Exploring hospitality workers' career choices in the wake of COVID-19: Insights from a phenomenological inquiry

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic severely hit the hospitality industry and caused employees concerns over health, finance, and well-being. These challenges may trigger their decisions to leave the profession, leading to major talent crises in the industry. Guided by the transactional model of stress and coping and the career construction theory, this study explored how their experiences with the pandemic affected their career choices moving on. A phenomenological approach was adopted, and 31 current and past hospitality employees were interviewed. The findings supported the conceptual model and addressed the connection between stress management and career decisions among the participants. It is also noted that, besides generational differences, most participants' career decisions at this critical moment were influenced by their personality traits, industry involvement, and employer-employee relationships. Thus, to create a sustainable, resilient, and engaged workforce, hospitality practitioners must commit to crafting positive relationships with their employees both in regular and crisis times.

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic took the world by surprise. With more than 45 million confirmed cases, the United States is one of the regions that has been severely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and C. f. D. C. a., 2022). Reports show that the impact of the COVID-19 crisis is nine times worse than 9/11, with 70% of hospitality and tourism employees laid off or furloughed (Oxford Economics, 2020). Even though restrictions have eased and the travel trend has been increasing, nearly 3.1 million hospitality and tourism jobs lost during the pandemic have not yet returned (O'Connell, 2021). Additionally, as a result of the ongoing pandemic, the hospitality and tourism industry has encountered multiple talent crises since 2021, manifested as the Great Resignation and Quiet Quitting trends (Harter, 2022; Liu-Lastres et al., 2022). While it is believed that the pandemic is not entirely responsible for these labor issues, it is evident that the COVID-19 crisis and the resulting economic shock have driven employees to take action and reconsider their career plans (Chen and Chen, 2021; Liu-Lastres et al., 2022).

Hospitality employees are the backbone of the business and firsthand witnesses to the detrimental effects of the pandemic on the industry. Therefore, it is remarked that topics related to the hospitality workforce,

such as their perceptions, resilience, and post-crisis training and development, should be featured in future academic attempts (Zopiatis et al., 2021). Consistently, recent studies have revealed the close association between the pandemic and various hospitality employee issues, such as stress and burnout (Popa et al., 2023; Wong et al., 2021), substance abuse (Bufquin et al., 2021), damage to well-being (Chen and Chen, 2021), and higher turnover intentions (Bufquin et al., 2021; Chen and Chen, 2021; Popa et al., 2023; Wong et al., 2021). Aside from inciting depression and negative emotions, the pandemic impacts the hospitality industry's current and future workforces' career optimism, with many of them reevaluating their future career plans and prospects (Birtch et al., 2021; Chen and Chen, 2021; Manoharan et al., 2021; Park et al., 2021; Wong et al., 2021). The recent employment and resignation trends also show that the pandemic has affected hospitality employees' turnover intention, and many have taken a leap and joined other industries (Liu-Lastres et al., 2022). Given that the pandemic spanned over multiple years, there is a need to examine further hospitality employees' actual job choice behavior, including those who remained in the industry and past employees who left the profession for good.

While the hospitality management literature has documented the adverse effects of the pandemic on the workforce, the crisis management literature argues that crises are unique opportunities to bolster

employer-employee relationships (King et al., 2016). Having the experience of working together during difficult times can enhance employee trust and help to build a more resilient organization (Gillespie et al., 2020; King et al., 2016; Seville, 2018). This is especially important for the hospitality industry, where committed, resilient workers are essential to service excellence (Rabiul et al., 2022). Likewise, it is imperative for the hospitality industry to build a workforce that is prepared to adapt to post-pandemic situations (Schwaiger et al., 2021). Notably, considering that most of the hospitality workforce's current perspectives are derived from their pandemic experiences, it becomes vital to understand what they have gone through during the pandemic, especially how they coped with the challenges and how those experiences shaped their ultimate decisions to remain in, return to, or leave the hospitality profession in the wake of COVID-19.

Thus, guided by the stress-coping transactional model and career construction theory, this study develops a conceptual model and tests the model through a theory-based qualitative approach. From a theoretical perspective, the findings of this study explicate not only how hospitality employees manage uncertain, unexpected, and adverse situations but also the interpretive process through which they construct their vocational behaviors and career decisions. Practically, the findings of this study can be applied in ways that support hospitality employees in crisis situations and help to sustain and build a resilient hospitality workforce in the long run.

2. Literature review

2.1. Understanding the hospitality workforce' COVID-19 experiences

Tourism and hospitality businesses are especially vulnerable to this prolonged crisis involving the COVID-19 pandemic (Zopiatis et al., 2021). With border closures, travel restrictions, and social distancing regulations in place, many hospitality businesses ceased operations. According to the World Travel & Tourism Council's (WTTC) Economic Impact Report (2021), hospitality and tourism jobs fell by 18.5% globally, with more than 62 million jobs lost in 2020. In the United States, 5.4 million hospitality and tourism jobs were lost.

Job loss, wage cuts, and furlough arrangements influenced the livelihood of the hospitality workforce and their mental well-being. Zopiatis et al. (2021) revealed the pandemic's impact on the workforce to be a vital issue, with concerns such as absenteeism (Karatepe et al., 2021), burnout/stress (Yu et al., 2021a), and increasing turnover intentions (Lee et al., 2021; Yu et al., 2021b). Yang et al. (2021) also identified emotions, well-being, and mental health as key themes in early COVID-19 research in tourism, including research on both tourists and employees under the stress of COVID-19. Given the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on hospitality employment, numerous studies have examined the concept of job insecurity and its impact on hospitality worker's emotional exhaustion (Vo-Thanh et al., 2021), fear, anger, and increasing turnover intentions (Popa et al., 2023; Yu et al., 2021a), and mental health, self-esteem, economic self-efficacy, and life satisfaction (Abbas et al., 2021).

Moreover, in response to COVID-related stress and the perceived risk of unemployment, hospitality workers have considered quitting and switching careers, which contributed to the emergence of the Great Resignation (Liu-Lastres et al., 2022; Manoharan et al., 2021; Park et al., 2021). On a personal level, uncertainty and disillusionment with hospitality careers led hospitality employees to change career goals and consider other industries. For instance, Manoharan et al. (2021) explored the career optimism of hotel workers during the pandemic. They found that the weak job market and challenging economic outlook inhibited the career optimism of the hospitality workforce. Even for future talents, Birtch et al. (2021) found that negative emotions invoked by COVID-19 diminished hospitality students' occupational identification, which, in turn, reduced their intentions to choose jobs in hospitality.

