

Crisis-Induced Career Reflections: Post-Pandemic Career Choices of Hotel Employees

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Abstract

The widespread effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on hotel workforce have been recognized globally. Substantial research on furloughed hotel employees' jobs and welfare has been reported, but little has been done to examine their career change intention. This study investigated the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on career change intentions and choices among front-line hotel employees. Utilizing a qualitative approach, the research involved focus group discussions with 10 diverse participants from Kuala Lumpur hotels. Thematic analysis of the data revealed key insights into participants' experiences and perspectives. The study found that career adaptability, emotional resilience, and supportive organizational environments were crucial in navigating the crisis. Additionally, the pandemic prompted significant career reflection, resulting in some employees considering moving to more stable industries. The study highlights hospitality organizations' role in fostering adaptability, support mechanisms, and career development opportunities to enhance employee retention and resilience. The originality of the study lies in its focus on the nuanced experiences of front-line hotel staff during a global crisis, providing valuable implications for workforce development strategies in the hospitality sector.

Keywords:

career change intention, career choices, hotel employees, post-pandemic

1 Introduction

After the implementation of the Movement Control Order (MCO) in Malaysia on 18 March 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the country's tourism industry faced unprecedented challenges. The MCO mandated strict restrictions that effectively shut down much of the tourism sector, including hotels, except for essential services and quarantine operations. This period marked significant disruptions for front-line hotel employees who found themselves grappling with a range of difficulties from job insecurity to stagnant career paths and altered work environments. During the MCO and subsequent phases, hotels across Malaysia were forced to close or operate with minimal staff and services. Many front-line employees, essential for quarantine and limited guest services, faced heightened health risks due to their direct contact with travellers from abroad. This situation not only posed health hazards but also led to financial strain as many employees accepted reduced pay or were placed on unpaid leave. These challenges underscore the vulnerability faced by front-line hotel staff during crises, a topic increasingly highlighted in recent scholarly literature.

Research indicates that the pandemic exacerbated existing vulnerabilities within the hospitality industry. Studies have documented increased job insecurity among hotel employees globally (Aguiar-Quintana et al., 2021; Bacon, 2020). Baum et al. (2020) highlighted shifts in workforce dynamics as hotels adapted to reduced demand and changing operational needs. Meanwhile, Bufquin et al. (2021) explored the profound impact on mental health and turnover intentions among hospitality workers, emphasising the toll of prolonged uncertainty and workplace disruptions. In addition to posing economic and career-related challenges, the pandemic caused significant changes in employees' personal lives. Yu et al. (2021) noted that many hotel employees experienced improved work-life balance during the pandemic, particularly mothers who welcomed the opportunity to spend more time with their families due to reduced work hours or extended leaves of absence. This period of reflection and reprieve from hectic work schedules raised questions about future career trajectories and aspirations among hotel staff. Despite these insights, absenteeism resulting from the pandemic remains an under-researched area within crisis management in tourism and hospitality sectors. Wordsworth and Nilakant (2021) argued that absenteeism, influenced by health concerns and workplace conditions, is a crucial issue in organisational resilience during crises.

Similarly, Yu et al. (2021) emphasised the need to understand employees' perceptions and experiences during crises to inform effective crisis response strategies and support mechanisms. Moreover, the frontline nature of hotel work exposes employees to significant health and safety risks during pandemics and other crises. Hu et al. (2020) highlighted the dual responsibilities of hotel employees in crisis response and their vulnerability to infectious diseases due to frequent customer contact. This

context underscores the importance of addressing employees' health concerns and career aspirations in crisis management frameworks. Amidst these challenges, the pandemic-induced pause in career progression has prompted hotel employees to reconsider their professional goals and personal priorities. Bajrami et al. (2021) observed that mid-career changes became viable options for employees, particularly those balancing family commitments and concerns about health risks associated with returning to hotel work environments. For many, the extended leave and disrupted routines provided opportunities for introspection and revaluation of career paths.

Building upon these observations, this study aims to investigate the multifaceted impacts of the pandemic-induced career pause on front-line hotel employees in Malaysia, with a particular focus on how this period influenced their professional life and reshaped their career options. By addressing these dimensions, the study seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the adaptive strategies and resilience demonstrated by hotel employees in response to evolving workplace dynamics, particularly in light of unanticipated circumstances including crises.

