

# Hotels as social hubs: a new market approach to enhancing well-being for established and recently arrived locals

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Using an on-campus hotel and a faculty club as a case study, this research examines how hotels can foster community through club formation. It explores the benefits and challenges of such initiatives, with a focus on enhancing member well-being, strengthening social interaction, and creating mutually beneficial partnerships between hotels and faculty members.

**Design/methodology/approach** – A qualitative approach was employed, involving in-depth interviews with seven junior professors and six hotel managers, including the general manager and key department heads. Data were analyzed thematically to identify key opportunities, challenges, and strategic recommendations for establishing and managing faculty clubs within hotel environments.

**Findings** – Findings indicate that junior faculty often experience limited peer support and community engagement, which can be alleviated through participation in faculty-based clubs. Hotel managers recognize the value of leveraging existing facilities to support these initiatives. Faculty members benefit from improved well-being, expanded professional networks, and a stronger sense of belonging, while hotels gain increased revenue and deeper community connections. Evidence also shows that hotels already function as informal social hubs through activities such as fan groups and cooking clubs.

**Practical implications** – Hotels may deploy underutilized spaces to host affinity-based groupings that epitomize community engagement and generate prospective revenue streams. By aligning the offering of amenities with local resident needs, operators can strengthen their positioning as community-centered hubs, reduce seasonal dependencies and engender loyalty amongst local customers.

**Originality/value** – This study contributes to hospitality literature by highlighting how hotels can support community building while expanding their role in well-being and market development.

**Keywords** Community development, Community building, Hotel management, Hospitality industry, Clubs, Networking and well-being

**Paper type** Research article

## 1. Introduction

Population mobility is reshaping local communities across the United States, and the State of Texas vividly illustrates this trend. In 2023, Texas recorded the highest net domestic migration in the country, gaining approximately 134,000 residents as a result of inflows from states such as California, New York, and Florida which exceeded outflows (US Census Bureau, 2024). In the same year, over 272,000 international migrants also arrived in Texas (Trevizo, 2024), contributing to the state's rapid demographic diversification. While mobility can spur



economic growth and cultural vibrancy, it also presents challenges for social integration and well-being. The scarcity of accessible, inclusive social spaces is a critical challenge faced by recent arrivals as they adjust to unfamiliar environments and seek interpersonal connections which can facilitate a sense of belonging. For conceptual clarity, this study distinguishes between tourists, defined as temporary visitors, and newcomers or migrants, defined as individuals who relocate and integrate into a community for employment or long-term residence. The following analysis focuses on the latter group rather than on short-term visitors.

Community integration has been a topic of interest across disciplines, yet hospitality researchers have not examined the role of industry, especially hotels, in this domain. Historically, hotels in the United States functioned not only as lodging establishments but also as places for social interaction and community life (SandovalStrausz, 2007). More recent scholarship has been revisiting this social role. For example, Sandiford (2019) conceptualized hotels as “third places” that support local sociability; Aquino *et al.* (2021) examined hotel involvement in community support during the COVID-19 pandemic; and Dobie *et al.* (2018) showed how hotel corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives can benefit community well-being. Additional studies suggest that hotel design and service offerings, such as food and beverage programming (Mun *et al.*, 2022) or locally-oriented lobby spaces (Park *et al.*, 2024), can foster stronger connections with nearby residents.

Despite these contributions, the literature has yet to provide a full and systematic articulation of how hotels might serve as social hubs that support sustained community integration and individual well-being. The existing research has focused on discrete interventions (e.g. CSR activities) or on aspects of design and temporary engagement rather than exploring strategic, ongoing social engagement embedded in regular operations. As a result, the notion of the hotel as an intentionally managed space for community life has been underexplored empirically and conceptually by hospitality scholars. This gap is significant given the mounting pressure on hotel managers to diversify revenue streams, address seasonality, and strengthen relevance to local markets; yet evidence-based models demonstrating how hospitality spaces can contribute to both social and business outcomes are limited.

This study addresses this scholarly and practical gap by investigating how a hotel can function as a social hub that enhances community belonging, well-being, and networking while supporting hotel operations and opening new market opportunities. Assistant professors form the focal group for this research. These represent a group of academic newcomers who have recently relocated for employment and often experience social isolation while establishing professional and personal networks in a new community. By focusing on this specific group, the study situates community integration within a well-defined population that exemplifies the social challenges associated with relocation, rather than treating migrants as a homogeneous category.

The conceptual framework for this study draws on community-building theory (Kruckeberg and Starck, 1988), which emphasizes the purposeful creation of social ties and mutual support; community development theory (Christenson and Robinson, 1989), which highlights participatory engagement and empowerment; and third place theory (Oldenburg, 1989), which identifies neutral, accessible environments outside home and work as essential for fostering community ties. Taken together, these perspectives suggest that physical and social spaces which are managed intentionally, can support repeated interactions, shared identity, and a sense of belonging. These are in turn linked to improved psychological and social outcomes (Haim-Litevsky *et al.*, 2023). Drawing on historical analogies, exclusive social clubs have traditionally served as sites of social networking and well-being (Moss, 2001). This study explores whether hotels can adapt these functions in a more inclusive and community-oriented format, aligning social value with hospitality operations.

The empirical setting for this research is a hotel located on a major university campus within the Texas Triangle, a region that encompasses approximately 66% of the state’s population across its largest metropolitan areas (Kinder Institute for Urban Research, 2023).

The hotel serves out-of-town visitors, faculty, students, and locals, and its public spaces, including café, lobby, and conference areas, already host a range of social and academic events, making it suitable for studying how hospitality spaces can facilitate community engagement. Guided by these contexts, the study addresses the following research questions:

- (1) How can hotels serve as inclusive social hubs that foster community connection, social well-being, and a sense of belonging for both local residents and recently relocated individuals?
- (2) In what ways can hotel-based clubs contribute to community vitality and unlock new market opportunities within the hospitality industry?

