands. Recent changes, including technological advances and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, have altered consumers' priorities: they now place more value on social responsibility, personalized experiences and deep cultural connections. These changes require hotel chains to rethink their strategies to respond to the new market dynamics.

This study analyses how Romanian hotel chains are responding to these new demands and proposes a strategic framework for a value-responsive quality culture (VRQC). Based on semi-structured interviews with managers and operational staff, complemented by the analysis of public material, the study identifies practices that define the modern hospitality industry in the Romanian context. The findings contribute to the academic literature on service quality in Eastern Europe and provide hotel managers with practical solutions for aligning strategies with customer values. Through this approach,

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[*] Corresponding author
  Authors' ORCID:
  Cristina-Mirabela Malaia
  Vlad Diaconescu
  Daniela-Elena Mocanu

the study highlights the role of Romanian tourism in strengthening the country's economic and cultural competitiveness.

2. Literature review

The COVID-19 pandemic has served as a catalyst for profound changes in tourism, accelerating the transition to sustainability, digitalization, and authenticity. Traditional practices are no longer enough as the industry is now driven by new expectations: social responsibility, smart technology, and meaningful emotional experiences (Paddison & Hall, 2024).

Post-pandemic, tourism is under pressure from a new triple bottom line - environmental, social, and economic (Paddison & Hall, 2024; Kritikos et al., 2025). At the same time, research on inclusive tourism confirms that the need for accessibility and the reduction of marginalization is an integral part of sustainable tourism (Korbiel et al., 2025). This underlines the need for measures that not only protect the environment but also promote equity and social cohesion.

Digitalization is no longer just about automation, but is becoming a means to co-create personalized experiences. A recent bibliometric analysis has highlighted the dramatic growth of research on AI, chatbots, and generative systems such as ChatGPT, underlining the trend towards hyper-personalized experiences in the hospitality industry (To & Yu, 2025). At the same time, systematic reviews point to emerging dilemmas around privacy, trust, and the balance between humans and technology (Nira, 2025).

In cultural tourism, authenticity is no longer just a "nice-to-have" attribute, but an important emotional trigger. Recent studies have confirmed that authentic environments promote emotional bonding and prosocial behaviour (Zhu et al., 2025), and that emotions such as nostalgia and gratitude influence visitor satisfaction and loyalty (Yang et al., 2023; Lei & Zheng, 2025). Authenticity therefore enables a deep connection with cultural heritage and the local community.

A current analysis of post-pandemic changes in tourism therefore requires an integrated approach that considers not only the declared trends but also the structural and operational changes in the industry. In the following, we will explore three complementary and essential directions for understanding the evolution of the sector: (1) ethical, sustainable and inclusive practices as a foundation for systemic resilience, (2) personalized digitalization as a vector of guest experience, and (3) authenticity and emotional connection as pillars of profound tourism value. These directions have been identified due to their increasing importance in the post-pandemic context, where tourists prefer social responsibility, personalized experiences and deep cultural connections (Buhalis & Sinarta, 2019; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020; Rickly & Canavan, 2024). Each of these dimensions is supported by recent academic literature and relevant case studies that paint a coherent picture of the new paradigms of global hospitality. In Romania, these aspects have been less explored in the context of chain hotels, although urban tourism plays an essential role in the economy (Munteanu & Goschin, 2024). By addressing these issues, the study identifies gaps in the existing literature and positions the current study as a contribution to the understanding of service quality in the Romanian hospitality industry.

2.1 Ethical, sustainable, and inclusive tourism practices

The changes triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic have made it clear that global tourism must be responsibly redesigned, guided by ethical values, environmental sustainability and social inclusion. Ethical practices can no longer be seen as simple marketing components, but form an essential foundation for the resilience of the sector. Recent research emphasizes that ethical tourism requires both universal accessibility and respect for the cultural and economic rights of local communities (Korbiel et al., 2025). In this context, inclusive tourism becomes a priority in sustainable development policies by promoting the active participation of vulnerable groups and ensuring equal opportunities for all visitors.

Sustainability plays a central role, which has been rethought after the pandemic, not only as ecological protection, but also as a synergy between economic development, social cohesion, and technological innovation. Alreahi et al. (2023) have shown in a study of hotels in Budapest that the adoption of environmentally friendly practices - such as energy efficiency and waste management - positively

influences customers' perceptions and shapes their consumption preferences, suggesting an increased focus of demand on sustainable tourism. Similarly, Mazilu et al. (2023) showed how Romanian cities such as Craiova can turn the pandemic crisis into an opportunity for sustainable urban development through tourism policies that promote digitalization, eco-friendly mobility and heritage preservation.

Regenerative tourism, a new concept analysed by Bellato & Pollock (2025), proposes a paradigm shift from minimizing negative impacts to maximizing positive impacts on communities and ecosystems. This approach emphasizes the restoration of natural and cultural capital, the intensive involvement of local stakeholders and the promotion of active cooperation between tourists, administration and industry. The authors emphasize that tourism can no longer be seen as a simple economic engine, but must be reconceptualized as an instrument of social cohesion and ecological balance.