Although the pandemic's impact on the hospitality workforce may seem similar to previous global crises and depressions, COVID-19 is different as it impacts hospitality and tourism directly. The specific nature of the coronavirus and resulting social distancing practices challenge the essence of hospitality and tourism. According to Rivera (2020), "the pandemic is affecting the DNA of hospitality at its core." Hospitality is about warmth, welcome, and people coming together, but the spread of the coronavirus is forcing people to keep their distance, use protective wear, and stay away from social gatherings (Xiang et al., 2022). The pandemic also brought the phenomenon of "travel shaming," where people's perception of hospitality and tourism behaviors changed – from prestige and envy to danger and shame (Huang et al., 2023). Hence, the effects of COVID-19 are beyond business downturns and large-scale layoffs, but threaten the core of hospitality services. When considering future prospects, employees became more acutely aware of the vulnerability of the industry (Reichenberger & Raymond, 2021) and developed "backup plans" outside the industry.

To summarize, it appears that this stream of hospitality management literature has shed light on the career shocks brought about by the pandemic as well as developed a new perspective on their work assignment. Noticeably, the majority of studies in this research body adopted a quantitative design and heavily relied on online panels. While such research designs reveal the association between key variables, they generally cannot reflect peoples' behavioral changes over time and the findings' validity sometimes remain questionable (de Vaus, 2001). In the present context, these limitations are especially relevant, given the extended nature and global outreach of the pandemic as well as its long-lasting effects. A phenomenological approach, which is qualitative in nature, can help rectify some of these oversights given its concentration on studying people's lived experiences as well as their deep involvement with the external world (Pernecky and Jamal, 2010). This is also reflected in the findings of a recent qualitative study (Manoharan et al., 2021), which found that the pandemic's effects on hospitality workers' career optimism could be temporary and employees' perspectives towards the pandemic effects varied by personal capacities and circumstances. Nevertheless, this study (Manoharan et al., 2021) mainly focused on minority workers and did not examine the career changes among the participants.

It is also worth noting that the shocks and changes caused by the pandemic go beyond individual concerns, revibrating across organizations and the entire industry (Liu-Lastres et al., 2022). In light of these shared experiences, both hospitality employers and employees have changed the way they approach and think about work in the future (Hite and McDonald, 2020). Thus, instead of reporting issues, it is more valuable to understand the actual experiences hospitality employees encountered during the pandemic, learn from these experiences, and apply these insights to future practices. As the hospitality industry moves forward in the post-covid era, this knowledge will be essential to developing a sustainable workforce and being prepared for future complications.

2.2. Theoretical background

2.2.1. The transactional model of stress and coping

Mental health and well-being are essential issues among the hospitality workforce during the pandemic (Karatepe et al., 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly altered how we live our daily lives and has created new causes of job-related job stress for many hospitality workers (Chen et al., 2022). As such, stress management is a primary component of the COVID-19 experience for many hospitality employees. Coping with stress, however, is never simple. It is a process involving both cognitive and affective attempts to develop strategies to manage the stressors and overcome the barriers (Chirico et al., 2020). The transactional model of stress and coping developed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) is a classic model that explains how individuals manage stress (Berjot and Gillet, 2011). The model was first proposed as a

comprehensive theory and had been through several essential revisions. The latest version defined stress as "a particular relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exciting his or her resources and endangering his or her well-being" (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984, p.63). There are two key components in the processes – cognitive appraisal and coping. Cognitive appraisal refers to the "process of categorizing an encounter, and its various facets, with respect to its significance for well-being" (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984, p. 31), and it goes through the phases of primary and secondary appraisals. The primary appraisal is an assessment of the situation by asking the question "Is the encounter a threat, challenge, or benign?"; While the secondary appraisal involves evaluating one's resources and answers to the question "What can I do about this encounter?" (Folkman, 1984).

Coping can be understood as the "cognitive and behavioral efforts to master, reduce, or tolerate the internal and/or external demands that are created by the stressful transaction" (Folkman, 1984, p. 843). Coping aims at achieving two goals – regulating emotions (emotion-focused coping) and solving problems (problem-focused coping). Although Lazarus and Folkman outlined the broad category of problem-focused and emotion-focused coping, there is still a lack of conceptual clarity, which makes the boundary between these two concepts blended (Skinner et al., 2003). Additionally, Lazarus and Fokman (1984) suggested that the appraisal and coping process is related to various antecedents, including personal factors such as commitments, beliefs, and personal traits and situational factors, such as the novelty and predictability of the circumstances, the sense of uncertainty and/or ambiguity, and temporal factors.

2.2.2. Career construction theory

For many hospitality employees, COVID-19 not only threatens their personal health and safety but also decimates jobs and places their livelihoods at risk. The fears of the pandemic, the lack of organizational support and resources, and social isolation have all added another layer of uncertainty, making this probably one of the most challenging times for them. It also becomes apparent that most hospitality workers' COVID experiences have raised professional challenges, especially in how they can navigate their work-life amidst uncertainties and how they can manage these career changes (Chen, 2020). Career construction theory offers a proper meta-theoretical perspective to respond to the question as it explicates how individuals develop their professions by aligning their self and social identity with their work (Rudolph et al., 2019). Savickas (2005) outlines the three critical components of one's career construction process: (1) individual differences, which reflect differential views of careers and manifested through one's vocational personality; (2) developmental tasks and coping strategies, which shows the developmental nature of one's career and is represented through the concept of career adaptability; and (3) psychodynamic motivation, which reveals the dynamic perspectives of one's career and is typically illustrated by life themes.

The primary application of the career construction theory sets the guidelines for career development and lays the foundation for career consulting, providing suggestions for vocational choices and improving the quality of work lives (Rudolph et al., 2019). Despite the comprehensive scope of the theory, Rudolph et al. (2017) found that most empirical studies have focused on career adaptability while other components of the theory have not received much attention. When it comes to tourism management research, similarly, studies found that career adaptability is positively related to tourism and hospitality employees' extra-role performances (Safavi and Karatepe, 2018). The concept of career adaptability is instrumental in the COVID-19 context. For instance, Rivera et al. (2021) found that career adaptability is an antecedent of hospitality students' psychological capital, which further affects their individual resilience and life satisfaction during COVID-19. Interestingly, Lee et al. (2021) found that career adaptability operates as a double-edged sword, where the relationship between career adaptability and turnover intentions is moderated by social support. Unfortunately, these attempts have overseen the potential impacts of other components of career construction theory on one's career decisions in uncertain times.