To unpack these questions, the study further explores:

- (1) how newly relocated individuals perceive the hotel as a space contributing to their social integration and professional development,
- (2) the benefits and challenges hotel managers foresee in developing hotel-based clubs, and
- (3) how hotels can strategically implement community-building practices to attract and retain broader customer segments beyond traditional overnight guests.

By answering these questions, the study makes three key contributions. First, it extends theoretical understanding of hotels as multifunctional social spaces that go beyond accommodation. Second, it offers practical insights for hotel practitioners on enhancing well-being and belonging among newcomers in urban communities. Third, it provides strategic recommendations on aligning community-oriented practices with business strategy to strengthen revenue streams and brand relevance. Through empirical evidence from both community members and hotel managers, this research presents a novel framework for aligning social value creation with long-term market development and operational resilience in hospitality.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1 Historical context

The hospitality sector has long served as a place of social interaction and community engagement, yet its role has historically varied between inclusivity and exclusivity. Early American “public houses” and English pubs functioned as community centers, hosting social, political, and cultural gatherings. These spaces were inherently accessible, offering platforms for spontaneous social interaction and collective identity formation. They highlight a historical precedent for hospitality venues acting as third places, sites that facilitate informal connection beyond home and work.

However, the evolution of clubs and country clubs in the U.S. reveals an alternative perspective on hospitality’s community function. Clubs, originating in elite urban settings like St. Andrew’s Country Club in 1888, are characterized by exclusive membership and high financial barriers, creating spaces that simultaneously build community while reinforcing social hierarchies (Golf Digest, 2008). Here, the concept of community becomes selective: membership consolidates shared interests and social status but limits accessibility. This raises a conceptual question for contemporary hospitality: can hotels replicate the community-building benefits of clubs while avoiding exclusionary practices tied to wealth or privilege?

Historically, “community” is framed as a cohesive network of personal ties and shared interests (Storper, 2005). This study positions hotels as potential sites for inclusive community formation, adopting the relational and social cohesion benefits of clubs without the barriers inherent in elite institutions. By designing environments that foster belonging and shared identity, hotels may simultaneously support interpersonal connection, well-being, and social

integration. In doing so, this research foregrounds a theoretical reframing: hospitality venues can act as managed social infrastructures that balance accessibility with affinity, creating inclusive third places that build meaningful community while avoiding the exclusivity historically associated with clubs. This may position hotels not only as service providers but also as active social actors, potentially shaping contemporary urban and professional networks.

## 2.2 Conceptual framework

This study integrates three complementary theoretical perspectives; third place theory, community-building theory, and community development theory. These theories are used to explain how hotels may function as intentionally managed social hubs. Rather than treating these perspectives independently, the study positions them as sequential and interrelated mechanisms that link physical space, structured engagement, and community-level outcomes within hospitality settings. First, third place theory provides the spatial foundation of the model. Third places are informal, public environments outside home (the first place) and work (the second place) that foster conversation, connection, and inclusivity. Core characteristics include ease of access, the presence of regular participants, and the development of a “home-away-from-home” atmosphere (Montgomery and Miller, 2011). Previous studies have emphasized the importance of third places in promoting social cohesion and the formation of strong social ties (e.g. Goosen and Cilliers, 2020). Within hospitality contexts, hotels can serve as such third places through spaces such as ballrooms, cafés, lounges, and event areas, offering consistent and welcoming environments for recurring interaction. In doing so, hotels contribute to the broader social infrastructure (Klinenberg, 2018) that supports community interaction and fosters belonging among targeted affinity groups, such as faculty members participating in a hotel-based club. Thus, third place theory explains how hotels provide the physical and social conditions necessary for sustained engagement.

Second, community-building theory explains the relational mechanisms that operate within that space. Community-building emphasizes the intentional creation of environments that foster trust, shared identity, and mutual support. In contemporary contexts characterized by professional fragmentation and mobility, structured initiatives become essential for rebuilding social cohesion. Research in hospitality and service contexts suggests that organizations can actively foster these bonds through structured programs that promote sustained social interaction and shared identity (Almeida and Campos, 2022; Fernández-Gómez *et al.*, 2019; King and Tang, 2020). Within the hotel setting, affinity-based initiatives such as a faculty club transform casual encounters into predictable, repeated interaction. Through structured programming, shared activities, and regular meetings, the hotel facilitates the development of belonging and interpersonal trust among members. In this way, community-building theory clarifies how spatial interaction evolves into meaningful relational bonds.

Third, community development theory extends the framework to developmental and empowerment outcomes. This perspective emphasizes participatory engagement, capacity building, and collective improvement. Applied to the hotel-based faculty club, community development theory suggests that sustained belonging can foster professional growth, mentorship, social integration, and collective capacity among members. This theory supports the notion that hospitality spaces, like hotels, can function as platforms for initiatives that enhance community connection and overall well-being (Sandiford, 2019). Importantly, these outcomes extend beyond individual well-being; they also strengthen the hotel’s embeddedness within the local community by positioning it as a platform for empowerment and collaboration.

Taken together, the three theories operate sequentially and interactively. Third place theory explains how hotels provide the spatial conditions for repeated interaction; community-building theory explains how structured affinity-based initiatives transform interaction into

belonging; and community development theory explains how belonging evolves into empowerment, professional development, and sustained community value. This integrated perspective positions hotels not merely as accommodation providers, but as intentionally managed social infrastructures capable of generating both enhanced well-being for targeted groups and long-term organizational sustainability (see [Figure 1](#)).