At the operational level, flexibility and integration are also supported by technological innovations. Boccoli et al. (2024) show that the perception of control over time and the workplace increases employee well-being in industries that depend on human interaction, such as tourism. In addition, studies show that technology can help monitor the impact of tourism, optimize routes, and inform tourists in real time (Sigala, 2021), which in turn contributes to a more ethical management of resources.

In the post-COVID era, sustainable tourism is therefore no longer an option, but a prerequisite for the viability of the sector. The integration of ethical, sustainable and inclusive practices becomes not only a moral imperative but also a long-term competitive strategy.

2.2 Personalization and digital integration in the hospitality industry

In the post-pandemic era, the personalization of the guest experience and the integration of digitalization in the hotel industry are no longer options, but are becoming standards for quality and differentiation. Recent studies show that smart digitalization not only improves operational efficiency, but also strengthens loyalty by adapting services to individual needs.

The implementation of technologies such as AI, IoT and big data analytics enables hotels to automate processes while offering personalized services. For example, a study in 5-star hotels in Indonesia shows that cloud-based management systems can increase operational efficiency by up to 30% and AI reduces staff workload by up to 70%, results that directly correlate with customer satisfaction through distributed personalized experiences (Anwar et al., 2024).

An important development in this context is the introduction of 'connected' rooms (smart rooms). In global chains such as Hilton and Marriott, guests have control over in-room lighting, temperature and entertainment via smart apps and interfaces, enhancing the personalized nature of the stay and reducing friction when communicating with staff (EHL Insights, 2024; Hilton, 2024).

Intelligent CRM systems integrated with guest experience platforms have become important tools for delivering personalized offers and upselling through predictive analytics. The Deloitte report highlights that up to 52% of customers expect AI-driven interactions and personalization at the enterprise level, and 44% consider such technologies essential for guest engagement (Jiwnani, 2024).

Similarly, a recent report on AI hyper-personalization in hospitality warns of the paradox between personalization and privacy, pointing to the need to find a balance between using data for individual experiences and protecting guest data (Nira, 2025).

At the same time, digital integration in hospitality requires operational simplicity and a seamless guest journey: contactless check-in and check-out, chatbots, digital signatures, secure and fast interactions - elements that 62% of customers expect as a post-pandemic standard (Michalis, 2024.)

However, the implementation of these technologies also brings challenges: IT infrastructure, cybersecurity, data protection and maintaining the balance between people and technology. Experts in the field warn that technology must support, not replace, human interaction, with staff remaining essential for emotion, empathy and memorability (Puorto, 2025).

Digital personalization in the hospitality industry is based on the synergy between technology and human services. When properly integrated, it offers convenience, efficiency and proximity and creates sustainable competitive advantages. At the same time, it requires responsible implementation: data

security, systemic interoperability and training measures to maintain the balance between efficiency and authentic hospitality.

2.3 Authenticity and emotional attachment in tourist experiences

In the context of modern tourism, the perception of authenticity becomes an essential catalyst for creating a deep emotional connection between the visitor and the destination. Recent research clearly shows that authenticity is not only a structural attribute, but also an affective trigger that increases tourists' attachment to the place and their satisfaction.

Rickly et al. (2023) argue that contextual authenticity, achieved through an authentic cultural and physical environment, significantly increases emotional attachment and aesthetic appreciation of a place. The discrete role of emotions such as gratitude or nostalgia can enhance the sense of authenticity and strengthen the tourist's emotional attachment to cultural heritage (Pung et al., 2024).

In cultural tourism, positive emotions evoked by authenticity (e.g. awe, joy) have been shown to enhance the overall experience and the intention to recommend visitors to others (Zhu et al., 2025). A study conducted in China shows that these conveyed emotions increase attachment to the place, which in turn promotes prosocial behaviours such as loyalty and the desire to return (Lei & Zheng, 2025). Perceived authenticity in a cultural tourism context triggers a range of complex emotional responses that contribute significantly to strengthening visitors' cultural identity. A study conducted at the Mogao Grottoes in Dunhuang shows that emotional experiences not only increase tourists' satisfaction, but can also influence their future behaviour by activating cultural identification processes (Yang et al., 2023). These findings emphasize that authenticity is not just a feature of the environment, but a catalyst for personal reflection and deep connections to cultural heritage.

Furthermore, the link between authenticity and visitor engagement is mediated by emotional engagement. Recent studies have shown that emotional engagement plays a mediating role between authenticity and overall satisfaction at cultural festivals (Nguyen et al., 2025). Authenticity thus arouses relevant emotions, which in turn promote affective engagement and positive behaviour among visitors. Moreover, the authentic identity of the destination (including local architecture, authentic traditions and community engagement) is considered in recent research as a strategic factor for the development of sustainable tourism and tourist loyalty (Candra et al., 2025). Thus, authenticity also becomes a vector of cultural and economic responsibility that contributes to the preservation of local heritage and the strengthening of community cohesion.