2 Literature Review

The COVID-19 pandemic profoundly disrupted the Malaysian hotel industry, creating a career progression pause that temporarily halted the conventional trajectories of hotel employees' professional growth (Bufquin et al., 2021; Chen & Chen, 2021; Ghazali & Ishak, 2021; Manoharan et al., 2020). This pause was marked by reduced work hours, furloughs, and remote working arrangements, all of which significantly impacted the professional and personal lives of hotel employees. For many, these changes reshaped their career stability and prompted a re-examination of their roles within the industry.

Hotel employees, who were already struggling to balance long hours and irregular schedules, faced additional challenges during the pandemic as health risks and heightened anxiety further disrupted their ability to maintain a stable work-life balance (Baum & Hai, 2021). The closure of hospitality establishments and the transformation of some hotels into quarantine facilities exposed workers to new occupational hazards, adding to their stress. Financial pressures compounded these difficulties. Many employees experienced pay cuts, loss of allowances, and even retrenchments, straining their financial stability and creating an environment of uncertainty (Hemmington & Neill, 2021). The cumulative effect of these factors amplified concerns about mental health and well-being (Trougakos et al., 2020), prompting employees to reassess their career priorities and, in some cases, consider alternative career paths (Bajrami et al., 2021).

Unsurprisingly, evidence indicated a pattern of increased labour turnover and job-hopping among hotel employees (Jung et al., 2021; Willie, 2021). While this trend is not new to the hotel industry, the pandemic has undoubtedly intensified this pattern, underscoring systemic issues such as limited career progression opportunities and inadequate workplace support. To counteract these challenges, organizations must

prioritize creating work environments that not only address employees' immediate concerns but also foster long-term resilience and loyalty. In this context, Self-Efficacy theory is employed in this study to offer a valuable lens for understanding how hotel employees navigate career transitions amid such unprecedented disruptions. Central to this theory is the belief in one's ability to adapt and persevere through challenges, a concept particularly relevant in the face of prolonged absences from work, heightened health risks, and shifting family dynamics (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2012). Also, the theory highlights the importance of organizational support and resilience in facilitating adaptive career decisions. For instance, employers' responsiveness to their workforce's evolving needs can be pivotal in reducing turnover and maintaining morale during crises (Rasheed et al., 2020).

3 Methodology

3.1 Participants and procedures

This study employed a qualitative approach to investigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on front-line hotel employees' professional lives, career progression options, perception of family well-being, and intentions regarding career changes. Focus group discussions were chosen as the primary method to gather rich, nuanced insights from participants. A total of 10 front-line hotel employees from various job positions, ages, genders, and seniority levels were purposively selected to participate in the focus group discussions.

Participants were recruited from hotels operating as quarantine centres in the Kuala Lumpur area. This selection ensured a diverse range of perspectives and experiences related to the challenges faced during the pandemic. Prior to their involvement, all participants provided informed consent. The focus group discussions were structured to explore several key areas: the impact of the pandemic on their professional roles and career trajectories, changes in their perceptions of family well-being, and considerations regarding potential career changes. The discussions were moderated to encourage open dialogue and to allow participants to share their experiences, concerns, and aspirations freely.