2.3 Empirical research and research gaps

A growing body of literature acknowledges that hotels can extend their role beyond accommodation, yet this research remains conceptually fragmented. One stream of studies examines hotels’ temporary or crisis-driven community engagement, such as their adaptive responses during COVID-19, where properties supported public health and local well-being ([Aquino et al., 2021](#)). While this line of inquiry demonstrates hospitality’s social responsiveness, it often frames engagement as situational rather than structurally embedded in hotel operations.

A second stream emphasizes community engagement as a driver of local development and sustainability (e.g. [Wiltshier, 2020](#)). Here, hotels are positioned as stakeholders in regional resilience. However, these studies primarily focus on external impact rather than on how hotels might serve as ongoing social infrastructures for specific affinity groups. A third body of research draws on third-place theory and spatial design, showing how food and beverage programming, lobby openness, and architectural elements can attract both guests and locals ([Sandiford, 2019](#)). Environmental psychology further reinforces this perspective by demonstrating how thoughtfully designed environments enhances psychological well-being and spontaneous interaction ([Sui et al., 2023](#)). Although these studies highlight the importance of space and atmosphere, they often treat social interaction as emergent rather than intentionally structured.

Parallel to this, research on subscription models and loyalty systems ([Kim et al., 2026](#)) introduces a revenue-focused lens, suggesting that recurring engagement can generate financial stability and repeat visitation. Yet this stream typically emphasizes customer retention and economic outcomes without explicitly integrating theories of belonging or community-building. Similarly, CSR-oriented research ([Dobie et al., 2018](#)) frames hotels’ community involvement as an ethical or reputational responsibility. While valuable, this approach positions social contribution as an adjunct activity rather than as a core strategic function.

Taken together, prior research shows that hotels can contribute to communities through CSR initiatives, crisis response, and spatial design that encourages interaction. However, these perspectives largely treat community engagement as either situational or emergent rather than as a strategically structured function embedded within hotel operations. Consequently, limited empirical attention has been given to how hotels might intentionally operate as semi-commercial social hubs that cultivate sustained belonging while maintaining organizational viability. While third place theory highlights the value of informal social interaction, less is known about how professionally managed hospitality environments can deliberately structure

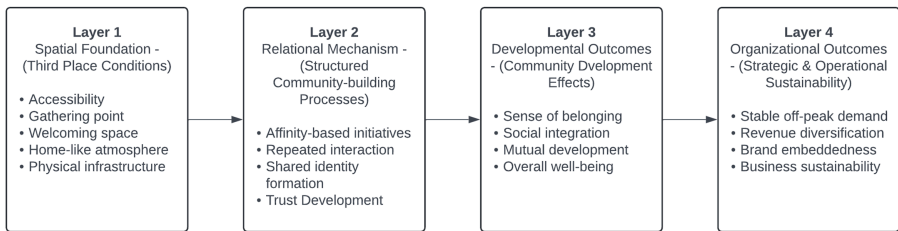


Figure 1. Conceptual model

affinity-based engagement to foster cohesion and well-being (Seeman, 1996). This study addresses that gap by examining a faculty club embedded within a hotel setting as an example of an intentionally organized social platform. By integrating third place, community-building, and community development perspectives, the research advances understanding of how structured hospitality spaces can transform recurring interaction into belonging and developmental outcomes, while simultaneously supporting long-term strategic sustainability.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Research design

The research design for this study adopts an exploratory, qualitative single-case study approach, aiming to explore the role of hotels as social hubs and their impact on local and newcomer well-being. Informal observations made during a summer position as a student worker at the Hotel provided early insights into its community-focused programming and available spots, especially during low season, reinforcing its suitability as a case for in-depth qualitative exploration. Case studies are particularly useful for exploring complex phenomena in real-life contexts, especially when context matters (Yin, 2018). The choice of a single-case study is justified because the case (hotel) provides a rich context to examine how semi-commercial third places can foster community-building, social cohesion, and well-being, linking hospitality practice with third place and community development theories. To assess the feasibility of this model, this study adopts the Lean Startup approach, which emphasizes rapid hypothesis testing and market validation before committing significant resources (Eisenmann *et al.*, 2012). This makes the case study method particularly suitable, as it allows for in-depth exploration and iterative testing of the model within a real-world context. The case study is set in Texas, USA, with a particular focus on a campus hotel.

#### 3.2 Sample and data collection

As this is a case study, the population for this research consists of hotel managers at the hotel, as well as assistant professors at the university, who represent the target community. The assistant professors' community (or faculty community in a broader sense) was selected because this hotel is a campus hotel, and the faculty is the closest existing community to the hotel. Additionally, their characteristics closely align with the research purpose, as they form a group of individuals who share common experiences, many of whom are newcomers to the town. This study focused on assistant professors, as early-career academics are more likely to face relocation compared with other faculty positions. By conducting this case study and deriving findings from it, actionable recommendations can be generated for hospitality practitioners aiming to support social integration and community well-being. This study adopts a dual-perspective, where assistant professors represent the demand-side perspective, providing insights into community needs and well-being outcomes, while hotel managers represent the supply-side perspective, offering strategic and operational insights regarding feasibility, positioning, and revenue implications. Including both groups allows examination of the relational and institutional dynamics necessary for sustainable community-building within hospitality settings.

The study relies primarily on criterion sampling (Patton, 2014) for participant selection. Data collection took place during the spring and fall of 2025. Hotel managers were selected based on their leadership roles and decision-making responsibilities within the property. For assistant professors, criterion sampling was combined with a referral-based approach to identify additional information-rich participants who met the predefined criteria (e.g. recent relocation). The study conducted 13 in-depth interviews, which is considered sufficient based on recommendations by Malterud *et al.* (2016). This sample size was further justified using the concept of information power, as the study's narrow aim, highly specific participant groups, and depth of the semi-structured interviews provided high information power. A total of six out

of eight hotel managers were interviewed, representing the majority of the identified population within this group. For faculty members, interviews continued until data saturation was reached, in line with [Guest et al. \(2006\)](#) saturation was considered achieved after the fifth interview, as no new themes or factors emerged beyond that point. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 30 minutes, enabling in-depth exploration of participants' experiences ([Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009](#)).