Recent literature shows that the future of tourism is no longer conceivable without an integrated approach that combines ethical responsibility, digital innovation and authentic experiences. The three directions analysed - ethical, sustainable and inclusive practices; personalization and digital integration; authenticity and emotional connection - not only reflect the responses to the external pressures of the pandemic, but also define the foundations of a quality culture that lives up to today's values.

This triad of change can be understood as a strategic matrix: Ethical practices and sustainability respond to environmental, social crises and structural injustices, creating resilience and legitimacy; digitalization and personalization respond to consumers' new expectations of efficiency and convenience, offering competitiveness and differentiation; authenticity and emotional connection respond to the need for meaning, belonging and affective relationship with destinations, fostering loyalty and cultural sustainability.

The integration of these pillars - ethical, technological, and emotional - enables the reconceptualization of quality in tourism, not only as an operational performance, but as an expression of the shared values of companies, employees, communities, and guests. In this sense, we propose an original framework, Values-Responsive Quality Culture (VRQC), which can become an analytical and operational tool for understanding and assessing the ability of hotel organizations to build sustainable, authentic, and valuable relationships in the post-pandemic context. Value-Responsive Quality Culture (VRQC) proposes a strategic framework to help hotel organizations respond to new customer expectations and values by integrating ethical, sustainable, digital, and authentic practices into a model of service quality. In this framework, quality is no longer defined solely by operational performance or compliance with predetermined standards, but by the continuous alignment of the company's values with those of its

stakeholders: guests, employees, communities and management. VRQC focuses on authentic experiences, social responsibility, personalization through technology and emotional connections to deliver services that are not only high quality but also meaningful to all stakeholders (Figure 1).
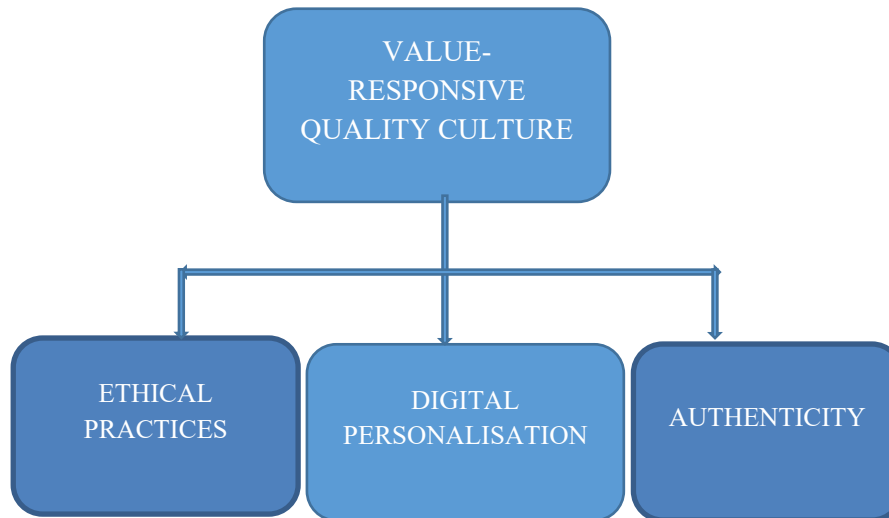
Figure 1. The Flow of Value-Responsive Quality Culture (VRQC)
Source: Authors' own conception (2025)

Thus, VRQC can become a conceptual extension that goes beyond the traditional view of "service quality" as a set of operational standards and aligns it with the continuous alignment between stakeholder values (guests, employees, communities, management) and concrete organizational practices. This framework is all the more relevant in Romania, where the literature on quality culture in chain hotels is still limited, despite the economic and social importance of urban tourism.

3. Methodology

In this study, a qualitative approach is chosen to investigate how Romanian hotel chains are adapting to changing consumer expectations in order to develop a value-based quality culture (VRQC). The choice of the qualitative method is justified by the need to gain a deep understanding of perceptions, strategies and practices in the hotel industry that cannot be adequately captured by quantitative methods. The research combines semi-structured interviews with content analysis, which enables data triangulation to ensure the validity and robustness of the results.

All participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the use of the data, and the right to withdraw at any time. Informed consent was obtained in writing or verbally (on record). The identity of participants was protected by the use of pseudonyms when reporting results. Data is stored securely and following the GDPR.

In accordance with data protection regulations, only public data was used for customer reviews.

The study focuses on hotel chains in Romania. The primary participants are hotel managers and operational staff who can provide valuable insights into the implementation of ethical practices, personalization, and authenticity. To complete the perspective, customers were also included by analysing online reviews. Hotels were selected by location (e.g., Bucharest, Cluj-Napoca, Brașov, Constanța) and market segment (luxury and mid-range) to capture the diversity of practices in the Romanian hotel industry. The participants were selected based on their experience in management or in the implementation of service quality strategies. Depending on data saturation (the point at which no new topics or important information emerged), a total of 10 participants were interviewed. For the content analysis, 50 sources (hotel websites, social media posts, customer reviews from the last 12 months) were examined to ensure adequate representativeness. A purposive sample was drawn, selecting participants who were able to provide information relevant to the study objectives.

