



**THE ROLE OF OMOTENASHI CULTURE IN SERVICE MANAGEMENT:
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Abstract

The Japanese hospitality industry faces a new challenge as international visitor growth began to plateau entering 2026, shifting hotel competitiveness from visitor volume toward the quality of its service culture. This study analyzes the role of omotenashi culture in service management at Hotel Shirahama Gyoen, Wakayama, examined through its three elements, *shitsurai*, *furumai*, and *shikake*, and its internalization through human resource management practices. A descriptive qualitative approach with an instrumental case study method was employed. Primary data were drawn from the researcher's one-year participant observation during an internship, complemented by semi-structured interviews with five informants: one manager, two regular staff members (one of non-Japanese cultural background), and two hotel guests. Data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldana. Findings show that the three elements of omotenashi function as an integrated system: *shitsurai* is realized through continuous cleanliness and comfort maintenance, *furumai* is evident in staff willingness to read and anticipate unspoken guest needs, and *shikake* is reflected in a deliberately calm, understated service flow that defines the hotel's identity. Value internalization occurs through a combination of



standardized initial training, on-the-job training, cross-functional rotation, daily feedback, and performance appreciation systems. A supportive, non-judgmental mentoring approach was found to help staff of non-Japanese background internalize omotenashi values deeply. These findings offer concrete implications for developing internship preparation modules at the Department of Business Administration, Politeknik Negeri Manado.

Keywords: Omotenashi, Service Management, Japanese Hotel, Internship, Vocational Education

INTRODUCTION

The success of a hotel today is no longer determined solely by physical facilities or price, since both can be relatively easily replicated by competitors, but rather by the quality of service management carried out by its employees (Ali et al., 2021). Infrastructure can be duplicated within a matter of years, and pricing strategies can be matched or undercut almost overnight, yet the way employees interact with guests, anticipate their needs, and resolve problems represents a far more durable source of competitive advantage — one that is embedded in organizational culture and human capital rather than in capital expenditure. This shift is clearly visible in the Japanese hospitality industry, an industry long regarded as a global benchmark for service excellence. The Japan National Tourism Organization recorded that international visitor arrivals to Japan throughout 2025 reached an all-time high, yet the estimated arrivals for April 2026 actually declined compared to the same period the previous year (JNTO, 2026). This reversal, coming immediately after a record-breaking year, suggests that the tourism sector can no longer take continuous volume growth for granted; external shocks, shifting travel patterns, and intensifying regional competition can quickly erode gains that once seemed secure. When growth in visitor volume can no longer be relied upon as a stable foundation for business performance, the distinguishing factor between hotels shifts toward their ability to deliver service experiences that are consistent, personal, and not merely transactional — experiences that make guests choose to return, and to recommend the hotel to others, regardless of fluctuations in overall tourist numbers.

Within this context, the Japanese hospitality industry possesses a distinctive form of capital known as omotenashi, a service culture that demands



sincerity without expectation of reward, deep sensitivity, and the ability to read unspoken situations in order to anticipate guests' needs (Morishita, 2021). Unlike standardized service protocols that can be written down, trained, and audited through checklists, *omotenashi* operates largely at the level of tacit knowledge and disposition — it is expressed through subtle gestures, timing, spatial arrangement, and attentiveness that guests may not consciously notice but nonetheless feel. Precisely because of this tacit and deeply internalized character, *omotenashi* does not grow spontaneously; it is cultivated systematically through human resource management practices, starting from recruitment and selection, continuing through training and mentoring, and extending to performance evaluation and ongoing reinforcement within the daily rhythm of hotel operations. This issue is highly relevant for Indonesia, given that the demand for skilled labor in the Japanese hospitality sector continues to rise, and Japan is among the largest destination countries for Indonesian migrant workers (BP2MI, 2025). As Indonesian students and workers increasingly enter Japanese hotels through internship and labor placement schemes, their ability to understand and internalize this service culture — rather than merely perform its surface behaviors — becomes a decisive factor in both their professional success and the reputation of Indonesian labor abroad. However, pre-departure preparation for students in Indonesia generally still focuses on technical skills and language proficiency, while managerial understanding of cross-cultural service empathy and the intelligence required to internalize a host culture's service philosophy remains limited, leaving a gap between what students are taught before departure and what they are actually expected to embody once placed in the field.