3.2 Data Analysis

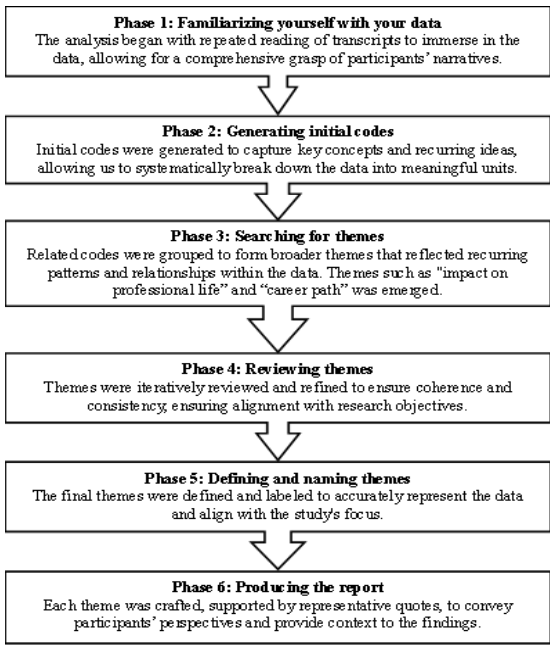
A six-step thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2017) was employed to analyse the qualitative data gathered from the focus group discussions. This method allowed for the systematic identification and interpretation of patterns or themes within the data, providing a comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences and perspectives. The analysis process began with thorough reading and familiarisation with the transcripts to gain a holistic understanding of the data. Initial codes were then generated to capture key concepts and ideas emerging from the discussions. These codes were subsequently organised into broader thematic categories that reflected common patterns and relationships within the data. The procedure

corresponds with recent qualitative studies in the hotel context (Lodhi et al., 2024, Shagirbasha, 2022; Wang et al., 2023; Zhao et al., 2024). Figure 1 illustrates the process.

The study utilised Atlas.ti to facilitate the analysis process. This software enabled the systematic management of data by organising codes, comparing themes across different transcripts, and refining thematic categories through iterative rounds of analysis. By employing this methodological approach, the study aimed to ensure rigor and reliability in capturing the depth and complexity of participants’ narratives.

The subcategories identified from the thematic analysis were integrated with the main themes to provide a nuanced portrayal of the impacts of the pandemic on front-line hotel employees’ professional and personal lives. This iterative process of analysis was aimed at uncovering meaningful insights that contribute to the understanding of the challenges faced by hotel employees during crisis situations and the adaptive strategies they employed.

A schematic representation of this analysis process as shown in Figure 1 illustrates how raw data evolved into themes relevant to the understanding of the impacts of the pandemic on hotel employees’ professional and personal lives. The final thematic structure is also applied and referenced directly in the results section, where we examine how the derived themes, such as “impact on professional life” and “career path,” provide insights into the adaptive resilience of hotel employees during crises.



Source: Braun & Clarke (2006)

Figure 1: Thematic analysis (six-phases process)

4 Findings

4.1 Demographic profiles

The demographic profiles of the participants in our study provide a comprehensive snapshot of the diverse group of front-line hotel employees who shared their insights on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants, identified by their unique IDs, represent a range of genders, ages, job positions, and seniority levels within the hospitality industry.

This study included five female participants occupying the roles of housekeeper (P1, P6), front desk staff (P3), receptionist (P4), and front office manager (P9). These women, aged between 26 and 48 years old, collectively brought perspectives from different stages of their careers with varying levels of seniority ranging from under 3 years to over 5 years. Their inclusion ensured a nuanced exploration of how gender dynamics and career experiences intersected during the pandemic. The study also involved five male participants occupying the positions of front desk staff (P2, P3), chef (P5), senior waiter (P7), concierge (P8), and purchasing officer (P10). These men, ranging in age from 24 to 43 years, similarly represented diverse career stages with seniority levels spanning from under 3 years to over 5 years.

Their insights contribute to the understanding of the pandemic's impact on men in different hotel roles from customer-facing positions to management and support roles. The participants' job positions underscore the variety of roles essential to hotel operations, with each participant bringing distinct perspectives on how their daily tasks and responsibilities were affected by the disruptions caused by the pandemic. For instance, while housekeepers (P1, P6) provided insights into hygiene protocols and workload adjustments, front desk staff (P2, P3) and receptionists (P4) shared experiences related to guest interactions and reservation management during fluctuating demand periods. Additionally, participants in managerial roles such as front office manager (P9) and purchasing officer (P10) offered perspectives on decision-making processes, workforce management, and resource allocation amidst economic uncertainties and health concerns.

The demographic profiles underscore the diversity of experiences and perspectives among front-line hotel employees navigating the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Their insights, informed by their gender, age, position, and seniority, provide a valuable context for understanding the multifaceted impacts of crisis situations on the hospitality industry's workforce. This diversity enriches our study's findings, offering a comprehensive view of how different individuals within the sector adapted, coped, and envisioned their professional futures amidst unprecedented global disruptions.