The research uses two main methods of data collection:

a. Semi-structured interviews. Interviews were conducted in person, by telephone or via online platforms (e.g. Zoom, Microsoft Teams) depending on participant availability. They were recorded (with the participants' consent) and transcribed verbatim for analysis. The instrument used was a semi-structured interview guide developed to cover the three identified trends: (1) ethical, sustainable and inclusive practices; (2) digital personalization and integration; (3) authenticity and emotional connection. The guide contains open-ended questions to allow for flexibility and the exploration of new ideas (see Appendix A for the interview guide). Each interview lasted between 30 and 45 minutes to respect participants' time and obtain detailed responses.

b. Content analysis. Public material was analysed, including hotel websites, posts on social media (e.g., X, Instagram, Facebook), sustainability reports where available, and customer reviews on platforms such as Booking.com, TripAdvisor or Google Reviews. The sources were selected based on their relevance to the three trends (sustainability, personalization, authenticity) and the representativeness of the selected hotels. 50 sources (10 websites, 20 social media posts, 20 customer reviews) were analysed, including 10 different hotels to ensure diversity.

The interview transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis (e.g., 'sustainability initiatives', 'digital technologies', 'authentic experiences'). Data coding was done manually.

A coding framework was developed for secondary material (websites, articles, reviews) based on three trends: sustainability (e.g., eco-certifications, waste prevention measures, support for local communities), personalization (e.g., personalized packages, mobile apps, AI chatbots) and authenticity (e.g., integration of Romanian cultural elements, brand stories, emotional interactions with customers).

4. Results

This section presents the findings from the thematic analysis of the 10 semi-structured interviews (guided by the provided interview protocol) and the content analysis of 50 secondary sources (10 hotel websites, 20 social media posts, and 20 customer reviews from platforms like TripAdvisor, Booking.com, and Google Reviews). The data were organized around the three key trends identified in the literature and interview guide: (1) ethical, sustainable, and inclusive practices; (2) personalization and digital integration; and (3) authenticity and emotional connection. These trends directly align with Sections 2-4 of the interview guide, while general context (Section 1) and VRQC building (Section 5) informed overarching themes. Thematic saturation was reached after the ninth interview, with no new significant insights emerging. Findings reflect post-COVID adaptations, such as increased focus on hygiene and digital tools, as noted in multiple interviews.

4.1 Thematic analysis of interviews

Interviews involved 6 managers and 4 operational staff (e.g., receptionists/ front desk agent, representing 4 luxury and 6 mid-range hotels (Table 1).

Table 1. Description of the sample

Participants/ Code	Gender	Position	Location	Hotel type
Participant 1 / H1	M	General manager	Cluj-Napoca	Luxury
Participant 2 / H2	W	General manager	Bucharest	Luxury
Participant 3 / H3	W	Sales manager	Bucharest	Mid-range
Participant 4 / H4	W	Sales and Marketing manager	Bucharest	Luxury
Participant 5 / H5	W	HR manager	Constanța	Mid-range
Participant 6 / H6	M	Receptionist	Brașov	Mid-range
Participant 7 / H7	M	Receptionist	Brașov	Mid-range
Participant 8 / H8	M	Receptionist	Constanța	Mid-range
Participant 9 / H9	W	Front Desk Agent	Cluj-Napoca	Luxury
Participant 10 / H10	M	Assistant Manager	Bucharest	Mid-range

Source: Authors' own research (2025)

The analysis of interviews conducted with managers of Romanian hotel chains shows how these establishments build a quality culture that responds to values and meets both customer expectations and internal brand standards. Predominant themes include adapting to new customer expectations,

implementing sustainable and inclusive practices, personalizing services, integrating digital technologies, creating authentic experiences and human resources challenges.

All interviewees observed significant changes in customer behaviour, which were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Manager H3 mentioned that "the number of online reservations has increased, that there has been a staffing crisis, and that guests have a greater interest in cleanliness". A receptionist echoed this sentiment: "People are now asking more about how we ensure the rooms are clean and how quickly we can respond to their special requests" (H8). Another manager emphasized that "expectations are in proportion to the price paid, i.e., they expect to receive services of the highest standard" (H4). Manager H1 noted that guests expect "easy, fast and personalized booking processes, authentic experiences, but also real commitment from hotels in terms of sustainability and social responsibility". In addition, one employee (H7) noted: "We realize that guests appreciate it when they find small personal things in the room - a book, a small gift, or a note written by us". These findings suggest that hotels need to be simultaneously efficient, flexible, and sensitive to their customers' values to maintain their satisfaction and loyalty.

1. Ethical, sustainable, and inclusive practices

This theme dominated 9 interviews, with participants describing post-COVID shifts toward sustainability as a response to heightened consumer awareness of health and environmental responsibility. Sub-themes included resource conservation, community support, and inclusivity. The hotels have introduced a wide range of sustainable and ethical practices. Manager H4 mentioned the introduction of Green Key certification, selective recycling, and the modernization of the heating and cooling systems in terms of energy efficiency: "During the renovation, the entire heating/cooling system was replaced - it is now much more efficient in terms of consumption". An employee added: "We collect waste selectively and try to reduce food waste; guests even ask about our sustainability policy" (H6). Manager H3 highlighted the hotel's commitment to the community through the "Donate Blood Together" campaign, which has a direct impact on the local community: "Guests are positively impressed by these practices".