Based on the researcher's one-year internship experience (25 April 2025 to 20 April 2026) at Hotel Shirahama Gyoen, Shirahama, Wakayama Prefecture, this article aims to analyze how the *omotenashi* culture is applied in the hotel's service management when examined through its three constituent elements — *shitsurai*, *furumai*, and *shikake* — how these values are internalized among employees through human resource management practices, and what implications this holds for the development of an internship preparation module for students of the Business Administration Department at Politeknik Negeri Manado.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Omotenashi is a polite form of the verb *motenasu*, which means to entertain guests, and is defined as a sincere welcome, reception, and service without demanding anything in return (Morishita, 2021). Unlike commercial service



transactions in which a reward or tip is implicitly or explicitly expected, *omotenashi* is premised on the idea that hospitality should be extended as an end in itself, an expression of genuine care rather than a means to secure guest satisfaction scores or repeat business. The roots of this concept are often traced to the tea ceremony or *chanoyu*, where Sen no Rikyu formulated the four principles of *wa-kei-sei-jaku* (harmony, respect, purity, calmness) and the spirit of *ichigo ichie*, which is the awareness that every encounter only happens once so it must be served wholeheartedly (Morishita, 2021). Within the tea ceremony tradition, the host would meticulously prepare every aspect of the encounter — from the selection of utensils to the arrangement of flowers — precisely because that particular gathering, with those particular guests, at that particular moment, could never be replicated again. This philosophical foundation continues to shape the way contemporary Japanese hospitality workers approach even the most routine guest interactions, treating each check-in, each meal service, and each farewell as a unique and unrepeatable moment deserving of full presence and attention.

The essence of *omotenashi* lies in *kokoro*, which is the inner intention that underlies action, and which is manifested in several interrelated values: *omoiyari* (imagining the feelings of guests), *kikubari* (detailed care) (Palandi, 2019), *kuki wo yomu* (reading the atmosphere), and *taisei* (equality between host and guest). These values do not function as isolated behavioral rules but rather as an integrated disposition — a way of perceiving and responding to the guest that must be cultivated over time rather than simply instructed. *Omoiyari*, for instance, requires the host to mentally place themselves in the guest's position, imagining what the guest might need before the guest is even aware of the need themselves, while *kikubari* translates that imagined understanding into concrete, often minute, acts of attentiveness. These values can only function effectively because Japan is classified as a high-context culture, that is, a culture whose meaning is largely stored in shared context, nonverbal cues, and implicit understanding rather than in words explicitly spoken (Broeder, 2021). In such a cultural setting, an excessive reliance on explicit verbal requests from guests would itself be considered a failure of service, since the ideal host is expected to perceive needs through subtle signals — a glance, a pause, a shift in posture — rather than waiting to be told.

Structurally, *omotenashi* comprises three observable elements: *shitsurai* (the preparation of the physical environment of the service, encompassing spatial arrangement, ambiance, and sensory details that set the stage before the guest even arrives), *furumai* (the behavior, demeanor, and actions of the host in carrying



out the presentation of service, including tone of voice, posture, and timing of movement), and *shikake* (the design of the flow and mechanisms that engage guests and shape how they experience and enjoy the service, such as the sequencing of an experience or subtle cues embedded in the environment that guide guest behavior without explicit instruction). These three elements do not operate in isolation but work together and reinforce one another, forming a cohesive whole in which the physical setting, the host's conduct, and the underlying design of the guest journey are mutually dependent (Sattavorn, 2023). A well-prepared physical environment (*shitsurai*) loses much of its effect if the host's demeanor (*furumai*) fails to match its tone, just as a carefully designed guest flow (*shikake*) cannot succeed without a physical space and staff behavior that support it.

Compared to service, which is passive and responsive strictly to explicit requests, and hospitality, which is active but still fundamentally grounded in stated or anticipated requests, *omotenashi* assumes a more demanding posture: that the host anticipates unspoken needs entirely on their own initiative, as a form of equality between host and guest rather than a hierarchical relationship of provider and customer (Morishita, 2021). This notion of *taitosei*, or equality, distinguishes *omotenashi* from Western models of hospitality in which the guest is often positioned as a paying customer whose satisfaction must be secured, whereas in *omotenashi* the host and guest are understood to meet on equal standing, each contributing to the quality of the encounter. As a culture, *omotenashi* is not an innate trait possessed automatically by Japanese employees but is systematically internalized through a range of deliberate human resource practices, including selective recruitment that screens for underlying disposition, structured training programs, the modeling behavior of senior employees who embody the values in daily practice, joint evaluation processes that reinforce shared standards, and performance appreciation mechanisms that recognize and sustain these behaviors over time.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach with instrumental case study methods, which are suitable for use when research questions are how and why (Miller, Porter, & Barbagallo, 2023). The main data source was the researcher's participatory observation during a one-year internship at the Shirahama Gyoen Hotel (25 April 2025 to 20 April 2026), which was documented in logbooks and field notes. The data was complemented by semi-structured



Indonesian-Japanese bilingual interviews with five informants selected through purposive sampling: one hotel manager (M1), two permanent employees, one of whom had a non-Japanese cultural background (S1 and S2), and two hotel guests (T1 and T2). The interview will be conducted in writing and asynchronously through the LINE application in July 2026, considering that the researcher has returned to Indonesia. The interview guidelines are structured based on the three elements of *omotenashi* (*shitsurai*, *furumai*, *shikake*) plus an internalized dimension of values and supporting factors for employees across cultures, with open-ended questions that provide space for informants to explain their experiences narratively; Sample questions and full answers are presented in the Appendix.