2.2.3. Conceptual model

According to scholars (Baum et al., 2020; Liu-Lastres et al., 2022), the COVID-19 pandemic is one of the catalysts for recent rising labor issues, and our previous literature review (see Section 2.1) indicated the absence of a critical understanding of hospitality workers' lived experiences of COVID-19. While COVID-19 is a global pandemic, individuals experience the situation differently based on where they are and how their daily life, work, family, health practices, etc. have changed. Given COVID-19's impact on travel and social gatherings, the lived experience of hospitality professionals during the pandemic and their interpretations of its impacts are mediated through individual historicality, including their pre- and during COVID work conditions. Accordingly, this study aims to explore tourism and hospitality employees' lived experiences with COVID-19 and reveal the experiences' situated meanings in relation to their personal history and characteristics.Phenomenology, a qualitative research approach, is adopted in this study to support such an inquiry.

Built upon the transactional model of stress and coping and the career construction theory, this study develops a conceptual model, which is presented in Fig. 1. This study focuses on the context of COVID-19, which acts as the starting point for the entire inquiry and the main stressor. The two theories complement each other. The transactional model depicts the overall stress management process, including how tourism workers appraise the situation, develop coping strategies, and reach further decisions through re-appraisal. Career construction theory offers additional insights into the two steps that are work-related. More specifically, the concept of adaptability aids us in understanding how tourism workers develop strategies to cope with the work-related challenges brought on by the pandemic. The concepts of vocational personality and life themes offer additional insights into the re-appraisal process, which investigates tourism employees' reflections on the COVID-19 experiences and the potential impacts of these experiences on their future career considerations.

Consistent with the conceptual model, this study tries to answer the following interrelated research questions:

How did tourism and hospitality workers manage the COVID-19 situation?

What factors affected hospitality workers' decisions to stay in, leave, or return to hospitality after experiencing the impact of COVID-19?

3. Materials and methods

3.1. Research design

Ontologically, this study is phenomenological research, which "describes the meanings of several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon" (Creswell, 2012, p. 58). Phenomenology is an increasingly popular method in tourism research, given its ability to provide a systematic means to interpret the nature of individuals' experiences and their involvement in the world (Szarycz, 2009). The phenomenological approach addresses the importance of subjective experiences, sees the participants as "experts," allows their voices to be heard, and gives credibility to their accounts within studies (Szarycz, 2009). Particularly, this study features the approach of transcendental phenomenology, which stays aligned with the positivistic paradigm and attempts to break down one's experiences into essential structures (Pernecky and Jamal, 2010). This approach matches the purpose of this study, as the identified essential structures not only reveal the process of how hospitality employees adapt to the evolving circumstances but also contribute to the development of the conceptual model.
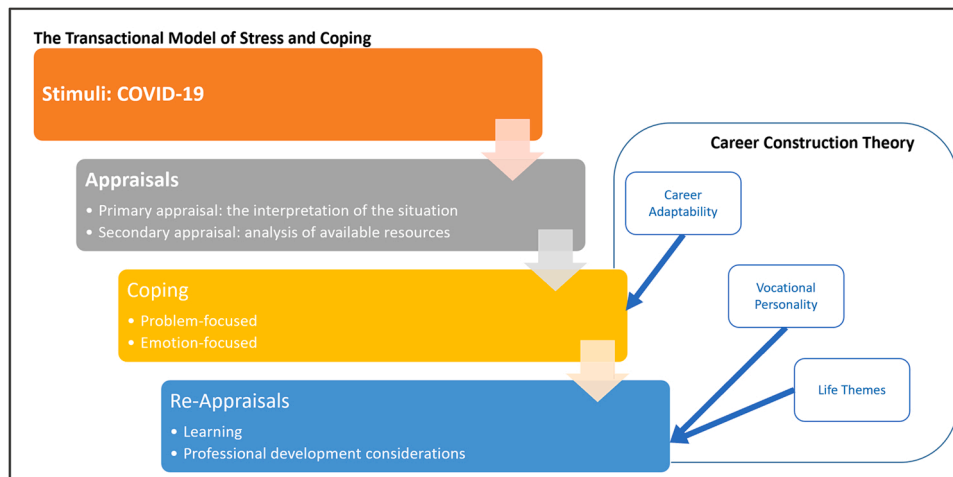
Fig. 1. Conceptual Model.

3.2. Data collection

Thirty-one semi-structured interviews were conducted in the summer of 2021. The target population of this study was hospitality employees who had firsthand experiences with the COVID-19 pandemic at work. The research subjects were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling. The criteria for participant selection are: 1) above age 18, 2) with at least one year of full-time work experience in hospitality, and 3) working in the industry in the United States at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. The researcher team first started recruiting eligible participants through professional networks and asked the enrolled participants to refer additional research subjects.

The interview protocol included the following sections: 1) self-introduction (Can you tell me about yourself?), 2) industry involvement and career views (e.g., Can you tell me about your work experiences in tourism and hospitality? What aspects do you value in your work life?), 3) COVID-19 experiences (e.g., How has COVID impacted you?), 4) coping strategies (e.g., How do you manage the situation?), 5) outcomes and career considerations (Moving on, what's your next step? Has there been any changes in your perception/attitude towards your profession and the industry?) The research team audio-taped the interviews, hired a professional company to transcribe the interviews verbatim, and verified the content. The length of the interviews ranges from 15 min to 56 min, with an average length of 27.7 min.

3.3. Data analysis

Thematic analysis, "a foundational method of qualitative analysis" (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 78), was used to analyze the interview data. Following Smith and Osborn's (2015) suggestions, the analysis consists of the following steps. First, the researcher(s) started with the major concepts extracted from the theory and one transcript, where the texts were read several times and interesting or significant responses were marked. These initial codes were then transformed into themes, which are high-level expressions that reflect the meanings and essences of their words. Second, the identified themes were listed in bullet points and further categorized into different components according to the conceptual framework. Third, this coding process continued with other cases. Fourth, the data collection process stopped when there were no new themes emerged from the interviews. Fifth, the researchers moved from identifying themes to a write-up, concluding statements expressing the meanings inherent in the precipitants' accounts of their experiences and feelings. Lastly, multiple measures, including method, investigator, and theory triangulations, were used to ensure the validity of the results (Carter et al., 2014).