In terms of inclusion, the hotels have implemented concrete measures for people with disabilities. One manager stated that the hotel had "fully equipped and adequately sized rooms for people with disabilities, access ramps and parking spaces" (H5), while another emphasized that "all public spaces are accessible via spacious elevators and staff provide personal assistance" (H1). Two non-managers added: "Staff are trained to help people with reduced mobility without making them feel uncomfortable" (H8, H10). In general, the challenges associated with implementing these practices are mitigated by training programs and strict brand standards (H9).

2. Personalization and digital integration

All 10 participants highlighted digital tools as a post-COVID necessity for contactless services. Sub-themes covered AI-driven personalization and integration barriers.

The personalization of the customer experience and the digitalization of services are priority goals for hotel chains. The H4 manager explains that the "One Rewards by IHG (InterContinental Hotels Group)" loyalty program offers "all the benefits of each tier" and highlights how the brand designs experiences according to each guest's profile. The H2 manager emphasizes the use of mobile applications and online check-in to reduce wait times and increase convenience for customers.

However, digital integration faces technical obstacles. Manager H4 mentioned the "incompatibility of the PMS with the online check-in system", which leads to difficulties in accounting procedures. A receptionist also said, "Sometimes the systems do not communicate with each other and we have to process some special requests from customers manually" (H8). On the other hand, manager H2 believes that digitalization is well accepted by customers, but "there is still resistance from operational staff", indicating the need for a balance between technology and staff training. In addition, non-executives mention that training is essential: "We need to learn how to use new applications without compromising the customer experience" (H6, H7).

3. Authenticity and emotional connection

Emerged in all interviews, linking Romanian culture to guest loyalty amid post-COVID demand for meaningful experiences. Sub-themes included cultural integration and emotional strategies.

Creating authentic and emotional experiences is key for hotels. Managers reported that interior design, incorporation of local history and staff training all contribute to this goal. "Grandmother, mother and granddaughter got married at Le Diplomate - it was a very moving experience" (H1). Manager H2 recounted a moving episode: "We had a customer who came to Bucharest every year for a conference and told us that his grandfather had studied at the Polytechnic University (the hotel is nearby, author's note). One year we prepared a surprise: a small photo collage of the old buildings on the campus and a personal letter. He was touched and told us that this was the <warmest gesture> he had ever received at a chain hotel."

Non-managerial employees see the direct impact on customer relations: "When we talk about the history of the hotel or local traditions, guests become more open and appreciate our attention to detail" (H10, H9). Authenticity is therefore maintained through the "humanization of interaction" (H4) and the involvement of employees at all levels.

4. Overarching: Building VRQC and post-COVID context

The concept of quality culture is understood as an integrated commitment to customers and the brand. "Quality is the most important aspect for the brand, the owner and the employees" (H4, H3). Non-executives added that maintaining quality standards depends on communication and collaboration: "If we are not properly informed about changes or new procedures, the customer experience can be affected" (H8, H9).

Staff dynamics and operational turnover were cited as the biggest challenges that can affect the consistency of services. Recommendations from senior managers included staff retention strategies and ongoing training, while non-managerial staff emphasized the importance of ongoing support and internal feedback in maintaining a quality culture (H6, H8).

Table 2 summarizes the main themes and sub-themes identified from interviews with both managerial and operational staff, accompanied by illustrative quotes to highlight participants' perspectives.

Table 2. summary of themes and illustrative quotes from managerial and operational staff interviews

Theme	Sub-theme / Observation	Relevant quotes	Source
Changes in customer expectations	Increase in online bookings and increased requirements after COVID	"Online bookings have increased, there has been a staffing crisis, guest interest in cleanliness has increased."	Manager, H3
	Expectation of premium services	"Expectations are proportional to the price paid, i.e. they expect the highest level of service."	Manager, H4
	Attention to personalized details	"We have noticed that guests appreciate it when they find small personal items in their room - a book, a small gift or a note written by us."	Employee, H7
	Concern about safety and hygiene	"Guests are now asking more about how we ensure that the rooms are disinfected and how quickly we can respond to their special requests."	Employee, H8
Ethical and sustainable practices	Energy efficiency and certifications	"With the renovation, the entire heating/cooling system was replaced - this is much more efficient in terms of consumption."	Manager, H4
	Recycling and waste prevention	"We selectively collect waste and try to reduce food waste; guests even ask about our sustainability policy."	Employee, H6

