

ABSTRACT

While previous studies have investigated negative perceptions towards the hospitality industry, less research to-date has examined employees' personal changes from work experience. This paper seeks to fill this research gap by examining how personal changes emerged and connected with frontline work. In-depth interviews with hospitality dropouts revealed five dimensions of personal change: *emotional management*, *extroversion/introversion*, *work competency*, *individual development*, and *ambition*. This study contributes to literature by highlighting the potential influences of personal change on frontline work experience and dropout decisions. Managerially, insights are offered to managers who seek to encourage positive and manage negative change associated with frontline work.

KEYWORDS

Personality; retention; personal growth; career development; emotional management

INTRODUCTION

A lack of commitment towards hospitality employment by young talents has long been an existing issue. Previous studies have reported on the dropout trend of hospitality employees who opt not to stay in the hospitality industry within a few years after graduation (Brymer and Pavesic, 1990; O'Leary and Deegan, 2005). Not only does this continually propagate an unfavorable image of the hospitality industry, but it also exerts pressure on recruitment and talent management in the long run. Oftentimes, the problem stems from an expectation gap between studying and working, as young hospitality employees have unfavourable perceptions toward the industry during their real frontline internships or work experiences (Zopiatis, 2007; Kim & Park, 2013; Zopiatis & Theocharous, 2013).

Previous studies that have investigated employees' negative perceptions associated with frontline job experience have examined external factors, including the challenging work environment of the hospitality industry (Kim, McCleary & Kaufman, 2010). These aspects include long working hours, low pay, and work-life imbalance (Pavesic & Brymer, 1990;

Kusluvan & Kusluvan, 2000; Brown & Thomas, 2015). Conversely the investigation of internal factors such as personality traits and personal change on the reasons why hospitality employees drop out from the industry are so far limited (Kozako, Safin & Rahim, 2013).

Understanding personal change-from frontline work experience can inform prospects who aim to join the industry as well as practitioners who need to manage diversity in the workplace (Senge, 2003; Molouki & Bartels, 2017; Tung, Tang & King, 2018). **Personal change refers to an individual's perceived or assumption of change (Johnson & Sarason, 1978).** It can be constituted by both external and internal components. External personal change, represents one's perception of having little or no control over a change and in which the change is easily influenced by external factors. It is usually employment- or career-related, such as employment perceptions and career development (Johnson & Sarason, 1978; Blau & Lunz, 1998). On the contrary, individuals perceive internal personal change as controllable by their own actions or intentions, such as emotion and personality traits (Johnson & Sarason, 1978; Martin & Johnson, 1996). **There is currently less research on internal personal change compared to external personal change, and more specifically, to the best of the authors' knowledge, there is no research to-date that has examined the personal change from individuals who have dropped out from hospitality employment.**

To address this research gap, the objectives of this study are two-folded. First, this study aims to investigate the internal and external personal changes from hospitality employees who dropped out from frontline work experience. Second, this study seeks to highlight frontline work characteristics that influence such personal changes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Frontline career prospects for hospitality management

Frontline work in the hospitality industry refers to those working sections that have major and frequent contact with customers on regular days (Slåtten & Mehmetoglu, 2011). Employees who graduated from hospitality management degrees are oftentimes placed in front-of-the-house sections, including hotel front office, housekeeping and food and beverage (F&B), during industrial practicums or internships (Chen & Shen, 2012), and previous research efforts have examined the effects of hospitality frontline work on their career prospects,

career attitudes, expectations, aspirations, and commitment (Wildes & Parks, 2005; Maxwell, Ogden & Broadbridge, 2010; Chen & Shen, 2012). Nevertheless, previous research findings often suggest that negative perceptions from hospitality employees toward frontline careers typically outweigh positive ones.