Data analysis uses the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2020), which includes data collection, data condensation through deductive coding based on three elements of *omotenashi* plus the categories of internalization of values, data presentation, and conclusion drawing and verification. The validity of the data was strengthened through source triangulation, which is comparing the perspectives of managers, employees, and guests, as well as triangulating methods between participatory observations, interviews, and documentation studies.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Shitsurai: Preparation of the Physical Environment of Ministry

The hotel manager explains that the facilities and cleanliness staff create a warm atmosphere through the management of a spacious free lounge, comfortable public baths, relaxation areas, gardens, and handmade wooden decorations (M1). These findings were independently confirmed by the two guest informants. T1 stated that the hotel rooms and facilities were very clean and well prepared, while T2 said that the cleanliness of the hotel was constantly re-checked. Consistency between managerial explanations and direct guest experiences reinforces the validity of findings through source triangulation.

Unlike the *shitsurai* in the tea ceremony which emphasizes seasonal aesthetic arrangements, the *shitsurai* at Hotel Shirahama Gyoen operates more as an ongoing maintenance, i.e. a process of repeated re-checking to ensure that the cleanliness and readiness of the space are always maintained, rather than just a one-time arrangement before guests arrive. This practice aligns with the definition of *shitsurai* as an environmental preparation that is fully completed



before guests arrive, while extending it to be a readiness that is maintained throughout the guest's stay.

Furumai: Employee Behavior and Interaction with Guests

At the basic level, furumai is realized through standard restaurant service SOPs, namely welcoming guests with greetings and smiles, conducting product calls and yamabiko calls so that guests enjoy dishes in the most delicious state, cleaning the table and refilling tableware, helping to take memorable photos while talking with guests, and escorting guests home with greetings (M1). However, S1 explained that employees are taught to apply the "plus one" principle, which is to always provide added value in the form of small attention outside of standard procedures, through words and personal concern.

The ability to read the needs of the unspoken guest (*kuki wo yomu*) appears consistent from the informant's point of view. S2, an employee with a non-Japanese cultural background, said that the staff always paid attention to the movements of the guests, for example when elderly guests had difficulty taking food or needed a food cart, the staff took the initiative to help without being asked. This experience was confirmed directly by both guests: T1 recounted that when his son dropped the food on the floor, the staff immediately came to clean it up and always helped elderly guests pick up the food cart, while T2 said that the special crab menu he ordered was delivered before it was delivered to the waiter, and the staff proactively offered to take photos.

In handling complaints, M1 explained the protocol that places a sincere apology as an initial response, followed by listening and empathizing with the guest's opinion, providing solutions that meet the guests' expectations but still considering the company's interests so that it does not just provide reactive discounts, and explains preventive measures so that the incident does not happen again. The three findings, namely standard SOPs, the plus one principle, and anticipatory capabilities, show that the furumai at the Shirahama Gyoen Hotel bridges the minimum level of service with the *omotenashi* level that anticipates implicit needs, and empirical evidence from the guest side reinforces that this ability is not just a managerial claim, but a real experience felt by the service recipient.

Shikake: A Stay Experience Flow Plan

Shikake appears to be a series of actions that are deliberately designed so that guests can experience, not just be offered. M1 explained the order of



restaurant service which included a welcome greeting, an announcement of a newly cooked dish so that guests could enjoy it in the most delicious condition, table cleaning that maintains the comfort of dining, moments of interaction when helping to take memorable photos, to a release greeting. This series is not only operationally efficient, but also deliberately geared towards creating memorable experiences.

On a broader level, M1 asserts that Hotel Shirahama Gyoen deliberately positions itself differently from its more crowded neighboring hotels, by offering a quiet and relaxed space and time, rather than a luxurious or surprise service. The kitchen staff even paused to show directions to guests who seemed to need help outside of the restaurant's operating hours. The choice of a quiet service style and attention to small details, rather than surprise service, is a shikake at the level of hotel strategy, which is the overall design of the stay experience that distinguishes it from the competition.

Internalizing Omotenashi's Values through Human Resource Management

The internalization of omotenashi begins from the first day of work through basic service training (setsugu kunren shokyu), which includes facial expressions, voice intonation, posture, walking, and proper bowing (ojigi), as well as the instilling of an understanding that the hotel's main service is service provided directly by the staff (M1; S2). This out-of-work training (OFF-JT) is complemented by on-the-job training (OJT) which aims to foster awareness of lack of knowledge and experience, as well as encourage self-development and work motivation. Each new staff is accompanied by a coach who gives an explanation, observes work practices, and then guides the missing parts (S1).