Theme	Sub-theme / Observation	Relevant quotes	Source
Personalization and digital integration	Involvement of the community	"Guests are positively impressed by these practices."	Manager, H3
	Inclusion of people with disabilities	"Fully equipped and accessible rooms, access ramps, parking."	Manager, H5
	Accessibility and personal support	"All public areas are accessible via spacious elevators and staff offer personal assistance."	Manager, H1
	Personal support without inconvenience	"Staff are trained to help people with reduced mobility without making them feel uncomfortable."	Employee, H8&H10
	Implementation and fewer challenges	"These practices are easy to implement thanks to brand standards and training programs."	Employee, H9
	Loyalty program and tailor-made experiences	"One Rewards by IHG with all the benefits of the individual levels."	Manager, H4
	Check-in and mobile applications	"The use of mobile apps and online check-in shortens waiting times and increases customer convenience."	Manager, H2
	Technical obstacles	"PMS (Property Management System) incompatibility with online check-in leads to accounting difficulties."	Manager, H4
	Manual management of requests	"Sometimes the systems don't communicate with each other and we have to process certain special customer requests manually. "	Employee, H8
	Employee training for digitalization	"We have to learn how to deal with the new applications without compromising the customer experience."	Employee, H6 & H7
	Resistance to digitalization	"There is still resistance from operational staff."	Manager, H2
Authenticity and emotional connection	Integration of the local culture	"Design elements, pictures with personalities from our country; book with the name of the hotel; integration of the hotel's history into the sales pitch."	Manager, H1
	Customer care and cultural education	"Training in customer service and cultural differences"	Manager, H4
	Emotional guest experiences	"Grandmother, mother and granddaughter have organized their weddings at Le Diplomate."	Manager, H1
	Humanizing interactions	"By humanizing the interaction, we manage to maintain authenticity even in standardized chains."	Manager, H2
	Direct emotional connection	"We try to offer them unforgettable moments that create an emotional connection with the hotel."	Employee, H9
Challenges in quality culture	Operational personnel dynamics	"Staff dynamics in operational departments can have an impact on quality standards."	Manager, H3
	Employee retention	"Take measures to retain staff to maintain a culture of quality."	Manager, H4
	Adaptation to customer requirements	"We need to be flexible and adapt quickly to guest demands."	Employee, H6
	Balance between standards and customization	"It's a challenge to maintain brand standards while personalizing services for each guest."	Manager, H2

Source: Authors' own research (2025)

The table shows how hotel chains in Romania are transforming customer expectations into concrete practices by combining digital innovation, experience personalization and social responsibility to build a truly authentic and sustainable culture of quality.

4.2 Content analysis

In addition to the findings from the semi-structured interviews, a comprehensive content analysis of 50 secondary sources was conducted, including 10 hotel websites, 20 social media posts and 20 customer reviews from platforms such as TripAdvisor, Booking.com and Google Reviews. These sources were selected based on their relevance to three key trends in the hospitality industry identified in the literature: ethical/sustainable practices, personalization and digital integration, and authenticity/emotional connection. In the selection process, care was also taken to ensure that different hotel chains were represented in order to obtain a diverse and balanced perspective.

A coding framework was developed to systematically analyse the material. The framework assigned the three trends to observable practices and mentions within the content. Examples of codes are Eco_Certification and Local_Community_Support for sustainability, Mobile_CheckIn_System and AI_Recommendations for personalization, and Cultural_Storytelling and Guest_Emotional_Bond for authenticity. The coding was applied consistently to all 50 sources and resulted in a total of 92 relevant mentions (Table 3).

Table 3. Key hospitality trends identified across online sources

Trend	Websites (n=10)	Social Media (n=20)	Reviews (n=20)	Total Mentions
Ethical/Sustainable Practices	9	14	11	34
Personalization/Digital	8	11	9	28
Authenticity/Emotional	7	10	13	30

Source: Authors' own research (2025)

The analysis revealed that ethical and sustainable practices were the most frequently mentioned trend (34 mentions), highlighting the increasing importance of environmentally conscious initiatives in Romanian hotel chains. Websites frequently highlighted certifications such as Green Key and local sourcing initiatives (e.g. InterContinental Athénée Palace Bucharest, n.d.), while social media reinforced these efforts with posts promoting recycling programs and energy-saving measures. Customer reviews confirmed these practices with comments such as "Hilton's recycling made our stay eco-friendly" (TripAdvisor, n.d.; Hilton, 2024), demonstrating the alignment between hotel communications and guest perceptions.

Personalization and digital integration were mentioned 28 times, reflecting the introduction of contactless technologies and tailored experiences in hotels post-COVID. On websites and social media, features such as the Menteno app and AI chatbots were highlighted (e.g., Romania Insider, 2024), while guest reviews praised the seamless mobile check-in and personalized room preferences at the Sheraton and Le Boutique Hotel Moxa. The balanced distribution across the different sources shows both the promotion of digital tools and their perceived value to customers.

Authenticity and emotional connection were repeatedly mentioned in 30 reviews and on social media, suggesting that guests prefer meaningful, culturally-informed experiences. Examples of this include the storytelling and traditional décor at Radisson Blu Bucharest and Radisson Epoque, which guests say creates a real emotional connection: "Warm staff and Romanian traditions create a real connection" (TripAdvisor, n.d.; Radisson Hotel Group, n.d.). Although the standardization of the chain occasionally limited authenticity, these practices were important differentiators that fostered loyalty and positive emotional connection.