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Sample profile

Table 1 reports the participant information. The average age of the participants is 31. 0 years old; the majority are female (n = 23, 74.1%), nearly half of them (n = 17, 42%) are white, and most of them (n = 20, 64.5%) are single without children. The length of their experiences in the tourism and hospitality industry ranges from 1 to 30 years, with an average of 9.42 years. More than one-third (n = 11. 35.4%) of them worked in the accommodation sector, followed by the food services sector (n = 8, 25.8%), tourism and travel sector (n = 5, 16.1%), and others (n = 4, 12.9%), such as transportation. In terms of employment status, nearly three-out-of-tenths (n = 9, 29.0%) of the participants remained employed in the same organization during the pandemic.

Others were either furloughed or laid off during the lockdown. These participants could be further divided into three groups. The first group (n = 12) immediately returned to their original employer or found a new job in another hospitality organization. Among them, two participants were owners who resumed their businesses when the restrictions were lifted. The second group (n = 2) was temporarily out of the profession but still actively seeking opportunities in hospitality. The third group (n = 8) completely changed their career direction and decided to switch professions. The diversity of the sample is manifested through their working sectors, industry experiences, and employment status changes. The selection of the sample is coherent with this study's phenomenological inquiry, which aims at "uncovering the multiple layers of the hiddenness of a pheromone within its context" (Frechette et al., 2020, p.6).

4.2. Appraisal of COVID-induced stress

4.2.1. Comprehending the COVID-19 situation

The first confirmed COVID case in the United States was reported in January 2020, and the nationwide lockdown executive order was issued in March 2020. However, some participants, especially those who worked at the frontline, started to notice industry-wide changes in between. They not only saw "*guests leaving*" (ID #12) but also were "*cutting hours*" (ID #3) and asked to take over multiple responsibilities beyond their own job description. The declining performance of the hospitality business during this time, naturally, resulted in participants' negative evaluation of the situation. One participant (ID#9), for example, described the situation as "*really bad.*" Meanwhile, the shocking and uncertain nature of the pandemic has limited the participants' ability to fully comprehend the situation. For instance, the pandemic was depicted

Table 1
Sample Profile.

ID	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Marital/Family Status	Education	H&T Sector	Work Experiences	Employment Status during COVID	Career Update	Trajectory
7	27	F	Hispanic	Single, no children	Bachelor, H&T major	Hotel	6	Remain employed	Stay in the same organization	Stay in H&T
14	22	F	White	Single, no children	Bachelor, non-H&T[a] major	Food services	7	Remain employed	Stay in the same organization	Stay in H&T
17	31	M	White	Married, have children	Bachelor, non-H&T[a] major	Tourism & Travel	7.5	Remain employed	Stay in the same organization	Stay in H&T
24	26	F	White	Single, no children	Bachelor, non-H&T[a] major	Food Services	1	Remain employed	Stay in the same organization	Stay in H&T
25	39	F	White	Married, have no children	Bachelor, non-H&T[a] major	Hotel	20	Remain employed	Stay in the same organization	Stay in H&T
28	27	F	White	Single, no children	Graduate Degree, H&T Major	Hotel	8	Remain employed	Stay in the same organization	Stay in H&T
2	41	F	White	Single, no children	Graduate Degree, H&T major	Food services	10	Remain employed	Stay in the same organization; Got promoted	Stay in H&T
11	42	F	Mixed Races	Married, Have children	Bachelor, non-H&T[a] major	Tourism & Travel	5	Remain employed	Stay in the same organization; Seeking additional education/training	Stay in H&T
23	23	F	African American	Single, no children	Bachelor, non-H&T[a] major	Food Services	8	Remain employed	Stay in the same organization; Considering switching companies	Stay in H&T
13	38	F	Asian	Married, have children	High School	Food services	20	Owner	Stay in H&T Reopened business	Return to H&T
27	52	M	White	Married, have children	Some College	Tourism & Travel	24	Owner	Stay in H&T Reopened business	Return to H&T
26	25	F	African American	Single, no children	Bachelor, non-H&T[a] major	Hotel	2	Furloughed/Rehired	Returned to the same organization	Return to H&T
3	34	F	Hispanic	Married, no children	High School	Hotel	6	Furloughed/Rehired	Returned to the same organization	Return to H&T
8	32	F	Mixed Races	Single, no children	Bachelor, H&T major	Food services	10	Furloughed/Rehired	Returned to the same organization; Got promoted	Return to H&T
29	23	F	White	Single, no children	Bachelor, H&T major	Food Services	7	Laid Off/Rehired	Returned to the same organization	Return to H&T
4	47	M	Asian	Single, no children	Bachelor, H&T major	Hotel	25	Laid Off	Found a different job in H&T	Return to H&T
5	20	F	White	Single, no children	Some college	Tourism & Travel	1	Laid Off	Found a different job in H&T	Return to H&T
20	21	F	White	Married, no children	Some college	Others	5	Laid off	Found a different job in H&T	Return to H&T
21	26	F	White	Married, have children	Graduate Degree, H&T major	Hotels	5	Laid off	Found a different job in H&T	Return to H&T
30	23	M	White	Single, no children	Bachelor, H&T major	Events	4	Laid Off	Found a different job in H&T	Return to H&T
31	25	M	Asian	Single, no children	Graduate Degree, H&T major	Others	5	Laid Off	Found a different job in H&T	Return to H&T
19	58	F	Hispanic	Single, no children	Bachelor, non-H&T[a] major	Hotel	30	Furloughed	Want to stay in H&T; Looking for jobs in H&T	(Want to) Return to H&T
6	31	F	Asian	Single, no children	Bachelor, H&T major	Event	15	Laid Off	Taking a temporary break; Will stay in H&T	(Want to) Return to H&T
10	21	F	White	In a relationship, no children	Some college	Others	2	Furloughed	Found another job outside H&T	Left H&T
15	27	F	White	Single, no children	Bachelor, H&T major	Hotel	10	Furloughed	Found another job outside H&T	Left H&T
16	31	M	White	Married, have children	Bachelor, non-H&T[a] major	Hotel	8	Furloughed	Found another job outside H&T	Left H&T
18	26	M	African American	Single, no children	Some college	Food services	2	Furloughed	Found another job outside H&T	Left H&T
9	35	F	White	Married, no children	Bachelor, non-H&T[a] major	Hotel	12	Furloughed	Trying to find a job outside H&T, Seeking additional education	Left H&T