Consistency of service between shifts is maintained through the appointment of one person in charge at each operational hour and the policy of not assigning permanent work positions, so that staff change positions every day and it is easier to understand problems in each section (M1). This rotation policy was extended to a multifunctional training program (tanoko): new hires undergo three months of training across departments (front office, restaurant, kitchen and laundry, cleaning, and facility management), work experience helping other departments or hotels is even a condition for promotion to become a manager or head of kitchen, while technical interns are rotated in two departments, namely kitchen/laundry and restaurant (M1). S1 explained that a thorough understanding of the restaurant's workflow allows staff to serve guests without making them wait and answer questions better, while S2 added that the culture of greeting and getting to know each other between staff makes cross-section



coordination run smoothly, for example kitchen staff and restaurant waiters volunteering to help with the laundry department when there is a shortage of manpower.

The feedback and appreciation mechanism also strengthens internalization. M1 explained that the results of the guest satisfaction questionnaire are announced every day so that all staff know what services are rated good or not good, so that good service is used as an example and bad service becomes evaluation material. In the aspect of appreciation, employees are still assessed twice a year based on work attitudes, contributions, and communication with colleagues, with the results of the assessment determining the increase in basic salary; part-time staff may be asked for an hourly wage increase each month based on the quality of service; and across the hotel network the best staff were selected through the votes of award-winning colleagues and bonuses (M1).

Factors Supporting the Implementation of Omotenashi for Employees with Non-Japanese Cultural Backgrounds

The most prominent finding in this aspect is the senior guidance approach to S2. Instead of reprimanding or blaming when something goes wrong, such as forgetting to place things or fatigue due to long working hours, seniors provide motivational encouragement ("you can definitely do it, if others can do it too") with a friendly approach like a friend (S2). This supportive and non-judgmental approach seems to be the main supporting factor, as S2 is ultimately able to articulate the meaning of omotenashi with a formulation that is very close to its academic definition, namely serving sincerely for customer satisfaction without thinking about reward (S2), and being able to demonstrate the ability of *kuki wo yomu* through initiatives to help elderly guests without being asked.

Other supporting factors identified were a clear coaching structure (a combination of OFF-JT and OJT along with trainer mentoring) and a friendly work culture, where cross-section staff get to know each other and voluntarily help when one part is struggling (S2). It should be noted that the interview instrument at this stage of the study has not explicitly explored the narrative of difficulties or obstacles experienced by S2 during the initial adaptation process, so conclusions about specific inhibiting factors for non-Japanese employees are still tentative and need to be explored more deeply through follow-up interviews that specifically ask about the experience of cross-cultural failures or misunderstandings in the early days of work.

Implications for Vocational Education



Some of the findings above can be directly adapted into the material for the internship debriefing module at the Department of Business Administration, Manado State Polytechnic. First, the ability to read situations (*kuki wo yomu*) can be introduced as a skill that can be trained through case simulations, not just language skills. Second, the "plus one" principle can be taught as a simple framework for students to understand the difference between working according to procedures and providing added value. Third, complaint handling protocols that emphasize sincere apologies, empathy, and balanced solutions can be business communication training materials. Fourth, an understanding of the cross-functional rotation work culture needs to be conveyed from the beginning so that students do not find it strange when asked to help other parts outside their official placement. Fifth, an example of a supportive and motivating senior guidance approach to S2 can be used as a reflection material for students about the importance of being open to receiving corrections without feeling degraded.

CONCLUSION

The *omotenashi* culture at Hotel Shirahama Gyoen operates as a unified system of *shitsurai*, *furumai*, and *shikake*. *Shitsurai* is realized through the maintenance of continuous cleanliness and comfort, *furumai* is seen in the willingness of employees to read and anticipate the needs of unspoken guests while carrying out empathetic complaint handling, and *shikake* is reflected in the flow of service and hotel positioning that is deliberately designed to be calm and not excessive. These three findings are corroborated through consistent triangulation between manager, employee, and guest perspectives. Internalization of values takes place through a combination of standardized initial training, on-the-job training, cross-functional rotation, daily feedback, and a mutually reinforcing performance appreciation system. A supportive and non-judgmental approach has been shown to help employees from non-Japanese cultural backgrounds deeply internalize the value of *omotenashi*, although the narrative of the specific barriers they experience still needs to be explored further in further research. These findings provide concrete material for the preparation of internship debriefing modules for students of the Department of Business Administration of the Manado State Polytechnic to Japan and partner countries with similar work cultures. Follow-up research with a larger number of informants, including foreign guests, is recommended to strengthen the generalization of the findings.



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