#### *Ethical approval*

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the university's Institutional Review Board prior to commencing data collection. All procedures were compliant with relevant institutional and national guidelines for research involving human participants. Before participating, all prospective respondents were fully informed about the study purpose, voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Participants were also informed about how their data would be recorded, stored, and used for research purposes. Informed consent was obtained prior to each interview, including for audio recording. Participant anonymity and confidentiality were maintained strictly throughout the investigative process, all data were stored securely, and accessibility was confined to research team members. The study posed no foreseeable risks to participants. Interviews were conducted either in person or via Zoom to accommodate participant preferences and were transcribed for analysis purposes. The interview protocol is provided in [Appendix A](#).

#### *3.3 Quality assurance measures*

Reliability and validity criteria were addressed through credibility and dependability measures. Credibility was ensured through data triangulation ([Decrop, 1999](#)), including interviews with both hotel managers and faculty members, and saturation, where interviews continued until no new themes emerged. Dependability was achieved by maintaining a clear audit trail of our research process, including detailed documentation of data collection and analysis steps ([Carcary, 2009](#)). These strategies helped ensure the consistency and trustworthiness of our findings.

#### *3.4 Data analysis*

The data collected through semi-structured interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis ([Braun and Clarke, 2006](#)), supported by MAXQDA24 software. This tool facilitated the systematic organization, coding, and interpretation of the qualitative data ([Wahyuni, 2012](#)). Thematic analysis was selected for its suitability to identify patterns related to social interaction, community-building, and well-being, directly linking empirical data to the study's conceptual framework. After initial coding of the transcripts, codes were systematically reviewed and compared across participants to identify overlaps and similarities. Related codes were grouped into preliminary categories, which were then refined and consolidated into broader themes. Each theme was composed of multiple underlying factors, reflecting different aspects of participants' experiences. This iterative process involved revisiting the transcripts to ensure that the final themes accurately represented patterns and nuances across the dataset. Following [Creswell and Creswell's \(2017\)](#) procedural guidelines, the analysis used constant comparison to inductively identify key concepts and recurring patterns, providing a structured understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

Given the researcher's proximity to the research context through prior employment at the case study hotel, there was a need to consider reflexivity throughout the study. While this position provided valuable contextual understanding, potential bias was mitigated by using a semi-structured interview guide, relying on verbatim transcripts during thematic analysis, and systematically comparing data across participants. Including perspectives from both hotel managers and assistant professors further enhanced credibility through triangulation. In

addition, informal observations of hotel spaces and community activities during the researcher’s employment provided contextual insight that supported the interpretation of interview findings, although these observations were not formally coded as a separate data source.

#### 4. Results

Figures 2 and 3 show the framework that highlights the views of assistant professors and hotel managers on the faculty club. As shown in the framework, six major themes emerged from the interviews with faculty members, and ten major themes emerged from the interviews with hotel managers. The following sections provide a detailed discussion of these themes, accompanied by interview quotes (see Appendix B and C).

##### 4.1 Assistant professors’ views on the faculty club

4.1.1 Theme 1: Current Situation of Faculty Life and their social community. The life of assistant professors, especially those on the tenure track, is filled with stress and pressure. As one interviewee explained, “It’s always about work, work, pumping out research, pumping out grants, stuff that will advance our career, as opposed to forming, like a relationship that’s based on, you know, togetherness, Kumbaya, you know, we are of the status, like, let’s celebrate that,

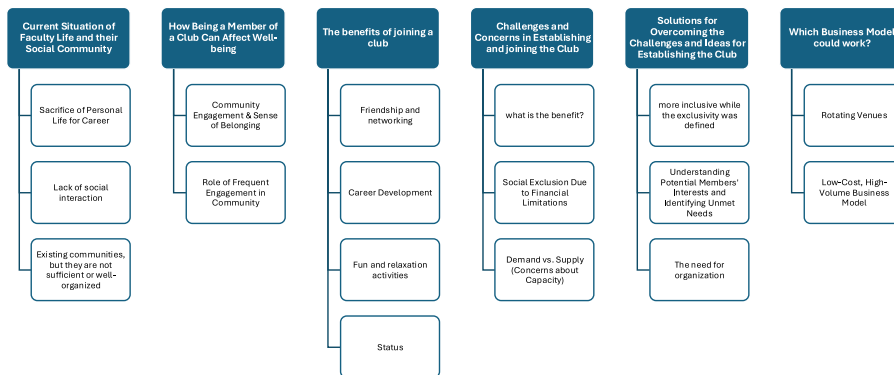


Figure 2. Thematic framework of assistant professors’ perspectives on the faculty club

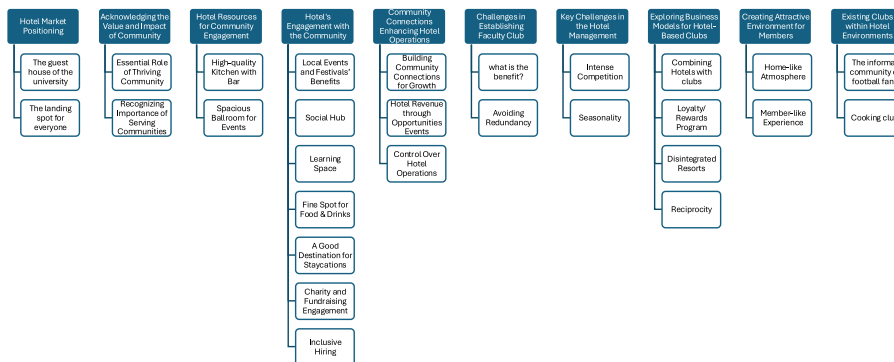


Figure 3. Thematic framework of hotel managers’ perspectives on the faculty club

and let's just sit back and relax like that's not the life of an assistant professor" (F3). Peer support and social interaction would be helpful, but they are often lacking or have diminished over time. One respondent noted, "there's no social, there's not really a lot of social" (F2). While there are some gatherings, they are not well coordinated. As one interviewee mentioned, "I attend meetings, they have lunch and learn . . . if it's on Tuesdays, and I can't go because I have class" (F2).