Triangulation with interview data confirmed the robustness and consistency of the findings. Practices highlighted in the interviews, such as laundry reuse programs, mobile check-ins, and cultural storytelling, were confirmed in secondary sources, supporting the reliability of the findings. The analysis also captured post-COVID adjustments, including increased hygiene measures, digital solutions and increased attention to sustainability, which were highlighted by both hotels and customers.

To summarize, the content analysis of 50 secondary sources supports the thematic findings from the interviews and provides quantitative frequency data and qualitative examples that illustrate how Romanian hotel chains are moving towards a value-based quality culture (VRQC). This culture

emphasizes ethical alignment, digital innovation, and authentic customer engagement, responding to changing consumer expectations in a post-pandemic hospitality landscape.

5. Discussion and implications

The results of the study show how Romanian hotel chains are responding to new consumer expectations by introducing a value-based organizational culture (VRQC). The thematic analysis of interviews and the content analysis of secondary sources reveal three main dimensions: ethical, sustainable, and inclusive practices; personalization and digital integration; authenticity and emotional connection. These dimensions are consistent with trends identified in the literature (e.g., Gössling et al., 2020; Sigala, 2021; Zahidi et al., 2024), but offer specific insights for the Romanian context.

Ethical, sustainable, and inclusive practices. Luxury hotels in Romania implement eco-certifications and waste prevention programs, confirming the observations of Gössling et al. (2020) on environmental responsibility as a competitive factor in tourism. Medium-sized hotels are more likely to adopt pragmatic measures, which is in line with the findings of Blanco-Moreno et al. (2025) on financial and operational barriers to sustainability adoption. However, our study makes an original contribution by showing how these practices are communicated through digital channels and explicitly acknowledged in online customer reviews.

Personalization and digital integration. The use of mobile apps, AI chatbots and personalized offers confirms the theories of Sigala (2021) and Zahidi et al. (2024) on the digitalization of the tourism experience as a central element of customer loyalty. Our study shows that average hotels struggle to fully implement these technologies, which extends the existing literature by providing insights into adapting to limited resources and market segmentation.

Authenticity and emotional attachment. The integration of local cultural elements and the creation of memorable experiences support the findings of Pine & Gilmore's (2019) study on the experience economy and Rickly's (2022) study on authenticity in tourism. Our study contributes by highlighting the concrete ways in which Romanian hotels are balancing authenticity and operational requirements, and by demonstrating the impact of these initiatives on customer satisfaction and loyalty as measured by online reviews.

The results suggest that the development of VRQC requires an integrated effort between management and operational staff, which confirms the observations of Bui & Le (2023) and the study by Chathoth et al. (2020) regarding the involvement of all levels of the organization in the implementation of value-based quality strategies. The differences between luxury and mid-range hotels point to the need for differentiated strategies that are adapted to the resources but pursue the same goals such as sustainability, personalization, and authenticity.

Theoretical implications

Our study contributes to the literature on VRQC in the hotel industry by highlighting how Romanian hotels integrate ethical, sustainable and personalized practices into the customer experience. Although previous studies (Gössling et al., 2020) have documented the importance of sustainability in tourism, the present study shows concretely how these practices are implemented in Romanian hotel chains and how they are combined with digitalization and authenticity of experiences.

The results show that hotels use digital tools (mobile apps, AI chatbots) for personalization, which supports Sigala's (2021) theories on digitalization in tourism. Our study helps to understand how technology not only enables efficient operations but also creates perceived customer value.

The study confirms and extends the conclusions of Pine & Gilmore (2019) and Rickly (2022) on the importance of authenticity in tourism experiences. In the Romanian context, authenticity is not only associated with local cultural elements, but also with direct emotional interactions between employees and customers, which supports the experiential theory applied to VRQC.

Practical implications

Managers can use the results of the study to develop strategies and processes that combine sustainability, digitalization and authenticity. For example, the integration of mobile applications that provide personalized recommendations, along with staff training programs on empathetic guest interaction, can increase guest satisfaction and loyalty.

The study shows that the practical implementation of sustainable initiatives (e.g., eco-certifications, waste reduction) must be adapted to the size and typology of the hotel. Managers of mid-sized and small hotels can learn from the experiences of large chains on how to prioritize resources and communicate transparency to guests to support the image of a responsible brand.

The findings highlight the need to invest in digital technologies that enable personalized experiences without reducing human interaction. Hotels can use AI or mobile applications for personalized recommendations, but they must maintain direct contact with guests to preserve the authenticity of the experience.

Analysing online reviews provides valuable feedback for implementing VRQC. Hotels can use this source to adjust services in real time and identify aspects that affect the perception of authenticity, personalization or sustainability.