Table 1 (*continued*)

ID	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Marital/Family Status	Education	H&T Sector	Work Experiences	Employment Status during COVID	Career Update	Trajectory
1	56	F	White	Single, no children	Bachelor, non-H&T[a] major	Event	15	Laid Off	Looking for jobs outside H&T	Left H&T
12	33	F	White	Married, have children	Bachelor, H&T major	Tourism & Travel	8.5	Laid off	Looking for jobs outside H&T	Left H&T
22	27	M	African American	Single, no children	Some College	Others	3	Laid Off	Found another job outside H&T	Left H&T

[a] H&T: Hospitality and Tourism

as "*unexpected*" (ID #14) and "*rare*" (ID #9). One participant (ID#3) further expressed the uncertainty embedded in the situation, commenting that "*nobody knew what's going on and how to handle stuff.*".

4.2.2. Work-related stress

The negative impacts on hospitality have caused work-related and personal stress. The employment status serves as a critical point under such circumstances. Nearly two-thirds of the participants were either laid off or furloughed during the shutdown, which posed immediate challenges to their financial well-being. These participants have addressed the importance of income since they needed to pay bills and rents/mortgages and buy food. For those who remained employed, their job responsibilities have considerably changed. They needed not only to accept new job responsibilities but also to adjust themselves to the new working formats involving remote working, social distancing, and a surge in telecommunication (i.e., zoom meetings). Furthermore, this small group of "survivors" almost immediately noticed the nuances in their changing working environments, which are very different from the pre-pandemic times and causing extra stress. One participant (ID#10) mentioned that not only has the workload been doubled, but the company's view and expectations were changed as well. He/She described the new attitude held by the company, suggesting that since "*You (the employees) can't go anywhere, so you might as well just work all the time.*".

The job transitions and constant changes resulted in different emotional responses. For participants who were let go during the shutdown, they seemed to find this outcome "*not surprised (ID#1)*". While for others who remained employed, their emotions ranged from a slight sense of gratitude, anxiety, worry to the increasing feeling of job insecurity. On the one hand, they were "*grateful to have a job (ID#4)*." However, on the other hand, they could not stop wondering "*if this is going to be my (their) last week and if I (they) am no longer needed anymore* (ID#3)." The anxiety had been intensified throughout the time, resulting in attitudes such as being "*extremely careful (ID#21),*" "*keeping the head down (ID#25),*" and "*hav(ing) to really work and earn it (ID#17).*" The pandemic had also impacted the participants who returned after the lockdown. Negative emotions were more frequently reported among these participants. For example, one participant (ID#19) shared his/her experiences:

"Before COVID, I was pretty happy. I always smiled and sang. There were definitely some challenging times – we ran about 95% occupancy, so it was very busy. But overall, I had a lot of positive experiences. Then after March 2020, things came out much difficult and it was a job that I did not enjoy in the same way. Even my manager asked me: why don't you smile anymore?".

4.2.3. Personal stress

Besides work-life challenges, the ongoing pandemic took a toll on the participants by raising their health and safety concerns. They not only worry about their own health and safety, but also their families', friends', and all loved ones'. The infection risk is highlighted, considering that the service nature of hospitality products requires most participants to interact with guests and co-workers directly. One

interviewee (ID#8) explicated his/her situation, saying that,

"I was living with my parents at that time – my dad was having health issues and my mom worked at the hospital. Being around my parents and my family was definitely worrisome for me … I noticed everybody who were not wearing their masks … and you never know if the people coming in got their shots. So it definitely added a stress ".

4.2.4. Employer-employee communication and relationship

Although this section mainly concerned the impacts caused by the pandemic, surprisingly, the findings showed that employer-employee communication played a critical role in assisting the participants in assessing the situation and regulating their emotional response. More importantly, transparent communication is the key to maintaining a positive employer-employee relationship during the pandemic and creating a shared understanding between both parties. For example, one participant (ID#17), who worked at a DMO, commented that "*they (the employer) were very transparent, it's not like this was a done over. We were called individually and then the process in which they had chosen the employees that were kept.*" Similarly, another employee (ID#10) who worked in a catering company shared his/her experience, saying that "*they (the employer) were very kind in their explanation and there was no bad blood, and they gave me a good amounts of time for notice.*".

However, not every participant ended their relationship with the company on a good term. It is noted that participants who did not receive clear, straightforward, and upfront communication about the employers' decisions and responses at this critical moment tended to express negative feelings and even "*associate something extremely negative with the industry (ID#11).*" They often described the employer as "*cold and heartless (ID#12).*" Effective communication is equally essential for current employees. For instance, although not fired, one participant (ID#20) felt the pressure given their employers' lack of communication and explanation. The unsettling feeling got more aggravated when he/she constantly received calls from his/her team members, crying and panicking. As a result, this participant criticized, "*I give them an F (in terms of responding to COVID-19).*" Similarly, another participant (ID#12) described their organization's response as "*the opposite to transparent,*" where most employees were fired on the spot without much explanation. The participant further elaborated his/her disappointment:

"It was very cold, to be quite honest, after working there for eight years and being the most educated person on the team, being the youngest member on the team and handling the most accounts on the team, I felt it was incredibly cold– how it was handled.".

4.3. Coping strategies

To respond to the challenges brought by the pandemic, the participants have developed multiple strategies, including 1) solving the financial problem, 2) building professional relationships, 3) participating in leisure activities, and 4) seeking family and social support.