*4.1.2 Theme 2: how club affiliations can affect well-being.* Being a member of a club can enhance well-being, as one interviewee said, "I do believe that being a member of the country club can enhance one's well-being" (F3). The main factor was community engagement and belonging. One interviewee noted, "I do think that being a member of a country club . . . can foster a sense of belonging" (F3). Another key factor was regular club interactions that foster friendships and community. One interviewee explained, "the meeting taking place at the same location and if that's the hotel and conference and I think that's great because it's accessible you grow a sense of community based on that predictability you know that at the end of every Thursday at 4:00 you can go to this same location and likely there will be some of the same people there you really get to build and grow and that level of predictability kind of nurtures the sense of community" (F5).

*4.1.3 Theme 3: the benefits of joining a club.* Friendship and networking emerged as a key benefit of club membership, particularly for assistant professors who had recently relocated. As stated by one interviewee, "Having friends is important. For an assistant professor who has come from another town, city, or country . . . it might be difficult for them to find friends right away . . . On the other hand, having such a club would actually be more helpful, because then you would immediately find people who come from the same background" (F1). Beyond social interaction, these clubs aid career development. One said, "get connected with mentors or senior mentors . . . those who are senior in the field" (F6) could be valuable for professional development. Another major benefit was fun and relaxation. One explained, "For example, at some country clubs, you go and play golf . . . everyone is a big fan of golf, and then you have a common activity to discuss and enjoy" (F1). Status within the community was also a key. One noted, "When you feel like your status is defined by being a member of a . . . club, it can increase your well-being." (F3).

*4.1.4 Theme 4: challenges and concerns in establishing and joining the club.* The main concern before and after establishing the club is understanding its benefits. One interviewee mentioned "I would have to know what the benefits are" (F3). Financial limitations also raised concerns about social exclusion. One interviewee explained, "We are not able to connect with others . . . because we don't have the means to pay for the membership dues. I think that could be one of the consequences" (F3). Additionally, one interviewee mentioned a capacity concern: "If it was university-wide and a low-cost option, it could become incredibly popular . . . So, I wonder if that could lead to a capacity issue" (F4).

*4.1.5 Theme 5: solutions for overcoming the challenges and ideas for establishing the club.* A key idea was creating a club balancing inclusivity and exclusivity. One interviewee said, "Having all the professors from different levels would be more helpful, because there would be more people, and the environment would be more vibrant and livelier" (F1). Another important point was understanding members' interests and unmet needs. One person noted, "I don't know if there is, like, a spa on campus already, but if there isn't, I think that would be a great opportunity for the . . . club to meet that unmet need." (F4). Organization matters too; "Having some sort of agenda beforehand, so that you can share it with the members, would be a good idea" (F1).

*4.1.6 Theme 6: which business model could work?.* A major theme was strategy, how this club could function. One idea is a Rotating Venue, as one interviewee said, "That's a cool idea to be like, Hey, come this Friday, and we're going to have this space at the university club where you can get some food and drinks. But next Thursday, we'll be at this hotel with a hot tub and pickleball or something. . . . That's a cool idea!" (F4). Another model raised by the same interviewee was Low-Cost, High-Volume. They explained: "There are a lot of services and

businesses out there that operate with this model of low cost but high customer volume. If it were a very low-cost offering, it seems that, from a business perspective, it would likely require a large volume of club members to sustain itself. For example, look at Disney + or Hulu, these streaming services have a lower cost but need a large volume of subscribers to succeed” (F4).

#### 4.2 Hotel manager views about a prospective faculty club

4.2.1 *Theme 1: Hotel Market Positioning.* A key theme from the interviews was Hotel Market Positioning. One interviewee stressed that even new initiatives should align with it, saying, “I think as long as everything matches the brand, it might make sense” (H4). The hotel’s role as the university’s guest house was the first factor identified in this theme. “When we opened this hotel, I had to spend a lot of time talking to folks within the university to help them understand that we were the university’s hotel” (H1). Although this is a campus university, and they primarily see themselves as the university’s guest house, it is also a space open to everyone: “This isn’t exclusive to faculty . . . kind of being a landing spot for everyone” (H2).

4.2.2 *Theme 2: acknowledging the value and impact of community.* Another major theme was recognizing the value of community. One factor for this theme was the essential role of a thriving community. An interviewee shared, “I think regardless of what the community looks like, as people, we need community. There’s a benefit that anyone gets from a thriving community . . . Whether you’re attending or servicing it, there’s value and benefit” (H2). Another factor was the importance of serving and supporting communities. Even without profit, one interviewee emphasized their commitment: “They paid for us to do it, but there was no profit in that. But it was the right thing for us to do” (F1).

4.2.3 *Theme 3: hotel resources and facilities for community engagement and social gatherings.* In terms of the facilities the hotel offers, it can primarily rely on its fine kitchen, food and beverage services, and a suitable ballroom. One of the interviewees mentioned, “Well, we have a little over 32,000 square feet of conference and ballroom space. So, that’s pretty good for a small hotel; it’s a decent-sized conference room base. We also have a full kitchen, so we can provide food and beverage services, as well as a bar and restaurant. Additionally, we have 250 guest rooms” (H6).