The emergence of negative perceptions toward frontline jobs could represent a potential expectation mismatch, in which there is huge deviation between the actual operational work setting and the expected managerial knowledge taught in classes (Zopiatis, 2007; Kim & Park, 2013). Moreover, Ricks and Williams (2005) have looked into the issue of frontline talent loss in hospitality industry and reported a lack of career appreciation towards frontline customer service jobs by hospitality employees that crucially deterred the positive career prospects of the sector. For example, Richardson (2008) explored the career attitude and perceptions of hospitality employees towards hospitality work and found that frontline customer service work experience drove negative career attitudes and undermined career commitment to the field. Robinson, Kralj, Solnet, Goh and Callan (2016) provided a detailed analysis on frontline career prospects, and suggested that F&B and front office could be unstable areas that are unfavorable to students or employees with a career focus or long term commitment to work. Another study conducted by Robinson, Ruhanen and Breakey (2016) employed a qualitative research approach to understand the change of career aspirations of Australian hospitality management employees after internships. Most of the participants indicated a switch in career goals and aspirations from the hospitality industry after experiencing frontline work.

Despite this line of work on the negative prospects of hospitality frontline jobs, other researchers reported that hospitality employees expressed positive career outcomes toward frontline careers (Charles, 1992; Chuang, Goh, Stout & Dellmann-Jenkins, 2007). For examples, Charles (1992) found a majority of surveyed Caribbean hospitality management graduated employees considered experience from frontline or operations departments in hotels or F&B allowed them to secure potential employment opportunities for professional growth. Chuang, et al (2007) investigated hospitality employees' career planning process and found that practical hospitality work experience, including the frontline work, facilitated the formation of more realistic career expectations and established career goals.

2. Personal change from work experience

Learning about personal change from work experience is important as it sheds light on how to effectively manage, attract and retain talent in the workplace (Senge, 2003). Apart from organisational impact, personal change can also influence one's perception of identity and future career expectation (Molouki & Bartels, 2017). Increasing research efforts have been dedicated to studying personal or internal dimensions of hospitality employees as understanding their perceptions can effectively inform industry prospects (Tung, Tang & King, 2018).

People are likely to experience some personal changes from their work, which could be affected by work ambiance, culture, tasks, or colleagues in the workplace. Other changes have also been captured by previous researchers for hospitality employees, such as deeper understanding of the workplace, strengthened communication skills and teamwork, higher employability, and work ethics (Mihail, 2006; Chen, Lin & Kuo, 2011; Chiu, 2012; Chen, Song, Wu & Ma, 2013). However, most of these changes reflect external career development, while those relevant to internal factors, like individual emotion, characteristics and personality traits were less discussed. In a service workplace context, being able to understand emotional and personality change are vital as they can be regarded as a requisite 'skill' in the industry (Baum, 2002; Ritzer, 1993). For instance, Wang, Chuang and Lee (2014) investigated the level change in anxiety of hospitality management graduated employees throughout their internship experience. Two hundred and forty five valid responses were collected using self-administered questionnaires where a majority of employees worked as servers in hotels or restaurants. Anxiety, which influences career commitment significantly, was found to remain, if not higher, after the internship.

3. Dropouts

A number of scholars have reported on the high dropout rate of hospitality employees (Johns & McKechnie, 1995; Jenkin, 2001; O'Leary & Deegan, 2005). Only around 50% of the hospitality management graduated employees remain in the industry, and in particular, a considerable number of them with bachelor and master qualifications tend to leave while a high number of diploma-holders commit to the industry (O'Leary & Deegan, 2005). This suggests a potential mismatch in attained education level from those who stay in the field.

The reasons for dropping out from the hospitality industry can be classified into external and internal dimensions. The external dimension reflects employability factors associated with

the job nature itself while internal variables may refer to individual- or personal-relating characteristics (Ahmed, Alam & Alam, 1997; Kim & Jogaratnam, 2010). External contributory factors account for dropping out from hospitality industry by employees has been widely discussed (Martin, 1980; Walmsley, 2004). They, with no large variations among countries and institutions, include work-life imbalance derived from long working hours, low salary rate or poor remuneration, poor image of working in the frontline, undesirable career structures, and unchallenging work (Kusluvan & Kusluvan, 2000; Kelley-Patterson and George, 2001; O'Leary & Deegan, 2005; Brown & Thomas, 2015). These external factors could ultimately affect employees' career commitment or intention to stay in the industry (Kim, McCleary & Kaufman, 2010; Zopiatis & Theocharous, 2013).