4.3.1. Problem-focused strategies

First, for participants who faced financial challenges during the pandemic, some of them were able to "*have enough savings to go through the situation* (ID#1)," while others needed to adjust their lifestyle and "*be wise with the money* (ID#30)" (i.e., less online shopping, less take-out). A small number of participants compromised for lower-paying, temporary, and part-time jobs to cover their living expenses. It is also very common for the participants to rely on their unemployment benefits. However, moral dilemmas existed as around half of the participants expressed discomfort about exploiting the benefit. One interviewee (ID#9), for instance, agreed to return to the hotel once it was reopened, even though he/she got more payment from the unemployment benefit. He/she described the reasoning:

"*As a young person, I wanted to be active. I feel like if I keep doing the unemployment, I mean, I don't know. There are other people doing that for real, and they don't have any employment. So, when they (the hotel) offered back my position, I took it. It was good to have three, four months of paid vacation, but I don't think that was fair with the system. I know some people are just abusing the system, but I don't want to be one of them.*".

Furthermore, the results suggested that relationship-building and networking appeared to be popular strategies for participants seeking professional opportunities. They constantly attended workshops and networking events, and have been tracking job postings and applying for positions.

4.3.2. Emotion-focused strategies

In addition to extending professional relationships, the participants received support from their personal networks, such as friends and family members. Daily and weekly conversations, virtual hangouts, and even video games have become an essential part of their pandemic life. One participant (ID#19) shared, "*it has been helpful with the stress having a close network of friends, who is very important and supports you. We talk things through* ." It seemed that social support not only comforted them but also eased their anxieties. One interviewee (ID#1), for example, commented that,

"*So I guess it's just a matter of having a positive attitude, knowing that it will work out the way that it should. And you know, I know I have a lot of friends and family that are supportive and so forth. So, you know, in the back of my head, I said, even if I ran out of money, I'm like, no one's going to let me be homeless.*".

The participants also engaged in various recreation and leisure activities to help themselves feel better during such a challenging time. These activities include nature walks, exercises, reading, cooking, knitting, and house projects. One participant (ID#19) even revealed that binge eating is a way for him/her to release stress. The participants believed that constant exercise and engagement in these leisure activities made them "*feel better* (ID#30)," "*relax* (ID#21)," and "*let off some steam* (ID#13)." Furthermore, some participants chose to use the shutdown as a time to reflect and reset.

4.4. Re-appraisals

As the infection rate starts to lower down in some hard-hit areas, early signs of recovery are appearing. In the same vein, hospitality businesses begin to reopen and rehire slowly. When presented with new opportunities, the re-appraisal process took place where the participants reflected on their COVID-19 experiences and reached different decisions for their personal and professional lives.

4.4.1. Reflect and reset

Regarding personal lives, some participants chose to focus on the positive aspects of their COVID-19 experiences. They treated it as "*a nice little break* (ID#1)," where they "*don't need to always think about work* (ID#7)," could "*try doing something else* (ID#14)," "*enjoy my (their) time with family and dogs* (ID#2)," "*have a personal moment* (ID#7)," and "*reflecting and thinking about myself (themselves) and goals* (ID#30)." The self-learning aspect was also featured, where many participants agreed that the participants actually "*made a lot of people more resilient* (ID#17)." Furthermore, going through hardship enhances the participants' stress management skills and brings out more mutual understanding and empathy. As one participant (ID#5) mentioned, "*I'm always trying to be nice to people because you never know what someone else is going through. And the pandemic has actually brought that out, given the wide range of circumstances that it's created.*".

4.4.2. Career decisions

The re-appraisal process also resulted in different career decisions. The "survivors" who remain employed appeared to be well adapted to the circumstances, along with an optimistic attitude about the future of the industry. Some participants belonging to this "survivor" group formed an even stronger connection with the team and the employer, which increased their commitment to the company and the profession. For example, one participant (ID#14) reflected on his/her COVID experiences, saying that, "*I am super appreciative. … it (the COVID experience) definitely gave me a better sense of the corporate culture, the relationship that I have, and the company that I work for.*".

For those who experienced layoffs and furloughs (n = 20), 4 participants chose to return to the same organization, 6 found a different job in hospitality and tourism, two were looking for jobs in hospitality, and 8 participants had moved on to other industries (see Table 1). Encouragingly, most participants expressed a strong desire to stay in hospitality, and the quality of previous working experience played a critical role in the decision-making process. Positive working experiences, including a healthy working environment and a strong bond with the team, as well as a sense of empathy towards the employer were the major drivers. An interesting difference is noted between the participants who were laid off versus furloughed. Furloughed employees either returned to the same organization, or decided to leave the industry for good. For layoffs, however, although most of them didn't return to the same organization, the majority still chose to stay in hospitality and tourism. Possibly, if the layoffs were due to business shutdown, employees were more understanding of the situation, rather than feeling mistreated by the company. Even though some were unable to return to the previous employer due to business closedown, they were glad to stay in the field and search for other opportunities.

Additionally, the participants who would like to stay in hospitality tend to share a hospitality trait: curiosity about a new culture, new environments, and new places, enjoyment of meeting and connecting with people, and a passion for creating unforgettable experiences and meaningful impacts. They, in particular, value the opportunity of working in hospitality because they feel rewarded, satisfied, empowered, and highly appreciated. One participant (ID#9), for instance, summarized that working in hospitality is more than being a good employee. It is part of their personality and is "*helping you as a person.*" Another participant (ID#19), who started working in the industry at 16, said that "*a lot of people are leaving hospitality. … it's very strange to me, because I'm old school, people like me die in hospitality.*" In addition to the emotional attachment, others' decisions to continue their career in hospitality are based on assessing their professional resources, such as industry involvement, education, and all the professional relations they have built over the years.

Some participants were hesitant to continue their careers in the hospitality profession. While the participants who chose to stay in hospitality consisted of different ages, those who left and found jobs in other industries tended to be younger, single, or have no children. Considering that the younger generation tends to take risks and try new things, this is not surprising. A small number of them said they would be waiting for the "*right opportunity (ID#12)*" and would like to "*keep the options open*

(ID#1)." And a couple of them chose to pursue advanced degrees in business administration, believing that this would facilitate their transition to other fields. On the opposite side, some participants who were married and had children decided to leave hospitality due to a growing sense of job insecurity and the desire to maintain a stable family life. For example, one participant (ID#16), who has already found a job outside hospitality, shared his/her insights:

"Yes, we got through the big wave of COVID, but there may be another wave that comes back in 2022, you know, that's the only thing that I worry. … I value stability. I value having a consistent paycheck. I value growth within this company. I just value different things right now because hospitality is not secure. If we have another pandemic and it shuts our city down again, I will still have a job. But if I worked for the hospitality, I've heard restaurants closing down, like all businesses, small hotels closing down. I don't want to be a victim of the pandemic, a second round of it. I want to play it smart right now, financially smart for myself and my family.".