The hospitality industry was profoundly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result of decreased consumer demand, travel restrictions, and event cancellations, hospitality service providers particularly were subjected to significant negative repercussions (Chen, Tsai & Chen, 2022). The impacts on the professional lives of front-line hotel staff were characterised by a complex interplay of challenges and adaptations.

Across various roles, participants in the focus group faced unique challenges ranging from adapting to new responsibilities to confronting financial strain and uncertainties. Those with a strong will may perceive their experience as beneficial; conversely, it could be construed negatively and has taken a toll on their mental and emotional well-being, causing some of them to reconsider their options.

Table 1: *Profiles of Study Participants*

No	Participants (ID)	Gender	Age	Position	Seniority (years)
1	P1	Female	48	Housekeeper	5 and over
2	P2	Male	24	Front Desk	Under 3
3	P3	Female	26	Front Desk	3 to under 5
4	P4	Female	25	Receptionist	Under 3
5	P5	Male	43	Chef	5 and over
6	P6	Female	38	Housekeeper	5 and over
7	P7	Male	27	Senior Waiter	3 to under 5
8	P8	Male	26	Concierge	3 to under 5
9	P9	Female	32	Front Office Manager	5 and over
10	P10	Male	28	Purchasing Officer	3 to under 5

4.2 Interview Results

4.2.1 *Impact on Professional Life*

The COVID-19 pandemic profoundly disrupted the professional lives of front-line hotel staff, necessitating significant adaptations and resilience. The findings reveal two overarching themes, namely, (a.) adaptability and career agility and (b.) resilience amidst adversity, each encompassing several sub-themes.

a.) Adaptability and Career Agility

Adapting to new responsibilities was a pivotal aspect of the front-line staff's experiences. Adaptability in the workplace, often known as career adaptability, refers to the psychological and social resources that enable individuals to deal effectively with and adjust to changes in their employment and working conditions (Savickas & Savickas, 2016). As hotels transformed into quarantine centres during the COVID-19 pandemic, employees were thrust into unfamiliar roles, necessitating rapid adjustments and expansions of their skill sets. This adaptation was not only limited to tasks but also extended to implementing stringent safety protocols, showcasing a collective commitment to the well-being of guests and staff.

Preparing meals for those in quarantine became a culinary challenge like no other. The circumstances demanded flexibility and innovation. I had to adapt recipes, consider dietary restrictions, and ensure that each meal not only nourished the body but also provided a sense of comfort during a challenging time. The unpredictability of the situation required quick thinking and a willingness to embrace change. It was not just about the ingredients but also about adapting to the unique needs and

preferences of those in quarantine. The kitchen became a space of constant evolution, and each day brought forth new lessons in flexibility. (P5)

The responsibility of enforcing safety protocols and liaising with health officials was not without its challenges. The evolving nature of the pandemic required constant adjustments and a heightened sense of responsibility. Despite these challenges, my commitment to ensuring the well-being of guests and colleagues remained unwavering. (P8)

The responsibility of organising supplies, coupled with the challenges of adapting to new safety protocols, demanded flexibility and quick thinking. Navigating through supply chain disruptions and ensuring the availability of essential items for the hotel became integral to my role. The experience was not only professionally demanding but also required a steadfast commitment to upholding safety standards. (P10)

Overnight, my role shifted from managing reservations to ensuring the safety and well-being of those seeking refuge from the virus. Adapting to the demands of this unexpected turn was a challenge, but it also revealed the resilience within our team. (P3)

The situation not only required the front-line hotel staff to possess a higher level of career adaptability, which, according to Chen et al. (2020), enables individuals to adjust to changes in their professional roles with relative ease, but also demanded the workforce to be agile as agile individuals are thought to be better equipped to deal with change and uncertainty (Petermann & Zacher, 2022). Indeed, agility has been suggested as a factor that activates an individual's career adaptability (Coetzee, Mbiko, & Nel, 2023).

b.) Resilience amidst Adversity

The experience also cultivated internal fortitude among the front-line hotel staff to maintain resilience amidst ambiguity. To keep going, front-line staff fought back against their own emotions and cognition to deal with stress. Some of them looked elsewhere as a source of motivating inspiration to resist their own conscience.