Yet, a number of researchers have also noted the importance of internal factors in employees' decisions to drop out from the industry (Jenkins, 2001; Kim & Jogaratnam, 2010). For examples, Jenkins (2001) examined the discouraging factors for industry commitment and suggested that employees' perceived dissonance between hospitality education and industry influenced them to leave the industry. Kim and Jogaratnam (2010) examined the effect of internal motivation on intention to stay in hospitality and found that inherent enjoyment from careers could lower the possibility of hospitality employees from dropping out of the industry. Although internal factors may not be the main reason for hospitality employees to drop out, they nevertheless influence career-related values like job satisfaction, commitment and career success (Erdogan, Kraimer & Liden, 2004; Chuang, Yin & Dellmann-Jenkins, 2009; Kim and Jogaratnam, 2010).

METHODOLOGY

Research design

The study employed a qualitative approach to examine the perceptions of personal change of hospitality employees who dropped out of the industry. Participants were recruited via purposive sampling. Participants were selected if they matched the following criteria: They (a) studied hospitality management in university, (b) previously worked in hotel frontline, (c) have already switched their career paths within 3 years after graduation from hotel and tourism management (Walsh & Taylor, 2007). The advantage of the purposive sampling is that it allows researchers to focus on a particular subset of people who will be able to better

communicate their views and experiences in a fluent and reflective way (Etikan, Musa & Alkassim, 2016).

Data was collected through face-to-face semi-structured interviews with the participants in a quiet conference room on the university campus. The interviews were conducted between April and May 2018. Semi-structured in-depth interviews are useful for understanding perceptions of change from individuals in a well-rounded manner (Martin & Johnson, 1996). Previous studies of exploring individual perceptions have recognized the importance of semi-structured interviews in ensuring the best use of time, extracting more important information, clarifying and expressing answers freely in understanding perceptions and viewpoints (e.g., Louise Barriball & While, 1994; Kwortnik Jr, 2003; Gibson & Busby, 2009).

The interviews in this study were audiotaped and conducted in Chinese to allow the interviewees to express their ideas freely and naturally. At the beginning of the interview, the participants were informed of the introduction to the study purpose and the reason they were selected for the interview. An interview guide was prepared with questions to guide the whole interview progress and facilitate the dialogues (Kwortnik Jr, 2003). For example, participants were asked how their work experience in hospitality industry affected their personality and/or self-characteristics positively or negatively. They were also asked to describe how they thought those changes helped or hurt their personal growth and career development (see Appendix A).

Data Analysis

In the data analytic process, the transcripts were typed and translated into English from the audio recordings of the interview. **Cross-translation between Chinese and English in both written and spoken format were managed by the co-authors where discrepancies were resolved through discussion.** Next, the transcripts were coded logically in a process of data reduction to handle compilation of cases and mass data (Corbin, Strauss & Strauss, 2014).

The data was allocated into text segments as descriptive codes, which were further interpreted and categorized into broader themes corresponding to the research purpose. For example, the concept of emotional management was captured by the expressions “being able to cope with negative emotion” and “being emotional at work doesn’t help”. The method of descriptive coding is valuable for refining code meaning, connecting codes with the study to create

various coherent categories and validating themes (Green, Willis, Hughes, Small, Welch, Gibbs & Daly, 2007).

The validity and reliability of the dataset were ensured with the use of member checking and co-analysing. As suggested by Creswell (2009), member checking enhances participants' contribution to the study and minimizes investigative discrepancies. The participants were asked to review their own copies of the transcripts to identify any inaccuracies, researcher bias and errors in the transcription of their responses. After member checking all the transcripts, the lead and co-researchers jointly interpreted the transcripts and categorized them into a coding framework (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Sparse data and expressions were regarded as coding disagreements and recategorized until a coding framework was reached (Tung & Ritchie, 2011; Tung et al., 2017). Finally, efforts were made to keep the Chinese transcripts from participants as close as possible in the English translation to ensure accuracy in presentation. For example, one participant quoted, "I was ignited a little", which is a literal translation from Chinese to give the sense of vocabulary used by the participant from an emotional perspective.

RESULTS

Twenty participants were recruited (i.e., four males and 16 females; between 22 to 25-years-old, with 10 of them at 23 years of age). The participants graduated from either a large hotel and tourism management institution in Asia or Europe. Fifteen of the interviewees dropped out of the hospitality industry in about one year after graduation. All participants had hotel frontline work experience in Food and Beverage (F&B), Housekeeping, Front Office, and Concierge. Nearly half of the participants reported their dropout reasons as internal in nature (i.e., the work does not fit their personality). Not being able in getting used to the tiring shift schedule in frontline work was the most commonly reported external reason for dropping out. The industries they joined after dropping out are widely spread among finance, retailing, sales and marketing, and law. Demographic details of the participants are shown in Table 1.