5. Discussion, implications, and conclusions

This study's primary purpose was to understand how hospitality employees lived COVID-19 experiences fully. Through in-depth interviews with 31 participants from various professional backgrounds and pandemic experiences, this study developed and tested a conceptual model to obtain insights into the phenomenon involving hospitality workers and COVID-19. A summary of the major findings is presented in Fig. 2. The findings not only break down the participants' experience into three critical components (e.g., appraisal, coping, re-appraisal) but also confirm the close connection between stress management and career decisions in turbulent times. The findings of this study have both theoretical and practical implications.

5.1. Theoretical implications

Previous studies (Bajrami et al., 2021; Chen and Chen, 2021; Popa et al., 2023; Zopiatis et al., 2021) repeatedly addressed the stressful situation caused by the pandemic and reported employees' declined performances. The findings of this study observed similar results and further revealed that such pandemic-caused stress is manifested through vocational, financial, and mental perspectives. Instead of offering a general description of the negative emotions, this study provided

additional insight into the appraisal process, which is driven by individual, organizational, and environmental factors. The pandemic's unprecedented nature raised uncertainties, resulting in participants' anxiety and insecurity. This feeling is common among both survivors and unemployed participants. However, this study finds that effective employer-employee communication can alter the situation. As indicated by the findings, direct, transparent, and consistent internal communication efforts help create and maintain a positive employer-employee relationship and generate mutual understanding between parties. The results also show that such a transparent working environment assured the participants and increased existing employees' confidence in and commitment to their company. Similarly, even participants who were furloughed or laid off expressed a strong desire to return to the same employer if available. This finding is particularly important, as it is commonly believed that the ruthless treatment of hospitality employees during the pandemic damaged their trust and faith in their employer and caused serious repercussions contributing to the current Great Resignation trend (Horn, 2021).

When it comes to the specific type of stress, this study noted similar results suggested by previous studies (e.g., Popa et al., 2023; Yu et al., 2021a). The stress is closely tied to the pandemic's adverse results, such as being laid-off, changing job responsibilities, financial concerns, increased risk perception, mental stress, and health concerns. These consistent findings support that the pandemic is unique, especially considering its extended nature and wide-ranging impact (Chen and Chen, 2021). However, this study notes a changing trend, where besides health concerns and increased risk of infections, other stresses are becoming more and more common at the workplace and often affect individuals' career decisions (Lustig et al., 2012). This observation underscores the transient nature of the participants' experiences and highlights the essence of an in-depth exploration of this phenomenon, which aligns well with the scope of this study.

Additionally, previous studies tended to focus on the pandemic's negative consequences on hospitality employees' mental health and well-being (Chen, 2020; Popa et al., 2023; Yu et al., 2021a), while this study explored how the participants developed various coping strategies based on the assessment of the situation and available resources. These strategies are both problem- and emotion-focused. This process exemplifies the secondary appraisal process and aligns well with key assumptions of the transaction model of stress and coping (Lazarus and
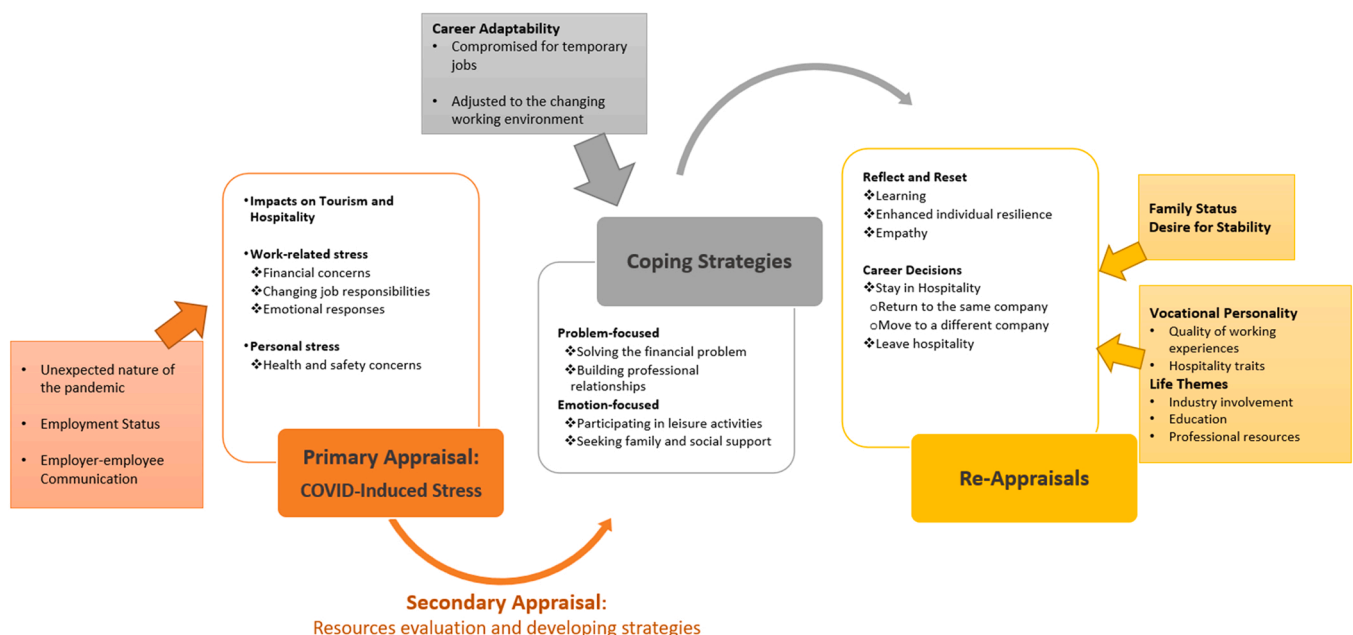

Fig. 2. Summary of Major Findings.

Folkman, 1984). A closer examination revealed that the problem-focused strategies tend to be work-related, while the emotion-focused strategies appear to be more self-centered. Coping is central to developing self-efficacy and resilience, which are crucial to employees' abilities to deal with uncertainty and urgent situations (Seville, 2018). Particularly, this study highlights the participants' utilization of personal, social, and professional networks as well as engagement in leisure activities during the coping process.