4.2.4 *Theme 4: how the hotel serves and engages with the community.* The hotel currently serves the community in multiple ways and has potential for further growth. One key factor is hosting local events and festivals. An interviewee said, “It benefits the community in the sense that here’s something really interesting, which I’d probably had to go to (other cities) to experience” (H1). The hotel also acts as a social hub. The same interviewee stated, “This is an asset that serves as the gateway to the university, and to the outside world, and it can function as the social hub for the university” (H1). They added, “We want this (hotel) to be connected to the university in a sense of being a place where learning is happening” (H1). Another factor is its contribution to providing exceptional food and beverage experiences: “For the community, we’re offering fine dining experiences” (H4). The hotel also attracts locals for staycations: “Some people may do a staycation” (H4). Additionally, this hotel hosts fundraisers: “We’re the location chosen for lots of galas and fundraisers throughout the years” (H3). Finally, the hotel strengthens the community by supporting inclusive hiring: “We’re very active with Project Reach, which helps disabled individuals find work” (H5).

4.2.5 *Theme 5: the role of community connections in enhancing hotel operations and revenue.* A key benefit for the hotel is the opportunity to strengthen community ties. One interviewee noted, “It would create value for the hotel and enhance its reputation within the community, because the faculty are also very much members of the larger the city community . . . There’s a further reach that could then draw in additional business for us” (H2). Another factor is the potential to sell rooms or tickets tied to local events. As one interviewee said, “There’ll be a lot of nearby folks who come for the festival. They’ll stay. They’ll stay with us” (H1). A final benefit is improved operational control. One interviewee explained, “I wouldn’t

say it would be a big source of revenue . . . but it would be something that we would have control over. It would be consistent and not necessarily community-driven, like a football game . . . It's something we control" (H4).

*4.2.6 Theme 6: Key Challenges in establishing a faculty club within the hotel.* The most important factor mentioned by the interviewees was What is the Benefit? One interviewee stated, "What's the value of that? You know, I'm going to charge you. It's going to cost me this much because anything you give has a cost associated with it, right? So, step one is to figure out, okay, what are people looking for? Let's create this club and offer these benefits, but it's going to come with a fee. Are these people willing to pay this fee for that amenity?" (H3). Another factor that emerged was Avoiding Redundancy. One interviewee noted, "Could we run a faculty club for the university? Sure, we could. There's already one that exists. I don't think there's a need for a second one" (H1).

*4.2.7 Theme 7: Key Challenges in the hotel management.* The first factor mentioned was intense competition. One of the interviewees noted, "All these hotels got built right in front of this hotel . . . There is a massive amount of new supply that entered this market, a huge 60% growth over about a three-year period" (H1). Another factor was seasonality, as the same interviewee mentioned, "The second half of December and the first 10 days of January are more challenging, as people don't tend to be meeting. So, those are more challenging times." (H1).

The interplay between Theme 5 (community connections) and Theme 7 (hotel management challenges) highlights key factors impacting revenue generation. Intense competition and seasonality are the most important challenges the hotel is facing. On the other hand, steady revenue from community events and local engagement is not affected by seasonality, and if the hotel can leverage these initiatives effectively, it could gain a competitive advantage over its competitors. Even if competitors attempt community-based initiatives, this is a positive sign, as it contributes to a more vibrant community within the competitive market that shapes around it.

*4.2.8 Theme 8: exploring business models for hotel-based clubs.* Several business models for operating a club within a hotel emerged during interviews. One example was combining hotels with health or country clubs. One interviewee shared: "If you go down to Houston and visit the Houstonian Hotel, there's an interesting model . . . They operate a very high-end health club. . . . It's a big health club attached to the hotel. It's there for the benefit of hotel guests too" (H1). Another model mentioned was loyalty or rewards programs. One interviewee stated: "We've had a few different loyalty programs or a few different avenues through which guests can receive discounts or connect with benefits" (H4). Disintegrated resorts were also discussed. As one interviewee explained: like "where we are the central point, and then we have relationships with places like . . . Golf Course" (H2). Reciprocity in club memberships was another idea. One interviewee noted: "(there is) a corporation that manages several country clubs across the country, and they offer reciprocity . . . if I'm a member of (it) my home club is in Houston, but if I'm traveling to Colorado, I can check to see if there's a club there that offers me reciprocity." (H3).

*4.2.9 Theme 9: creating an attractive environment for club members.* One key factor is a home-like atmosphere with personalized service. As one interviewee noted: "I have worked at the hotel at Auburn University . . . what I witnessed in their restaurant was very much the same every day at lunch, faculty members coming in, and the staff knowing them. Everyone was on a first-name basis . . . It created an elevated experience, but at the same time, it was very comfortable and home-like" (H2). The same interviewee emphasized the value of a member-like experience, saying: "I think that everyone likes . . . to remember their unique preferences, whether it's their preferred soft drink or a food allergy . . . That's where you continue to attract more customers and, as a result, generate more word of mouth . . . Hey, this experience is unlike anything else . . . You should come here and experience something unique, something member-like" (H2).

4.2.10 *Theme 10: existing clubs within hotel environments.* An informal community that emerges because of the hotel's presence is the group of football fans. One interviewee noted, "I think there is a smaller community, particularly during football season. . . . we have guests who stay with us for every game, and they might have their own little community" (H2). Additionally, other affinity groups, such as cooking club, have been created by the hotel, where members share similar interests and meet and interact regularly through cooking classes and events. One interviewee mentioned "like our culinary . . . they do like a cooking class or how to make a certain type of drink class, and we get a lot of repeat attendees there too" (H4).