The emotional toll of the uncertainties was palpable, and there were moments when I felt the weight of the situation bearing down on me. However, in my role as a front office manager, it was imperative to show strength and character. My subordinates looked to me for guidance and support, and in those challenging moments, my duty to lead and uplift the team became a source of motivation. (P9)

There were moments when the thought of pursuing another job crossed my mind. The financial strain and uncertainties of the times tested my resolve. In those moments, the support from my family and the words of motivation from my seniors became instrumental. Their encouragement reinforced the significance of staying true to my passion and weathering the storm. (P8)

Like many others, I also experienced wage cuts during that time. The uncertainties of the time tested my resilience, and there were moments when the urge to seek alternative employment crossed my mind. However, the awareness that I still had a job in such uncertain times served as a grounding force, compelling me to stay put and weather the storm. (P10)

The findings highlight the support they received during those trying times, which enhanced their career adaptability. It is a testament to the previous findings by other scholars like Ito and Brotheridge (2005) and Karatepe and Olugbade (2016) who found that work social and supervisory career support fostered career adaptability. The tenacity of front-line hotel staff to overcome hurdles and adapt to difficult situations can become so taxing, necessitating external support. This finding ultimately adds to our understanding of the vicious impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the professional lives of those in the hospitality industry.

However, not all occurrences were exclusively positive; there were instances where the weight of this unprecedented outbreak was unbearable to some. Reduced working hours, furloughs, and wage cuts affected the front-line hotel staff's financial stability and reverberated through the broader context of family well-being. This finding is consistent with Marshall et al. (2021), which found a correlation between financial hardship and symptoms of depression and anxiety. The pandemic, inducing income loss, negatively affected workers' emotional well-being (de Miguel et al., 2022).

The demands of the pandemic on the hospitality industry, coupled with the uncertainties that unfolded, took a toll on my mental health. The relentless worry about health, the financial strain induced by reduced working hours and furloughs, and the overarching sense of instability seeped into my daily life. Each day became a struggle to balance the demands of work with the need to prioritise my mental well-being. (P6)

Apart from that, fear of infection and working in a quarantine centre also weighed down on the front-line hotel staff's emotions.

Working in a quarantine centre came with its own set of personal challenges. The fear of potentially exposing myself to the virus weighed heavily on my mind, and I had to take extra precautions to protect both myself and my family. (P3)

Balancing the demands of my job, the responsibilities of parenthood, and the constant fear of infection took a toll on my mental and emotional well-being. Every day was a delicate dance, and the uncertainty of the situation weighed heavily on my shoulders. (P1)

4.2.2 Career Path

The experience from the pandemic even catalysed a period of introspection and revaluation of career paths for some of the front-line hotel staff. Two distinct themes emerged: (a.) exploration of new opportunities and (b.) career retention and commitment. Some of them contemplated career changes in response to the transformative experiences brought about by the pandemic but remained steadfast to the industry. Others sought stability in different sectors, recognising the volatility within the hospitality industry during times of crisis.

a.) Exploration of New Opportunities

Some participants viewed the pandemic as a turning point for pursuing alternative career paths. P1's decision to explore entrepreneurship by starting a small food business with her daughter reflects a desire for stability and control outside the volatile hospitality sector. Similarly, P4 and P6 sought roles in more stable or flexible sectors, such as remote work or fast food, to align with their redefined priorities.

I envisioned a more stable future for my family within the familiar confines of the hospitality sector. The prospect of providing a secure foundation for both my daughter and me motivated me to persevere through the challenges. The lockdown presented an unexpected opportunity. My daughter and I decided to embark on a small food business venture together. As the world gradually reopened, I found myself at a crossroads. The decision to remain committed to the hospitality industry, with its known stability, or to continue the journey as a small entrepreneur became a contemplative dilemma. (P1)

In the midst of these challenges, a realisation began to crystallise—I needed a change. The traditional office setting no longer resonated with the work-life balance I sought. The toll on my mental health spurred a yearning for a more flexible and stable work environment. Considering these factors, I've made the decision to explore other options. The prospect of working from the comfort of my own space, free from the constraints of a fixed office location, holds the promise of a more accommodating and balanced lifestyle. Remote work, with its emphasis on flexibility, aligns with my newfound understanding of the importance of mental health in the professional sphere. (P4)