---Insert Table 1 here---

In general, five dimensions of personal change from hospitality employees who dropped out from frontline work experience were identified: *Emotional Management*, *Introversion/Extroversion*, *Workplace Competency*, *Individual Development* and *Ambition*.

Emotional Management

Hospitality employees acknowledged that their hospitality frontline work experience was valuable in enhancing their emotional control and resilience. Customer service experiences educated them the way to effectively control negative emotions and subsequently strengthen their emotional capability. For example, while they nevertheless reported negative emotions such as grumpiness and depression from work, they still acknowledged overall positive emotional development such as becoming less moody, more patient and more optimistic, after the work experience. The following description best illustrates this:

“...I think (working in F&B) I might become easier to get angry. As you know, when the restaurant was busy, then everyone, including the chef and colleagues, would get intense to give out dishes. I was ignited a little. However, for me, I think it (being angry) is a stepstone in the process of personal growth and improvement. No matter how hard it (working in F&B) was, I still had to tackle the problem, having bad emotion only deteriorates a problem.”

(Participant #3)

Additionally, most participants felt their emotional resilience developed from the work experience. Despite tiring and hardwork in hotel frontline, they stood the test of time and stress, and grew themselves with fortitude. As this hospitality employee responded:

“No matter whether you like or dislike the (F&B) work experience, it’s a learning process for yourself. It educates me on how to adjust my attitude in dilemmas and overcome tough situations. My personality became stronger, more resilient, more able to adapt to different difficult environments and I will never give up easily.” **(Participant #2)**

Extroversion/Introversion

Extroversion refers to individuals who are drawn towards people and things in the outer world (Whitelaw & Gillet, 2003). Most hospitality employees turned out to be more

extroverted after the work experiences. Hospitality frontline careers are customer-focused and people-oriented, and this required participants to communicate and speak up more often. As a result, they became more outgoing, talkative, and presentable. For example:

“After the internship, I became more talkative and I know how to start a topic in a conversation, express with better words and tones, and became more presentable
(Participant #4)...I think I turned out to be more confident, more outgoing, more willing to communicate and interact with others.” **(Participant #1)**

Yet, some dropouts reported higher degrees of personal introversion after their work experience. Introversion relates to the personal characteristic that people are drawn towards their own inner worlds, and they seem to be self-reflective and introspective (Janson, 1994). Introverted personal change suggested participants became less willing to share and less talkative. As this participant mentioned:

“I became less talkative because I hate interacting with customers, I think I have done enough in my internship and I am not going to tolerate that anymore. I enjoy being alone.”
(Participant #7)

However, what is interesting about the findings for introversion is that these hospitality dropouts coincidentally shared the same observation of getting more repressed after working in the front-of-the-house. They expressed they became more repressed in two ways, psychologically and interpersonally, when they were unable to truly reveal their own feelings about working in hotel frontline. Psychologically, working in hotel frontline imposed higher pressure and depression on them. As this participant stated:

“Indeed, sometimes I don’t want to fake a smile when I am depressed or not in a good mood. But as a frontline front office or F&B service person, I have to fake a smile and I could not show that (my negative mood) in public. I feel bad as I am not able to truly express myself
(Participant #1)... I tend to hide my true self, as you know, working in the (hospitality) industry, somehow you have to hide your real thoughts about the colleagues and the guests.
(Participant #12) I could not present my real face, I had to fake one and I don’t like that. That was too pressurized and I remember one of my friends cried under such depression.”
(Participant #4)

Interpersonally, hiding one's real face can be interpreted as putting on a fake mask, which could be negatively perceived or despised by others, and in turn, weakened interpersonal relationships. This finding is clearly depicted in the description below:

“...sometime, not dare to directly and freely express myself can be a bad thing. For me, hiding your own feeling might make people feel that you are concealing facts and not telling the truth to them. In workplace, not being able to directly and freely express myself might make people or colleagues want to alienate from me, as you know, they may develop negative feeling and impression on me when they perceive me as lying or hiding something.”