## 5. Discussion and conclusions

### 5.1 Discussion

The growth of individualism within advanced societies such as the United States has contributed to loneliness, social detachment, and a lack of support, leaving many people without essential social connections (Heu *et al.*, 2019; Viswanath *et al.*, 2006). These gaps in social support can lead to mental health challenges, including depression and anxiety (Chen *et al.*, 2024). Addressing these issues requires intentional efforts to build and sustain community, and the tourism and hospitality industry is uniquely positioned to play such a role. By fostering spaces that encourage interaction and shared experiences, hotels and similar venues can help mitigate social isolation while simultaneously contributing to local community development. Our findings support this potential, showing that hotels can actively engage affinity groups, create predictable opportunities for social connection, and provide structured environments that strengthen relationships. In this way, hotels not only enhance the well-being of community members but also generate strategic and financial benefits for themselves, demonstrating a mutually reinforcing model of social and economic value.

The interview data revealed six themes from faculty members and ten themes from hotel managers. The discussion first presents the empirical findings and then interprets each of them in relation to relevant theoretical frameworks. The first faculty theme, Current Situation of Faculty Life and Their Social Community, indicates that assistant professors experience professional pressure and limited structured opportunities for peer interaction. Interviewees described fragmented engagement and difficulties in maintaining consistent social interaction. Assessing such contextual conditions is essential for identifying intervention needs (Schön, 2017). Empirically, the findings point to a perceived gap in organized community support among early-career faculty. Interpreted through Community Development Theory, participatory and structured platforms may strengthen fragmented communities; however, the present study documents perceived needs rather than testing developmental outcomes.

The second and third themes show that faculty members expect a structured club to enhance belonging, engagement, networking, and professional collaboration. These expectations were expressed consistently in interviews but were not measured through behavioral or psychological indicators. Thus, the empirical contribution lies in identifying faculty perceptions of anticipated benefits. Interpreting these findings through third place theory, recurring and predictable gatherings may facilitate social cohesion and informal learning.

The fourth faculty theme identified concerns regarding affordability, value clarity, and organizational feasibility. Interviewees explicitly questioned the tangible benefits of membership and emphasized inclusivity and effective structure. The fifth and sixth faculty themes suggested solutions and possible strategies (such as rotating venues (Kaufmann *et al.*, 2016) and adopting a low-cost, high-volume model (Carroni and Paolini, 2020) which emerged directly from participants. These proposals represent exploratory strategic concepts grounded in interview data. Therefore, the study provides insight into perceived feasibility conditions, not confirmed implementation success.

Turning to hotel manager perspectives, the first theme, Hotel Market Position, indicates that managers view the property primarily as the university's guest house while aiming to

communicate openness to broader audiences. Market positioning influences how initiatives are evaluated and aligned with brand identity (Keller and Kotler, 2009). The second theme, Acknowledgement of Community Value, reflects managers' belief that community engagement contributes to both relational and organizational value, consistent with arguments by Donnelly *et al.* (2023). Importantly, these statements represent managerial perceptions rather than performance outcomes measured in this study.

The third and fourth themes document the hotel's existing infrastructure and current community-oriented activities, including conferences, culinary classes, jazz events, and recurring informal affinity groups such as football-related gatherings. Empirically, these examples demonstrate that the hotel already facilitates repeated social interaction. Interpreted through third place theory, such recurring activities share characteristics with managed third places that enable informal connection. Revenue-related considerations emerged in the fifth theme. Managers suggested that structured community initiatives could generate more stable and controllable demand, particularly in contexts characterized by competition (Nain, 2018) and seasonality (Sáez-Fernández *et al.*, 2020). These assumptions align with prior findings that socially responsible, community-oriented hotels may experience operational and financial advantages.

The sixth and seventh themes, Key Challenges in Establishing and Operating a Faculty Club, indicate the need to clarify benefits, ensure mutual value for members and the hotel, and avoid redundancy. Interviewees reported uncertainty about the club's unique contribution and potential operational conflicts. Empirically, these findings highlight perceived gaps in benefit clarity and alignment. Interpreted through Resource-Based (Barney, 1991) and Strategic Management perspectives (Porter, 2008), addressing these gaps may enhance value creation. The last three themes focus on hotel management pressures, proposed business models, and examples of existing clubs. Competition and seasonality were reported as key contextual challenges. Hybrid formats, loyalty integration, reciprocity arrangements, and informal communities (e.g. football and cooking clubs) were suggested to enhance member engagement. Empirically, these reflect managerial perceptions; interpreted through service-dominant logic (Vargo and Lusch, 2014) and third place theories, they suggest potential mechanisms for value co-creation and social connection.

It is notable that prior studies have explored how hospitality organizations can contribute to community-building while also deriving organizational benefits. The present study extends this knowledge base by providing empirical documentation of (1) a perceived need for structured faculty interaction, (2) managerial openness to community-oriented initiatives, and (3) existing affinity-based social practices within a hotel environment. Collectively, these findings suggest that hotels may function as intentionally managed social infrastructures that extend beyond accommodation services. This study demonstrates that social interactions are a vital element in hotels settings and that when design is a purposeful element of social infrastructure, it can generate economic value as well as community well-being. The proposed reframing extends the role of hospitality from service provision to community facilitation, offering a resource effective means of addressing social fragmentation and contributing revenues. While broader outcomes such as urban vibrancy or long-term financial performance require further empirical validation, the findings provide a strong conceptual and practical foundation for future research and implementation.