Recognising the toll the crisis had taken on both my mental health and financial stability, I began to explore opportunities in industries known for their stability. Fast food emerged as a potential avenue—an industry currently experiencing a shortage of employees. The promise of more stable work hours and financial security provided hope for my family. (P6)

These findings suggest an intricate interplay between career adaptability and turnover intention. Besides fostering commitment, adaptability can also empower individuals to pivot towards alternative sectors when circumstances demand it. This duality is critical in understanding workforce behaviour during crises, particularly in volatile industries like hospitality.

b.) Career Retention and Commitment

Despite the adversities faced, the other section of the focus group participants shared a common narrative of an unwavering commitment to the industry. Not only was their career adaptability negatively linked to turnover intention, as supported by Haibo et al. (2018), but this commitment also extended beyond the scope of duty, reflecting a passion that transcended the challenges posed by the pandemic. Despite facing wage cuts during the pandemic, for instance, their passion for the job and their recognition of recovery ahead spearheaded their decision to stay and leverage the enhanced skills acquired during the crisis. This is corroborated by Chen, Tsai, and Chen (2023), who found that those who enjoyed a more passionate and satisfying career were less likely to leave the industry.

My decision to stay in the hospitality industry was grounded in a genuine passion for the work. I saw the potential for growth and progress within my current career path. Being young and without personal commitments (marriage) allowed me the flexibility to consider my options. (P2)

Despite the long hours and the work often extended into the darkness, I realised that I wanted to continue down this path. The crisis became a catalyst for change, not just in how we operated but also in how I envisioned my future within the industry. (P5)

Despite the challenges, I chose to stay in the hospitality industry. My love for the job, the satisfaction derived from serving guests, and my belief in the industry's potential for recovery kept me motivated. Rather than discouraging me, the pandemic fuelled my desire to contribute to the industry's resurgence. (P7)

In the face of economic uncertainty, I grappled with the idea of seeking alternative employment. However, my enduring passion for the hospitality industry and the support I received from my family became the pillars that sustained my resilience. (P8)

The focus group participants' diverse paths underscore the pandemic's profound impact on individuals' career trajectories and highlight how front-line hotel staff navigated their professional journeys in the industry. Some chose to stay within the hospitality industry, leveraging enhanced skills and passion, and others contemplated career changes, exploring different paths that suited them personally.

5 Implications of the Study

5.1 Theoretical implications

A prominent theoretical implication from the findings is the increased importance of career adaptability among front-line hotel employees. As highlighted by Savickas and Savickas (2016), career adaptability involves psychological and social resources that enable individuals to adjust effectively to changes in their work environment. During the pandemic, participants were thrust into unfamiliar roles and faced with new responsibilities, such as transforming hotels into quarantine centres and enforcing stringent safety protocols. This situation necessitated rapid adaptation and expansion of their skill sets (Chen et al., 2022). The ability to adapt was not confined to technical skills but also included resilience and cognitive flexibility in navigating uncertain and evolving circumstances (Crayne, 2020).

The findings suggest that an agile workforce, characterised by the ability to respond quickly and effectively to change, was better equipped to cope with the challenges posed by the pandemic (Coetzee et al., 2023). Agile individuals demonstrated a proactive approach in adjusting their roles and responsibilities to meet new demands, thereby enhancing their career adaptability in a crisis situation (Chen et al., 2020). In addition, employees were also able to craft their own job and career based on their current need and perspectives of the industry (Abuzaid, 2024). This theoretical

implication underscores the importance of fostering adaptability and agility in workforce development strategies within the hospitality industry.

Another critical theoretical implication is the role of emotional resilience and support mechanisms in mitigating the impact of the pandemic on front-line hotel staff. The qualitative interviews revealed that participants experienced significant emotional strain due to uncertainties surrounding health risks, financial instability from wage cuts, and the overall stress of working in a high-risk environment (Zheng et al., 2022). Despite these challenges, many participants drew strength from social support networks, including colleagues, supervisors, and family members, which bolstered their emotional resilience (Ito & Brotheridge, 2005; Karatepe & Olugbade, 2016).