6. Conclusions

This study explored how Romanian hotel chains are adapting to post-COVID consumer expectations to build a Value-Responsive Quality Culture (VRQC) that integrates ethical/sustainable practices, personalization/digital integration and authenticity/emotional connection. Based on the thematic analysis of 10 semi-structured interviews and the content analysis of 50 sources (10 hotel websites, 20 social media posts, 20 customer reviews), which yielded 92 mentions (34 for ethical/sustainable practices, 28 for personalization/digital integration, 30 for authenticity/emotional connection), the findings confirm that Romanian hotel chains are aligning with global trends in the hospitality industry while addressing local challenges. The VRQC framework, validated through triangulation and expert feedback, provides a strategic tool to improve service quality by aligning stakeholder values (guests, employees, communities) with meaningful practices.

Analysis of the interviews shows that luxury hotels have the resources and infrastructure to fully implement VRQC elements, including complex sustainability initiatives, advanced digitalization and training programs to personalize the guest experience. In contrast, mid-sized hotels are taking more limited measures, adapted to the budget and infrastructure, such as simplified recycling, less complex personalized packages and moderate use of digital technologies. This difference shows that available resources are a crucial factor in implementing sustainable practices. All hotels surveyed show interest in integrating ethical and sustainable practices, but the level of implementation varies. The results show that in the hotel industry, social responsibility initiatives are easier to implement in organizations with more resources and dedicated employees.

Luxury hotels use advanced digital technologies (mobile apps, AI chatbots) to provide personalized experiences, while mid-range hotels use simpler solutions, such as tailored packages based on customer requirements and direct communication via email or phone.

All hotels seek to create authentic experiences for customers by integrating Romanian cultural elements and through personalized interactions with staff. However, luxury hotels offer more complex and consistent experiences, while mid-range hotels tend to apply more selective measures. This suggests that the authenticity of experiences depends on the resources, expertise and commitment of staff.

The study shows that all hotels have introduced additional hygiene and digitalization measures, reflecting the rapid adaptation to new consumer expectations following the pandemic.

The study also has some limitations: The number of interviews (n=10) may limit the generalizability of the results to the entire Romanian hotel industry; the study focused on chain hotels and did not include independent hotels, which may have different practices; the content analysis used public sources and online reviews, which may be subjective or incomplete; direct customer satisfaction was not assessed through our own surveys, which could have provided additional insights.

However, the VRQC framework provides a novel, actionable model for Romanian hotel chains to move from service-driven to value-driven quality and promote sustainable, personalized and authentic experiences that resonate with stakeholders. This study highlights the industry's adaptability to post-COVID challenges and lays a foundation for future research on value-driven hospitality in emerging markets.

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Appendix A

Guide for semi-structured interviews: Building a value-responsive quality culture in hotel chains in Romania

Introduction (3-4 minutes)
Hello, thank you for agreeing to take part in this interview. My name is [...], and I am working on a study investigating how hotel chains in Romania are adapting to the new customer expectations to develop a culture of quality responsive to values. The interview aims to better understand your hotel's practices and strategies in terms of sustainability, personalization, and authenticity. The interview will last approximately 30-45 minutes and will be recorded with your consent to ensure the accuracy of the data. All information will be kept confidential, and your identity will be protected. Do you have any questions before we start? Do you consent to the interview being recorded?

Section 1 Background and general information (5-7 minutes)
1. Can you describe your role and responsibilities in the hotel?
2. How would you characterize the current customer expectations in chain hotels in Romania?
3. What changes have you observed in the Romanian hotel industry after the COVID-19 pandemic?

Section 2 Ethical, sustainable, and inclusive practices (10-12 minutes)
4. What ethical or sustainable practices has your hotel implemented (e.g., waste reduction, use of renewable energy, supporting local communities)?
5. How do customers react to these practices? Can you give specific examples?
6. How does your hotel ensure inclusion (e.g., accessibility for people with disabilities)?
7. What challenges do you face in implementing sustainable or inclusive practices?

Section 3: Personalization and digital inclusion (10-12 minutes)
8. What methods does your hotel use to personalize the customer experience (e.g., tailored services, loyalty programs)?
9. What digital tools or technologies do you use to enhance services (e.g., mobile apps, AI chatbots, online check-in)?
10. How do customers perceive these personalized or digital services? Can you give an example?
11. What are the barriers to implementing personalization or digital integration?

Section 4: Authenticity and emotional connection (10-12 minutes)
12. How does your hotel create authentic experiences that reflect the Romanian culture or brand identity?
13. What strategies do you use to create an emotional connection with customers (e.g., staff training, storytelling, cultural events)?
14. Can you tell a story about a customer experience that was particularly authentic or emotional?
15. How do you manage the balancing act between authenticity and the standardized processes of a hotel chain?

Section 5: Building a Values-Responsive Quality Culture (8-10 minutes)
16. How would you define a "quality culture" in the context of your hotel?
17. What steps is your hotel taking to meet new customer expectations (e.g. sustainability, personalization, authenticity)?
18. What are the biggest challenges in building a value-oriented quality culture?
19. What recommendations would you give to other hotel chains that want to improve this culture?

Conclusion (2-3 minutes)
20. Is there anything else you would like to add about customer expectations or quality culture in Romanian hotel chains?
Thank you very much for your time and your valuable contribution. If you wish, I can send you a summary of the study findings. Do you have any further questions or comments?