(Participant #5)

Workplace Competency

Although these hospitality employees decided not to work in the industry anymore, what they admitted was an elevation of certain workplace skills and abilities. These could be subdivided into 5 facets:

i) Enhanced cooperative ability

Through duty rotations in hotel frontline, most of these participants realized the significance of communicating and developing team spirit in the workplace. Comments made by them include, “learnt to cooperate with colleagues”; “work well to address customers’ needs”, and “improved communication skill in interacting with different people”. This description best illustrates that:

“... this work experience enabled me to develop a higher degree of team spirit than before. I learned to cope with different work areas with different working partners...I have to deal with company clients’ enquiries and explain some details of the hotel to them. For examples, where is the location of the car park? I have to point out clearly the location and direction the car park and present it in an understandable way for our clients. That requires some kind of communication and presentation skills.” **(Participant #16)**

ii) More considerate

Frontline work experiences have also enabled participants to become more thoughtful and attentive. They became more aware of others' feeling and work details. As this participant remarked:

“I would think more before I act while working in a hospitality environment, like how to handle customer complaints properly without leaving any follow-ups for myself and my colleagues...I have to take care of the guests all the time in case any dissatisfaction for the dishes, address their needs and give them alternatives...I am more detail-minded, paying more attention to minor things at work.” **(Participant #3)**

iii) Better time management

In addition, the participants perceived an improvement in personal time management after their work experience. The hospitality job nature itself requires strict time obedience and an efficient service process, especially when the service environment is full of customers. As such, being able to manage and control time to multitask was critical:

“Positively, working in hotels has improved my time management as I have to be on time for my shift **(Participant #13)**...I am able to perform multitasking. As there were lots of calls I had to deal with in the call centre, it trained me how to handle several job tasks at a time.” **(Participant #3)**

iv) More professional

Several participants came to realize the importance of disciplining and behaving themselves in being professional at work. They reflected a higher awareness in which their work serves others, namely, a higher sense of calling to their work, which is part of professional career development (Hall & Chandler, 2005). As this interviewee reported:

“I think the major positive change to my own character is that I become more professional. I realized what I should or should not do in different situations. Also, I will pay more attention to my own speech and behaviors of my role in serving others at different workplace venues... and I should only do something that should only be carried out in the workplace.” **(Participant #17)**

v) More slothful

Working in hotel frontline has been widely recognized as tiring and energy-consuming. Surprisingly, participants suggested working in hotel frontline made them lazier after all. This is interesting because the participants further contemplated the job nature before sharing their views. They commented working in hotel frontline are “non technical”, “boring”, “repetitive”, “mechanical”, “aimless”, and “unimportant”, which all led to slothfulness at work. As this participant explained:

“... I do not have a chance to use my brain throughout the whole day, serving every guest with the same words, running between the front part of the restaurant and the back kitchen, collecting dirty dishes.... that’s all I need to do **(Participant #18)**...I think the work was just too simple but not skillful...I think such kind of jobs made me lazier.” **(Participant #5)**

Individual Development

Another important personal change revealed in the interviews was enhanced self-understanding. Being used to take up hospitality frontline positions enabled participants to learn more about themselves in both dimensions of personal growth and individual career development. They gained a deeper understanding on their own personal characteristics and their preferred working environment that can determine their future career choice. For instance:

“For myself, I think I know my own personality well: I don’t like interacting with customers. Overall, I think facing customers is acceptable as I have adapted to it in my internship and work experience. But I am more affirmative that I would not choose a career that requires me to face customers all the time. And as I said, I prefer working in back office. The work experience actually helps me to distinguish whether I want to work in front office or back office.” **(Participant #1)**

Ambition

Finally, participants’ frontline hospitality experience also influenced their career ambitions in both positive and negative ways. Positively, they grew to be more progressive through benign comparisons with friends from other professional streams and capable practitioners from the industry. As one participant described:

“...I emphasize more on self-achievement, because I do not want to be looked down by others. As some of my friends see me as a service provider, and they perceive what I need to do in my major is pleasing others. That is a devaluation for my own ability...” **(Participant #7)**

Another participant noted:

“...I could meet some successful and experienced practitioners during my internship and lectures, including those hotel managers, mentors...I started thinking I have to improve myself and be that competent as them in the future...” **(Participant #8)**

Negatively suppressed ambition, derived from falling self-esteem and self-confidence, was also reported. As these two interviewees explained:

“I think my confidence lowered from being a waiter in F&B as I had to work at a very low position in F&B for start-up, but I aim higher...Working as a waiter and housekeeper lowered my self-esteem... During internship, I strongly felt that as a service provider, I had to put myself at a lower position under the customers. Also, I felt I could not make any major contribution in work. All these adversely undermined my sense of achievement.” **(Participant #5)**

“This industry is too low salary, too experience oriented. People are difficult and those frontline employees tend to have a lower moral ethic. They speak a lot of foul languages and act two-faced...Me as a university graduated-employee feel a lower self-image as these less compatible and unethical colleagues shared the same employment treatment as me...It is way below my expectation of gaining a quicker access to managerial level in a hotel property after graduation.” **(Participant #18)**

DISCUSSION

The trend of hospitality employees dropping out from the industry has long caught the attention of many researchers and industry managers. However, previous studies have seldomly investigated the personal changes of individuals who dropped out. For managers, insights into how frontline work characteristics could influence personal change is important

to better enable human capital management. With this in mind, this study examined both external and internal personal change of hospitality employees who dropped out from the industry after front-of-the-house work experience.

The findings suggest that the dimensions of Emotional Management, Extroversion/Introversion, Individual Development and Ambition reflect internal personal change, while Work Competency lies within the dimension of external personal change. In Emotional Management, both ranges of positive and negative emotions were obtained. Unsurprisingly, a multitude of negative perceptions towards unfavourable frontline work characteristics emerged, expressions like tough environment and intolerable workload were used by dropouts to criticize the frontline experience. As a result, it was expected that hospitality dropouts should be quite pessimistic about their work experience in terms of emotion. Yet, to the authors' surprise, participants suggested a sort of 'deepening resilience' after reflecting on their negative emotions. A possible reason for this personal change is that dropouts may have a higher tendency to mobilize their inner strengths, including self-confidence from life experiences, in order to draw on positive emotions to justify such negativity (Bono & Vey, 2007; Haver, Akerjordet & Furunes, 2014). They displayed emotional intelligence to regulate emotions and turned their negative emotions into a driving force. **This result adds to existing research on the resilience-building process, in which hospitality dropouts are able to manage their negative emotions and expand mindfulness in building resilience (Wong & Law, 2002; Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004; Haver, et al., 2014).**

In terms of Extroversion/Introversion, changes in both extroverted and introverted personality traits were equally captured. As a people-oriented and service nature industry, it is not difficult to understand why extroverted characteristics were exhibited by dropouts; yet, **it was quite unexpected to note the formation of introverted traits from dropouts. The participants indicated they became being more repressive by not being able to freely express themselves during frontline employment.** Due to exhaustion from daily recurring social interactions, most of the dropouts expressed a sense of repression, which is a noted outcome associated with frequent service interactions in a hospitality frontline work environment (Brymer & Pavesic, 1990). In light of this finding, dropouts were highly repulsive to 'surface acting' (i.e., 'look' positive) as well as 'deep acting' (i.e., 'genuinely' positive). **'Surface acting' represents how employees act and conceal genuine emotions**

in an organizationally appropriate way during service encounters, while ‘deep acting’ describes how employees display and feel the right emotions necessary for the job (Mesmer-Magnus, DeChurch & Wax, 2012). They were unable to show their feelings, and had to hide or fake their emotions in frontline servicescapes, even under physical and emotional exhaustion (Judge, Woolf & Hurst, 2009; Kiffin-Petersen, Jordan & Soutar, 2011).