Supportive work environments that fostered open communication and provided emotional support were instrumental in helping individuals cope with stress and maintain motivation (de Miguel et al., 2022). This finding aligns with previous research suggesting that social and supervisory support can enhance employees' psychological well-being and resilience during crisis situations (Akkermans et al., 2020). Thus, the theoretical implication emphasises the importance of cultivating supportive organisational cultures and leadership practices to safeguard employee well-being and resilience in times of crisis. The pandemic triggered a period of career reflection and revaluation among front-line hotel staff, leading to another theoretical implication regarding career decision-making and intention for change. Participants expressed considerations about their future career paths, with some contemplating shifting to more stable industries or entrepreneurial ventures (Chen et al., 2023).

The crisis served as a catalyst for introspection, prompting individuals to reassess their professional goals and priorities in light of newfound challenges and uncertainties (Akkermans et al., 2020). For instance, participants who perceived the hospitality industry as volatile during crises explored alternative career paths that offered greater stability and work-life balance (Petermann & Zacher, 2022). This theoretical implication underscores the dynamic nature of career decision-making and, for organisations, the need to provide opportunities for career development and growth amidst changing economic landscapes (Marshall et al., 2021). Understanding these career reflections can inform strategic HR practices aimed at retaining talent and fostering resilience in the workforce.

Despite the adversities faced during the pandemic, a significant theoretical implication emerged regarding the enduring passion and commitment of front-line hotel staff to the hospitality industry. Many participants expressed a deep-seated passion for their work and a strong belief in the industry's potential for recovery (Haibo et al., 2018). This intrinsic motivation fuelled resilience, influencing their decision to remain in the industry despite facing challenges such as wage cuts and increased work demands (Chen et al., 2023). According to the findings, individuals who derived satisfaction and fulfilment from their careers were less likely to consider leaving the industry, highlighting the role of job satisfaction in mitigating turnover intentions (Chen, Tsai, & Chen, 2022). This theoretical implication underscores the importance of

fostering a positive work environment that nurtures employee engagement and satisfaction, thereby enhancing organisational commitment and resilience during crises.

5.2 Managerial Implications

The study reveals critical insights that have significant managerial implications for hospitality organisations. First, a crucial managerial implication from the findings is the need to enhance career adaptability and agility among front-line hotel staff. The pandemic forced employees into rapidly evolving roles from managing reservations to enforcing safety protocols and even preparing meals in quarantine centres (Savickas & Savickas, 2016). This adaptation required not only technical skills but also resilience and flexibility in responding to unpredictable changes (Crayne, 2020). Managers should prioritise initiatives that foster career adaptability, such as training programmes that equip staff with diverse skills and capabilities beyond their traditional roles (Chen et al., 2020). Additionally, promoting a culture of agility where employees are encouraged to innovate and adapt to new challenges can strengthen organisational resilience (Petermann & Zacher, 2022). By investing in continuous learning and development opportunities, organisations can prepare their workforce to navigate future disruptions effectively.

The findings underscore the profound emotional toll experienced by front-line hotel staff during the pandemic, including heightened stress, fear of infection, and financial strain (Marshall et al., 2021). Managers play a pivotal role in supporting employee well-being and resilience, which are critical for maintaining productivity and morale in crisis situations (de Miguel et al., 2022). Implementing comprehensive support mechanisms such as employee assistance programmes, mental health resources, and structured communication channels can provide essential support to staff facing emotional challenges (Ito & Brotheridge, 2005; Karatepe & Olugbade, 2016). Cultivating a supportive organisational culture where managers demonstrate empathy, provide clear guidance, and recognise staff contributions can mitigate burnout and enhance overall job satisfaction (Haibo et al., 2018).

The pandemic prompted many front-line hotels staff to reflect on their career paths and consider alternative options due to the industry's volatility (Chen et al., 2023). Managers should facilitate career development discussions and provide opportunities for employees to explore new roles or industries aligned with their evolving aspirations (Chen, Tsai, & Chen, 2022). Offering career counselling, mentorship programmes, and skill-building workshops can empower employees to make informed career decisions and navigate transitions effectively (Coetzee et al., 2023). Organisations that support continuous career development not only enhance employee engagement but also foster loyalty and retention, particularly during periods of economic uncertainty (Zheng et al., 2022).