### 5.2 Conclusion

This study set out to examine how hotels can function as inclusive social hubs that foster community connection, enhance well-being, and create new market opportunities, particularly for newcomers to the locality who are adjusting to a new environment. The findings indicate that individuals who have recently relocated often experience fragmented social interaction and limited opportunities for meaningful engagement. At the same time, hotel managers recognize both the social and strategic value of facilitating such interactions, while also

identifying challenges related to value clarity, positioning, and operational feasibility. Importantly, the study shows that hotels already act as informal social hubs through recurring activities such as cooking clubs and fan-based gatherings, which create predictable opportunities for shared interactions and experiences. These existing examples demonstrate that structured, affinity-based initiatives can strengthen belonging, social connection, and overall well-being. Building on this foundation, hotels can intentionally expand such offerings to support both newcomers and well-established residents, while simultaneously enhancing customer engagement. Overall, the research highlights the potential for aligning community well-being with business strategy by leveraging existing practices and spaces. While the findings are exploratory and context-specific, they provide a foundation for practical application and further scholarly inquiry. This reinforces the role of hotels as managed social infrastructures capable of generating both social and economic value.

### *5.3 Theoretical contributions*

This study extends existing third place and community-building theories by demonstrating how hotels could function as intentionally managed, semi-commercial third places that foster sustained social connection and well-being. While third place theory has traditionally emphasized spontaneous, minimally commercial environments, the findings suggest that structured hotel-based clubs can replicate and even enhance third-place functions through predictability, shared identity, and repeated interaction. This reframes third places as potentially managed social infrastructures rather than purely organic spaces. Furthermore, the study refines community-building theory by showing that selectively inclusive, affinity-based communities, such as faculty clubs and cooking clubs, may generate stronger belonging and sustained engagement than fully open public environments. By empirically linking social belonging, professional networking, and emotional well-being with revenue stability and operational resilience, this research bridges a gap between social theory and hospitality strategy. It positions community-building not only as a normative social objective but also as a strategic mechanism for market innovation and competitive differentiation within hospitality management.

### *5.4 Practical implications*

From a practical perspective, this research offers valuable insights for hotel managers seeking to diversify their offerings. At a time when hotels face increasing competition and seasonality, managers articulated the pressure to diversify beyond traditional lodging services. In this context, the findings offer a strategic pathway for integrating social value creation with business sustainability. Faculty participants consistently reported fragmented social interaction, lack of structured engagement, and a desire for predictable peer connection, while managers highlighted competition, seasonality, and the need for controllable revenue streams. By illustrating how affinity-based clubs can enhance brand positioning, stabilize demand during low seasons, and deepen local engagement, as reflected in both faculty expectations and managerial concerns, the study offers insights directly relevant to hospitality management, destination development, and service innovation.

To translate the study's findings into actionable guidance for hospitality practitioners, this research proposes a concise managerial roadmap for implementing hotel-based community clubs. First, hotel managers should identify a clearly defined affinity group with a natural connection to the property, such as faculty at a campus hotel or interest-based communities like cooking clubs, as shared identity enhances engagement and retention. Second, managers should audit underutilized hotel assets (such as off-peak conference rooms, kitchens outside peak hours, or underused lounges) to align club activities with operational slack and reduce seasonality-related pressures. Third, value propositions should be co-designed with prospective members to ensure clear benefits, including networking, mentorship, wellness, or hands-on experiences such as culinary workshops, addressing concerns related to relevance

and redundancy. Fourth, hotels should adopt flexible and inclusive business models, such as low-cost memberships, event-based subscriptions, or rotating-venue formats, to balance accessibility with financial sustainability. Fifth, initiatives should be piloted on a limited scale using a Lean Startup approach, with success evaluated through participation, repeat attendance, and ancillary food and beverage spending. Finally, successful initiatives can be institutionalized through formal programming and brand integration, positioning hotels as intentionally managed social hubs that enhance community well-being while generating stable, community-driven revenue streams.

### 5.5 Limitations

This study used an exploratory approach to examine the potential of faculty clubs in a campus hotel setting, using a case study of a faculty club. While the study presents interesting findings, there are several limitations. First, the qualitative approach, and the researchers' roles in the study, may influence its design, data collection, and analysis (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). In addition, the single-case design limits statistical generalizability. However, consistent with qualitative case study research, the aim of this study is to generate in-depth, context-specific and analytical insights rather than broad generalizable claims.

Another limitation is transferability, since the findings from this single campus hotel and its specific community may not be generalized to other hotels or populations with different characteristics. The contextual uniqueness of the hotel and participant group may influence the applicability of results in broader hospitality or academic settings. Regarding the population, this study targeted assistant professors, who are often early-career migrant academics. However, other academic positions may have different perspectives on social and professional integration, and future research should include a broader range of academic ranks to enhance transferability. Additionally, we only conducted interviews with managers within the hotel. Future studies could expand this by including higher-level management at the corporate level.

A further consideration is the financial feasibility of implementing hotel-based social hubs. While faculty members may benefit from these spaces, the model must consider how the university or faculty can engage in a way that ensures financial sustainability while maintaining the value of the service provided. There are also other important considerations for implementing these clubs within a hotel setting. While they could be organized around affinity groups, such as cooking clubs, or shared characteristics, like being faculty at a university, care must be taken to avoid exclusivity or reinforcing social divisions, and ethical considerations should always be considered.

### 5.6 Future research directions

This study provides initial evidence of how hotels can serve as managed social spaces that foster community, well-being, and stable revenue. Future researchers could conduct empirical testing of the effects of hotel-based affinity clubs on social connectedness, networking, and individual well-being, as reported by faculty participants in this study. From the hotel perspective, future research could examine how affinity-based clubs influence business outcomes such as revenue diversification, steady income during off-peak periods, brand reputation, integration into the local community, and long-term operational sustainability. Additionally, business models suggested by interviewees, such as low-cost memberships, rotating venues, and event-based programming, could be further evaluated for feasibility, scalability, and financial sustainability. Finally, as this study focused on a single hotel and a prospective faculty-based club, future studies could explore other hospitality contexts, target different community groups, and compare outcomes across diverse settings to enhance generalizability.

**Supplementary material**

The supplementary material for this article can be found online.

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