The Work Competency dimension reflected external personal change. It represents positive changes in workplace skills and abilities as frontline work experiences may strengthen attention to detail, cooperative ability, and time management (Wang et al., 2014). However, dropouts also reported that they became more ‘psychologically slothful’ when they suggested that their brain was not operating during work or were aimless at work. This negative personal change could be influenced by perceptions of ‘non-skillful’ job characteristics in frontline departments. Standardization and routinization in frontline servicescape could influence views of frontline work as ‘non-technical’ that could lead to the de-skilling of employees (Baum, 2002). Yet, dropouts appreciated the benefits of role-modelling, personal and skill development (McCullough, 2013). On the contrary, dropouts suffered a self-image problem after being labelled as simply a service personnel, which ultimately suppressed their career ambitions and resulted in lowered self-esteem (Jenkins, 2001). **Another interesting explanation for suppressed ambition is dropouts’ incompatible perceptions toward other frontline colleagues, who may hold equal positions or ranks, despite having less hospitality management education.** This perception may be derived from a psychological imbalance from dropouts’ sense of pride when compared to colleagues they deem as less competent than they are (Tracey and Hinkin, 1994).

Overall, hospitality employees reflected on their personal change after dropping out from their frontline work experience in several aspects. The tough work environment and heavy workload of frontline jobs developed their emotional resilience; however, standardized and routinized working procedures in frontline servicescape increased their perceived slothfulness and de-skilling. Frequent interactions with customers in the work environment encouraged extroversion characteristics, but also gave rise to negative introverted repression. Insights into personal changes from frontline work experience could influence career perceptions and prospects, both favourably and unfavourably, and as a result, efforts could be made to better manage these impressions to reduce the dropout rates of hospitality employees.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

There are several important practical implications from this study. First, even though the frontline work environment is difficult for hospitality employees, resilience to this dilemma can be cultivated so that the process of overcoming adversity contributes to both emotional and work strengths of hospitality employees (Haver, et al., 2014). For example, human resources or human capital departments at hotels can provide training programs through role playing and ‘mystery shoppers’. This allows recent employees to enact and resolve obstacles that they may encounter. Hotels could also provide employees with leadership opportunities (e.g., appoint or rotate them as team leaders) with different types of challenges for developmental purposes.

Second, the results suggest ‘too much’ social interactions (i.e., with customers) on a daily basis could lead to burn-out, which facilitates emotional exhaustion on the long term. To address this issue, human resource departments of hotels should organize training courses to help employees to express their emotions and to resolve their problems properly. Moreover, a short daily sharing session allows superiors to better familiarize with and understand the emotions of their employees. On the other hand, managers should seek to identify the most appropriate candidates in the recruitment process so that employees with positive extroverted traits, ability to perform deep acting (i.e., genuinely positive), experience, and workplace competence are selected. For instance, human capital or departmental managers at hotels can arrange group activities for all candidates to observe their personality traits in the recruitment process, in which extroverted candidates could demonstrate deep involvement in group activities. After recruitment, it is important for managers to provide opportunities for hospitality employees to freely express themselves in appropriate collegial environments (Kiffin-Petersen et. al, 2011).

Third, educators in hospitality management could seek insight from the five dimensions of personal change to proactively address potential reasons for dropping out of the industry. For example, these issues could be addressed during orientation in frontline job placement and reviewed throughout the programme structure and curriculum. Additionally, educators could attach more practical training to nurture positive workplace competencies for students, and promote positive personal change in student recruitment (Ricks & Williams, 2005).

Moreover, by referring to both positive and negative personal change within the industry, prospective students can reflect and assess their outcomes in terms of personal growth and career development before deciding to join the industry.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

There are limitations in this study and opportunities for future research. First, the sample size is relatively small due to the qualitative nature of this study. There is also a larger proportion of female than male participants. The duration of participants who dropped out were relatively short-term (i.e., participants dropped out within three years of working after graduation) and the context of examining personal change was limited to frontline work experience. **Draft analysis text were not sent back to respondents, which could have strengthened the interpretation of the meaning of the responses in the data analysis.** Furthermore, since the study involved interpersonal sharing with a listener (i.e., the researcher) based on recollections of memories of work, the process could have elicited a process called capitalization in which respondents reconstructed details of their experiences to make it more memorable (Tung, Cheung, & Law, 2017).

Future researchers could compare personal change from back-of-the-house experience with that of the frontline, in order to broaden the scope of investigation in the hospitality industry and offer a more comprehensive and critical insight into the issue. Apart from hospitality students or employees, personal change of industry practitioners who do not have a hospitality education could also be examined. This could provide further insights to managers who need to balance the perceptions of hospitality and non-hospitality graduated employees within the workplace.

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