A notable finding is that despite facing significant challenges, front-line hotel staff displayed enduring commitment and passion towards the hospitality industry (Haibo et

al., 2018). Managers should leverage and reinforce this intrinsic motivation by recognising and rewarding employee dedication, innovation, and resilience during crises (Chen et al., 2023). Creating platforms for employee feedback, involving staff in decision-making processes, and celebrating successes can strengthen organisational cohesion and foster a sense of belonging (Ito & Brotheridge, 2005). Transparent communication about organisational goals and strategies for recovery can instil confidence and motivate employees to contribute actively to the organisation's resilience and growth (Petermann & Zacher, 2022).

6 Conclusion

The hotel industry is notorious for its high turnover rates, making it challenging for an organisation to secure an employee with long-term loyalty to the establishment. The demanding nature of hotel jobs, often involving irregular hours and stressful situations, may have contributed to job burnout. Guest complaints, unexpected events, and tight deadlines must constantly be responded to, and a high degree of adaptability is demanded from its workforce. Not only that, in the face of uncertainties posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the ability to adapt became particularly crucial. Given the dynamic nature of the hotel industry, employees who feel a sense of control over their cognition and emotional development are better equipped and resilient to navigate the challenges coming their way.

Resilience equips individuals to cope with challenges, bounce back from setbacks, and maintain a positive mindset. This dimension is a culmination of their passion towards the industry. As proven from the previous findings, passion drives them to be loyal to their job. Those who do not have the same capacity will have a hard time in the industry and may consequently crumble from engaging in strategic hotel career planning and development.

The participants in the study also provided subtle yet valuable insights into another critical dimension for successful career development within the hotel industry—career agility. Amidst the unprecedented challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the hints of career agility observed during the interviews underscore the importance of nurturing a culture that encourages continuous learning, innovation, and a proactive attitude that fosters workforce career agility. This approach will enable the workforce to be more resilient in manoeuvring through uncertainties and making valuable contributions to their professional career progression and the organisation's long-term success.

For future research endeavours, delving deeper into career agility within the hotel industry would offer a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics shaping successful career trajectories in this ever-evolving sector, apart from the well-known necessity of career adaptability. It is one strategy for success, as Dent et al. (2020) suggested. While the study provides valuable insights, like any study, there are limitations that warrant consideration and opportunities for future research to further explore and build upon these findings. One of the primary limitations is the sample size

and its representativeness. Qualitative studies often involve a smaller number of participants, limiting the generalizability of the findings to a broader population of front-line hotel staff across different regions or types of hospitality establishments.

Future research could aim for larger and more diverse samples to enhance the external validity of the findings. Also, the study's focus on the COVID-19 pandemic presents both a strength and a limitation. While it provides timely insights into a crisis situation, the findings may not fully capture long-term effects or changes that could occur as the pandemic evolves or recedes. Longitudinal studies could provide a more comprehensive understanding of how experiences and perceptions evolve over time post-pandemic. Participants' responses may have been influenced by the interview context, such as their relationship with the interviewer or social desirability bias, where they may provide responses perceived as favourable or socially acceptable. Future studies could explore these dynamics further to understand how they shape participants' narratives.

Given the dynamic nature of the hospitality industry and the ongoing recovery from the pandemic, longitudinal studies could track the career trajectories and well-being of front-line hotel staff over an extended period. This approach would provide insights into long-term impacts and adaptation strategies beyond immediate crisis response (Chen et al., 2023). Next, conducting comparative studies across different regions, types of hospitality establishments, or cultural contexts could elucidate variations in experiences and responses to crisis situations. Comparing pre-pandemic and post-pandemic data could highlight shifts in organisational practices and employee perceptions. Integrating qualitative findings with quantitative data could validate the themes and patterns identified in this study. Surveys or structured interviews could quantify the prevalence of specific challenges or coping mechanisms observed qualitatively, providing a more robust understanding of broader trends (Petermann & Zacher, 2022).

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