Furthermore, this study notes the connection between the participants' problem-focused strategies and career adaptivity, which is a key element in the career construction theory and indicates one's ability to adapt to transitions and traumas in their career (Rudolph et al., 2019). The application of the career construction theory in hospitality management has predominantly examined the concept of career adaptivity among current employees (e.g., Lee et al., 2021). In comparison, the findings of our study show that career adaptability is embedded in both employed and unemployed workers and often reflected through their strategies. More specifically, those who remained employed had to quickly adapt to the new working environments and job responsibility changes. For others, career adaptability is manifested through developing short-term solutions (i.e., temporary jobs) while actively seeking more professional growth and opportunities through personal networks and resources.

In addition, this study is one of the earliest attempts to incorporate the entire career construction theory in the hospitality management context and highlight the connection between coping strategies and future career decisions. This study finds that the re-appraisals, which determine employee outcomes, can be reflected through personal learning and future career consideration processes. In terms of personal learning, this study notes that most participants have focused on the positive perspectives of their experiences, displaying a more resilient and positive attitude. This is very different from most hospitality management studies but responds well with Luu's (2022) notion of a positive mindset, which is essential in creating individual resilience and compromises tourism workers' positive changes and adaption during pandemic times. Understanding hospitality employees' needs, thoughts, and adaptivity at this point is critical, especially considering the long-lasting pandemic impacts on hospitality employees' stress, emotions, attitude, and turnover intentions (Popa et al., 2023; Yu et al., 2021a).

Lastly, another key contribution of this study is to shed light on the participants' decisions to stay in, leave, or return to the hospitality industry. These decisions are influenced by their family status, a desire for stability, and their passion for the profession, which can be further broken down into the dimensions of vocational personality and life themes according to the career construction theory (Savickas, 2005). Family status and the desire for stability are highly intertwined in that those participants who are married and/or have children prefer to work in a stable industry, constituting secure jobs. The pandemic has raised their awareness of the fragility and instability of the hospitality industry, resulting in hesitation to advance their career in this field. Such phenomena have been widely observed across industries (Shoss, 2017).

The career construction theory also suggests that vocational personality, involving one's career needs, values, and interests, often affects one's decision to enter a career (Rudolph et al., 2019). This is reflected in the current findings, where participants' vocational personality is developed based on hospitality traits and their enjoyment of previous working experiences in hospitality, both of which drive a stronger desire to stay in the profession. The concentration on hospitality traits is consistent with pre-pandemic studies, which showed that individual characteristics, such as agreeability, stability, activity, and conscientiousness, all contribute to the hospitality trait of customer orientation and lead to better service quality (Liu & Chen, 2006). Extending this line of discussion, a couple of studies (Dawson et al., 2011; Lee-Ross, 2000) have highlighted the essence of the organization-person fit, where employees' traits and organizational culture complement each other and

ultimately, lead to a happy workforce, satisfied customers, and increasing service excellence. In the same vein, this study finds that the organization-person fit is more firmly established after going through difficulties together and frequently occurs in conjunction with the participants' understanding and desire to stay/return.

Life themes, which concern the alignment between one's self-identity and vocational behavior, are another critical element in the career construct theory (Rudolph et al., 2017). In the current study, it seems that some participants' vocational personality has been gradually transferred into their life themes, and the transformation is more intensified with their industry involvement, education, and professional resources. In other words, the heavy investment into this profession has made it part of their personal life and identity, and therefore, they would not quickly leave. Successfully making it through the pandemic has become an unforgettable part of their career, making them feel stronger, more confident, and even more resilient.

5.2. Practical implications

The findings of this study can be further translated into various practical implications. First, hospitality employers must realize that their employees, including current staff and future talents, are experiencing extra mental stress caused by the pandemic. Besides their perceived infection risk, the employees have other concerns comparable to those of other major career crises. The findings indicate that employers' support and intervention are essential in this context. Additionally. since hospitality employees tend to rely on social support and recreation activities, employers can consider promoting various employee-assistance programs that cover aspects such as mental health consultancy and leisure/recreation activities. Related professional associations should also consider setting up support groups and networking events to offer these resources to hospitality professionals in need. The support groups can be held regularly through various free video conferencing platforms, such as Google Hangout, Zoom, Webex, and Skype. Furthermore, local chapters of the organization can arrange networking events, which can be in the form of social hangouts, workshops, or even guided tours.

Second, the findings suggest that the participants approached the situation through personal and social cues, and that a perfect person-organization match can increase their loyalty and commitment to the employer, regardless of the situation. Therefore, hospitality practitioners should attempt to strengthen employer-employee relationships and bonds at regular times and cherish the achievement in crisis times. Consistent and transparent internal communication is the first step, where employees can receive accurate updates and share feelings of togetherness along the way. As revealed in the study findings, such a communicative and open working environment is essential in comforting the workers and enhancing their confidence in the company. Extending this line of effort, hospitality businesses should also consider devoting resources to building organizational culture and connecting with their employers. These goals can often be achieved through effective training, social events, and employees' engagements in various corporate social activities.

Third, despite the challenges presented by the pandemic, most participants in this study generally share a passion for the profession of hospitality, which drives their devotion to this profession. This is particularly prominent among participants who had invested heavily in the profession (e.g., education and professional resources). Hence, this segment should be prioritized in the hiring process and outlined through effective trait-based evaluations. Meanwhile, hospitality employers should support and encourage more professional investment from their employees. The American Hotel and Lodging Association recently created an apprenticeship program to outline career growth paths for entry-level employees and connect employers and employees through co-development.

5.3. Limitations and future studies

This study is not without its limitations. First, this study is confined to the U.S. market, while the COVID-19 pandemic is a major global crisis. Therefore, future studies should explore other regions and conduct cross-cultural comparisons. Second, this study is qualitative. The study's findings only reflect the participants' viewpoint, which may not be generalizable to a bigger population. Future studies should consider developing and testing hypotheses with a quantitative study with a bigger population. Third, the data of this study were collected during the summer of 2021. New developments such as COVID-19 strains and medical inventions may change the situation. Thus, a longitudinal study can be conducted to understand the long-term impact of the pandemic on the tourism and hospitality workforce. Fourth, this study is confined to a qualitative approach. Although several triangulation methods were employed, the findings of this study can be further confirmed through a quantitative research design, such as surveys.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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